Stroom

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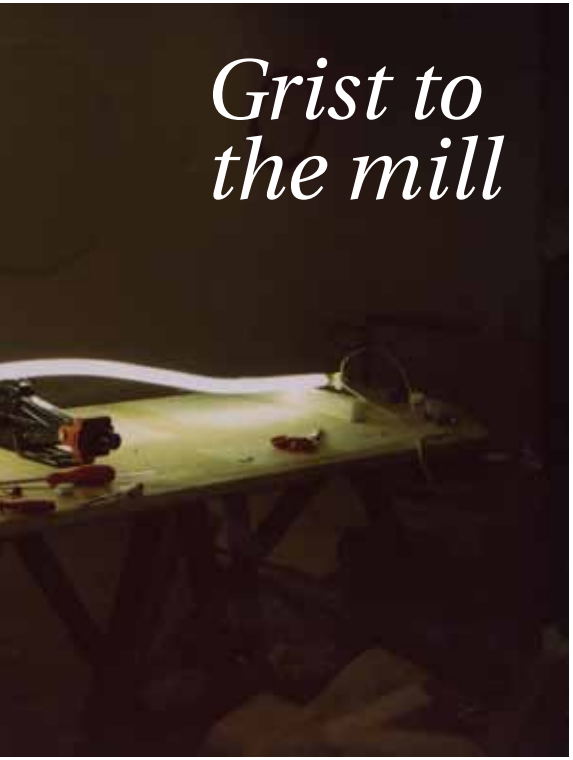

Bram De Jonghe

Bram De Jonghe '*Grist to the mill*'

22 June - 17 August 2014
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Cover: Bram De Jonghe, *Bending Light* (studio shot), 2013
Photo: Bram De Jonghe

Bram De Jonghe

Bram De Jonghe is an artist, engineer and inventor all in one. A talent with an optimistic mentality, encompassing self-organisation, associative thinking, will power and a strong work ethic. He creates sculptural equivalents of a so-called *reductio ad absurdum*, reducing an argument or hypothesis to absurdity in order to prove the opposite. One example is his obsessive ambition to build a machine that narrowly fails to blow out a burning candle. The effort this takes makes one wonder about a seemingly futile human act.

Everything he sees, finds and makes is *grist to the mill* of his 'absurd' argumentation. In order to create authentic amazement.

Bram De Jonghe positions himself between tradition, craft and concept, between architecture, sculpture and performance, between action and reflection; he cherishes the white cube as a place of refuge, but also disrupts it.

Because of his three-dimensional way of thinking and his ability to make jumps in scale Stroom places the exhibition by Bram De Jonghe in line with earlier key exhibitions by the artists Toby Paterson (2007), Navid Nuur (2007), Cyprien Gaillard (2009) and Adrien Tirtiaux (2012).

Arno van Roosmalen
(director Stroom Den Haag)

Untitled (Machine), studio shot, 2013

‘Suddenly struck by a sense of wonder’ Bram De Jonghe in conversation with Maaike Lauwaert

Bram De Jonghe: I generate visual perspectives on complex ideas. Capturing complex data in simple solutions gives me a sense of freedom. Although the pursuit of simplicity can occasionally be quite tortuous, I aim to achieve a maximum effect with the fewest means possible. Basically, my visual work amounts to a continuous quest for the organic relation between concept and form. I am more or less forced to find media that allow me to effectively give shape to my personal position vis-à-vis our world.

A moon pencil

My work has multiple layers of meaning, which aren’t connected in a logical or narrative sense - and can even be mutually exclusive or conflict with one another. Each of these layers charges the work for its own specific reasons. I stack these meanings on top of one another; fuse them until they completely cover each other, making it next to impossible to interpret the work as a whole. A prolonged viewing of the work will allow you to once again distinguish individual layers of meaning. As a result, my work generates a stream of mental images.

