

Guy Mees—
*The Weather
is Quiet, Cool,
and Soft*

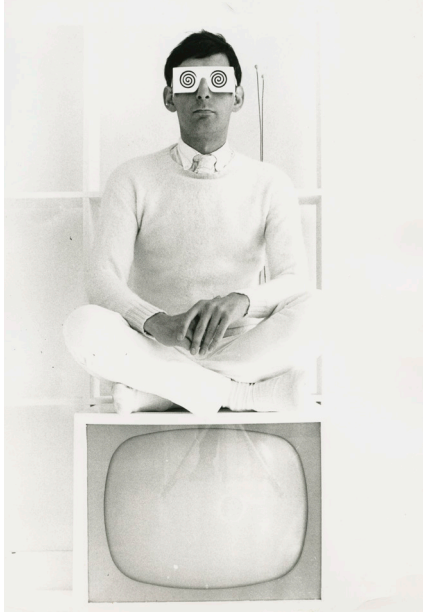
24.11.2018—
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Portretten
(Niveaunderschillen)
 (Portraits (Level Differences)), 1970
 B/w photographs,
 6 × (9 × 13) cm,
 courtesy Collection
 Estate of the Artist

Portrait of Guy Mees 1968–1969, photo Marc Poirier dit Caulier, courtesy Private Collection



Guy Mees (1935–2003) was a leading figure of the Belgian avant-garde. Having been acknowledged since the 1960s in Belgium, his work is now becoming increasingly popular among a recent generation of artists, and received internationally. The unique quality of his oeuvre lies precisely in avoiding conventional aesthetic and discursive classification.

Mees quickly gained recognition among the transnational avant-garde of the early 1960s. As a member of the “New Flemish School” he

was in touch with an international network of artists affiliated with the neoavant-garde from Europe, Japan, and North and South America (Spazialismo, Zero, Nul, G.R.A.V, Azimut/h,¹ and Gutai, to name but a few), who shared an interest in light, serial structures, movement, and monochromy. However, his non-authoritarian attitude and conceptual strategies soon led him down an alternative path. With precision and discretion, the artist set out to free his work from systems, structures, and supports. Radically it is based on a precise and attentive presence, and a fundamental but never totalizing way of thinking about the world.

The exhibition features different phases in Mees' career to shed light on his intuitive and conceptual approach from the beginning of the 1960s to his last works from the 2000s. The selected works allow an overview of his ideas of mutability, fragility, and the expansion of pictorial space into real space. The title of the exhibition, *The Weather is Quiet, Cool and Soft* (borrowed from a note by the artist) pays homage to the atmospheric impermanence and poetic processes present in his work.

For Mees, the question of the pictorial was an underlying, not to say omnipresent feature. He had not employed conventional ways of painting since the 1950s. Since then he applied

himself to its slow dissolution and shattering in ordinary space.

Entitled *Lost Space*, two major bodies of work (pieces in lace created between 1960 and 1966, and works from the 1980s onwards featuring coloured paper cut-outs pinned to the wall) define basic ideas of his artistic approach:

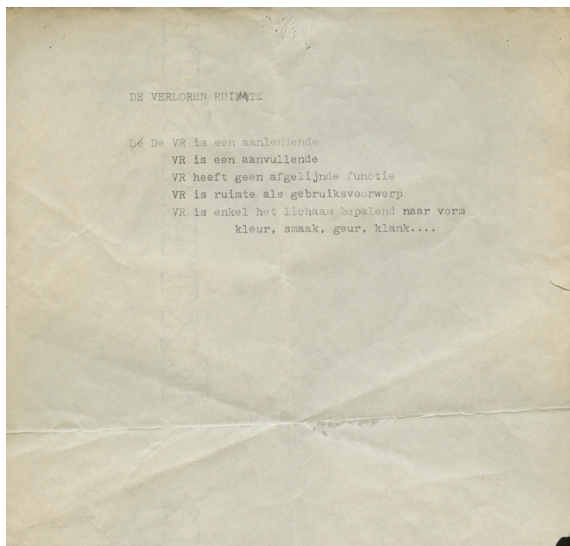
The Lost Space is an adjoining space.

The Lost Space is complementary to present-day living space.

The Lost Space does not have a clear-cut function.

The Lost Space is space as utility object, in which bombast becomes more difficult, and tangibility easier.

The Lost Space is simply the body defined by shape, colour, taste, smell, and sound.

