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Jaargang 19 No. 98

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(advertisement)

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Exhibition
12/09 – 24/10

Opening
11/09
12–8pm

MANON DE BOER



(advertisement)

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Lecture
15/10 8pm

LIONEL DEVLIEGER (ROTOR)

ARCHITECTURE AND SACRIFICE

Jan Mot
Rue de la Régence /
Regentschapsstraat 67
1000 Brussels, Belgium

(advertisement)

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Conversation
28/09 8pm

MANON DE BOER IN CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTOPHE WAVELET

Jan Mot
Rue de la Régence /
Regentschapsstraat 67
1000 Brussels, Belgium

(advertisement)

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Art Fair
22/10 – 25/10

JAN MOT AT FIAC

Salon d'honneur
Grand Palais
Paris



History Can Wait (Part 2)

By
Antony Hudek

ANTWERP, AUG. 18 – In the first installment of this multi-part text¹, I outlined what I saw as the need for a queer art history that would avoid any suggestion of ‘gay art’, and focus instead on a non-linear history of the period between the late 1970s and early 1990s, when AIDS and HIV were synonyms of certain death. In the first essay I took as a starting point Douglas Crimp’s memoirs, written from the point-of-view of a protagonist, and survivor, of this period. In his book-in-progress (which has appeared piecemeal in conferences and publications over the past several years, including in no. 96 of this *Newspaper*) Crimp details his participation in both New York’s queer social life in the late 1970s and 1980s, and in the elite intellectual circles around the journal *October*, which he co-edited until 1990. Memoirs such as Crimp’s, I suggested, serve as evidence of their authors’ resilience, and of an uninterrupted – and therefore reassuring – art history from the late 1970s to the turn of the twenty-first century.

The form of the memoir, for those who lived through the 1980s and 1990s, authorises a return to conventional narrative structures, after the ‘uchronic’ autobiographical writings of queer authors such as Guillaume Dustan, Hervé Guibert and Guy Hocquenghem, all of whom died of AIDS. More recent memoirs looking back on the AIDS period seem to combine the best of all worlds: an eyewitness veracity, the subjective license inherent in any act of remembrance, and the authority that comes from having come out on the other end. Yet however valuable the memoirs written after the containment of AIDS may be, one should not forget – indeed, one should recall – the lives of queer subjects deprived by AIDS of the possibility to look back and fashion their past as legacy. For it is in some of these lives that one finds potent models of remembrance that defy conventional means of historicisation – means that privilege the singular authorial subject to the detriment of other, more experimental, engaged and queer modes of recollecting art histories of the recent past. In what follows, I look at one of these lives in particular, that of the French artist Philippe

Thomas, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1995, at the age of 44.

Thomas’ oeuvre could be said to be devoted to the analysis, and ultimate erasure, of his name, which he declined in a number of ways: by inviting collectors to take authorial responsibility for his works, or by operating under several corporation-like agencies, including *readymades belong to everyone*®, which he opened in 1987. The question of subjective absence, and thus historical elision, runs through his work – an obsessive refusal to mark his time other than through the lives of others. This refusal has made separating the historical subject called ‘Philippe Thomas’ from the fictionalised subject at the centre of his work difficult.² It has also contributed to his historical obscurity, while at the same time reinforcing the dedication of a group of friends, artists, gallerists and collectors to make his work better known, without betraying his life-long disappearing act.

Thomas’ strategy of self-elision took two routes: a resistance towards representation and an embrace of theatrical and curatorial presentation. In his resistance to traditional representational forms – whether visual or narrative – Thomas looked to a number of literary sources (Roland Barthes, Jorge Luis Borges, Jean Cocteau, Vladimir Nabokov, Fernando Pessoa), but among them Maurice Blanchot stands out as particularly influential. A rare affinity brings together Thomas and Blanchot, the writer determined to arrive as near as possible in prose to lifelessness and subjective annihilation. So close was their shared passion for a narrative abyss that Thomas produced a series of three identical colour photographs of the sea, each with a different label and authorial attribution (*Sujet à discrétion*, 1985), as if in reference to the opening lines of Blanchot’s first novel, *Thomas l’obscur* (1941/1950): ‘Thomas sat down and contemplated the sea’ (‘Thomas s’assit et regarda la mer.’)³ This quote reappears in Thomas’ book entitled *Insights* (1989), published under the name of Laura Carpenter.⁴ *Insights* records Thomas’ diary-like notations as he sat behind a desk in the Cable Gallery in New York for the duration of an exhibition of *readymades belong to everyone*®. Among the other textual fragments in *Insights* (besides Blanchot’s quote) is an entry relating the author’s

encounter at New York’s The World nightclub with ‘Steve’, a recent art school graduate: ‘at about three in the morning, while we were waiting for the group *French Twist* (!)... up came the unexpected references to Serge Leclair and his text *Philippe: a case study*.’⁵

As in most of Thomas’ works, clues as to their intentions are hidden on their linguistic surface, triggering a proliferation of references and names. From ‘Thomas’ (the surname of the absent author) and ‘Thomas’ (the first name of Blanchot’s obscure hero), we (and the protagonist of *Insights*) stumble on ‘Philippe’, the subject of Serge Leclair’s well-known psychoanalytic case study.⁶ The décor of Philippe’s dream, which prompts Leclair’s analysis, is strangely reminiscent of Thomas’ setting in Blanchot’s novel:

The deserted square of a small town, it is not quite right. I am looking for something. There appears, barefoot, Liliane, who I do not know, who says to me: ‘It has been a long time since I have seen such fine sand’...’