Materials sometimes acquire new meanings due to simple questions that arise in my mind: How does it work? How was it made? Who invented it, and which purpose does it serve?
After all, in addition to its functional aspects, each object has its own history - a symbolic function. The Dutch word for pencil, for example, *potlood*, means 'pot lead'. 'Lead' refers to the lead used in its predecessor, the stylus. The earliest description of a pencil dates from 1565. People have been inserting graphite in wooden casings since the 17th century. In 1794, the Frenchman Nicolas-Jacques Conté came up with the idea of pressing a hardened stick of powdered graphite and clay between two pieces of wood. The nice thing about this invention is that it didn't appear out of thin air. At that point, the French Republic was at war with Great Britain and unable to source molybdenum (the key component of pencil leads up till then) due to a blockade. By using a mixture of clay and graphite as an alternative, the French could not only continue making pencils; they could also vary the hardness of the lead by changing the clay-to-graphite ratio. The substitute proved better than the original, and we're still using it today.

Pencils were also used in space travel, since regular pens use gravity to dispense ink, meaning that they are unable to write in zero gravity. However, the graphite tips and pencil shavings floating around caused problems in the cockpit.

A pencil poses questions about drawing, and about what a society expects from its artists and art in general. At that point, I start to wonder about the history and development of an object like the pencil, which in turn

leads me to see relations, ideas, connections. My work takes shape within a similar associative process. Molybdenum is found in pure form on the Moon, which got me thinking about the manufacture of a 'moon pencil'...

By making use of associations at different levels, I try to encourage the viewer to take a closer look and give thought to what he or she is seeing. Maybe you could compare it to a child's way of looking at things (naive; based on its own autonomous agency; without understanding the grown-ups' solutions) - that's how I want people to view my work. It's important for us to continue looking at art without any preconceived notions, so that it can evoke a sense of wonder and engross the viewer.

Do you consider yourself a sculptor?

Maaike Lauwaert: A number of themes have a strong presence in your art. They can also be found in your early work, but they have since become far more pronounced. But to start, I would like to talk about sculpture for a moment - the sculptural.
You work with a wide variety of materials and media. For example, both video and performance (either the recording or the actual performance) play key roles in your work. Nevertheless, you seem to keep returning to sculpture as a format and discipline.
Where does this love for sculpture come from? Do you see yourself as a sculptor? Which power and challenge does sculpture bear for you?

BDJ: I believe that as a child - without actually being aware of it - I was already familiar with the fundamen-

Bram De Jonghe during the installation of *Grist to the mill* Photo: Stroom Den Haag

tal issues of what you would call sculpture. I wasn't exceptionally good at drawing, nor was I actually involved in art in any real sense. As a kid I refused to comply with any kind of artistic education. Thinking back, though, I'd say I was already developing my own visual language. I remember, for instance, wanting a hockey stick at one point, but above all wanting to make it myself. You make do with whatever's available, and I remember this resulting in a kind of evolution - a practical evolution, that is. I started by refurbishing a plastic tube and a piece of coat hanger into a hockey stick. After a short game, my hockey stick was already in tatters, so I retreated to the garage again to continue looking for the most suitable material. From wood to aluminium to rubber...

It became a kind of quest. To be honest, I'd sooner call it aesthetic and laborious than particularly practical. I

wanted to learn to weld, because that would allow me to make joints that were virtually indestructible. Apparently I was already concerned about making something that would last the ages. When I was about 15, my parents gave me an electric welding set for my birthday. At the time, I was studying human science at the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwecollege in Ostend, so I had no technical training to speak of. I was an autodidact and I learned how to do it through trial and error. Of course, to weld, I needed iron – so you could regularly find me at the local CA site, pillaging the metal container. For years, I kept all this junk in my parents' garage, 'neatly' ordered in a wall cabinet.

I had to do my welding outside: as Chief Fire Officer, my father had to remove any risk of our house burning down. So one of the things I worked with was a mobile workbench that I could push up to our drive. I played with the pieces of metal and assembled them into works of sculpture, except I didn't see them as art. Until one day a local artist rode by on her bike, and stopped and asked me if I wanted to participate in a group exhibition. I took part in the show but didn't give it much more thought. By now, I had finished secondary school and needed to decide what to do with my life. I was basically a bit of a loner, who was interested in psychology, product development and the visual arts.

Ultimately, I decided to study sculpture at the Sint-Lucas Academy in Ghent. Here, I learned how to interpret art history, see connections and develop a visual language. But perhaps the most important thing for me was meeting kindred spirits in a free-spirited environment.

