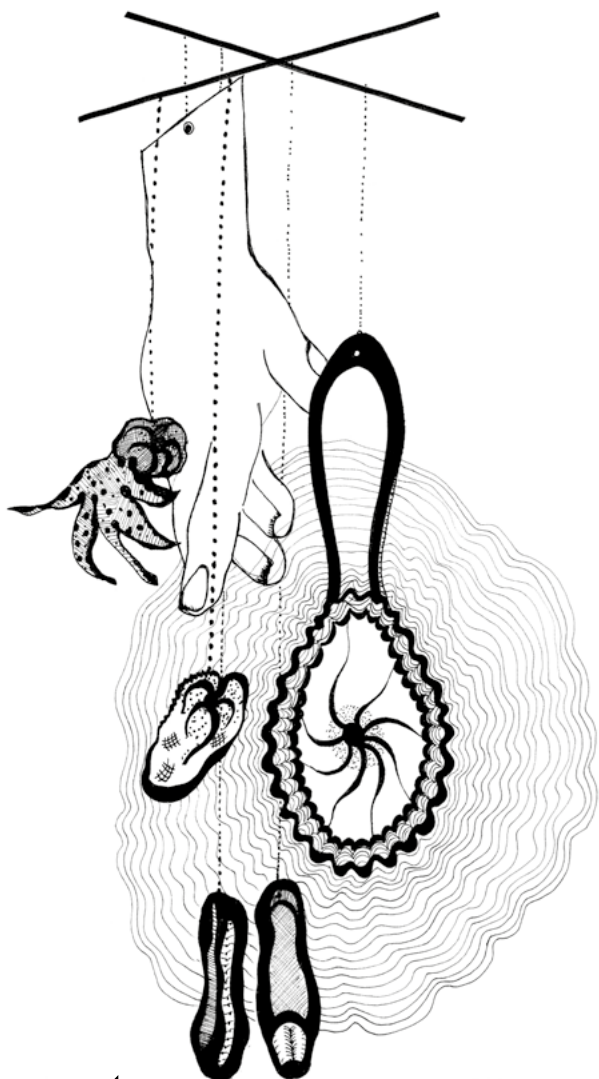


Museum
Leuven

ENG

VALÉRIE MANNAERTS

Antennae



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Valérie Mannaerts' versatile oeuvre stems from a curiosity about the forms and properties of things. How does the organic relate to the inorganic? How does sculpture relate to the pictorial plane? Through hybrid forms, she questions materiality and identity, drawing on feminist thinking. Her works are layered, amorphous and flexible. They resist a single interpretation and predetermined norms and boundaries. Her sculptures show that nothing is completely fixed: they play with transformation and constantly balance between representation and abstraction.

In 'Antennae', Mannaerts reflects on 30 years of artistic practice while also presenting new work. The title refers to the antennae with which insects explore their environment, but also serves as a metaphor for Mannaerts' artistic sensibility: the ability to establish subtle and complex connections between her world, her work, and the viewer.

Across five rooms, a sharp and contemporary picture of Mannaerts' artistic practice unfolds. In the first room, she explores the tension between painting and sculpture. In the next room, the focus shifts to the human body: a body that can convey and generate meaning through the skin of clothing. The third room functions like an outdoor space, where a monumental woven garden unfolds as the panorama of a personal and intimate place. In the last two rooms, the gaze turns inward again, focusing on the interaction between the inner self and what is visible on the outside. The exhibition culminates in a new installation in which Mannaerts explores the position that artistic practice can occupy.



Prefer to listen rather than read?
Explore *Antennae* with our audio
tour, which guides you through the
exhibition's galleries and works.
A tour with audio description is
also available for blind and visually
impaired visitors

03.04
→ 30.08.26

PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH
THE ARTWORKS

INTRO

Volubly Troublously, 2025

Volubly Troublously comprises a free-standing tunic in canvas, worked in relief and adorned with nipples, flowers, and other organic forms. The title translates literally as 'eloquent and unsettling'. Serving as the exhibition's prologue, this opening work gathers together the themes that underpin Mannaerts' visual language and recur across all five galleries: metamorphosis as an artistic stance, clothing as a bearer of meaning, the interplay between painting and sculpture, and a visceral physicality.

