

The quality of the work by

is

the same.



If the surface of the work

is

the same, can someone say



The work and reveal nothing?

is

the same.



The experimental media alchemy of E.E. Vonna-Michell and Balsam Flex

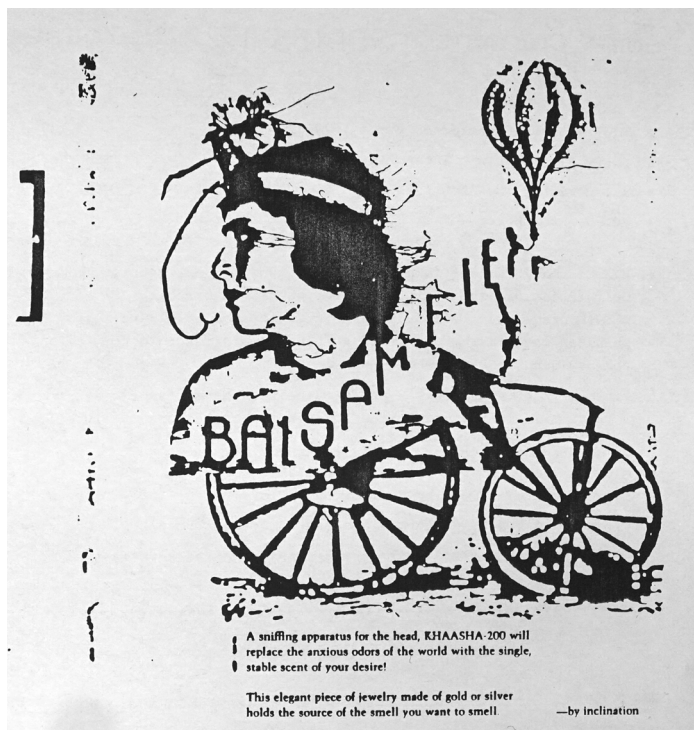


Illustration to an announcement for a 'sniffing device'; brochure for "series 3" of the Balsam Flex publishing project from the mid 1980s (detail).

By
Marc Matter

BAD SÄCKINGEN, JAN. 17 – "Fills the Room of Your Choice. A sniffing apparatus for the head, KHAASHA-200 will replace the anxious odors of the world with the

single, stable scent of your desire! This elegant piece of jewelry made of gold or silver holds the source of the smell you want to smell—by inclination."

This advertisement for an unusual and somewhat novel accessory can be found on a leaflet dating from the mid 1980s for

"series 3" of the UK-based Balsam Flex publishing project (see image). Run by E.E. Vonna-Michell (1950–2020) from the mid-1970s until the early 1990s, Balsam Flex remains a true enigma amongst small press publishers, even in the already baffling field of artist's publications produced in a DIY manner (or, more appropriate in most cases: DIT as in do-it-together, a term introduced to me by artist, musician and writer Chris Mann). Releasing experimental art and poetry works (foremost sound poetry) that expanded the notion of poetry, as well as documenting performances that happened mainly in and around London, the activities of this publishing project can be associated with the 'British Poetry Revival'. It ought to be recognized as a rather singular practice though, due to its utilization, and oftentimes misuse, of media and technology and a highly idiosyncratic approach.

The publications of Balsam Flex consisted mainly of sound works on audio cassettes (according to E.E. Vonna-Michell far over a hundred titles in a print-run of up to a few hundred copies), a few small, self-made books and other printed matter, as well as some video and original editions. Some of the releases were rather peculiar: for example, one original edition (*You are the only one missing* by Jiri Perez, presumably a pseudonym) is described as a "mannikin audio recorder – self-performing"; one audio cassette release seemed to be unplayable, foreshadowing so-called 'anti-records' by artists and noise musicians; another one's content differs each time it was played back due to a deliberate unstable mechanical constellation of the inner-life of the cassette.

(continued on page 5)

INSIGHTS AN EXHIBITION BY JAY CHIAT AND EDOUARD MERINO

If only by its title, the exhibition "INSIGHTS" provides an answer to the problem posed by its definition (What is it about?) by questioning its own boundaries.

After a quick glance, the viewer will realize that it is the very subject matter of these photographs, and what they depict (their motif), that can justify this title. He will feel as though each and every piece is showing a detail sampled from a location (a desk, an office, an agency?), or again, an instant captured in the ordinary flow of a now completed task whose nature he cannot fully grasp.

