

Exhibition

PLAYFUL SERIOUSNESS / SERIOUS PLAY

Art is a form of play. This does not mean that all seriousness is missing, quite the contrary. Those who do not take play seriously will never create art of any importance.

ARTISTS: Zeli Bauwens, Elen Braga, Marcel Broodthaers, Kasper De Vos, Kamiel de Waal, Anno Dijkstra, Jan Fabre, Frederic Geurts, Emilio López-Menchero, Gwendolyn Lootens, Panamarenko, Kelly Schacht, Lukas Vandenabeele.

CURATOR: Frank Maes

Frank Maes is artistic director of Emergent and writes about modern and contemporary art. Emergent has been presenting exhibitions in a historic building in Veurne since 2013. Until recently, these were exhibitions with an ever-changing line-up of contemporary artists. That will change from spring 2025. From now on, Emergent will represent and promote a permanent group of artists. The ambition is to build lasting relationships in the development of an artistic career: with a focus on authorship, on the internal dynamics and poetics of each oeuvre.

www.emergent.be

‘Homo ludens’

Cultural historian Johan Huizinga even saw play as the element from which all culture originated. In his book *Homo Ludens* (1938), he exposed the element of play not only in art and literature, but also in language, law, war, science, philosophy or religion. We can also add sport to that.

So play and games are not arbitrary aspects of a person's life, they belong to his being.

The 18th-century poet Friedrich Schiller wrote:

‘Man plays (...) only when he is human in the full sense of the word, and he is fully human only when he plays.’

An important side note to this though: a lot of animals also take obvious pleasure in playing. French thinker Jacques Ranciere, on the other hand, sees in the playful nature of art a way of shaking up the social status quo, without igniting it in the violence of a revolution.

Also intriguing is the distinction between the English nouns ‘play’ and ‘game’. ‘Play’ is characterised by the absence of a clearly defined purpose or structure. It can take place anywhere or anytime, with no rules of the game.

In contrast, a ‘game’ is a structured form of play, with rules and clear objectives, in which you can win, lose or draw. In childhood, both are essential.

This exhibition is inspired by the summer scene at the beach, where fantastic sandcastles rise for the duration of a tide or where you can pick up colourful paper flowers for a pittance. It is an ode to the child or artist in us, those who, fully aware that it is only a game, nevertheless play the game with grandiose seriousness.

Zeli Bauwens

Zeli Bauwens, who previously exhibited at villa Les Zéphyr, grew up as the daughter of a gardener and a florist in a garden centre. After studying textile design, sculpture and landscape architecture, the context in which she grew up, the Belgian landscape and its multifarious garden culture, still form the source of her imagery.

She creates landscape sculptures and installations. In her dealings with the landscape, she often introduces a slight shift, a twist, often not devoid of any humour, that makes us look at our familiar surroundings with a slightly different perspective.

In this sense, her work also recalls so-called 'folies', curious structures found in 18th-century gardens. In its creation, Bauwens starts from a concept. Each concept requires a different technique, material or location, and is usually given an initial shape by means of a scale model. The ultimate goal is to create as many life-size models as possible.

Elen Braga

Elen Braga was also a previous guest here. She explores themes of power and resilience. Her work often consists of self-imposed tasks and intense, labour-intensive efforts - e.g. in performances or in making fabrics. She delves into mythological stories and explores the ways they survive in contemporary behaviour and belief.

This is partly to do with her childhood in Brazil, where she was raised a strict Catholic. As a child, she was part of a gospel choir, but at the same time she was modelled in beauty pageants. With no artistic training, she started making art as an antidote. When she is working on a project, hunger and fatigue are the only stimuli that make her quit. But when there is no deadline, she can let go just as quickly and enjoy empty moments in search of inspiration.

Her many fabrics are partly inspired by the Greek myth of Arachne. This weaver defied the gods when she won a competition with a mocking image of Zeus. An enraged goddess Athena subsequently turned Arachne into a spider.

Marcel Broodthaers

Brussels poet Marcel Broodthaers decided in 1964 to become a visual artist for good. Henceforth, he plays the laws of various artistic disciplines - and especially those of word and image - against each other. He also plays with the double meaning of the French word 'moule': mussel or mould.

Broodthaers believes that every medium allows us to cast the world in certain forms or moulds, while on the other hand it blinds us to other aspects of reality. He often borrows forms from nature (e.g. mussels, eggs, a fish, a parrot), which he then literally empties. They then become signs, which can be filled with different meanings again and again.

Both artworks in this exhibition present a book in a special form. In a miniature atlas, entitled *La conquête de l'espace. Atlas à l'usage des artistes et des militaires*, the outlines of 32 countries have been collected. By depicting each country, from Andorra to Canada, at the same size, he shows how each image negates the scale of the one depicted. The countries in this atlas have already lost their original content; they look like the characters of a new alphabet.