Rare Organs, 2000-2001

The *Rare Organs* series brings together, in an associative spirit, travel snapshots, photographs of drawings, and objets trouvés – among them a crumpled cup displaying a photograph of a young Juliette Binoche. Mannaerts developed these images in her own darkroom before reworking them – drawing on the surface in coloured pencil, for instance – and photographing them again. The original image persists only dimly, buried beneath accumulated layers of manipulation.

ROOM 1

Where does the boundary between the two- and three-dimensional lie? How does a painting engage with a sculpture? In this gallery, Mannaerts explores that tension. The rhythm of the space is defined by the new series *Point de capiton*. The seven large sculptures are executed in canvas, as are several other works in the exhibition: canvas transformed into sculpture. Elsewhere in the gallery, the interplay between the pictorial plane and three-dimensionality continues to unfold. *Private Human* (2017) sits at the intersection of a tent pavilion, a sculpture, and a painted veil. *I Like Messy* (2021) is a free-standing tunic sculpture in painted canvas with no defined front or back: both sides carry equal meaning, each revealing facets of Mannaerts' artistic persona.

Point de capiton, 2026

Along the walls, the *Point de capiton* series presents seven sculptures interspersed with plaster buttons. Each sculpture consists of a canvas fixed to the wall at a single point; by folding, cutting, stuffing, and painting, Mannaerts gives it form and volume – a passage from one state to another, from canvas to sculpture. The title refers to the plaster buttons suspended at regular intervals between the sculptures: in French, *points de capiton* denote the buttons on, say, an armchair that gather fabric or leather together at a single point. Mannaerts' *Points de capiton* organise the works in the gallery like punctuation marks in a sentence – anchor points in the space where meaning and form converge, much as the Omphalos of Delphi marked the centre of the world for the ancient Greeks: the navel of the universe. The buttons and sculptures also offer a concise summation of Mannaerts' oeuvre, drawing attention to several recurring themes – the zone between the pictorial and the sculptural, the

boundary between the organic and the inorganic, and the ambiguity of the body. They likewise harbour forms that recur throughout her work: the nipple, the braid, the collar, the bow.

Private Human, 2017

The largest work in the space is *Private Human* – a tall canvas structure rising dramatically from the floor. A curtain? A tent? Mannaerts drew inspiration from follies: those eccentric, symbolic, and often non-functional structures – artificial ruins, temples, pavilions – that graced the gardens of wealthy aristocrats in the eighteenth century, conceived to receive guests in theatrical style. Yet as the title suggests, this *Private Human* is intended for one person alone: an intimate cocoon, a place of retreat that nonetheless maintains a theatrical presence to the outside world. Mannaerts is persistently drawn to the threshold between the intimate and the outwardly visible.

ROOM 2

This gallery places the body at its centre, exploring both its presence and its absence. The early photo and video installation *Porque Te Vas* traces a young woman's search for the representation of her own body and sexuality, and for her place in the world. The more recent series *M.M.* takes as its point of departure the clothing of Mannaerts' late father – what endures when the body itself has gone. For Mannaerts, clothing carries its own rituals and meanings.

The space is articulated by paravents or room screens. They recur regularly throughout her work. Screens serve both as temporary architectural elements that lend intimacy to a space, and as decorative objects in their own right. In keeping with the long history of the form, Mannaerts uses them as a vehicle for images – in this case, photographic series.

Porque te vas, 1996-2025

The song *Porque te vas* gained widespread recognition through the 1976 film *Cría cuervos* and the arresting performance of child actress Ana Torrent. From the screen, she holds the viewer's gaze with unsettling intensity. She is surrounded by Cibachromes – photographs mounted on a transparent paravent specially for this exhibition. These are images of drawings Mannaerts made in the 1990s: drawings concerned with the female body, with sexuality, pleasure, and desire. As in *Rare Organs*, the photographs function as a filter laid over the drawings. The drawn bodies are marked by photographic scars; they reveal themselves only from a deliberately maintained distance. For the then recently graduated Mannaerts, that distance was a necessity – the only means by which these intensely intimate images could be shown.