Something is missing! Details—a hand that halts over a book, a newspaper left on a sofa, wavering reflections on a piece of plexiglass—are as many indications suggesting a decor (New York?) and an occupation (employees?), which the viewer, however, cannot see.

If he is not able to make out the meaning or the nature of the activity at hand—or the function of the agency—he will at least be able to assume that through these "still lifes," the two artists aimed to put forth that which, in one of the photographs of a book opened on the right page, is accurately called a "poetics of absence".

Amused by this coincidence, which provides him with an anticipated commentary on his own reactions or dissatisfactions, the viewer will most likely find other similar instances and decipher a clue to the plot within each of the photographs, which would compel him to reconsider the exhibition as a whole. Thus, what he is given to see supposes a kind of inversion, akin to that of the name "philippe thomas"... which one of the photographs delivers only as a projected shadow or an inverted reflection on a work table.

"Readymades belong to everyone" or "One step beyond appropriation," instead of existing as mere inscriptions lost within pictorial compositions, would therefore be phrases whose meaning would have to be considered; just as the agency which, instead of setting itself up as an excuse for photographic tableaux, would find their display to be an occasion to demonstrate its activities, and establish its presence. Where does representation begin, and where does it end?... This would be a pressing question! If artists are so by virtue of the principle of appropriation, which confers them with the title and its function, in this exhibition, isn't it in fact more of a role play? Again, does one of the photographs not mention something like a "theatre of power"?

Hence, the exhibition would be a singular piece, "a play," (une pièce) with all the ambiguity arising from its ability to make the gallery a "stage," (une scène) and the exhibited works, elements of a performance (une représentation) whose duration knows no end.

Where the public would have a role to play—by having the capacity, for instance, to recognize "It's our pleasure to serve you" as another voice, a different kind of announcement than that of a banal coffeeshop—the two collectors would, to some extent, have gotten ahead of the spectators. By taking on the responsibility of making this project possible—that is to say: to give the tangible strength of a reality to the questions the project implies—these two persons will, for the first time in New York, have made complete sense of the advertisement "ART HISTORY IN SEARCH OF CHARACTERS..."

This text by Philippe Thomas for readymades belong to everyone® was written for Insights by Jay Chiat, Edouard Merino and Laura Carpenter, an exhibition at Curt Marcus Gallery, New York in 1989. Translated by Emile Rubino and published here for the first time. With thanks to Claire Burrus, Paris for providing the original text in French.

With more works dating back to the 1960s

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... and a series of objects.

Manon de Boer and Latifa Laâbissi at Frac Bretagne, MDD and Cinematek



Manon de Boer and Latifa Laâbissi, *Ghost Party (2)*, 2022, HD video, color, sound (French with English subtitles), 57 minutes (film still)

(advertisement)

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Exhibition
19/02–26/03
Opening
19/02, 2–6 pm

VONNA-MICHELL

back segments

Jan Mot
Petit Sablon / Kleine Zavel 10
1000 Brussels, Belgium

(advertisement)

243

Art Fair
23/02–27/02

JAN MOT AT ARCOMADRID

Section 40+1
IFEMA
Avenida del Partenon 5
28042 Madrid

Subject of one of the pieces he did this
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Since 2015 Manon de Boer and Latifa Laâbissi have been in continuous dialogue about the numerous voices that inhabit their thinking and bodies. During a long process of exchange and ‘cannibalizing’, the performance *Ghost Party (1)* (2021) was created that further lead to the production of the film *Ghost Party (2)* (2022) as well as sound installation *Blindsight* (2022). While *Ghost Party (1)* & (2) are currently presented in their duo show at the Frac Bretagne in Rennes (FR) (until 15/05), the film will have its Belgian premiere at the Cinematek in Brussels on March 1st. *Blindsight* (2022) for which de Boer and Laâbissi collaborated furthermore with Laszlo Umbreit will be on view at the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Sint-Martens-Latem (BE) from February 13th until May 22nd. In addition to the extensive sound installation, the show at the MDD will include works by artists such as Stanley Brouwn, Andrea Büttner, Lygia Clark, Marlene Dumas, Valeska Gert, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Agnes Martin, Louise Lawler, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Joëlle Tuerlinckx who all shaped Manon de Boer’s practice.

Too young, too soon, for him
to leave us, for me to know
how to pen these feelings.

My deep, sincerest condolences.
Lost for words. The loss of Jesse.

He was such a big part of
my experience and orientation
of the place and space
he called home.