Photo: Bram De Jonghe

There are a number of reasons why I love sculpture. For me personally, for example, sculpture was the art form most suited for deploying a wide range of media. Contemporary sculpture goes a lot further than traditional sculpture, and is no longer limited to extracting an

image from raw matter or building up an object from clay. It takes advantage of new technologies like 3D printing, and it also includes objects that refer to the sculptural without being actual works of sculpture themselves. In addition, for me, sculpture means being able to work with the specific characteristics of the space, and as such the presentation, the routing, or the way in which the viewer relates to the space and the objects contained within.

I see myself as an artist; and I view the world with the eyes of a sculptor, since I produce physical translations of the world around me. But video is also a medium that I work with as a sculptor. I like to compare it to a chef who is compiling a menu and incorporates flavours from a variety of cuisines. As long as the dishes are prepared with a sense of balance, the flavours don't necessarily cancel each other out.

ML: Which specific power and challenge does sculpture hold in your view?

BDJ: Actually, to answer that question, I first need to make clear how I understand sculpture itself. My work refers to the classic approach to sculpture, in which the artist produces a spatial work by removing material. By playing with the pedestal, someone like Brancusi subsequently managed to emancipate the statue itself. In sculpture's development as an art form, the focus has gradually shifted to its presentation, the setting, external factors, and how the public is guided through an exhibition. I believe that this is where you can still find sculpture's power and challenge, since these aspects have always been part of the sculptor's mental locomotion.

Using ‘the institute’ as a sound box

ML: During our conversations, I observed that on certain points, you take a critical view of - or even explicitly oppose - the institutionalisation of exhibition practice. Your own work primarily relates to its most emphatic expression: the so-called white cube, the drastically neutralised exhibition space that charges each object with the significance and weight of ‘art’. Sometimes, you consciously reject this institutional context in the arrangement and conception of your exhibition - transforming the white cube into something else, for instance, and consciously circumventing its logic and rules of play. At other times, you make playful fun of the mechanics of the art institution by presenting ready-mades. In a few cases, you have even referred directly to Marcel Duchamp, who had already thrown a spanner in the works of the art world’s institutional structures with his ‘invention’ of the readymade. What is your relationship to art as an institutional phenomenon? Both in an architectural sense - the bare white space illuminated by tube lighting - and in a metaphorical sense – the most forgiving environment imaginable, in which everything can become art, and the theatre for a complex game centring on art’s value?

BDJ: Basically, the answer is already implied in the question. The art institute is indeed an environment that offers opportunities for the visual arts to move forward. Duchamp had already done the necessary spadework, since his work both critiques the institute and reinforces it. In the process, he achieved the ultimate balance between art’s historical implantation and extrication.

New skin on my elbows, installation view, Billytown, 2013

I believe that although the featureless, white space is the environment best suited to the presentation of art, it also forms a hermetic framework. I like to play around with this fact. The white cube has developed such a strong historical impact that art production is constrained by the weight of artists like Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers. It turns art production into an object of ridicule. After all, a banana on a stick can also be considered a readymade, and is used as such to show up the idea of art. At the same time, the white cube allows artists to build on a foundation of possibilities laid out in the past. I try to lose the ballast and use ‘the institute’ as a sound box. In purely analytical terms, it boils down to a space with a number of walls, a floor, a ceiling, lighting and - if you’re lucky - a few windows. That’s the perspective I try to maintain.

In essence, institutional art theory posits that something is 'art' because an individual who has been awarded the position of 'artist' within the institutional field of art dubs it such. As a result, the concept of art has become detached from aspects like intrinsic quality, or an object's method of production. Regardless of whether a work of art is banal, or weak, or interesting, it is in any case art. My critical perspective mainly focuses on the fact that 'art as an institution' no longer takes any risks.

Blowing on a candle without blowing it out

ML: In addition to having a strong sculptural quality, your work also shows a strong tension between traditional workmanship on the one hand, and mechanised production on the other. Although you also bring the two together, when you realise such mechanical aspects by traditional means. For instance, you might manufacture a wooden sculpture using your hands, a chisel and sanding paper, but you could just as easily combine the object with a home-made machine that lets the work spin on its axis, or that supplies a constant breeze just weak enough not to blow out a candle flame. Could you tell me some more about these two themes and approaches? What's the relation between traditional workmanship and mechanical production in your practice?

