



# Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles: A “Philosophical Brothel”

by  
Cathleen Chaffee

BRUSSEL, 5 JAN. – In the photographs, installation, and book project that comprise *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles*, the color images of African prostitutes seem at first to dominate the exhibition. The women have selected their own poses, which range from the statuesque to the come-hither. Marie reclines on a park bench, Miranda veils her face with her hair, Solange leans provocatively against 250 Avenue Louise. Alongside these brass-framed photographs of prostitutes are monuments, buildings and interiors photographed, as the women were, by night along Avenue Louise in Brussels, and developed by Augustijnen into a portrait of the city assembled from traces of Leopold II’s colonial memory. For each live woman who poses for Augustijnen’s camera there is a statue such as, *Ixelles honors its colonial pioneers*. The former offices of the Colonial Lottery make an appearance, as do the King’s gardens, and a seemingly abolitionist sculpture by Louis Samain, *L’Esclave repris par les chiens* (1898). Alfredo Morelli, an employee at the Office de Sécurité sociale d’outre-mer (OS-SOM) is pictured near an image of Leopold II that hangs in his office. The bearded OS-SOM worker and King could be long lost brothers.

Two images are excluded from the category of prostitute or colonial relic: one a lone photograph of a fox, the other a picture of the plaque on the rue d’Orléans just off Avenue Louise commemorating where Karl Marx lived from 1846 until 1848, when he and his family were expelled by Leopold I in an attempt to stave off revolution in the capital. If the fox recalls the menace and fabled Flemish hero of *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, the Marx plaque, framed beside a photograph of “Tina,” seems to more neatly summarize the historical coincidences spiraling through *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles*. Avenue Louise was named in memory of Leopold II’s mother, Marie-Louise d’Orléans, herself daughter of the King of France, Louis-Philippe d’Orléans. Having never recovered from the trauma of seeing her family gravely threatened and exiled from France in 1848, Queen Louise died at the age of 39 in 1850. That streetwalkers from Africa should work the

avenue commemorating Leopold’s mother is ironic. But is it irony when Augustijnen reminds us that prostitutes, the perfect dialectical image, “both seller and sold in one,” work next-door to where Marx wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*?<sup>2</sup>

Such historical coincidences and historical traumas are likewise Augustijnen’s subjects in the book accompanying *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles*. The publication is presented for consultation in a ‘reading corner’ of the exhibition made up of banana trees (like the photographs’ brass frames, the trees refer to exports from the Congo), a small table, and two rattan and leather chairs. Scattered with stories from Leopold’s sexual biography – perfect fodder for any Freudian – the book adds the names of other women (the King’s lovers, wife, mother, and sister) to the *Demoiselles* photographed on Avenue Louise. The first essay, by psychiatrist Émile Meurice, *Esquisse d’un Regard Psychologique sur Léopold II*, asks whether the King’s internal fire, and the history he created were not intimately entangled. Meurice’s psycho-biographical interpretation of Leopold II and his sister Charlotte diagnoses the King with a fierce oral fixation, problems of identification (he spoke of himself in the third person), a lack of culpability, a pathological interest in satisfying his own needs and desires, and suggests that, although he was less severely dissociated from reality than his schizophrenic sister, Leopold II suffered from a “spirit that was visionary, but on the brink of insanity.”

More is revealed about Leopold II’s personal life in the salacious excerpts Augustijnen selected from the memories of Leopold II’s valet Henri Bataille, *La Vie Cachée de Léopold II*. The valet describes the King’s love of food, his voracious sexual appetites, and petulance when rebuffed. This last characteristic is notable in Bataille’s recounting of “Le scandale de la rue des Fripiers.” Although one young woman did not return the affections of Leopold II, he continued to inquire about her so publicly that it was assumed the two were lovers. Bataille remarks fatalistically, “Mlle L... would have to endure her entire life the mistake of having been pretty, and noticed by the Belgian king.”<sup>3</sup>

Augustijnen’s own text, *Coincidences de l’histoire*, similarly dwells on the misfortunes and possible effects of just the historical cir-

cumstances that were Mlle L...’s misfortune. As a point of departure, Augustijnen considers a lithograph depicting Leopold I on February 26, 1848 offering to abdicate if it would save Belgium, and proposes that the events of 1848 — when the fear of revolution forced royalty to disguise themselves and go into hiding throughout Europe — may have scarred the children of Leopold I. He wonders how not only Marxism, but the presence of Marx himself might have traumatized the young royal, asking, what if Marx and Leopold II had met in London when both Leopold II and the revolutionary visited the Crystal Palace in 1851? Regarding Leopold II, Augustijnen speculates that the King’s youthful ordeals may have given him both the desire and the ability to amass more in the Congo than Belgium alone ever could have given him, asking if “[Leopold II] developed a resistance to catastrophes and traumas through the events of 1848”<sup>4</sup>

In *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles*, Sven Augustijnen at first seems less interested in criticizing Leopold II, than in analyzing him. But after nearly a century in which historians have processed the effects of Leopold II’s actions in the Congo, how does a Belgian artist propose to “interpret” the King as Augustijnen so audaciously does in *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles*? Augustijnen’s essay poses a kind of “hurture” pendent to the theory of hereditary madness and delusion advanced by Meurice. Seen another way, it confronts destiny with circumstance.