Over the course of his analysis with Leclair, Philippe reveals a secret formula, a knot of proper names of parents and objects of affection, which he would murmur to himself like an incantation: ‘Poordjeli’. With the discovery of this cipher, Leclair inaugurates an analytic method bent on the reduction of names to the limits of the subject’s unconscious – the letter of the signifier itself. Such letters are both at the most intimate of the subject (one might call them sub-subjective), and trans-individual, the product of nominal concatenations that obey no other logic than the subject’s desire.

The overlay of Philippe’s dream with Blanchot’s novel results in a fictional yet irreducibly real hybrid, like ‘Poordjeli’, or ‘Philippe Thomas’. Note that Thomas (the artist) comes across Philippe (the psychoanalytical reference) at a well-known New York dance club, The World. New York’s nightlife in the 1980s was indeed a world onto itself, a liminal dreamscape (comically evoked in Martin Scorsese’s 1985 film *After Hours*). No more than ‘Thomas’ in *Thomas l’obscur* or ‘Philippe’ in his dream, ‘Philippe Thomas’ can speak for himself, as self-determined author-subject. In *Insights*, all he can do is jot down, under a borrowed name (‘Laura Carpenter’), snippets of con-

versations and memories, turning the Cable Gallery into a free psychoanalytical space where the positions of analyst and the analysand are constantly changing sides.

The problem of identifying the performer of the act from the performance itself is particularly vivid in environments where looking, and scripted movement and dialogue, are the norm: in art galleries, for example, or in dance clubs. The writer and artist Duncan Smith, in a book published the same year as Thomas' exhibition at the Cable Gallery, describes the awkwardness of standing still amidst a crowd of dancers.⁸ Dancing and not dancing are inseparable yet antagonistic, Smith argues, since the one presupposes the other, or more dangerously: often turns into the other. 'Dancing', writes Smith, 'condenses the aporia between figure and performance. It celebrates the failure of the two achieving unity'.⁹ As a gay man, who succumbed to AIDS-related illness in 1991 at age 37, Smith sees in the ill-fitting couple 'speaking about dancing' and 'dancing' a particularly queer issue. Not only do gay men of a certain age and social background often find themselves in clubs frequented by like-minded men (Thomas might well have been dancing next to Smith that night at The World, before meeting Steve). They are also 'implicated', Smith argues, in a rhetorical play:

They might call themselves 'gay', but by so doing they fall prey to referential, denotative straightjacketing. Gay culture prides itself on its irony; its exuberant 'lying', hence making the designation 'gay' or 'homosexual' a possible lie, a rhetorical play, an ironic figure. (...) Gay people will never be able to surmount the problem of what 'gay' means, its referentiality always made abyssal by the possibility that an individual can say 'I'm gay' and 'I'm not gay'.¹⁰

In Thomas' work, the illusion of identity and authority disappears once the act, its performance and its performer are laid bare and reshuffled. Descriptive histories attempt to dissolve these distinctions, and merge memory with history. Yet to paraphrase the title of an important exhibition from the period, memory comes at the cost of history, or at least of a certain 'straight' conception of history.¹¹ Thomas' work abjures the smooth surface of historical narratives that would position him on the dance floor, while the narrator stands somewhere else, insulated by the fiction of the survivor's memory. As a gay man, one can assume, following Smith, that Thomas was intimately familiar with the travesty of self-assertion. As an artist, he created a reality out of the fiction of his name, remaking the latter in the image of literature and

dreams. He left art historians no choice but to become sleuths in the psychoanalytical chamber, at once analyst and analysand, more interested in the queer performative rhetorics of desire than in the demonstrable (f)acts of a subject named 'Philippe Thomas'.

1 *Newspaper Jan Mot*, no. 97 (May 2015), pp. 4–5.

2 Thomas' work – a play of endless mirrors and refractions – should not be confused with the subject 'Philippe Thomas', who feared, we are told, dying posthumously, after having already died in name during his life-time (see Claire Fontaine, 'A.C.M.', *Retour d'y voir no.5, retraits de l'artiste en Philippe Thomas*, Mamco, 2012, p. 175).

3 See Stéphane Sauzedde, 'Roland Barthes (Accuser réception de l'œuvre de Philippe Thomas)', *Retour d'y voir no.5*, pp. 57–8.

4 Laura Carpenter, *Insights*, New York: Curt Marcus Gallery, 1989, p. 57.

5 *Insights*, p. 38.