Catalogue-Catalogue shows us the images from the 1974 exhibition catalogue of the same name, in which we see, among other things, an action the artist carried out with a friend on the beach of De Haan in 1969. At low tide, they dug out the ground plan of a museum. Signs with French-Dutch, handwritten messages were planted in the sand, such as: 'Musée d'art moderne Section XIXe siècle' or "Strictly forbidden to touch the objects".

In this childlike promise of sand, Broodthaers once again sought the boundary between nature and culture, between the futile, scintillating play of signs and a reality that doesn't care.

Kasper De Vos

Kasper De Vos often taps into the visual potential of found things. His working method betrays a good dose of fun at play, as well as a keen sense of the right match.

About *Daydreamer* he said: 'This is a blue plastic shutter found in Spain, on which I glued a semi-circular piece of fair carpet. It struck me that in a country where sun and blue skies are predominant, the protection against these is also the same colour, as a kind of camouflage. Just as with us the shutters are white, as protection against freezing temperatures, moisture and wind.'

In *The Gallery as Studiolo*, De Vos reflects on his role and position as an artist, referring to earlier times. During an exhibition at his gallery, he made a wooden scale model of the exhibition space, large enough to use it as a kind of 'cocoon'. In the art tradition since the Renaissance, there are depictions of a wooden study furniture, in which the thinker or artist withdraws physically and mentally from the outside world, to create his own universe.

Kamiel de Waal

As a young artist, Kamiel de Waal observes the goings-on in the art world half sceptically, half amusedly. When he uses techniques such as blow-up sculptures or 3D printing, it evokes his belief that art practice is not infrequently made up of a daring bluff.

He is the type of artist who dares to play the thin line between 'something' and 'nothing', between the magical sculpture and the 'collapsed soufflé'.

Vases are found in archaeological sites many millennia old. Today it is an eminently decorative object, sometimes functionally employed to present flowers, other times as a pure image. De Waal goes one step further, since it involves 3D printed objects: computer-controlled, wafer-thin, shiny plastic bowls.

This kind of art might bring to mind Broodthaers' empty mussel shells or eggshells or, say, *Diamond Dust Shoes* by Andy Warhol. Nothing but a dazzling, seductive beauty around a void. As if it were a bubble.

Anno Dijkstra

Anno Dijkstra is cutting edge in his sculptures. He often uses iconic images, which belong to the collective memory. In this way, he explores how we relate to these images, and what they do to us.

How to begin consists of a collection of hands, scattered here and there in the villa. They take three forms. Their mutual combination can be interpreted as the game of 'scissor-stone-paper', but equally as the expressions of three political ideologies.

This work marks a transition in Dijkstra's oeuvre. In recent years, he shifted his focus from collective memory to the anonymous collective itself. In the process, a remarkable number of hands appeared. Instead of images from all over the world, which inundate us daily but at the same time remain at a distance, he now questions the contact with the immediate environment. Just as sculpture - perhaps more than the eye - stimulates our sense of touch. These sculptures are made of polyurethane resin, reminiscent of the material in which children's toys are often made.

Jan Fabre

Jan Fabre is an artistic jack-of-all-trades. He is a theatre-maker, visual artist and writer. Long before 'research' became a hot topic in the arts, he was already looking for connections between art and science - for which he uses the English term 'consilience'. An early work is a tent in the shape of a nose. In it, as a child, he sat at night using the torch to lure insects. Then he made assemblages, e.g. of a beetle with a crown cap. These were literal metaphors, playfully regulating the traffic between 'here' and 'there', between the human and animal worlds.

Listen was part of Fabre's participation in the 1992 Documentary Exhibition in Kassel, Germany, with Jan Hoet as curator. During that period, he made large drawings with blue Bic ballpoint pens, sometimes scratching immense surfaces - up to an entire castle. This was his reference to *The Hour Blue*, the twilight time between day and night, when other senses take over the initiative from the eye.

Fabre believes in 'the lie of the imagination'. He describes himself and his actors/dancers as 'warriors of beauty'. Although he has created a lot of large-scale spectacles, in Kassel he opted for some small interventions, where he seemed to turn away from the very big visual spectacle that such a Documenta is, precisely to quiet it in his mind and listen to what was happening on 'the other side'.

Frederic Geurts

In 2004, art journalist Erik Bracke recorded the following from the mouth of Frederic Geurts: 'Much of my work has to do with the larger movement, such as of the earth around the sun. The realisation that, as we walk here from one point to another, there is still that great elliptical movement of our planet around the sun, as described by physicist Johannes Kepler in his famous law. (...) At the same time, I am looking for that imaginary point where matter seems to lift itself, where the thing gives the impression of having become immaterial and weightless.'