Untitled
studio shot,
2014

BDJ: A machine that performs some human action is realising a paradoxical transformation. Furthermore, its repetitive nature creates an expectation in the viewer that connects to our need for structure and functionality. What I find particularly interesting is that when you build a machine yourself, it gains human qualities. By making something yourself, you expand its margin of error. In effect, these devices start leading their own lives.

When a machine performs a human action - like blowing on a candle without blowing it out - this isolates the poetic gesture contained within this action. When some simple operation like blowing is done by a machine, this highlights how absurd and complex it actually is.

But when mechanical aspects start dominating the work, the bottom falls out - it becomes a trick. In other words, it's a question of striking the right balance between a work's poetic premise and its execution, mechanical or otherwise - between demonstration and revelation. For me, when an object primarily provokes

the viewer to think about its technical execution, it has failed as a work of art. To avoid this, I try to show the systems that support my work without them detracting from the work's poetry. And there's an added benefit to showing the mechanics behind the work: it demonstrates just how complicated it actually is to do something in a simple way.

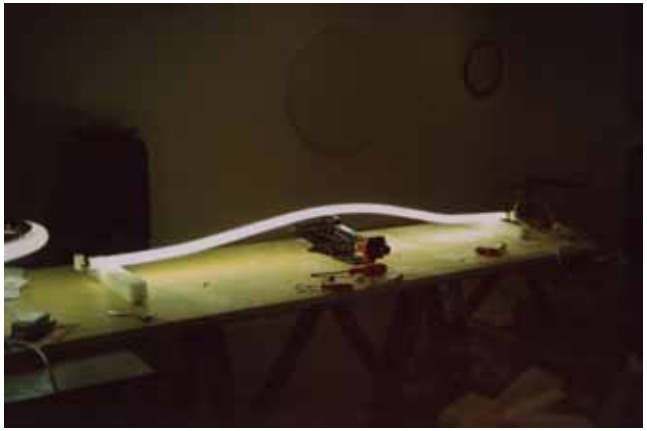
Besides, machines have a kind of sculptural power. An inoperative machine becomes a sculpture that suggests the potential of movement. Setting something in motion - and particularly when it turns on its axis - affects how we view objects. When we view a traditional sculpture, wandering through the space to look at it from a variety of angles, we do so in direct relation to the surrounding space, since we are constantly taking in some new aspect against a new background. However, when you view a work of sculpture or some other object that is spinning on its axis, you can see it from all sides against a fixed background. The Earth, the planets, star systems… electrons revolve around protons and neutrons… spinning stuff allows us to clean our clothes, drill holes in a wall, generate electricity, move forward, get a layer of *crema* on our coffee.

In addition, traditional and mechanical processes literally converge the moment you start realising a particular work. Mechanical aspects are introduced during the object's production, but they're also preserved in the work's appearance. A statue made with a 3D printer continues to communicate about this technology, about the human individual's role in making that object… And a wooden sculpture embodies the blood, sweat and tears spent carving, sawing or chiselling the work. For me, working in wood offers

Untitled, studio shot, 2013

the best opportunities for showing an action (the work involved in producing the sculpture) in addition to the final object (the physical work on display).

As an artist, I believe very strongly in doing stuff yourself, because your limitations occasionally inspire new ideas. You can suddenly be struck by a sense of wonder regarding some aspect or other, which in turn generates new pathways within the work. Although it's also good to know which things you won't be able to do yourself… When you outsource something, you also learn: you find out that the other person's expertise and work can also contribute to your sculpture's development. As far as I'm concerned, if I don't have a hammer,



Bending Light, studio shot, 2013

I can use a beer bottle - as long as it gets the nail in the wall. It doesn't really matter whether it's straight or crooked - it's in.

Viewing speeds

ML: While many of your sculptural works and total installations have a certain solidity, you often combine this sturdiness with more fragile, smaller-scale interventions that one could easily overlook as a viewer. In a similar vein, your video works have a strong element of coincidence, spontaneity, an ephemeral quality. How do these two variables mix in your practice? How do you view this interaction of large- and small-scale elements, permanent and transitory aspects?

BDJ: In a sense, these monumental, architectural interventions create conditions for the viewer's perception of the presentation. This is how I try to direct his or her experience. The major interventions and smaller objects are interwoven. This typifies my work. You could compare it to the relation between reading speed and typography: people can read serif typefaces faster than sans-serifs. When you combine these different typefaces, you get a variety of accents; directions. Mixing these two variables in my work leads to different viewing speeds.