This mix of biographical interpretation with speculation recalls the mad narrator of Vladimir Nabakov’s *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote, who is also supposedly the persecuted and exiled king of fictional Zembia. Kinbote tells his own improbable story through his commentary on the final work of the famous poet John Shade, a work Kinbote is nonetheless convinced that he, by means of suggestion, “gave” the poet. Indeed, Kinbote viewed not only Shade’s poem, but every person he encountered as actors, bending their lives to fit his own delusional narrative. The commentator’s irrational conclusions seldom reveal any actual connection to the text he is interpreting, and Nabakov’s elaborate fiction — a foreword, poem, commentary, and index — burlesques hermeneutics. Kinbote once quoted himself as King, saying, “I’m

quite satisfied with my own melodrama."<sup>5</sup> Like Nabakov, Augustijnen begins to seem – at least in part – to comment paradoxically on interpretation itself in *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles*. Among the ghosts in the *Demoiselles* are two of the dominant specters of twentieth-century art historical methodology: Freud and Marx.<sup>6</sup> By the time Augustijnen's book is completed, their tools of analysis – especially Freud's – appear to have been tried, and proven ill equipped to the task of explaining the builder king.

Although every element of *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles* contextualizes Leopold II, the work nonetheless eventually bypasses the King. From Manet to Picasso, prostitutes were made into ciphers for Modernity, simultaneously upending conventions of academic art and spectatorship. Despite contemporary clothes, and sometimes sexually explicit poses, the women in Augustijnen's photographs are less than confrontational. Rather, like the colonial memorials framed alongside them, they mark the persistence of history on Brussels's streets, a history of acquisition, malaise, seduction, and the fantasy of possession. *Les Demoiselles* suggests that an approach to the history of Brussels may only be possible through a poetic interpolation of visible historical traces such as build-

ings, markers, narrative, and even Modern interpretative tools now treated as part of the past. As surely as the fox – the animal that in fables revealed the mendacity and lust hidden behind the authority of kings – was caught in Augustijnen's flash, so too is the animal a portrait of Augustijnen himself: a gadfly on the Avenue Louise.

1. The exhibition's invitation featured an early twentieth-century postcard of this statue, accompanied by the handwritten observation in French of a contemporary, "The little group amuses themselves well."
2. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 10.
3. *Ibid.* 47.
4. *Ibid.* 63.
5. Vladimir Nabakov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage International, 1962), 129.
6. Since Freud tried his hand at art history, in his 1910 psycho-biography of Leonardo da Vinci, psychological approaches to artists and their works have been as controversial as influential. Meyer Schapiro's 1956 criticism of Freud suggested social contexts and literary sources for elements of Leonardo's art that Freud had attributed to psychological trauma. Schapiro was the first to suggest that Marxist social analysis had a critical role to play in art history. Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, ed. James Strachey, trans. Alan Tyson (1910; reprint. New York: Norton, 1989). Meyer Schapiro, "Leonardo and Freud: An Art-Historical Study," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17 (1956): 303 – 36.

(advertisement)

79

22/1 20H

**ORAL CULTURE**  
**MARIO GARCIA TORRES**  
**CHINESE WHISPERS**

Jan Mot  
Rue Antoine Dansaertstraat 190  
BE-1000 Brussel Bruxelles

## In Brief

*The Morning of the Magicians*, a 16mm film installation and a series of 10 photographs by **Joachim Koester**, entered the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The work was shown last year at Art Unlimited in Basel.

The catalogue raisonné of **Ian Wilson's** Discussion works, compiled by Chantal Kleinmeulman and with an essay by Anne Rorimer, will be presented on the occasion of Ian Wilson's Discussion at the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven on the 1st of March.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago acquired **Manon de Boer's** *Attica* that was exhibited in the gallery last year in January.

The gallery will again participate in **Art Basel** which takes place from the 10th to the 14th of June.

The Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris acquired two works by **Mario Garcia Torres**: *Sing Like Baldessari* and *Carta Abierta a Dr. Atl*.