Frederic Geurts has already been able to carry out quite a few projects in the public space. But besides these large-scale commissions, he also takes a childlike pleasure in creating very small constructions. He couples imagination with inventiveness in calculating, piecing together and testing out these often fragile and shaky-looking structures, which look like spatial drawings.

Again Erik Bracke described a sculpture by Geurts as a 'sublime image in the precarious intersection between heaviness and lightness, between tangible and ephemeral, between earthly and heavenly, between falling and flying.'

Emilio López-Mencheró

As the son of Spanish parents raised in Belgium, notions of identity play an important role in Emilio López-Mencheró's work. Trained as an architect, his interventions often intervene in concrete (urban) reality. For instance, during Jan Hoet's city exhibition *Over the Edges*, he unexpectedly made a Tarzan cry resound over the roofs of Ghent. Or he placed a replica of Checkpoint Charlie on the bridge over the canal between Molenbeek and Brussels' Dansaertstraat, himself playing the anachronistic role of East Berlin customs officer between two contrasting city districts.

Because López-Mencheró sees each of his projects as a test against reality, as an 'attempt', the title of each project begins with the words 'Trying to ...'. In this way, he tries to generate new situations, confront reality and reflect on the meaning of art.

In the photographic series *Trying to Be* (2000 to present), the artist has himself portrayed as a well-known, historical figure. In doing so, he tries to approach these characters with the utmost accuracy.

Gwendolyn Lootens

The basis of Gwendolyn Lootens' art practice consists in a continuous, intuitive drawing activity. The intuition of drawing is followed by reflection in the construction of an archive, in which all those 'traces' of spontaneous actions are kept, grouped, ordered. Presentation poses a challenge. For: how do you preserve the immediacy of a movement, the fleetingness of a feeling, the passing of a glance, a light reflection or a play of lines in the presentation of a drawing?

That is where Lootens has found several answers. She makes short films, 'moments in motion', which she presents on video screens. Drawings on paper she shows in sequences of 'moments', in plastic folders, which the viewer can leaf through. This interactive aspect is even stronger in the 'situations', a kind of collective happenings, created together with her partner Gawan Fagard, in which the social openness of Lootens' drawing practice manifests itself. All this together she calls 'a playground for adults'.

Panamarenko

For those who sit in a passenger plane without understanding why this colossus takes to the air, 'flying' remains an abstraction. Only by using your own mind and imagination to invent and make something that can fly will you fathom the mechanism and truly experience the miracle that is flying. This forms the basis of Panamarenko's poetics.

The scientific and industrial revolutions have installed numerous abstractions between man and nature. Panamarenko's reaction to this is not to renounce science and technology, quite the contrary. But he seeks to re-establish as direct a relationship as possible between man and the elements of nature - on land, at sea and in the air - and thus restore harmony between man and nature.

Panamarenko has amused himself throughout his life as an artist by giving free rein to his imagination and creating brilliant, ingenious contraptions. Crucially, however, these structures are fragile. And that, as soon as such a device is tested in concrete reality, it invariably results in pure slapstick.

Kelly Schacht

Three motifs are central to Kelly Schacht's poetics: space, language and the spectator. Like Broodthaers, she wonders how we relate to the surrounding world and how meaning is created in the process. To this end, she created a whole series of fictional characters, a kind of alter egos (whose hands we see in the photographic works).

From an artist working with language and meaning, it seems surprising that the physical is so central. But it is with our bodies that we generate and receive meanings. Our body too is (in Broodthaers' words) a mould into which the world is cast. Kelly Schacht invites the viewer to visit villa Les Zéphyrs with a pair of stilts. Your experience of the exhibition will be less visual, but more spatial, more physical.

Like e.g. Gwendolyn Lootens, Schacht likes to grant her works an openness, in which there is room for coincidences and for the active contribution of others. The folding screen is part of that part of Schacht's work called *Collecting the Alphabet*. This is a steadily expanding visual abécédaire, inspired by that of philosopher Gilles Deleuze. She became fascinated by Deleuze's last three letters, namely X - the unknown, Y - the unpronounceable or untold, and Z - the zigzag that avoids and connects everything.

Lukas Vandenabeele

For an artist like Lukas Vandenabeele, who dares to make things that don't look like art and who doesn't shy away from the silly, the practice of art means dancing on a slack tightrope. This body of work revolves around the notion of the invisible. It not infrequently shows how the invisible can only be made present by linking it to something visible. There you have it, an insurmountable problem.

It is Vandenabeele's ultimate and impossible-to-fulfil desire to see the world as it is, that is, purified of our gaze, tastes, interests, meanings, connections, structures, categories, judgements. His never-to-be-fulfilled desire is to behold paradise in which things, orphaned and freed from our incestuous judgements, exist completely autonomously. To this end, the artist formulates commands to unlearn actions, for instance. Or he tries to paint a series of bottles from the inside and, in the process, comes to the joyous conclusion that a certain area turns out to be untouchable.