6 Serge Leclair, *Psychanalyses*, Paris: Seuil, 1968.

7 Quoted in Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film*, London: Reaktion Books, 2004, p. 62.

8 I would like to warmly thank Bruce Hainley for bringing Duncan Smith's magnificent work to my attention, and for republishing some of it in *Commie Pinko Guy*, edited by Hainley (London/Cologne: Raven Row/Walther Koenig Verlag, 2015).

9 Duncan Smith, 'Reflections on Rhetoric in Bars', *The Age of Oil*, New York: Slate, 1987, p. 109.

10 Smith, *The Age of Oil*, pp. 106–7 (emphasis in the original).

11 *The Art of Memory / The Loss of History*, New Museum, New York (23 November 1985–19 January 1986), curated by William Olander.



View of the exhibition at the opening of the agency readymades belong to everyone®, Cable Gallery, New York 1987. Courtesy Claire Burrus.



LOS ANGELES – JUL. 31 – Pierre Bismuth and his assistant Nicolas Jolly travelled from Brussels to California at the end of July to shoot the last scenes of his upcoming feature film *'Where is Rocky II?'* including the following actors: Robert Knepper, Milo Ventimiglia, Tania Raymonde, Stephen Tobolowsky, Richard Edson, Roger Guenveur Smith, Barry O'Rourke and Stephen Dorff. This image was taken in Vasquez Rocks with on the left Ventimiglia, in the middle Bismuth giving instructions to Dan Katz, director of photography. The European premiere will take place in the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris) and the Tate Modern (London) in 2016. Production: The Ink Connection. Photo: Kevin Johnson.

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Agenda

Sven Augustijnen

Old News (Again), cneai Chatou (FR), 16/05 - 27/09; *EUROPE – The Future of History*, Kunsthhaus Zürich (CH), 12/06 - 06/09; *European Ghosts*, Mu.ZEE, Oostende (BE), 04/07 - 03/02; *Art in the Age of Asymmetrical Warfare*, Witte de With, Rotterdam (NL), 10/09 - 03/01; *Spectres*, (Fabriquer 1°) Afrique, Salle du Polygone étoilé Marseille (FR), 27/09 (screening); *(On)Voltooid Verleden Tijd*, Universiteitsbibliotheek Leuven (BE), 15/10 - 06/12

Pierre Bismuth

Expeditie land art, Kunsthal KAde, Amersfoort (NL), 19/09 - 03/01; *Walkers: Hollywood Afterlives in Art & Artifact*, Museum of the Moving Image, 07/11 - 10/04

Manon de Boer

Project 35: The Last Act, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art Moscow (RU), 10/08 - 31/01; Casa França-Brasil Rio de Janeiro (BR), 15/08 - 20/09; Tabakalera, San Sebastián (ES), 11/09 - 03/01; *On a Warm Day in July*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 12/09 - 24/10 (solo); *Panorama 17*, Fresnoy, Tourcoign (FR), 18/09 - 12/12; *Dissonant*, 25FPS Zagreb (HR), 26/09 (screening); *Conversation: Manon de Boer and Christophe Wavelet*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 28/09; *Manon de Boer: One, Two, Many*, Tate Modern, London, 06/10 (screening and talk); *Manon de Boer and Jayne Parker: Films in Dialogue*, Lux, London, 07/10 (screening); *Drawing. The Bottom Line*, SMAK, Ghent (BE), 10/10 - 31/01; *Lecture: Lionel Devlieger (Rotor)*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 15/10; *William Forsythe*, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 20/11 - 21/02

Rineke Dijkstra

Eu (título em construção), Novo Banco, Lisbon, 12/02 - 12/09; ... *and there was time*, Visual Arts Center Foundation Helga de Alvear, Caceres (ES), 25/04 - 31/01; *The Wild West. A History Of Wrocław's Avant-Garde*, Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 19/06 - 13/09

Mario Garcia Torres

"Poor Art" – Rich Legacy, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, 13/03 - 28/02; *The Strange Things My Eyes See*, neugierriemschneider, Berlin, 17/09 - 31/10 (solo); *Expeditie land art*, Kunsthal KAde, Amersfoort (NL),

In Brief

The work by **Manon de Boer** *Maud Capturing the Light 'On a Clear Day'* (2015) was acquired by the SMAK in Ghent (BE) and will be part of the upcoming exhibition at the SMAK, entitled 'Drawing. The Bottom Line', which opens on the 10th of October (until 31/01/16).

David Lamelas' installation *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio* will be part of the upcoming exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition is entitled *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980* and focuses on the parallels and connections among an international scene of artists working in—and in reference to—Latin America and Eastern Europe during the 1960s and 1970s. For the first time since its creation for the Venice Biennale of 1968, Lamelas' seminal work can be seen thanks to an important commitment of the MoMA to retrace and reconstruct, in collaboration with the artist, the different elements of the installation. The work was part of a larger group of works acquired by the museum in 2013. The show runs from 05/09/15 until 03/01/16.

