

## The world revised

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Childhood memories, loss, physicality and the 'presence' of elements from the immediate domestic environment divulge what is largely at stake in Goele De Bruyn's work from the last 10 years. De Bruyn developed a practice that is chiefly sculptural, linking the above aspects and in particular examining the psychological impact of the most disparate everyday factors on the body and the self. Her work includes drawings and paintings, sculptures, spatial interventions and installations, with public moments usually forming a combination of all these in a staged setting. De Bruyn makes reproductions of simple, familiar objects and images but gives them a twist, which can produce a confusing and - sometimes with a sort of delayed effect - unsettling appearance. Some of her objects are related to surrealist, paradoxical situations, such as a rocket made of matches or a giant plaster rubber whose edge seems to have been discoloured by the erasing but has suffered no loss of volume through this activity. Since all these objects are made accurately and often by hand, De Bruyn endows them with a highly personal marking. The pattern of a football is actually a knotted net wrapped tightly around the ball, while another ball placed in the vicinity acquires the surface of a fly agaric or a ladybird. Instead of a valve, the form of a navel is applied to the two balls (Wachtkamer [Waiting Room], 1998). An opened box reveals two footballs whose black geometrical forms are bordered with the instruction to cut along the dotted line. Sticks of chalk standing upright on the floor are repeated and relocated to a plaster cast in the form of a chamber pot (Wachtkamer, 1998 / Bed Met Kruiden [Bed With Crumbs], 2001), or are offered as a multiple in a perforated cardboard box, whose lid immediately takes on the role of a stencil. The statue of a candy Santa Claus in coloured aluminium foil, excessively large and placed on a sculptor's table, looks like a sort of rocket when seen from the back. The Santa Claus recurs as a heavy figure made of unbaked clay with a little umbrella, of which only the ribs remain, like the blades of a helicopter.

The innocent things from childhood, the world of school and games, are clearly re-made; it is not a question here of readymades. The way these works are possibly related to readymades has more to do with the precise craftsmanship of Robert Gober than with Marcel Duchamp, if only because of the notion of 'self-manufactured'. They involve borrowings from a non-artistic reality, it's true, but they are infected with 'something different'. A painting shows a peaceful landscape taken from a children's book. A witch cleaves the completely calm air on a rocket instead of a broomstick. There is nothing clamorous about the depiction and at first sight everything seems completely normal. The confusion is all the greater once we begin to doubt the credibility of this constructed readymade.

The ironic humour, sometimes disarming, sometimes biting, perhaps has its origins in surrealist examples. Think of the *Rek met Speelgoed* [Rack with Toys], in which flat figures of bears (with the look of children's toys or biscuits) are reproduced in a frighteningly convincing way in sandpaper. Above the rack are other figurines (a girl puppet with braids and a sort of Easter bunny), with the following materials listed on the label: "butcher's wrapping paper, tissue paper, coffee filters, toilet paper." The tactile aspect of toys is charged with a variety of absorptive possibilities. The domestic aura, the idea of cherishing, touching, the possibility of children putting the objects in their mouths, is problematised in a strange way by calling into existence a frightening 'little' world. The obstinate, almost morbid frugality of the old cliché of the Flemish housewife does not seem very far away. A childhood trauma is inadvertently brought up, whereby everything desirable is transformed into a phantasmagoria of undesirable and frightening surrogates. De Bruyn has also made children's clothes, for example, from mops and dishcloths or plastic garbage bags, skipping ropes from tissue paper, Santa Claus figurines from toilet paper, sponge and pinheads. Their absorptive materiality turns one's desire for them into a wary reaction.