## Agenda

### Sven Augustijnen

*Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles*, 4/12 – 17/1, Jan Mot, Brussels (solo); *Conference on Spectres, Hauntings and Archives*, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 15/1 – 16/1; *Ecole des Pickpockets*, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (USA), 14/3, 21/3 (screening); *Vérité Exposée*, Ernst Museum, Budapest, 11/4 – 31/5; *Stutter*, Tate Modern, London, 24/4 – 9/9

### Pierre Bismuth

*Pierre Bismuth, Ruled by Extravagant Expectations*, Christine König Galerie, Vienna, 14/11 – 10/1 (solo); *For The First And The Second Time*, CAC Vilnius (LT), 22/11 – 13/1; *Artist Talk*, ARCO 2009, Madrid, 12/2; *Neon, Mirror and Gold*, Galleria Sonia Rosso, Turin (IT), 6/3 – 5/4 (solo); *Lille 3000, Liquid Frontiers*, Tri Postal, Lille (FR), 14/3 – 12/7; *Pierre Bismuth, Following The Right Hand of...*, Team Gallery, New York, 2/4 – 2/5 (solo)

### Manon de Boer

*Now Jump*, Nam June Paik Festival, Gyeonggi-do, Seoul, 8/10 – 5/2; *Multikino*,

Tranzitdisplay Gallery, Prague, 9/12 – 8/2; Two Times 4'33", MONA FOMA Festival, MONA, Tasmania (AUS), 9/1 – 1/2; *Playtime*, De Warande, Turnhout (BE), 10/1 – 8/2; *Argos Open Lounge*, Villa Merkel, Esslingen (DE), 18/1 – 15/2; International Film Festival Rotterdam, Rotterdam (NL), 21/1 – 1/2 (screening); *Transmediale.09: Deep North*, House of World Cultures, Berlin, 28/1 – 1/2 (screening); *The Immediate Future*, Lund Kunst-halle, Lund (SE), 31/1 – 29/3; *The Space of Words*, MUDAM, Luxembourg (LUX), 19/2 – 25/5; *Manon de Boer & Hito Steyerl*, Pallas Contemporary Projects, Dublin, from 20/3 (solo)

### Rineke Dijkstra

*Street and Studio, An Urban History of Photography*, Museum Folkwang, Essen (DE), 11/10 – 11/1; *Listen Darling*, 11/10 – 30/8; *The World Is Yours*, Ellipse Foundation, Cascais (PT), from 11/10; *Role Models: Feminine Identity in Contemporary American Photography*, The National Museum Of Women In The Arts, Washington, 17/10 – 25/1; *The Fifth Floor: Ideas Taking Space*, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool (UK), 16/12 – 1/2; *Park Portraits*, La Fabrica, Madrid, 29/1 – 8/4 (solo)

**Mario García Torres**

*Recent Acquisitions, Nature, Space and Time*, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo (NL), 24/10 – 1/2; *This Is Not a Void*, Galerie Luisa Strina, Sao Paulo (BR), 25/10 – 22/1; *Image en Cuestión*, 41 Salón Nacional de Artistas, Cali (CO), 19/11 – 30/1; *For The First And The Second Time*, CAC Vilnius (LT), 22/11 – 13/1; *Recursos incontrolables y otros desplazamientos naturales*, MUAC, Mexico City, 27/11 – 27/2; *Il Aurait Bien Pu Le Promettre Aussi*, Jeu de Paume, Paris, 22/1 – 22/3 (solo); *Mario Garcia Torres*, MATRIX, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, 22/2 – 17/3 (solo); *Mario Garcia Torres. All That Color is Making Me Blind*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 5/3 – 11/4 (solo)

**Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster**

*The Unilever Series: Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster*, Tate Modern, London, 14/10 – 13/4 (solo); *theanyspacewhatever*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 24/10 – 7/1; *Un Autre Cinéma: Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster/Api-chatpong Weerasethakul*, Le Spot, Le Havre (F), 9/1 – 24/1 (screenings)

**Douglas Gordon**

*theanyspacewhatever*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 24/10 – 7/1; *Timecode*, DCA, Dundee (UK), 17/1 – 8/3; *Douglas Gordon*, Eva Presenhuber Gallery, Zürich (CH), 13/2 – 28/3 (solo); *Douglas Gordon, Jonathan Monk*, Fondazione Morra Greco, Napels (IT), from 20/2 (solo); *Zidane, A 21st Century Portrait*, Van Abbe Museum, from 28/2 (solo)

**Joachim Koester**

*The Great Transformation. Art and Tactical Magic*, MARCO, Vigo (ES), 19/9 – 18/1; *The Greenroom. Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, Bard College, New York, 27/9 – 1/2; *The Map Is Not The Territory*, Esbjerg Kunstmuseum, Esbjerg (DK), 3/10 – 18/1; T2, *Torino Triennale*, Turin (IT), 6/11 – 18/1; *The Return of Religion and Other Myths*, BAK Utrecht, 30/11 – 1/3; *Questioning History, The Past in the Present*, Nederlands Fotomuseum Rotterdam (NL), 13/12 – 22/2; *My Frontier is an Endless Wall of Points*, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Rotterdam (NL), 21/1 – 1/2 (screening); *Tate Triennial: Altermodern*, Tate Britain, London, 3/2 – 26/4

