

Texts Stefaan van Biesen

Text VIII [Article] **I shout silently** [extract from a talk with Stefaan van Biesen]

Stefaan van Biesen is 55, an artist. He has great affection for the mental world and the work of the late Joseph Beuys. He is a member of the Milena (www.themilena.com), a 'think tank, in which people from different countries and disciplines meet to reflect together on the border-crossing aspects of culture, language, art, science, ecology and health.' Here van Biesen discusses 'De Sleep' (= The Train) and 'De Ent' (= The Graft), which is about the melting together of nature and culture.

Stefaan van Biesen: 'Sometimes things happen, which are the final proof, so to speak, that one is doing well. After I had made De Ent for the psychiatric home in Torhout, it was decided that the building itself should be given the same name: the Psychiatric Home De Ent. It was a very nice present, particularly because it indicates that the people there felt the interaction between the place itself and the work of art; as a form of unity. When that happens, it really represents integration. Not everybody senses it in the same way; that is normal. I often make work that merges with nature; this was also the case in Torhout. Some people have a problem with that, in that they find it too ephemeral. But even that is exactly one of the purposes of art: to raise questions, and resistance if necessary. Still, through my art I try to teach the people mainly to look at the dialogue with the place. I find this to be a very rich experience.'

The work in Torhout consisted of a long broken branch, made from a glass-like polyester and carried by a few forked metal bars. The transparent substance gives lightness to the sculpture as a sign of hope: the branch does not die, it contains a promise of growth, of yearning for life. As such the work is also the symbol of the psychiatric patient, who tries to join society again. The graft seeks contact with the mother tree just as they are trying to join society.



'de Ent' 2005 foto: : ©Marco Cosaert

At the same time I wanted to make reference to old orchards, as the building, in my eyes, exudes an atmosphere of an ambulatory. I, myself, chose the trees, which grow there, but of course in consultation with the people of the home, out of respect. It is important to take specific standpoints in life. It is also important that one seeks out underlying arguments, in consultation with others – and by going to significant places to show, as an artist, how we can and should interact with our patrimony and thus also with our nature. In this way I take a standpoint. In a silent way, this is true. I am shouting but silently.'

'My work for the local health centre De Sleep in Ghent has, in many respects, come about in a more abstract way, simply because at that time, nothing had yet been built. I did, of course, look at the plans and the model. Furthermore it allowed me to constantly rethink my work during the whole process – once again always in consultation with the architecture, the place, the people who work there, and the people who visit the centre. Some think that architecture actually restricts one as an artist, but the opposite is often true; good architecture gives rather a feeling of relief.

De Sleep is a meeting place within a large environment and also for many cultures. There are a lot of sounds in the building; it is humming with activity – and that is how I got to De Zwermer (= The Swarmer), which is actually a combination of a bee hive and a clock, but with the sound holes of a stringed instrument. It is important to me to use a light material, to allow the work of art to be open. This is integration as well, and one thing leads to another. I talked to a lot of people there and discovered that those who work there, should first of all be able to listen. That is how I came to the idea of the listening ears, which I call (wh/l)is(p/t)e(r/n)ing shells, and they hang now at different places against the wall. Finally there are the pictures of five metres long: two graphically edited panoramas of people standing in a peculiar bee landscape with bee hives, people and swarms of bees. This work is mainly meant to incite, to be looked at and to be reflected upon. I have something about bees. In my work I often refer to the world of bees; a fascinating world with an ingenious biological system; a fragile caring society. Every little animal is a small link in the whole, and a necessary link, as this system protects the entire nest from disease. It is a natural, prehistoric, self protecting organism.'

'What I am basically doing, also now in my design of the new large kitchen of the Guislain in Ghent, is looking for maximum of integration and dialogue with few means. You will not be surprised when I tell you that I infinitely love the concept and force of the arte povera. I take a place on an imaginary stage and try, through a well chosen image, to address the other in silence, and with the hope that my art also offers a bit of comfort to the person who is searching.'

Laurens de Keyzer Extract from 'DE GESCHIKTE PLEK' (= THE APPROPRIATE SPOT).

Lannoo - archipl-architecten Patrick Lefebure. Belgium.

Text VII [Article] Geist - in situ installation ['Dots' Sint-Niklaas Belgium 2006].



Geist' Stefaan van Biesen 2006. Casinopark Sint-Niklaas 2005

In the park of the Casino one can see Stefaan van Biesen's 'Geist', a large print on canvas in the shape of a head thinking above a small pond. The forehead is not just frowning, but also reflecting on how to influence an environment in a positive way.