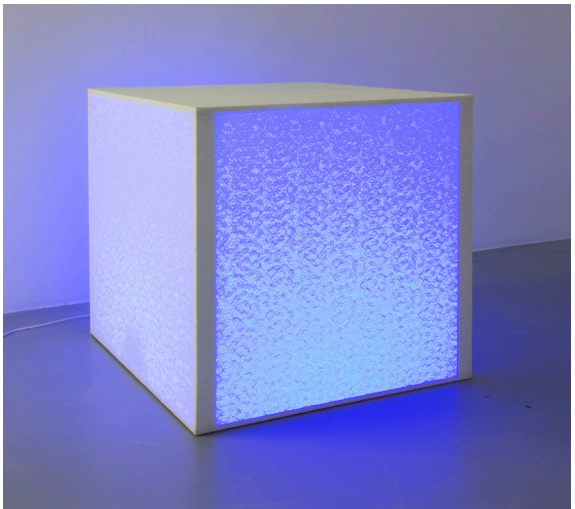


De Verloren Ruimte
(The Lost Space),
1965–1967
Typed version
of the text by Willem
Joris Lagrillière,
courtesy Collection
Estate of the Artist

This text, written in the 1960s by Willem Joris Lagrillière (after a first version from Wim Meuwissen) on behalf of the artist, serves as a poetic manifesto of Mees' work. Beyond his stripping back from form, Mees was an artist of the perceptible, not simply in the visual sense, but in a way that touches the reality of things as they are. Nothing in his work abstracts from what surrounds it, but shares the presence of the phenomena of the world.

The first *Lost Space* works from the 1960s adopt a minimal vocabulary. White panels or sculptural geometrical structures (square, triangle, circle and rectangle) contain white, coloured, or black light fluorescent tubes covered with sensuous layers of lace.

Verloren Ruimte
(Lost Space),
1964–1967,
lace, neon, wood,
70 X 70 X 70 cm,
courtesy Micheline
Szwajcer, Antwerp



The floral pattern of the lace refers both to an old Flemish tradition and to industrial reproduction, as it is not handcrafted, but manufactured lace. The layers create a visual grid no longer geometric, but vibrant and organic.

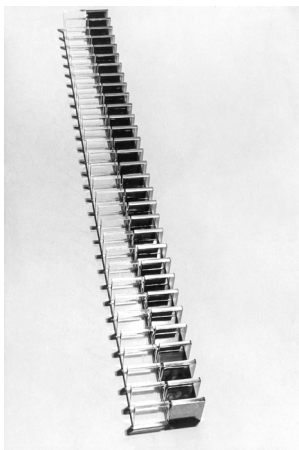


6 ties, 1966, lace,
fabric, courtesy
Private Collections

An edition from 1966, in which Mees presents six lace ties in various colours, also points to the underlying questioning of gender stereotypes in this series.

Mees' works in aluminium, chrome, and Plexiglas, arranged on the ground by order of size and material are listed in detail on the invite for his exhibition at X-One gallery in Antwerp

in 1970. The international artistic vocabulary of that time – including the question of authorship – is prevalent in these works. Each listed industrial object can be identified and replicated, following the instructions by the artist. In addition, these works reveal Mees' modular method: the stable form transforms in space, as light seems to fragment the material.



31 × (60 × 60 × 6) mm 31 × (60 × 60 × 6) mm 1970, Plexiglas, chrome, photo Marc Poirier dit Caulier. courtesy Jason Poirier dit Caulier, Antwerp

Each structure was conceived as *Directions Phenomena*. The white felt fabric envelopes for the metal structures were sewn by hand. They not only functioned as a protective measure, but also signified their negative, and were also displayed, positioned on the ground opposite

Exhibition view
Works, X-One
Gallery, Antwerp,
1970, photo: Marc
Poirier dit Caulier,
courtesy Jason
Poirier dit Caulier,
Antwerp



their positive counterparts. They counteracted the industrial facture with a sense of domestication. It shed light on Mees' distinctive and oblique attitude regarding the rationalism of the time, when seriality and industrial materials were widespread.

Water te Water
(Water to Water),
Zelzate, 1970
Action by
Guy Mees and
Wim Meuwissen
B/w photograph
16 X 23 cm
Photo: A. Dries,
courtesy Jason
Poirier dit Caulier,
Antwerp



The photographs and facsimiles of the actions and declarations *Water to Water* and *An Ice Floe Declared Undefined on 66.5° Southern Latitude and 5° Eastern Longitude in*

the Haakon 7 Sea Antarctica Area, during 120 Hours are good examples of Mees' conceptual commitment to questions that raise environmental concerns.