Old-fashioned Flanders is cited in still other works: five plaster figures represent enlarged 'Lievevrouwtjes' (a well-known Flemish type of candy). The power of the image lies in the paradox of their non-functional - in this case non-edible - aspect. These sculptures refer to a consumption that is frustrated. De Bruyn's sculptural pieces deal with a variety of formal and human concerns by juxtaposing, overlapping or uniting in contradiction functionality and non-functionality, the familiar and the strange. Some elements convey a psychological tension that is at once ordinary, mysterious and humorous. Everything that De Bruyn uses becomes part of her incorporations and associations. Even though this personal material touches on vanished memories, loss, impossible dreams and absence, the references are also related formally to this sort of mood, laden with associations and feelings that are private and not to be shared. Readymades that are not 'ready-made', but almost crafted, handmade (dis)illusions. Sometimes absurd and sometimes slightly comic, but in the final analysis always marked by a specific pregnancy: the impossible 'being' of the hybrid object and the melancholy of absence reveal themselves as cultural constructions, fabrications, as misplaced romanticism, false sentiment and nostalgia. What she reveals is not really the charming or

endearing qualities of childhood objects but their potential to become something else. They are fascinating and can turn into something with a function that can cause joy or a sense of threat. They are things that were invented by our elders in the belief that they make the child happy. It is also as adults that we have to deal with them when they have become phantoms, charged with all manner of unassimilated references from that past. Are these objects remade memories? Charged with psychological tensions? Does the work constitute personal reliquaries and universal metaphors based on trivial objects? It seems as though a number of images continually feed or haunt the artist's thoughts and feelings until they acquire a sort of complex resonance that can then be formally translated into an interesting artistic object. The only thing one can do when confronted with the toy animals and Santa Clauses is to summon up empathy. Identification is forced back the moment one discerns the chafing effect of the sandpaper, for instance. People project moral conclusions onto works of art depending on what they refer to. Goele de Bruyn plays with this and turns the mechanism inside out. Shown as sculpture and ordinary object, all the hidden meanings are activated. Suddenly these quiet objects, with their occasional references to idyllic conditions, acquire a disturbing, abysmal side. Connected with each other in a totally personal grouping of themes, the things or objects sometimes look 'soiled'. This happens literally on a blackboard where a drawing of nuclear fission (from a school textbook) has been applied over another erased drawing. The awareness of change and displacement, even if only minimal, produces a form of anxiety. What is cherished is 'meddled with' and thus 'changed'. Very often the metamorphosis of an object from the one to the other scene carries with it a marking, at once psychological and compositional, that influences the subsequent iconographical elements. We never get a total picture. It is impossible to reconstruct the story or the possible trauma. But, seen in retrospect, the disclosure in time of De Bruyn's themes and images fails to furnish a narrative. Rather, one gets the image of a sort of anthology as a means of evoking certain concerns without specifying direct connections. De Bruyn plays a role but varies it with every performance.

The principles with which meaning is constructed are related to the mise-en-scene. Despite the fact that different strategies give rise to a sense of cohesion when one surveys the work, you ask yourself whether there is an underlying system or leitmotif. Disillusionment is played off against any possible expectation. It even seems to be a sort of escaping game, a running away from everything that could point to a form of systematisation. An image can occur again and again in different guises, but this mainly ensures that the whole does not have the appearance of a totally arbitrary accumulation. This in fact literally becomes the theme in the installation 'Villa Doorsparen' (Tour et Taxis, Brussels, 2001), which unites works made between 1991 and 2001. 'The exhibition not only shows the patient accumulation of works, but includes in its meaning the safe (and suffocating) idea of collecting and cherishing (of desires, sentiments, hope and faith).', writes Goele De Bruyn herself about her work. Things from previous work are reused, copied, displaced, permuted, disguised, etc. In this way Goele De Bruyn reconstitutes a mental space again for each public occasion, since exhibiting work also becomes work; or rather, she organises a milieu with and for her work. Some things thus remain unseen since they have not yet found their exhibition. The work traverses different times and its character becomes contaminated according to the milieu into which it infiltrates. Objects and environment form a whole that is at once reassuring and disturbing. Hesitation is almost automatically the initial