'Geist' is a print on an industrial canvas, on which the head of the artist is partly visible. The portrayal is floating above the water surface of a little pond in a well-kept and laid-out little park. The portrayal is not so much a portrait, but more the representation of a place: the head as the locus of reflection. At the same time and paradoxically, the artist wants to enfeeble this rational cliché. The cognitive capacity of man is not solely located in the brain. In other words, what does this absolute expression mean if this reflection is not being related to other things? The work of Stefaan van Biesen shows an associative closeness between reflection, acting, the environment and welfare. Or formulated as a question: how do our thoughts manifest themselves through acts within our environment and to which extent do they contribute to our welfare?

The specific choice of materials (a canvas) and the location (above water) also give the literal aspect of 'Geist' a symbolic layer. Wind and water are the physical manifestations of the Eastern concept of Feng Shui. Feng Shui tackles the question of how an environment can influence happiness. Can harmony arise between natural and created forms and is it possible to adapt the environment in order to stimulate vitality? These are questions which are crucial when talking about town planning and urbanisation, but that are often completely lost given a solely rational-functionalistic approach. 'Geist' aims to portray this appeal by ignoring the belletristic embellishment.

Stefaan Van Bellingen [fragment from the catalogue 'Dots' September 2006].



Geist' digital print on canvas

Text VI [Article] Sanctuaries [approaching silence] galerie S & H De Buck.

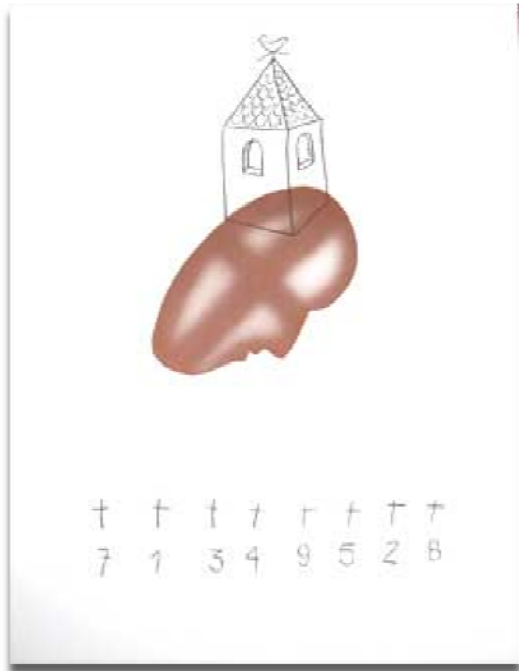
Sanctuaries are nature reserves where one cannot make any noise. Silence is a concept, which everybody in this modern society knows, but only seldom really experiences. That Stefaan Van Biesen tries to create such an area in a gallery is therefore remarkable. Then a gallery is a place where art is exhibited and thus a cultural space by definition. Van Biesen however tries to abolish the age-old contradiction between nature and culture by bringing the two concepts in harmony.

Van Biesen is a landscape artist. This does not mean that he makes a sculpture to have it put in some or other public park or lawn or passes his days, painting idyllic nature sights. No, the landscape artist works with the landscape. He integrates nature in his art or communicates with nature by means of his art.

Stefaan Van Biesen exhibits charcoal drawings and some three-dimensional works in Gallery S&H De Buck until 30th October (2004). We often see the artist's sculptures back in his drawings, such as the 'Gedachtenvanger II' (= 'Catcher of thoughts II'), a round spherical shape with a zinc funnel. Talking about pure poetry! This instinctive aspect can be found in most drawings. A jam pot with the word 'souvenir' above it refers to smells, which are often connected with memories. These are evoked again every time such a smell passes our nostril. But nature also remains the leading actor in his drawings. Birds, rabbits, flowers, etc., although put on paper in a simple way, always refer to something deeper. Still those works are always playful and never remain heavy on the stomach. Thanks to their high poetic content they are rather like butterflies in the stomach: a feeling of happiness and emotion. That Van Biesen is a talented author as well does not surprise us. Finally - with our sweet teeth - we still mention a chocolate sculpture representing the artist himself. He is crawling on all fours on a road, which is indefinable. The artist is an eternal traveller in his own landscape, a human being crawling alone through his world. Melancholy through and through!

Stefaan Van Biesen shows in gallery S&H De Buck a side, which the public possibly did not really know yet. Still the drawings breathe the same poetry as his landscape art. They clearly follow the same line, but not in a boring way. We certainly did not have any problems with a déjà vu and rather let ourselves be silenced.