The confidence and warmth
he exuded when we walked through
doors and deliberations of
collaborations and celebrations.

Care and dedication.
The loose threads, the laughter,
the loiter, he always knew how
to tie them together. He always
knew how to bring us together.

Tris Vonna-Michell



Our dear colleague and friend Jesse Van Bauwel passed away on the 3rd of December.
Jesse's portrait above was made at the gallery on the 29th of November by Cyriaque Villemaux.

(continued from page 1)

I had great luck to visit E.E. Vonna-Michell in his London studio in early 2017 to talk about his projects and the publishing experiences with Balsam Flex, an encounter made possible by the mediation of his son Tris who I met and became friends with due to our shared interest in experimental spoken word, concrete and sound poetry. The meeting was one of the most impressive encounters I ever had. After years of trying to organize a meeting, I was curious and excited. He turned out to be welcoming and open to my interest in his work. He talked about his current projects that were not declared as art and placed incognito in public places such as trains, as well as other projects executed in anonymity and hard to grasp in its audaciousness and complexity. Never applying for grants and reluctant to declare himself an artist, he rather earned his money doing printing and duplication jobs for colleagues and later consulting for various companies using his expertise in media technology.

E.E. Vonna-Michell had an odd kind of humour and dry wit but being of utmost seriousness concerning matters of artistic research, practice and reflection. In addition to that, his approach to media technologies and its utilization in the arts was extremely insight-driven and well-informed—a true and deeply involved ‘artist-engineer’ who added, subtracted, dismantled and reassembled materials (C.f. ‘Collage, Montage and Related Terms: Their Literal and Figurative Use in and Application to Techniques and Forms in Various Arts’ by Ulrich Weissenstein) in new and yet unknown ways, creating works that comprise the process of its making in itself. After my visit I immediately took notes of our conversation and the term ‘media-alchemist’ popped up in my mind: somebody who searches and finds alternative ways to handle technical media to achieve aesthetic results which had yet to evolve. As cliché it might sound, he seemed to me as somebody taking deep trips into unknown and uncharted territories.

Many Balsam Flex audio releases resemble what has latter been called ‘noise music’ or ‘industrial’; remarkable in this context, *The Art of Flight* by Allen Fisher has been realized in the sound studio of Coum Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle, a transgressive performance and music collective that coined the term ‘industrial’. Other releases can be associated with post-fluxus aesthetics by its commitment to

ephemeral and mundane everyday situations, while occasionally displaying outlandish methods of production in handling materials, bodies, voices, spaces and media technologies.

Will Montgomery, a literary scholar, wrote one of the very few essays about Balsam Flex to date (another being the brief article by Julian Cowley in the music magazine *The Wire* #297 in 2008) in which he divides the audio releases of the label into three main categories (“Balsam Flex: Cassette Culture and Poetry”; in *Modernist Legacies. Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today*. Edited by Abigail Lang and David Nowell Smith 2015): “The first embraces recordings of a number of improvisatory, often collaborative performances—material by Bang, Crash, Wallop, or the duo of [E.E.] Vonna-Michell and [Lawrence] Upton, for example; the second is solo material by Vonna-Michell and those in his immediate circle; the third is independent of the Balsam Flex ‘aesthetic’—readings and sound poetry by poets including [Henri] Chopin, [Bob] Cobbing, François Dufrêne, Peter Finch and Ken Edwards. Lesser known figures such as Alice Blommor left little or no trace.” (p. 134) Some of the artist names in the Balsam Flex catalogue presumably being pseudonyms—like Yurine Burns, Rudi Schlemmer-Topf, Dyane Citroen, Neko Nekosen, Jiri Perez, Iida Kajino, John & Mary Outchan, and Tumla Nitnelav (which is the name of E.E. Vonna-Michell’s wife written backwards)—these works are most likely by E.E. Vonna-Michell himself or produced in collaboration with friends or family.

Some of the releases feature proto-glitch aesthetics by making use of technical glitches and errors normally being suppressed as unwanted noise or flawed sound, a practice that later became popular in experimental electronic music during the 1990s as ‘glitch’. One extreme example of this is *Touch* by the probably pseudonymous Iida Kajino, in which an interrupted string of electrical hum can be heard, disrupted by on-and-off noises that seem to originate from touching (hence the title) a jack plug of an audio cable which is normally supposed to be ‘touched’ only by its matching socket. Another work in this vein, foreshadowing experimental musical practices that later came to popularity, is *Canopy in Green* in which the sound of a needle running through an empty run-out groove of a vinyl record plays a dominant role: the rumble of the vinyl itself and its stubbornly repetitive clicks (produced by

the opening of the run-out groove) displays the materiality of another sound medium: the sound of vinyl released on an audio cassette. Utilizing these noises as compositional material in a as-found manner by merely recording the end of a vinyl record which contains no proper ‘sound’ but just the normally unwanted noise turns it into music of a sort.