**David Lamelas**

*This Is Not a Void*, Galerie Luisa Strina, Sao Paulo (BR), 25/10 – 22/1; *Timecode*, DCA, Dundee (UK), 17/1 – 8/3; *David Lamelas*, Centro Guerrero, Granada (ES), from 23/4 – 12/7 (solo)

**Sharon Lockhart**

*Life on Mars, the 55th Carnegie International*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (USA), 3/5 – 11/1; *Listen Darling*, 11/10 – 30/8; *The World Is Yours*, Ellipse Foundation, Cascais (PT), from 11/10; *Sharon Lockhart*, Wiener Secession, Vienna, 21/11 – 26/1 (solo); *For The First And The Second Time*, CAC Vilnius (LT), 22/11 – 13/1

**Deimantas Narkevicius**

*The Greenroom. Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, Bard College, New York, 27/9 – 1/2; *The Unanimous Life: Deimantas Narkevicius*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 14/11 – 16/2 (solo); *Ritornell, Neun Geschichten*, Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck (AU), 22/11 – 25/1; *Questioning History: The Past in the Present*, Nederlands Fotomuseum Rotterdam (NL), 13/12 – 22/2; *DocPoint - Helsinki Documentary Film Festival*, Helsinki, 20/1 – 25/1; *The Unanimous Life*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (NL), 28/2 – 24/5 (solo)

**Tino Sehgal**

*This Is Not a Void*, Galerie Luisa Strina, Sao Paulo (BR), 25/10 – 22/1; *Image en Cuestión*, 41 Salón Nacional de Artistas, Cali (CO), 19/11 – 30/1; *Political/Minimal*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 30/11 – 25/1; *The Fifth Floor: Ideas Taking Space*, Tate Liverpool (UK), 16/12 – 1/2; *Tino Sehgal*, Karriere Bar, Copenhagen, 8/1 – 17/2; *Tino Sehgal*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 22/1 – 28/2 (solo); *Tino Sehgal*, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris, 31/1 – 7/3 (solo)

**Tris Vonna-Michell**

*Bending The Word*, Matrix Exhibitions, BAM/PFA, San Francisco, 28/9 – 8/2; *Learning to Love You More*, BALTIC, Newcastle upon Tyne (UK), 16/1 – 8/3; *Tate Triennial: Altermodern*, Tate Britain, London, 3/2 – 26/4; *I Repeat Myself When Under Stress: Ceal Floyer, Hans Schabus, Tris Vonna-Michell*, MOCAD, Detroit (USA), 13/2 – 26/4 (solo); *IAPSIS Open House*, IAPSIS, Stockholm, 13/2 – 14/2; *The Space of Words*, MUDAM, Luxembourg (LUX), 19/2 – 25/5; *Auto-Tracking*, Kunsthalle Zürich, Zürich (CH), 27/2 (performance); *Ars Viva*, Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, (DE), 1/3 – 24/5

**Ian Wilson**

*Plug In #47. Ian Wilson*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (NL), 27/9 – 1/3 (solo); *This Is Not a Void*, Galerie Luisa Strina, Sao Paulo (BR), 25/10 – 22/1; *Van Abbemuseum*, Eindhoven (NL), 1/3 (discussion); *MAMCO*, Geneva (CH), 5/4 (date to be confirmed) (discus-

sion); *Ian Wilson. Reconstructed Paintings*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 5/3 – 11/4 (solo)

Opening sponsored by  
**Vedett / Duvel Moortgat NV SA Bionade**

**Colophon**

*Publisher* Jan Mot, Brussels  
*Concept Design* Maureen Mooren & Daniel van der Velden  
*Graphic Design* Maureen Mooren, Amsterdam  
*Printing* Cultura, Wetteren

/ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12  
C  
L  
o  
o  
t  
t  
J  
l  
A  
l  
n  
l  
E  
e  
o  
3  
u  
-  
a  
F  
e

I  
l  
S  
Granada (ES), from 23/4 – 12/7 (solo)

(advertisement)

**JAN MOT**

Rue Antoine Dansaertstraat 190  
BE-1000 Brussel Bruxelles  
tel: +32 2 514 10 10  
fax: +32 2 514 14 46  
office@janmot.com  
www.janmot.com

donderdag-vrijdag-zaterdag 14-18.30u  
jeudi-vendredi-samedi 14-18.30h  
en op afspraak / et sur rendez-vous