Yoon Hee Lamot [Magazine Zone 09, October 2004].



Melancholy rules the world of Stefaan van Biesen

Text V [Article] Excerpts from 'The figurative library'

[Imagination and contemporary art in the public library]

Bibliotheek- & Archiefgids, nr. 4, August 2003 by Geert Vermeire.

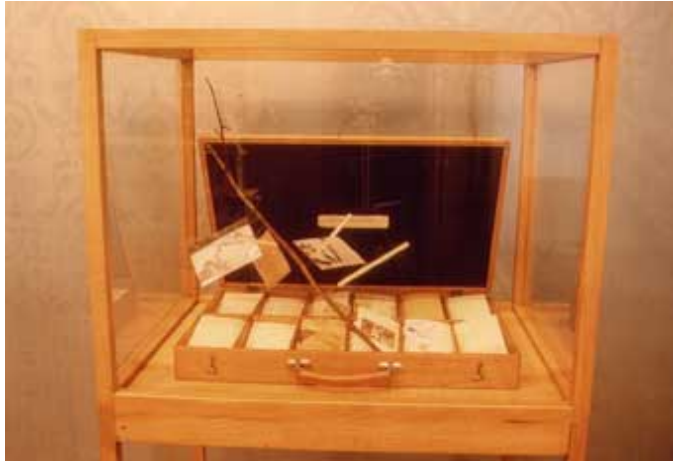
Contrary to other cultural forms, art is rarely associated with the library. Although literature became a commonplace in various museums, museums have lost their status of art temples in favour of public houses where the focus is not only on collections but also on imagination, in manifold ways. Museums are beyond conservation. They question themselves and participate in a dialogue with their visitors. Writers and literature in general are invited to collaborate. This article investigates whether libraries experience a similar evolution and explores what contemporary art has the libraries to offer.

Art and language

Historically, art and language have always been affiliated. Opposing word and image is largely a Western reflex. Word and image are inseparable. Poets, philosophers and painters speak a common language. From the second part of the 20th Century on, Belgium has played a unique part in the ongoing dialogue between art and language. No other country has given the word such dominance in image-, object- and concept art. The pieces of René Magritte, Cobra, Christian Dotremont, Marcel Broodthaers, Jef Geys, Denmark, Fred Eerdekens, Patrick Corillon, Gaston De Mey and many others, exist by grace of the word. The notorious 'blue bic'-art of Jan Fabre is a variation on the same theme. Contemporary artists like Wim Delvoye, Thierry De Cordier en Stefaan Van Biesen integrate word and image, driven by a hyper individual world experience. Brieven uit Schoorisse (Letters from Schoorisse) and Brieven aan een Boom (Letters to a Tree) evaporate the image, only words remains. The pieces of these artists let us participate in a systematic, incessant doubt. Thierry De Cordier isolates himself in his kitchen garden. Through his writing, reporting a complete recoil, the artist wishes to erase himself. In Brieven uit Schoorisse (1988-1998) only landscapes, silence and absence remain. Writing as revocation.

Stefaan Van Biesen's *Letters to a tree* (1996-1997) puts fundamental questions about communication and language into words. Experiencing nature cannot be expressed. Van Biesen's 38 letters constitute an intimate, vulnerable library, safely put and closed away in a case, a shrine. Only the image remains. What comprises the existence of language then? In these pieces the public is deprived of the certainty of text, they are drawn to themselves with the question 'Who am I without language? What does a wordless world mean to me?' The pieces of De Cordier and Van Biesen are libraries of the imagination. They put vulnerable words in a shrine. They take words for butterflies, strong in their flight, fragile in their rest.

As threatened objects, books are omnipresent in contemporary art. Inherent is the representation of the library as a shrine...



Letters to a tree, 1996/1997.

The library as perceived by the contemporary artist

Contemporary art is fascinated and in awe by the library-as-a-shrine, as a mausoleum. Stefaan Van Biesen's installation '*SKIN*' incorporates this form of watching. The piece consists out of a reconstruction of an imaginary library, like the one exhibited in '*San Girolamo nello studio*' (ca. 1474), a painting by Antonello da Messina guarded in the National Gallery, London. The hermit in the painting reads a book from his private library, a wooden construction, platform-like, in a Gothic space. There are a few eyeholes exposing a serene landscape. The reader is unaware of the setting. Birds wait on the doorstep of the building and sing in an unintelligible language. Van Biesen made a reconstruction of this library, purposely putting the imaginary library into an actual one. A transit space, an open library where one can walk through without entering. A void space in and out of the world. At the same time, it is also a precise reconstruction of the painting's library. The artist makes it literally accessible.