An example of challenging intentionality and originality, more precisely broadening the form and use of ‘scores’, is the audio cassette *Orange Wipes*, produced and instantaneously composed in an agile performance, as described on the leaflet accompanying the cassette: “this recording contains the third transcript of the orange wipes transcribed on October 12, 1979 by mounting five mono record heads, in the left and right hands and feet dancing over and over some 900 feet of one inch 16th century dance recordings braided to size a very small area.” As a special feature which links technological settings of the audio cassette medium to meaning making is the fact that it could only be listened to once: “please note: due to the nature of this cassette, any attempts to fast forward or rewind may result in irreparable damage.” The instantaneous composition and production of this work can also be understood as a special form of translation or transcription, in which specific movements of a body in space are transferred into music. The outcome is a wild, vivid and dense sound piece, realized in a surprisingly clear and crispy sound.

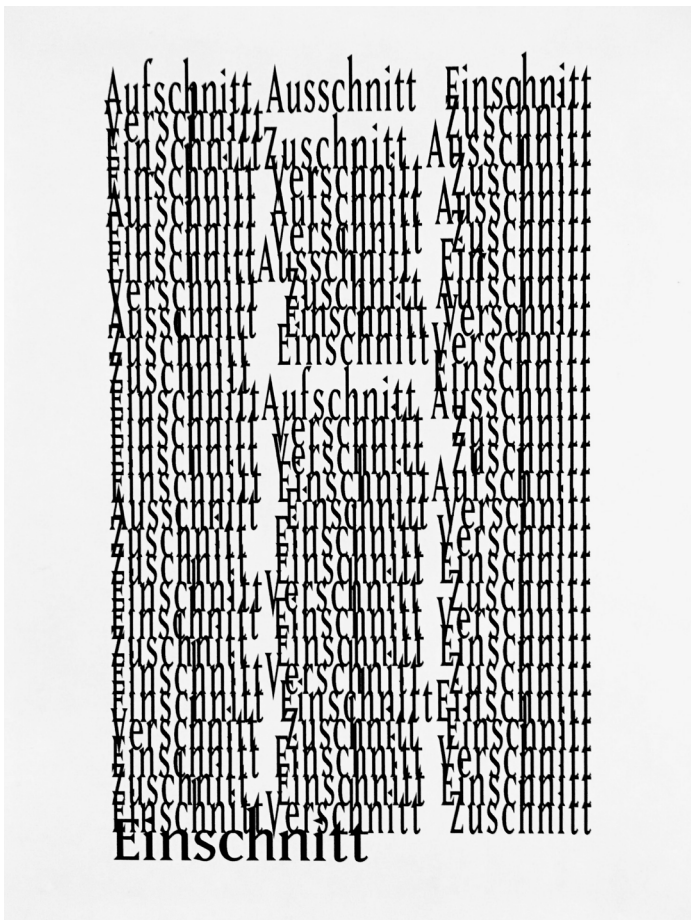
Other experimental setups, although apparently not successful, included writing a long poetic text on 1.200 feet of audio tape and then removing the electromagnetic sound information not protected by the writing, proposing a form of shaping erasure; in a way comparable to so-called blackout poetry in which portions of a given text are blackened or crossed out so that new texts emerge (an early example being ‘Paris, mai 1924’ by Man Ray) but transferred to the time-based medium of sound. For this kind of experiments, E.E. Vonna-Michell often found ways to get material, sometimes seemingly custom-made, from big tech-companies like Sony.

Some of the audio cassettes released by Balsam Flex were produced in a studio or at odd locations like an operating carwash (*Carwash Interview* with Allen Fisher) including all the surrounding noises as part of the work, resonating with post-Cagean aesthetics of abolishing the demarcation

between useful and useless material. Other releases were recorded live on-site at performances and happenings, occasionally exercising a kind of in-situ publishing by recording a given performance and subsequently duplicating it onto audio cassettes to make it available to the public by the end of the event. During my visit in his studio, Vonna-Michell revealed that sometimes the audience would have been served food after a performance to gain time for the duplication of the cassettes.