In case of *Water to Water* (1970), Guy Mees and his friend and collaborator Wim Meuwissen deposited a transparent Plexiglas object containing pure, demineralized water into the polluted canal of Zelzate in east Flanders. Despite highlighting environmental issues, this action also evokes notions of failure and loss: the object exploded as soon as it fell into the water.

The statement *An Ice Floe Declared Undeclared on 66.5° Southern Latitude...* from November 1st, 1969, consists of an A4 document with the written declaration.

A map recently discovered in Mees' archive shows additional traces of a pencil line connecting Belgium and the designated spot: a sign of the tangible that evades any purely conceptual attitude. "In Mees, you never have the question of purity so many artists were invested in: the Zero group, for example, or even Hans Haacke, for whom there was an original, and thus uncontaminated, state."²

The question of authorship, raised in his works from the 1960s and 1970s, encouraged him to explore the amateur's approach to film

Portretten
(*Niveaoverschillen*)
(Portraits (Level
Differences),
1971, 1972, b/w
photograph,
courtesy Collection
Estate of the Artist



and photography. *Portraits (Level Differences)* are spontaneous recordings that each depict a group of three people on three levels of Ytong blocks serving as a podium. This podium was placed in various artistic or familiar environments – a gallery, a street or a garden. The hierarchical positioning of the protagonists allows six possible arrangements: 123, 132, 213, 231, 312 and 321. However, the succession, the protagonists, the surrounding, and the photographic formats are infinitely variable. This resulted in *1,2,3*, a work on cardboard with annotations and photographs from contact sheets. The photos are laid out in a grid, like an outline for sensory mathematics, and highlight the absurd

aspect of the mechanical changing process. However, the photographs featuring friends and family also offer an interesting portrait of the Belgian avant-garde scene, including the entourage of the Galerie MTL (Fernand Spillemaeckers) and the X-One Gallery (Marc Poirier dit Caulier). On an international level, a portrait of Nicholas Serota at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1974 stands out.

*Portretten
(Niveaverschillen)*
(Portraits (Level
Differences)), 1970,
photo Anton Dries,
courtesy,
E. Leytens/
B. Steyaert



In a filmed version presented at the Paris Biennale in 1971, the variability and informality of the situation is even more striking: people talk, smile and switch places in a never-ending process that shows the subjective reproducibility of the action.

The six-position principle also led Mees to further formal explorations of combinations based on a six-colour chromatic chart. In *Level Differences* (a black and white contact sheet on cardboard, 1970), he displays a code where each numerical combination is linked to a felt-

tip colour pen: 123 = green; 132 = yellow; 213 = blue; 231 = red; 312=orange; 321 = violet.



Untitled, 1970,
marker on paper,
courtesy Collection
Estate of the Artist

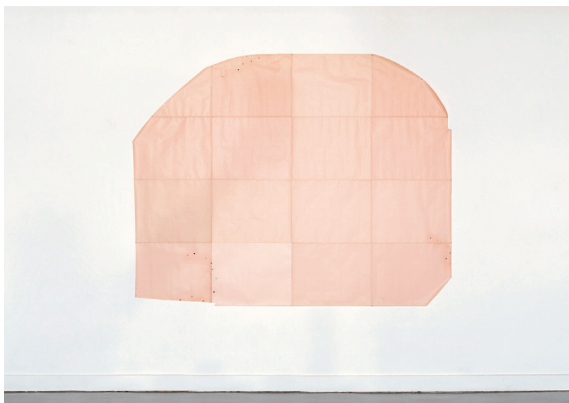
This code was applied to a series of drawings with lines in felt-tip pen arranged in columns on thin paper and placed in groups of three. While the overall composition with its automatism and repetition of pattern and gesture resembles a mechanical process, the order of the sheets cannot be reconstructed, so that they can only be read according to chance. Later on, the lines give way to a sparse constellation of pastel-coloured dots on the surface of the fine paper whose elusive patterns at times almost coincide with the wall and punctuate its lining.

