



WRITES

Lien Anckaert

*from ovaries to uterus*

21.01 – 19.03.2023

Dear Lou,

I imagine you weren't expecting a letter from me. It has also been years since I took pen and paper to write anything: except for the weekly shopping list, I have the impression that I never write the way I was taught in school. A visit to an exhibition at the Bijloke site prompted me to do this. In a nostalgic mood, I wanted to take a look at my birthplace, and had completely forgotten that the Academy is now located in the buildings of the old Polyclinic Institute.

Believe it or not, I spent more than an hour in a room where drawings and a series of three black obelisks by a certain Lien Anckaert were on display. You know my aversion to biographical details when assessing the work of an artist. So I won't be able to tell you anything about Anckaert's age or previous exploits. When I was in the room, a young woman was writing with a white marker on one of the obelisks. It could well have been the artist but I was in no mood for conversation and she also seemed too focused to be disturbed. Perhaps I also didn't want to break the magic of my personal discovery of these works with a conversation I would have found trivial in retrospect. (You know how slow I am—compared to you—to translate my emotions and enthusiasm into words!)

But you still know nothing about the works in question. On one of the walls was a series of seven or eight framed drawings that together formed a whole. Actually, I say "drawings" but I might do better to describe them as handwritten texts. The arrangement was such that I first bumped into the end of the text, the footnotes of what later appeared to be a copy of a Dutch Wikipedia article (or something similar) about zombies. A form of appropriation that I would usually find a bland form of academism in contemporary art and wouldn't even take a minute for.

This time was different: it made me smile so hard internally that I took the time to read the whole article. So, like a monk in the Middle Ages, the artist had ensured the multiplication of knowledge—but instead of parchment and beautiful ornamental letters, it was now only black ink on a far too large a sheet of paper. With our instant copy-paste digital culture, we forget how slow the dissemination of information was in the past. But also how slow it might be again tomorrow, should we suddenly run out of electricity to run our computers, networks, and data centers. Would these drawings then become real zombies in se? Would they be the only remnants of that particular Wikipedia article?

I haven't yet told you about the writing or rather scripture that makes Anckaert's works so special. Some texts she writes in capitals, others in lower case. But what makes her works spectacular is that when she starts copying texts it appears that she writes the first letter of each line of text on a vertical axis, only to copy the rest of each line afterwards. Letters like p and q never went below an invisible line.

Most copied texts (I have the impression that Anckaert never records her own words) occupied the top left corner of the sheet, with the result that much of the sheet remained white. On some sheets, she used this space to copy other texts. They had become veritable collages and, as it often happens with pasted clippings, made for the most surprising associations.





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If you are still reading, I can imagine that you would now like to know what the texts read. The title of the exhibition was as follows: *from ovaries to uterus*. Besides an unlikely and no less hilarious questionnaire on sexual practices, there were all sorts of other texts around female sexuality. The second of the obelisks (almost three meters high), which was not quite finished, bore the same text as on the first one, which was already full: fragments of a kind of Kama Sutra for lesbian sex. For a series of drawings based on photographs of artworks found in art books or auction catalogues (including the page numbers or the number of the lots), Anckaert concentrated on the naked female body and its fusion during sapphic love.

Remember our visit to Tate Modern and our discovery of Tracey Emin's tent, in which she had written the names of all the men she had shared a bed with? Well, Lien Anckaert's work shares some qualities with Emin's. Raw. Direct. Without taboo. Uncompromising. BANG! A punch in the face. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 ... KO! It's a form of realism you can't escape. The mirror she holds up to us is not there to tell us we are the most beautiful. No, she confronts us with how we are: fragile, playful, in constant change.

At home I searched the internet for other works by Anckaert. I found a series of unlikely drawings brimming with figures that, if I understood correctly, are a kind of representation of starry skies. The figures literally start dancing on the sheet of paper. A great pity they were not on display at the Ghent exhibition. Or maybe not so bad! It might have detracted from the unity of the exhibition. As it turns out, some of these drawings are currently on display in Amsterdam, at the Hermitage. Maybe we should go there together?

Take care!

Chris

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