In an interview with Ken Edwards recorded in 1981, E.E. Vonna-Michell talks about his fascination with cooking, resonating with artistic methods of disintegration processes and transformations: "the way things used to change. You'd see a package of something dry and later it came out wet... things became cakes, never understood! How a thing became a cake like that. I remember now seeing a cardboard box with all the dry stuff in it, three hours later we had this big cake. [...] Puddings were mysterious, jelly... all that business, fascinating." Besides transformation and disintegration, long-durational processes were of high interest. Regarding a performance, one demurely plain leaflet announces *A Weekend* by E.E. Vonna-Michell: "48 hours / to begin at 8pm on July 14 / ending at 10pm on July 16 / to take place in / around / Lower Green Farm-Kent. There will be a 2 hour interval on July 15 from 3 to 5pm."

Some of the lyric output by E.E. Vonna-Michell published on paper as small books or in magazines (like *Spanner* #19, a split-release with Allen Fisher's *Speech Poetry*) is concerned with similar problems as his audio works: one 'book' was conceived in the form of a physical object that would go into a process of degeneration depicted in the self-explanatory title *2 ply washing up for more than 10 months*. Other print publications were concerned with repetition and combinatorial concepts: *Segments. Back* is based on variations on the word 'back' in highly repetitive patterns: "seen back / sense back / skid back / seem back / seize back / slip back." Concerned with the materiality of language, it is also a writing that is dependent on the sound shape of language, rich of assonances and idiosyncratic rhymes. Another work, a visual poem of unknown date, squeezes together a variety of the German word 'Schnitt' (cut) with all possible prefixes so that a field of words emerges that typographically overlap each other (see picture). His book *Falkenhagen* (Dreit Editions) on the other hand displays excessive overwriting. It is a reworking of



Poem by E.E. Vonna-Michell; variations on the German word 'Schnitt' (cut) with different prefixes, date unknown.

the terrorist laws introduced in 1974, using appropriated text and applying a specific process to it: "more than one text written on the same page, typed onto the same page. [...] a writing manipulation. [...] It's writing over itself and again itself. First thing is written. Then it's rewritten. Then it's rewritten. It's just responding to itself." In regard to another of his books, he concludes that it is "writing that works against itself" (interview with Ken Edwards). E.E. Vonna-Michell regarded those processes including appropriation, transformation and erasure as 'performances', the production of a book like the one mentioned above being the performance itself, so he didn't see the need to perform it over again.

The same goes for much of his audio and film works, in which material was exposed to a certain, pre-defined process. The results would then be released on audio cassettes or shown as films on various occasions.

A collaborator of high importance for E.E. Vonna-Michell was Henri Chopin, who contributed a collection of his audiopoems entitled *oh* to the *Balsam Flex* catalogue. Chopin, a publisher of experimental poetry himself (OU review and edition), was a key figure in the European postwar avantgarde and a tireless connector of artists and scenes from the early 1960s on. Together with Chopin, E.E. Vonna-Michell realized some forceful works of 'expanded media' combining

Agenda

Francis Allys

The Little Catalogue of the S.M.A.K. Collection / The Exhibition 'Part 1', S.M.A.K., Ghent (BE), 30/10-17/04; Yi / Chair Season, Zhi Art Museum, Chengdu (CN), 15/09-10/04; Colección Jumex: Temperatura ambiente, Museo Jumex, Mexico City, 07/10-13/02; The Principle of Hope, Inside-Out Art Museum, Beijing, 16/10-27/02; Collection Exhibition 2: BLUE, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa (JP), 20/11-08/05; Beyond Borders, Koroška galerija likovnih umetnosti, Slovenj Gradec (SI), 10/12-20/03; There is Nothing Inevitable About Time, Tavros, Athens, 02/02-20/03; WALK!, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Frankfurt (DE), 17/02-22/05; The Nature of the Game, Belgian Pavillon, Venice Biennale, Venice (IT), 23/04-27/11 (solo)

Sven Augustijnen

The Little Catalogue of the S.M.A.K. Collection / The Exhibition, S.M.A.K., Ghent (BE), 30/10–17/04; *Spectres*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 08/04 (screening)