A particular work can have an entirely new impact by incorporating it within the wider context of an exhibition. The purified - or overly purified - environment of a white cube can draw too much attention to an individual work. That is why in specific spaces, I try to change these qualities via architectural interventions, for instance. This structuring of the exhibition space and the work's interaction with its environment is partly determined in the space itself, and partly in my studio. I love tweaking existing elements in a room so that the space starts to contribute to the overall experience. For example, I once got someone to bend a fluorescent tube so that it appeared to sag. People hardly noticed it after it had been put back in its fixture. Although some people took note of it, others simply concluded it had started to sag over the years or had melted.

The main issue is the expectations you create for the viewer. You could compare it to wrapping a present. Each work is wrapped in a different kind of gift paper, and the size and shape of the box containing the work influences the viewer's expectations. In the case of art, you could say this wrapping is made up by, for example, the light; the architectural setting; the number of works on display and their positioning; the notes to

the exhibition; how the public is routed through the presentation; and so on. Each decision I make in relation to the presentation of my work contributes to how it is actually experienced.

Object full of air

ML: Your presentation at Stroom is also marked by the variety of viewing speeds you referred to earlier. Viewing the work, some aspects seem to always take place in the corner of your eye, but there are also a number of sculptural interventions that meet you head on. You often appear to draw inspiration from everyday phenomena: things that go unnoticed by most people, but which strike you and in your hands can gain an entirely new direction. Was this also the case developing this presentation?

BDJ: My point of departure in my exhibition for Stroom was associative, spatial conceptualisation. Each space has its own unique characteristics, and supporting or countering these qualities can serve as a formal starting point.

Stroom's exhibition area is quite special thanks to the open space between the basement and the ground floor. There's a harmonious balance between its width, length and height. Its architectural dynamics optimise how people view art in this setting. I experience it as too 'neatly wrapped up'. This makes it a bit more difficult. I usually look for dissonances - 'dysfunctional' elements that are brought back into balance by the positioning of the work. This way, the viewer is not so much conscious of the space itself as of what is presented in it. Still, I don't want to strip the space of all its architectural delicacies. The two stairwells on both sides of the space

Photo: Bram De Jonghe

are used to route the visitors. I found out fairly soon that I actually wanted to show a work in one of these stairwells, meaning that I will need to block this passage. I want to use this situation to change the routing – increase the probability that the viewer experiences the space in a different way.

On the ground floor, I plan to build a pedestal in the form of a surface. This surface will consist of a metal frame covered in shrink-wrap. The way through to the staircase will likewise be closed off by a metal frame and shrink-wrap. The surface will be suspended in the centre of the space, raised high enough to suggest a passage. Both slightly too high and slightly too low. I'd like to use either white or transparent plastic, so that I

can create a large, light volume that has a strong presence without obscuring or concealing anything else.

For me, both the procedure used to manufacture shrink-wrap and its industrial applications make it a very interesting material to work with. The plastic contracts when you apply hot air. It forms a protective layer around the frame, covering it but still showing the shape and mass of the object underneath. The volumes this creates are filled with air, and you're consequently reminded of a pedestal: a hollow object filled with air that does nothing other than represent something else. It's a kind of metaphorical mirroring of the pedestal. In the exhibition, these pedestals transform into independent works, although they can never completely break loose of their history as a functional object.

The plastic-covered frame also refers to the canvas as an object, and as such has a specific conceptual charge. This intervention will contrast with the smaller-scale gestures found throughout the presentation. While this work makes a statement about art itself, my choice of materials also roots it in our everyday environment.

Communication

Artists aren't always easy to understand or accessible when they talk about themselves or their thoughts about life. Communication will always require making an effort. Without making an effort, without passionate desire, it would be inconceivable for one person to ever understand another.

Maaike Lauwaert works as Visual Arts Curator for Stroom Den Haag

Colophon

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Willem Kramer

www.stroom.nl
www.bramdejonghe.com
www.billytown.org

Den Haag

Stroom Den Haag
Hogewal 1– 9
NL-2514 HA The Hague
www.stroom.nl

T +31(0)70 365 8985
F +31(0)70 361 7962
info@stroom.nl

Den Haag