M.M., 2019

The body is always present in Mannaerts' work, even in its absence. In the series *M.M.*, displayed on the upper screens, she photographs the garments of her late father. Clothing – and the craft of making it – runs deep in the Mannaerts family. Her grandfather ran a menswear shop, and her father, too, had a pronounced

sense of style and placed great importance on his choice of dress. For the photographs, Mannaerts arranged compositions with garments from his wardrobe, as though dressing a shop window.

A shop window is a semi-public space designed to both display and animate – merely placing a garment on a mannequin does not suffice. In these photographs, too, the clothes are animated by the way in which they are arranged, folded, and presented. Through material objects – coats, waistcoats, and ties – Mannaerts seeks to grasp something immaterial: the absence of her father. In this sense, *M.M.* may be read as a family portrait, an evocation of a loss that continues to reverberate through body, memory, and object.

Tender Vessel, 2024

These small shoes in unpainted canvas call to mind the handmade slippers often encountered in textile or ethnographic museums – objects that speak to Mannaerts with particular force. A shoe, after all, is literally moulded to the foot that once wore it; the absent body remains recognisable within it, almost palpable. At the same time, the shoes invoke an ancient Western tradition. It was long customary to cast a child's first leather shoes in bronze, with each set of grandparents receiving one shoe. Such a cast shoe marks a milestone in a life, symbolising growth and development. The slippers in *Tender Vessel* likewise suggest something that grows and lives – though here this is conveyed through what they contain. Inside each slipper lies a teeming mass: bronze casts of forms made in salt dough, which Mannaerts created together with her daughter.

Salt dough is fragile, easily worked, and strongly associated with childhood. By casting these delicate forms in bronze and then re-enclosing them within a tactile and fragile canvas shoe, Mannaerts inverts the material logic. The canvas shoes become, literally, a 'vessel' – a container for creativity and sparkling vitality, and a metaphor for artistic practice.

ROOM 3

Private Architecture (tuin) [garden], 2023

Private Architecture (Garden) presides over this space – a symbolic outdoor environment set within the exhibition. *Private Architecture* is the title Mannaerts gives to all works created for the public realm. This piece is a replica of a curtain she made on commission from URA Architects for the multi-purpose space at Pleegzorg Vlaams-Brabant en Brussel – a foster care organisation in Leuven – the place where, among other things, children meet their foster parents for the first time. When drawn, the curtain lends the space a sense of enclosure without entirely excluding the garden. On the contrary – the garden seems to seep inwards. Mannaerts incorporated elements from the garden and its surroundings at Pleegzorg into her composition. The curtain is composed of wide and narrow panels that together form a varied panorama: an imaginary sculpture garden. On the wide panels, sculptures take pride of place – some that exist, others that could.

In the absence of a horizon, blue screens lend the surroundings a sense of scale and perspective. The blue references the blue elements in the architecture of the Pleegzorg building, which in turn harks back to the blue shutters of the former villa that once stood on the site. The narrower panels harbour all manner of playful forms – plants and animals, among them frogs, rabbits, cacti, and butterflies.

ROOM 4

In this gallery, the gaze turns once again inward – towards the inner self, towards that which pulses and seethes in the depths of the human being. The dark drawings on the wall lay bare the visceral interior of a body: organs and thoughts that ordinarily remain hidden. The other works in the space likewise probe the tension between what is visible on the outside and what stirs within.

Freedom to Think of Things in Themselves, 2020

Freedom to Think of Things in Themselves takes the form of a gigantic free-standing samurai armour – or perhaps simply a large tunic. As in *Tender Vessel*, Mannaerts again inverts the material logic. Where one might expect – partly given the scale – a hard, indestructible silhouette, the sculpture proves to be constructed from many soft layers of black tulle, overlaid with a canvas tabard. The work radiates both feminine strength and vulnerability.

The canvas tabard may be read as a contemporary take on the sandwich board man – a figure who takes to the streets wearing text-bearing panels on front and back. Here too, the garment carries meaning through photographs of women from Mannaerts' archive applied directly to its surface. If these women share anything, it is their aura, their individuality, and their freedom to consider things in themselves – *Freedom to Think of Things in Themselves*. Mannaerts drew the title from Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* – a text about finding one's place in the world, the space one occupies, and what one needs in order to make work as a woman.