The installation is completed with videos of various libraries, with stills of book walls and interiors of writers, artists and philosophers. The books are visible but inviolable. The books are present as bearers of knowledge, with an invitation to watch, not to read. The piece communicates a wordless experience, emphasized by large monochrome canvasses. Colour, not words, interacts with the visitor. The installation is completed by a 'walking library'. A few bookcases are placed amidst the identical cases of the guest library. The artist invited a hundred people to fill these cases with a worthwhile moment of a walking journey captured in a glass jar. This library of experience dialogues with the thousands of (other) books. The glass books mirror their concealed forms of experience.



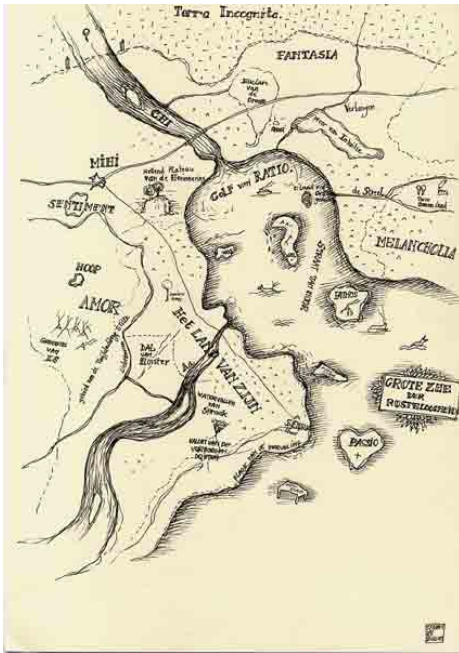
With the 2002 project 'Verticale Stromen' (Vertical Streams), the public library of the Belgian Bredene, invited seven contemporary artists tot express their views on libraries in and around the edifice. Each artist was asked to exploit a locker at the entrance... Stefaan Van Biesen labelled his locker 'De droom van de tuinman III' (The Dream of the Gardener III). His displayed a small garden with blooming words. The shoes of the gardener (librarian) stood solitary in the garden. Van Biesen suggests a librarian who encourages the growth of words in a library as a public garden. The artist also presented 'De gemarkeerde tijd' (Marked Time): a remarkable book table. A roadmap to the imagination was drawn on the tabletop. On the map, books were drenched in honey, the table's legs stood in honey pots. Figuratively speaking, honey pours over the books and the table. A library catches the honey (imagination) and offers it to its visitors.



'De gemarkeerde tijd' (Marked Time)

Stefaan Van Biesen collaborated with some youngsters on a gigantic map of the imagination, placed up against large terrace doors. 'Het land van Zijn, is... (The Land of Being, is...) mapped young people's emotional world and built figurative bridges to the countries of the other participants...

Geert Vermeire [Bibliotheek- & Archiefgids, nr. 4, August 2003].



'The Land of Being, is'. drawing ©Stefaan van Biesen

Text IV [Article] Nature cultivated

The three installations of Stefaan Van Biesen, 'Buzzer 1', 'Library' ('Appendix') and 'Plant Talker', show a same sensibility and empathy for the environment in which he is working. To him, the park and nature are no setting.

They almost become a medium, a place where man is confronted with incomprehensible phenomena and insoluble questions, but also with his own impotence and insignificance. Doubt and melancholy are never hard to find in Van Biesen's oeuvre.

'Buzzer 1' belongs to a series of pieces of art which have been created by his fascination for sounds of nature and the world of bees. It is a wooden sound box with belfry windows of which the back has been made of an organic material of feathers, sand and foam. Surprisingly is the confrontation between the smooth front and the back, which reminds you of an animal's nest or of the pellets of an owl. It is as if the artist wants to neutralize the 'imaginary' contrast between nature and culture. The piece of art has been put like a precious shrine, a reliquary, on two branches of a large tree in the beech alley. Is it a peace offering to the tree or a present of the tree?