Pierre Bismuth

Tout le monde est artiste mais seul l'artiste le sait, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 20/10–28/02 (solo); *8 flags*, Nouveau Musée National de Monaco (NMNM), Monaco (MC), 25/11–15/05 (solo); *Zijn naam was Austerlitz/Austerlitz was his name*, A Tale of A Tub, Rotterdam (NL), 09/02–03/04; *Everybody is an artist but only the artist knows it*, West Den Haag, The Hague (NL), 25/03–10/07 (solo)

Andrea Büttner

Donation Outset (The KW Production Series), Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach (DE), 26/09–13/02; *Communicating vessels. Collection 1881–2021 – Exodus and Communal Life*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 27/11–ongoing; *Bodies in Space*, MIRROR, Plymouth (UK), 27/11–26/02; *Blindsight*, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Sint-Martens-Latem (BE), 13/02–22/05; *Radical landscapes*, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool (UK), 05/05–04/09; *On Caring, Repairing and Healing*, Griepius Bau, Berlin, 16/09–15/01

Manon de Boer

Ghost Party (duo with Latifa Laâbissi), Frac Bretagne, Rennes (FR), 21/01–15/05; *Go Against the Wind, Performances, Actions and Other Rituals*, Frac Franche-Comté, Besançon (FR), 22/01–30/04; *Blindsight*, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Sint-Martens-Latem (BE).

13/02–22/05 (solo); *Ghost Party* (2), Cinematek, Brussels, 01/03, 7 pm (screening); *Che bella voce*, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, St. Gallen (CH), 26/03–09/10 (solo); *Down Time*, Kunsthall Aarhus, Aarhus (DK), 03/06–21/08 (solo)

Rineke Dijkstra

The gallery of honour of Dutch photography,
Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam (NL),
09/06–ongoing: *Tomorrow is a Different Day*,
Collectie 1980-nu, Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam, 06/07–ongoing: *Mother!*, Kunst-
halle Mannheim, Mannheim (DE), 01/10–
06/02; *Masculinities: Liberation through*
Photography, FOMU, Antwerp (BE), 21/10–
13/03; *Diversity United: Contemporary*
European Art, Berlin. Moscow: *Paris*, New
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 23/11–13/03;
Raw, The Rembrandt House Museum,
Amsterdam, 22/01–22/05

Mario Garcia Torres

La poética del regreso, MARCO Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Monterrey, Monterrey (MX), 12/03–10/02 (solo); *Go Against the Wind, Performances, Actions and Other Rituals*, Frac Franche-Comté, Besançon (FR), 22/01–30/04; *Zijn naam was Austerlitz/Austerlitz was his name*, A Tale of A Tub, Rotterdam (NL), 09/02–03/04

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster

Blow up—James Spader par Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, ARTE TV, 03/11—ongoing; *Video Room*: Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Museu de Arte de São Paulo (BR), 12/10–13/02 (solo); *astrocytes*, Jan Mot at ARCO Madrid, 23/02–27/02 (solo); *Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster*, Serpentine Galleries, London, spring 2022 (solo)

David Lamelas

Collection 1940s–1970s, MoMA New York,
New York City (US), 24/10–ongoing

Sharon Lockhart

Sharon Lockhart: *Noa Eshkol's Movement Notation*, Guggenheim Bilbao (ES), 04/11–27/02; *Since Unveiling: Selected Acquisitions of a Decade*, The Broad, Los Angeles (US), 20/11–03/04; *Sharon Lockhart*, Gladstone Gallery, New York (US), 14/01–26/02

Philippe Thomas

Edouard Merino, Insights, Jan Mot, Brussels,
15/12–05/02 (solo)

Tris Vonna-Michell

Zijn naam was Austerlitz/Austerlitz was his name, A Tale of A Tub, Rotterdam (NL), 09/02–03/04; *back segments*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 19/02–26/03

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Represented by the gallery

Francis Alÿs, Sven Augustijnen,
Pierre Bismuth, Stanley Brouwn,
Andrea Büttner, Manon de Boer,
Rineke Dijkstra, Mario Garcia Torres,
Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster,
Joachim Koester, David Lamelas,
Sharon Lockhart, Tino Sehgal,
Seth Siegelau / Egress Foundation,
Philippe Thomas, Tris Vonna-Michell,
Ian Wilson

Colophon

Publisher Jan Mot, Brussels
Concept Design
Maureen Mooren & Daniël van der Velden
Graphic Design
Maureen Mooren with Maud Vervenne
Printing Cultura, Wetteren

(advertisement)

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