Arbalette (Kimono), 2016

The kimono work *Arbalette*, displayed on a raised plinth, may be read as a drawing one can wear on the body. The cotton exterior appears covered with feathers or fallen leaves – a protective, concealing garment. The silk lining, however, is visible only when the kimono is displayed rather than worn and reveals a chaotic world: a pulsating composition of bodily organs. The work holds within itself the capacity to transform – enveloping the body whilst simultaneously serving as a vehicle for images through the pattern of the fabric.

At the same time, it acquires a sculptural quality, both when worn and when at rest on the stand. *Arbalette* functions as a portable space divider – a garment that transforms not only the physical space around the body, but also the mental space of the wearer. The act of putting it on thus takes on a ritualistic quality: a temporary shield against the outside world.

ROOM 5

Attached ever so Lightly, 2026

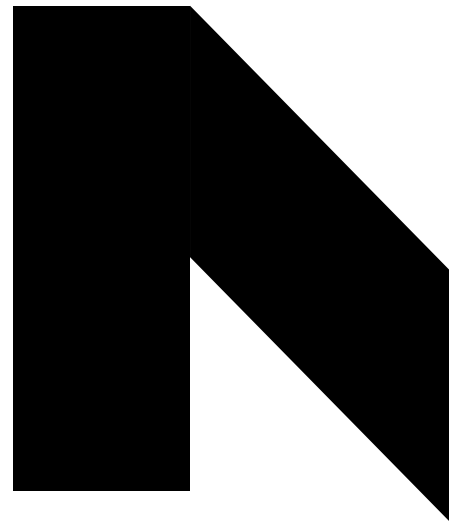
The installation *Attached ever so lightly* comprises a central, towering sculpture surrounded by ceramic objects. Suspended from the ceiling is a leather spoon alongside an enlarged photograph of a hand operating the strings of two glazed ceramic marionette shoes – just barely grazing the ground. The work plays on the idea of the traditional marionette as a lifeless puppet seemingly brought to life: movement that does not originate from within the body, but is imposed from outside – a necessity, an existential compulsion.

Herein lies the connection with the artist's position: both feet firmly planted in reality, yet always reaching for the essence. The sculpture thus establishes a link with the exhibition title *Antennae* – the feelers with which Mannaerts probes and absorbs her surroundings, the artist as mediator between outside and inside, between the world and man. The central installation is surrounded by ceramic spoons and vases – 'vessels', as Mannaerts herself calls them.

The English word 'vessel' resists direct translation into Dutch: it encompasses at once a vase, a container, a receptacle, even a boat – all of these things simultaneously. The spoons, in turn, are an extension of the hand – humanity's most elemental tool. The form of the slightly cupped hand closely resembles that of the spoon. Without seeking to evoke any specific period or culture, Mannaerts here draws inspiration from universal forms and everyday objects. Her ceramic spoons and vessels stand as symbols of what artistic practice can be: a container of experiences in which multiple perspectives become possible. Mannaerts herself draws an analogy between her ceramic vessels and Ursula K. Le Guin's theory of the 'carrier bag', as set out in the feminist literary essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986).

That text centres on the metaphor of the carrier bag: '(...) this great heavy sack of stuff, my carrier bag full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed, and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble, an imperturbably functioning chronometer telling the time on another world (...)'. For Le Guin, the 'carrier bag' – filled with diverse experiences and fragments – serves as a literary alternative to the linear heroic narrative so often dominated by war and masculine strength.

In this sense, Mannaerts' vision of artistic practice resonates with Le Guin's idea of fiction as a 'carrier bag': a form that follows no single central narrative, but gathers together diverse experiences and meanings.



Inspired by the exhibition? During a series of 'Food for Thought' lectures and guided tours, experts will explore themes in Valérie Mannaerts' work in greater depth.