The pastel works on tissue paper from 1975 to 1982 are a turning point in the evolution of Mees' oeuvre and indicate the expansion of the work into space as well as the deconstruction

of the frame. Transparent sheets of coloured paper are directly mounted to the wall using a precise system of taping that creates a delicate grid. The works' chromatic impression is mainly defined by the coloured support. Traces of pastel dots are scattered across the tissue paper and seem to spread beyond it. Pinned to the wall, the works seem to merge with the architecture. In few pastel works, atmospheric titles with reference to seasons, colours and flowers start to appear: *The Weather Is Quiet, Cool and Soft* (1978), *September* (1975), *Impression of a Pink Room with Victoria Blue*, 1978. The conservative romantic tone of these titles, reminiscent of 19th century painting, is a very conscious choice from Mees and his ambivalent relationship to painting. These works point to visual impressions while their colour palette features sombre tones, dim and not exactly seductive, but also saturated, vivid and decorative tonalities. Mural paintings on baseboards – that Mees began in 1980 at his house in Verlus, France – were soon follow, marking a definite and everyday space, yet with an interior blending into the exterior.

The *Lost Space* series from the 1980s consists of strips of coloured paper hastily cut out, sometimes composed of several pieces of coloured paper lightly pinned to the wall. The

*Impressie van een
roze kamer met
victoria-blauw*
(Impression of a pink
room with Victoria
Blue), 1978., 232 X
174 cm,
pastel, pencil
on pink paper (16
parts), courtesy
Micheline Sz wajcer,
Antwerp



Lost Space works almost casually summon the idea of a deconstructed frame and shattered pictorial space. Here, the pastel pattern has disappeared. Support, form, and colour merge with real space and connect art to reality, with the former being an emanation of the latter.

Despite their formal elegance, these works are created out of almost nothing. Various small holes the artist had punched to hang them confirm his antagonism against the iconisation of his work. "They're the pinnacle of the adversity to the spectacle", as Dirk Snauwaert put it.³

The *Lost Space* works recall the starting point and culmination of Mees' conceptual and poetic approach, "filled with that of which he is its outcome, filled with its loss."⁴ They also emphasize

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Dirk Snauwaert,
from the interview
conducted by
Lilou Vidal, *About
Guy Mees*, with
Wim Meuwissen,
Dirk Snauwaert,
Micheline
Szwajcer, *Guy
Mees—The
Weather is Quiet,
Cool and Soft*, ed.
Sternberg Press,
2018

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From a text by Dirk
Pültau, in *L'Espace
perdu, Facettes
d'un Concept*, *Guy
Mees*, Catalogue
Ludion-Cera, 2002

Verloren Ruimte
(Lost Space),
1990, orange paper,
54 X 114 cm,
courtesy Collection
Estate of the Artist



the issue of space, fundamental in Mees' work. "If the work is not installed the way he had envisioned it, the work dies, it ceases to exist. The work is at once very small, and immense," tells his former gallerist Micheline Szwajcer.⁵

In his last works, *Imaginary Ballet* and the watercolours on tracing paper, the antisystematism dear to Mees is again highly relevant. *Imaginary Ballet* is a series of paper cut-outs of floating skirts and dresses, pinned directly onto the wall or painted on glassine paper. The motifs dance lightly on the wall; the strict abstraction is reconciled with delicate figuration.

⁵ Micheline Szwajcer from the interview conducted by Lilou Vidal, *About Guy Mees*, with Wim Meuwissen, Dirk Snauwaert, Micheline Szwajcer, *Guy Mees—The Weather is Quiet, Cool and Soft*, ed. Sternberg Press, 2018

Imaginair Ballet
(Imaginary Ballet),
1998, colored
paper, pastel on
paper, lace,
cardboard box,
28.5 × 28.5 ×
0.8 cm, photo:
Vildana Memic,
courtesy Micheline
Szwajcer, Antwerp



In his last watercolours, floral and geometric forms flirt with a sort of figuration sometimes reminiscent of the luminous boxes covered in lace, the pattern-like paper cut-outs, or the simple gestural touches on tracing paper adapting motifs from his early paintings of the 1950s. This exhibition at Mu.ZEE is an extension of the exhibition from the show presented by the curator at Kunsthalle Wien (31 January - 9 April 2018). It pays special attention to additional archival materials from his estate and punctual actions or ephemeral installations and includes a new selection of works from a different period. It provides further insight into the mind of an artist who, during his entire lifetime, preserved himself from any analytical discourse about his work in favour of its perceptive experience.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication tracing the artist's path and following his gaze through a tactile and archival approach to his works. It includes unknown archival material from Guy Mees's estate, such as early photographs, slides, texts and notes and other documents. In addition, the publication features newly commissioned essays by François Piron, Lilou Vidal, and an interview conducted by the curator with Wim Meuwissen, Dirk Snauwaert, and Micheline Szwajcer – all close acquaintances of the artist. The publication is edited by Lilou Vidal and published by Sternberg Press, Berlin. A new little book of unreleased facsimiles dedicated to the writing process of *The Lost Space* text will be edited by the curator and published by Mu.ZEE and Paraguay.