Elsewhere in the park, he has made a small library leaning against a tree trunk, on a branch which is like turning away from the tree and supported by a nest box. The books have been binded and are therefore illegible. "I am a silent observer, who experiences at the bottom of your crown, how inaccessible knowledge can be, how intangible life can be", as he writes in a 'Letter to a Tree'. How is it, for example, that birds can sing and fly? "Science is looking for answers to unanswerable questions and looking to your bark, with the books carried by your branches, I wonder whether we will ever really know. Whether man will be able to reach the knowledge which explains the secret of life (...) Here I express my insignificance to nature, my impotence to declare is a recognition and immoderate enjoying of her beauty." Art as an attempt to fathom comforting nature. With the 'Plant talker' he seems to hand over an instrument to start the (impossible?) dialogue with nature. It is a big prompt box in which you can stand up. You can then see a small fragment of a young tree through a horizontal slit. The prompt box is a tool which you can use to talk to a young birch tree and to encourage it to become big and strong. So it is more like a metaphor for the incompetence to converse with nature in a natural way...

Paul Geerts ['nature cultivated' De Morgen, may 2003].

Text III [Article] The world of the recluse [Stefaan van Biesen's philosophical path].

Many will have looked at the painting "San Girolamo nello studio" by Antonello da Messina in the London National Gallery with certain amazement and questioning eyes. San Girolamo is better known as Hieronymus. The Saint is mostly represented as a hermit who lives in poor circumstances. Let's think about the famous painting of Jeroen Bosch in the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium. We see the recluse who has thrown himself in front of the crucifix, only dressed in his undergarment. Behind him, a serene and most beautiful landscape unfolds, to which the hermit pays no attention.

Voluntary seclusion

Antonella da Messina pictures the recluse in his study, an open construction in which the church father withdraws. His wooden construction is part of a bigger picture, an imaginary, gothic room which could refer to a church as well as to a palazzo. Slender pillars and vistas with a view on the landscape, only meant for the viewer, not for the character who has withdrawn in that space. He has retired voluntarily in a firmly structured studio with only walls. The studio is somewhat elevated above the world, it is like a stage. The learned church father is reading a book and is surrounded by several objects. He observes the world through educational material, not through direct observation. He observes the world in which he has retired. Let's not forget that the man is a monk and a scholar who is responsible for the Latin standard version of the bible, the Vulgate. His cardinalate was assigned posthumously, therefore the red mantle and cardinal's hat, attributes with which he is mostly represented.



©National Gallery London, 'San Girolamo nello Studio' - Antonella da Messina

The philosophical path

Many artists, scientists and philosophers recognize themselves and their own situation in this state of retiring disposition from the world. Stefaan van Biesen shares this feeling. He wants to complete an installation from this fascinating painting. In his preparatory file he writes the following about the scholar: "The trip he makes is a mental voyage, as if he can transfer himself through thoughts to other, still unknown places. The studio is a projection of his thinking."

Van Biesen himself studied arts but his work is mainly determined by the sense of 'made for a certain place'. "I always start from the place", he tells me in confidence. That is how he was invited for a solo exhibition in the Park ter Beuken in Lokeren, Belgium. For this project he started from the existing and laid-out footpath. He regards it as a philosophical path, a path, which you follow while you're thinking on your way. You philosophise while you're walking, you are talking to yourself. Your train of thoughts is interrupted when you meet a piece or art. His "Little house of whispers" for example, is leaning against a tree and invites you to enter and whisper. You are talking to a tree. Actually, you are talking to yourself.





'Skin' installation – Public library Zwijndrecht, Belgium 2005.

A temporarily imaginary space

Stefaan van Biesen considers the park as “an imaginary space in which he is staying temporarily.” He likes to tune piece of art to the place and to integrate it in the related site. That is why it is sometimes hard to find his pieces of art, because they really become part of the environment. Yet most pieces of art clearly differ from the environment, different from nature.

Van Biesen’s work is quiet work, contemplative and urging to observation and experience. His “Wind chamber”, which he created in Zonnebeke Belgium near Ieper, is a brilliant example. It consists of a circular tube, which has been suspended from a large tree, and is made of black tulle with a height of 14 meters and a diameter of 1,80 m. The tube has an opening, which can be used as an entrance. You can retire for a while in the middle of nature and observe the place around you, looking through a black haze of tissue. You may think you are isolated, even if everyone can see you and you can see them. It is a mental space, which is formed in a sublime and poetical way, as a shaft of black rays, black light that beams through the trees.

In transit

The imaginary space is something that has been occupying him for years now. The painting of the Messina is a piece of art that repeatedly stood out. The working space of Girolamo “is an open place, it is an imaginary room which can only be closed for the eye of the other by thought. It is a place in which you are ‘inside’ as well as ‘outside’”

It is an orchestrated space, a transit zone, a place of being positioned both in and out of the world. The observer is forced into the role of peeping Tom, he can observe without participating. It is a world, which is not or cannot be his.