10.05

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Secret Life of Clothes: the meaning behind what we wear

Shahidha Bari on clothing as an interface between body, identity and the world, in conversation with Valérie Mannaerts

28.05

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

An artist's look at Valérie Mannaerts' 'Antennae'

Guided tour by artists Manon De Boer and Hana Miletić

11.06

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A reflective look at Valérie Mannaerts' 'Antennae'

Guided tour with art historian and philosopher Thierry de Duve

30.08

BOOK PRESENTATION

Walther König Verlag is publishing a book in connection with Antennae

Guided tour by Valérie Mannaerts and curator Valerie Verhac, followed by the book presentation with Mannaerts and Ann Demeester

mleuven.be/programme

Advance registration via the website is recommended

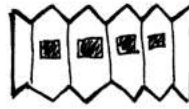
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Kunst in de Stad • Lilou Vidal & Pieter Vermeersch
Kristof Mertens • Cadr'art • Joanna Grauls Carrée
Claude Mannaerts • Koenraad Dedobbeleer

This exhibition will travel to the Centre d'art contemporain d'Ivry – Le Crédac, where Valérie Mannaerts' work will be on display from January to March 2027.

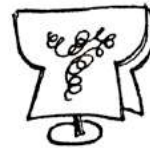
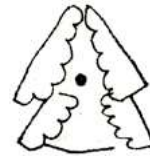
INTRO

1. Volubly Troublously
2025
Canvas, oil paint, plexiglass, resin, latex, tulle, silk, leather, wooden pedestal
2. Rare Organs
2000-2001
Silver gelatin print on baryta paper, (colour) pencil, watercolour, ink



ROOM 1

1. Point de capiton
2026
Canvas, latex, oil paint, textile, lace, woven metal, plaster, mixed media
2. Private Human
2017
Canvas, oil paint, wood, metal, silk
3. I Like Messy
2021
Wool, canvas, oil paint, tulle, metal support
Contemporary Art Collection of the National Bank of Belgium
4. Joyfully Wet (powder pastel)
2026
Fiberglass, acrylic paint



ROOM 2



1. **Porque te vas**
1996-2025
Cibachrome prints
on aluminium, video,
plexiglass



2. **R.M.**
2025
Canvas, metal



3. **M.M.**
2019
Archival pigment print
(framed)



4. **VALÉRIE MANNAERTS
& SYLVIE EYBERG**
Cameracontinue
2019
Archival pigment print
(framed)
Edition MOREpublishers



5. **Tender Vessel**
2024
Patinated bronze, canvas

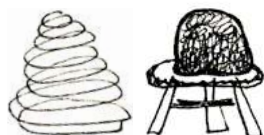


6. **Petit fantôme**
2025
Canvas, wool, oil paint,
lacquered steel, ribbon

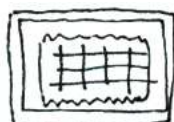
ROOM 3



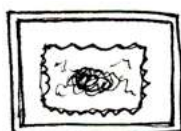
1. **Private Architecture**
(tuin)
2023
Jacquard woven curtain



2. **Fine Boisterous**
Somethings
2011
Bronze, oil paint, varnish



3. **Accumulation of**
Unrecorded Life
(Green Lines)
2021
Canvas, oil paint, tulle,
embroidery (framed)



4. **Accumulation of**
Unrecorded Life
(White Lines)
2020
Canvas, oil paint, tulle,
embroidery (framed)

ROOM 4



1. **Freedom to Think**
of Things in
Themselves
2020
Tulle, canvas, cord,
metal, paper, glass
Collection Mu.ZEE Oostende –
Flemish Community



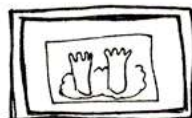
2. **Experimental**
Architecture
2007-2009
Drawing on black paper,
pencil, oil pastel, metal
chains, latex, eyelet,
collage (framed)
Includes works from:
Private collection, Brussels
Private collection
Kersten Geers Collection



3. **Arbalette (Kimono)**
2016
Silk, cotton, coated steel
Edition MANIERA Gallery
Brussels



4. **Little Vessel**
2023
Coated steel, cord,
electrical components
Edition MANIERA Gallery
Brussels



5. **Feet**
2021
Paper, pencil, pastel,
watercolour (framed)

ROOM 5



1. **Attached ever**
so Lightly
2026
Ceramic, leather, textile,
papier-mâché, bronze,
photo mounted on
aluminium, wooden
frame, chain