response when one finds oneself, for example, on a section of varnished floor bordering the installation with domestic elements, giving rise to the idea of 'walking on water'. The starting point is disorientation. Once adjusted, trust is each time renewed on the next round of interpretation. A large part of the installation works with the notions of absorption capacity, moistness and dryness. Sewn together mops form 'floormats' or 'blankets' with a decorative pattern of knots. Other mops form beds. De Bruyn herself associates a lot of mechanisms of consolation with this work: sleeping, dreaming, believing, cleaning, discarding, learning, eating, collecting, saving... (Goele De Bruyn, Teksten 2001-2004)

In more recent work, everything is brought into a less personal atmosphere. More and more it's about the spectator, about how the spectator deals with these sorts of intimate propositions, how mental spaces are experienced and how one experiences both psychological as well as physical boundaries. Thus we are confronted, for example, with a closed pole barrier in an exhibition space. The barrier is bent, apparently twisted, as though it couldn't get in. It immediately functions as a supporting element. A number of leather handles confirm this interpretation; "for resting your foot or knee while you take in the space at your leisure. That's allowed too (here there's no attempt to protect the sculptures; the works may be touched and examined) and this construction offers a support for the viewer. The barrier is thus no longer the indication of a border, but is also something that can create a safe distance and make space for undisturbed viewing." (Sara Weyns/Netwerk Galerie, Handleiding 02-03) The living room next to the room in which a video is projected is empty: the empty zone is a buffer but also forms an anticipatory volume. The film is one of three films showing variations of the same event. As though different camera viewpoints are being deconstructed. We see a thief armed with a torch cautiously entering a living

room, sitting carefully at a table and taking out various objects from his pockets, studying them carefully and even cherishing them. Small, ordinary things, the sort of things one hardly notices in the daily round and which therefore easily disappear unnoticed; like a sock in the wash, an umbrella, a key or a lighter. Things that are only conspicuous when one loses them. The artist herself describes the aquarium-like atmosphere of the film, at once sharp and vague, recorded with slow camera movements: "it is a sharp reproduction of a picture surface that has become vague, painterly like a gauze-like piece of embroidery. The film gives the impression that it is an enlargement of a previously made film. In reality the film was projected onto a large screen and refilmed, with the addition of the searching beam of the torch. This second film was projected once again and filmed another time." (Goele De Bruyn/Teksten 2001/2004)

Besides this there exists a longer version of the film which is shown on a monitor, a more documentary version as it were, in which the thief consigns the objects that he first studied to different places in the room. It is not really clear if he initially also found them in these places, or took them from somewhere else. Goele De Bruyn's film evokes the picture of the alternation or infiltration of a space, a space denoted as personal and familiar. The private sphere is desecrated, even though the thief seems paradoxically a sort of Santa Claus

figure bringing found objects into the house as presents. A third version of the film is shown in a large telescopic camera on trestles. Here we see just the moving, searching beam of the thief's torch before he enters the room. "The movement of the torch is slowed down, rendered frame by frame, while a second beam moves across the screen in real time, groping like a will-o'-the-wisp." (Goele De Bruyn/Teksten 2001/2004). The slow beam of light problematises the experience of time, making it strange. Gradually the light shifts to an indefinable distance in an explosion of blinding light.

These films are mediated, and thus self-reflective, provisional syntheses of a number of concerns that characterise all of Goele De Bruyn's other work. The appropriating of and meddling with familiar or intimate objects and in this way alienating them from their referent, thus creating a troubled, sometimes invisible or ghostly repetition of the quoted sign. An aura is constituted, a vibrating dimension of strangeness is added (by refilming the projection), so that the spirits of fiction force their way in. The brutal familiarity of the objects appearing in earlier work acquires an inauthenticity through their alternating, their changing, their handling by the 'other', so that the aura only installs a sort of presence of an absence, like a phantom.