To step into the work

Stefaan van Biesen titles his project “skin – huid – peau – pelle”. He wants to reflect the layers that are hidden in his work. The project exists of a precise wooden reconstruction of the studio, which is represented on the painting. The reconstruction is stripped of every anecdotic style, he shows the study in three-dimensional and pure, naked form, so it can really function like that. It can entered by everyone and can be filled out one way or another or used as a mental space.

The data visible on the painting are being respected accurately, however, the completion of the non-visible parts remains. The gate on the left-hand side is being completed. The back is a different story. In this the artist is not tied, and he foresees a flexible installation with tables and videos. On the video screens shootings can be seen of some acquaintances' and friends' libraries. The book holds all the knowledge, and is one of the means to explore the world.



The library of a friend, Stefaan van Bellingen, art historian. Video-still: 'Skin, must learn how to breathe'

Large monochrome canvases complete the installation. They too create an interaction with the observer, as colours have a distinct influence on our behaviour.

Indefinite future

This project would fit in a city like Bruges, where the exhibition "Jan van Eyck", the Flemish Primitives and the South" scores a big success now. It could be an interesting reflection and supplement. I can only hope that the project can be realised and that the reconstruction plays a definite part. It does have other purposes than being only observed.

Daan Rau [Openbaar Kunstbezit, June 2002].

Text II [Article] Stefaan van Biesen lays an ear on the grass [1998]

Lokeren always succeeds in achieving a high level with its modest summer open-air expositions in Park Ter Beuken. This summer Stefaan Van Biesen starts an intense conversation with the dark, fairy-tale side of the park with its age-old trees. The artist says that he considers the park mainly 'as an imaginary room, which he is staying in'. This stay resulted in a wonderful exposition.

An ear on the grass, the title of the exposition, refers "to my position as observer of and attentive listener to the dialectic of the place. I want to be there nearly anonymously and disappear in it mentally, so that only what is on display is a remnant or still evidence of my presence during the preparation process." This is a quote from the catalogue text of Johan Pas. But one does not need the catalogue to be able to enjoy this exposition. The statues of Stefaan Van Biesen speak for themselves. They are somewhat old-fashioned and romantic, but exceed the categorisation thanks to their fascinating formal articulation.

The stone statue hanging straight down from a branch, Valeriaan, is breathtakingly beautiful and this precisely because of its perfectly stylised realisation. This hanging straight down like a plumb line is strengthened by two belts with cross connections, which the statue is hung in and which come closer to each other the higher you go, thus increasing the illusion of height. The stone statue itself with its polished form also makes you think of a plumb line. It is a kind of flat cone, which gets an abstracted human face with a stylised nose. But still, under this taut form slumbers a kind of stagerer: a human being hanging upside down with its head.

It is the first statue already dating from 1993, which you meet beside the winding path in the park with ponds. The second statue can be found against the old wall on the other side of the path. It is a brown square pillar with a moulded nose on top of it and some branches and leaves as a crown. In this statue, which appeals to our childlike imagination in which trees get human features, Van Biesen creates a tension between the geometric form of the pillar and the organic elements.

This contrast is also present in the fabulous 'Whispering house' (1998), which is placed at the foot of a big tree. The little house with its taut form leans against the stem with its slanting roof. It makes us look to nature in an artificial way through the groove in the back wall, through which you can only see a strip of the stem. Once again there is the contrast between culture and nature, which is characteristic for the park. As a romantic creation from the 19th century the public park also offers an ambiguous character: a piece of tamed nature in an urban context to simmer down, but also a place of child molesters and assailants.

This ambiguity is perceptible for instance in the work with the cushions tied high up to the stems of the trees. Images of feet are printed on the front of the cushions: images of a previous video performance showing Van Biesen dancing on the parquet like a wild man dressed in vine leaves. The mythic wild man in this performance is a harrowing parody of the myth of man in his natural state.

The sculpture Landscape/Mindscape a little further down is a hanging transparent hood with a wooden edge at eye level. When you go and stand under it, you come into another world. The hood functions as a kind of sound catcher: what was an unspoken background noise just moments ago, now seems to fall apart into separate components. One becomes very much aware of the water streaming in the pond a little further up for example. A panorama of a large field with beehives has been attached to the inside of the round wooden edge at eye level. After spending some time under the round hood, one loses one's orientation. So Van Biesen also knows how to evoke vivid experiences without appealing to a language of romantic forms.