The exhibition and the publication *The Weather is Quiet, Cool and Soft* are a co-production between Mu.ZEE, Ostend and Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna with the generous support of The Estate of the Artist and Micheline Szwajcer, Antwerp.

Curator: Lilou Vidal

Biography

Guy Mees was born in 1935 in Mechelen, Belgium and died in 2003 in Antwerp.

He has had international solo exhibitions in major institutions and galleries, among others: Ad Libitum, Antwerp (1960–1966); Galerie Orez, Den Haag, (1968–1977); Galerie X-One, Antwerp (1969–1971); MTL, Brussels (1970–1976); Galerie Micheline Szwajcer, Antwerp (since 1982); Academie Waasmunster, Waasmunster (1990); Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (1990 and 1993); MuHKA Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp (2002); Galerie Bernard Bouche, Paris (2007–2010); Museum M, Leuven (2012); Bureau des Réalités, Brussels (2016); Galerie Micheline Szwajcer, Brussels (2016); Galerie David Zwirner, London/New York (2017); gb agency, Paris (2017); Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin/ Cologne (2017); Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2018).

His work has been featured in various international group exhibitions including: *Zero Avantgarde*, Lucio Fontana's Atelier, Milan (1965); *Wide White Space*, Antwerp (1967); *Belgium Avant-Garde*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (1973); Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, (1974); *The Sixties: Art in Belgium*,

Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK), Ghent (1979); *Betekende Ruimte II–Plaats van Handeling / Designated Space II–Space as Scene*, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, (1993); *La Consolation*, Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble (1999); *Exile on Main Street*, N.I.C.C, Antwerp (2002); *STUK*, Leuven, (2002); *Dedicated to a proposition*, Extra-City Kunsthall, Antwerp (2004); *Monopolis – Antwerpen*, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (2005); *A Story of the Image: Old & New Masters from Antwerp*, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp (travelled to Shanghai Art Museum, followed by National Museum of Singapore, 2007–2009); 7, Roger Raveel Museum, Machelen-Zulte (2007); *T-Tris B.P.S.22*, Espace de création Contemporaine, Charleroi (2009); *The Responsive Subject*, Mu.ZEE, Ostend (2010–2011); *Looking Back*, Argos, Brussels (2012); *50 Days at Sea*, 9th Shanghai Biennale (2012); *The Gap: Selected Abstract Art from Belgium* at the Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, London and the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp (2015–2016) among others.

Book Launch and Talk

Table Ronde about Guy Mees

With Koenraad Dedobbeleer, Wim Meuwissen, Dirk Snauwaert, Philippe Van Snick, Lilou Vidal

Sat 24 Nov 3pm

Guy Mees' oeuvre seems to escape all forms of permanence, not only because of the fragility of the materials that the artist chose, but also because of his attitude and the unique deliberately ambiguous short definition he gave to his work according to the text *The Lost Space*. This conversation addresses the question of authorial authority, and that of language, but also considers the issue of preservation of the works and the archives from an oeuvre that strives to elude all logical forms of determination in favor of poetic opacity.

Guy Mees cultivated an approach that was both conceptual and sensitive. He was wary of the irrevocable nature of words and tended to avoid theoretical discussions of his work and to favor the sensory experience of it instead. How, then, can we talk about someone who was wary of excessive analytical debate? Lilou Vidal, curator of the exhibition, has invited Wim Meuwissen, Dirk Snauwaert, Philippe Van

Snick, close acquaintances of Guy Mees and Koenraad Dedobbeleer to discuss their personal approach of Guy Mees' work. Together, they will share their testimony and comment a selection of visual materials and archives related to the two new publications, *The Weather is Quiet, Cool and Soft*, published by Sternberg Press and *The Lost Space*, dedicated to the writing process of *The Lost Space* text, published by Mu.ZEE and Paraguay, both recently edited by the curator for the exhibition.

Colophon

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Tuesday to Sunday 10 am to 6 pm
closed on Mondays

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and 13.30 to 18.00 pm

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