Beehives are not only depicted on the panorama under the transparent hood. Van Biesen also made one on the other side of the stone bridge. The work of art 'De werkster' (= the Woman Worker) consists of a simple square beehive with an enormous ball dress on a thread. The last work of art in Park Ter Beuken with excavated shadows of a high wire walker in the lawn draws a bit of a blank. In this park exposition Stefaan Van Biesen nevertheless reveals himself as an interesting 'melancholic' artist certainly worth noticing.

Eric Bracke, De Morgen, June 1998.

Text I [catalogue] an ear on the grass [Johan Pas]



'letters to a tree' 1997. Domherenpark Heusden-Zolder Photo: Jan Kempenaers

Thoughts in the park [on an exhibition by Stefaan van Biesen].

I. Modernity and Melancholy

This introduction is in fact not more than a written train of thoughts. This goes for a poem as well, all-be-it less strict. The linear journey of the traveler recognizes its antipode in the encircling movement of the walker. If a written article can be considered as a purposeful trip, then an essay should rather be seen as a circuitous stroll, and a poem as a consciously aimless stray. And it is precisely this stray which is often most significant. This is how the 17th century Dutch author Jacob Cats wrote a lot of his moralizing poems, either whilst strolling in the fields or in the big garden of his property Sorghvliet. The sight of a frog, a dead bee in a flower or a few hewed down trees inspired him to create most sublime poems of nature. These were later on (1646) bundled in 'Hofgedachten', which prompted me to choose the title for this text. Reflecting on some of Cats' writings, they reveal an almost pre-romantic melancholy. A banal observation of ploughing farmer's leads in this way to a rather cynical reverie about human transitorizes and it even has an ecological undertone.

The collection of poems "Letters to a traveler" by Stefaan van Biesen also often appears to be the result of a spontaneous association on a rather banal subject. The articulation of an "ordinary" experience most strongly confronts us with ourselves. Most of van Biesens' texts create a dialogue themselves. "Writing is looking at yourself in the mirror." The traveler from the title is the artist, who writes and reads simultaneously and molds his self-image on paper. On the one hand the fields of tension between present and past, and on the other hand between nature and culture, constantly present points of contact. The last lines of Stefaan van Biesens' poem are as follows:

I am the archivist of my own past

I collect words in images

on the flea market of the present

on which I sometimes get lost,

I lose any reason if I fail.



'My load is undefined' 1992/94. Video registration of a two-day trip Photo's: Dirk van Himste

These sober words constitute the basis of an as sober self- portrait: the portrait of the artist in doubt, as traveler without destination. This melancholic self-image becomes even clearer in the performance on the videotape "My load is undefined" (1992-94). On this video van Biesen makes a two-day trip with an unidentifiable, but rather heavy object on his back. This "story of an endless journey" signifies an accurate metaphor for the "aimless" artistry in a purposeless time, described as "post-modern".

Van Biesens' wandering and unsure attitude which appears from his texts and his arts of design, exemplary contrasts with the self-confident and fighting language from the manifests and actions of the early avant-garde (not for nothing a military conception). To hardcore modernists such as futurists and constructivists avant-garde was a synonym for civil war, and modernity equaled conflict. Their hatred for the middle-class conservatism matched their dislike of romantic melancholy and sentiment of nature. A futuristic slogan such as "Let's kill the moonlight" should be read as an announcement of nature's downfall. An image of nature, which was polluted by romance and bourgeoisie, had to give way to future and technology. As such the early modernism can be regarded as a cult of conflict, as the poetics of the polemic. The world-picture of the modernist consists of polarities: new versus old order, body versus spirit, and culture versus nature.

Stefaan van Biesen opposes the aggressive image of modernity to the frail image of melancholy. In this others support him. Artists such as Jan Vercruyssen, Thierry De Cordier and from the younger generation Ludwig Vandeveld, and Philip Aguirre, work in a similar field in which concepts like present-past, body-spirit and culture-nature are no longer regarded as irreconcilable. In this option the piece of art does not function as a weapon, but as a balm on the wounds caused by modernism. When melancholy is interpreted in this way it represents sadness and comfort at the same time. Stefaan van Biesen's oeuvre shows similarities with several artistic traditions in which doubt and melancholy are important, such as certain aspects of mannerism and baroque, but also aspects of romanticism and symbolism. Besides this the artist does not experience the differences but the similarities, not the conflicts but the connections as essential and meaningful.

Against his better judgment van Biesen creates a melancholic world-picture in which the (unreachable) unity of body and spirit, the (dis)continuity of present and past and the (impossible) reconciliation of culture and nature are in a central position. This world-picture is gradually created by an at the same time stubborn and traditional image of complex allegories and symbols, sentimental walks and letters, precious objects and materials, busy bees and threatened trees. As such van Biesen's texts, drawings, sculptures, installations and videotapes are poetic moments in a search without purpose, with maybe the exception of comfort.



Valeriaan', Lokeren 1998 Stefaan van Biesen. Photo: Paul De Malsche.

II. An ear on the grass

For the last few years the concept of "open-air exhibition" has been devaluating significantly. The budding of the trees and the first warm days more often coincides with open-air exhibitions of sculptures. To many organizers it is not art, but the catering industry and tourism, which are the most important instigators.

Gardens and parks are filled with multiform objects which do not belong there and which have the effect of a dog in a manger. It is difficult for a designing artist to fill up a space, which is not suitable for art. Both organizers and artists require a nuancing and tolerant attitude to avoid the traps of the genre. A thorough reflection in the necessity, context and concept of this project emerge. His first acquaintance with the location of Park ter Beuken confronted him with both the difficulties and possibilities of the place.

Of course a park is a most ambiguous place. It represents artificial nature amidst an urban surrounding. As a 19th century concept the town park is the hybrid result of enlightenment, romanticism and social utopia. Most of the big town parks such as Central Park in New York, have split up during the 20th century in utopia and its drawback, i.e. nightmare. The metropolitan park, which is during daytime an idyllic place for joggers and nannies, at night transforms into a dark setting of sexuality and terrorism. Landscape gardens and town parks have initially been designed for walking and leisure. Therefore they show characteristics of picturesque design created around moments of moving, thinking and looking. The park is circuit, a place of thought and a field of vision. It is a domesticated landscape for the inexperienced walker. There is no room for real nature. As intersection of present and past, of nature and culture, the park represents a kind of twilight zone, a fictitious space.

It is this aspect, which seems to inspire Stefaan van Biesen. He tells us to consider the park 'as an imaginary room in which I temporarily reside'. The title of his project, 'An ear on the grass', refers 'to my situation as an observer and attentive listener to the dialectics of the place. I want to be there almost anonymously and disappear mentally. As such only what is shown is a remainder or still evidence of my presence during the preparation process. Because of van Biesen's intention, the park is not just another background for a few existing sculptures. The completed works will function as temporary ephemeral props in a given space. Some of his performances, such as 'Little House of Whispers' and 'Landscape/Mindscape' even evoke associations with typical aspects of the English landscape garden; i.e. the follies.

These fictitious and imaginary creations were most famous between 1750 and 1850. Replicas of illustrious monuments, pseudo-ruins and pagodas and other picturesque constructions represented as it were the punctuation marks in the garden as cultural text. They created the landscape, offered metaphors and points of contact. Van Biesen's interventions can be regarded as contemporary variants of these follies. Conscious of their artificiality, they manifest themselves jaunty in an artificial surrounding. It is exactly through this artificiality that they show us the magnificent Absentee: Nature.



'Little house of whispers', Lokeren 1998. Photo: Paul De Malsche

On the video performance 'Wild Man' van Biesen transformed for an hour into a mythical savage man, a fictitious hybrid of culture and nature. The pursuit to be tuned in to nature results in caricature and parody. The stuck on vine leaves cannot disguise that even this bush native is cultural fiction.



'Wild man variations' 1998. Video Performance Photos: Annemie Mestdagh

As a poet, collector and walker Stefaan van Biesen, to some extent, seems to be a distant successor of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who saw nature as the sole comfort for his melancholy and disgust for modernity.

In his 'Reveries du promeneur solitaire' the elderly man describes in ten 'promenades' how the romantic musings and botanical walks made his stay on the virgin Ile de Saint Pierre the happiest period of his life. But at the same time he tries through his botanical research to penetrate that sublime and comforting nature. Rousseau's biggest wish is to spend the rest of his life listing all floral varieties on the island:

'On dit qu'un Allemand a fait un livre sur un zeste de citron; j'en aurois fait un sur chaque graminée de prés, sur chaque mousse des bois, sur chaque lichen qui tapisse les rochers; enfin je ne voulois pas laisser un poil d'herbe, pas un atome végétal qui ne fut amplement décrit'.

Rousseau's research possibly is the most imaginable melancholic project. After all he tries to describe in detail what mostly escapes our mind. What remains is emptiness.

Johan Pas, Antwerp 1998.



'Landscape/mindscape', 1998 Park Ter Beuken, Lokeren, Belgium. Photos: Annemie Mestdagh