

## Recursive News, Perverted Truth

### Two gestures

Text: Steven ten Thije, 2023

As you enter the exhibition space, on the right hand side you'll see four square-shaped metal plates attached to the wall. Not directly attached, but floating as it were, in front of the wall. They are dark brown, but not entirely monochrome. Some parts are bronze in colour. If you look closely then you'll see that they aren't specially made square plates, but door handles. Perhaps only the very astute visitor to the Van Abbemuseum might recognise them, as they are the door handles from the old main entrance of the museum. The discolouration has not been caused by acid or metal cleaning agent, but rather the sweat transferred from the thousands of human hands entering the museum over a period of decades. The door handles are an artwork by Erwin Thomasse *Network / This Too Shall Pass* (2021).

If you take a look to your left, you'll see *Flugten Til Aegypten* (1985) by Per Kirkeby: a large grey work with heavy studies, light grey on the edges and darker in the middle. The work is positioned high on the wall and partially overlaps with *Was Ist Gravitation? I* (1984) by A. R. Penck, an even larger black and white piece with a couple of stylised cartoonish figures. Continue on and you'll also see two gigantic canvases of Hermann Nitsch *Schüttbild* (1982), splattered with large quantities of red paint. And almost up at the ceiling hangs a smaller work by Arnulf Rainer *Fingermalerei* (1984), in which coloured paint seems to have been applied with five fingers during a fist fight. In between these works and overlapping with the work of Nitsch are pieces from a series *Different Strokes for Different Folks* (2019-present) by Marcel van den Berg, who also made his composition with paintings. Some works are displayed on handmade ceramic supports and consist of dynamic canvases, - part collage, part painted - inspired by camouflage patterns.

These two very different artistic gestures have one thing in common: a game with the museum. Thomasse offers the silent witness of the word-less (and thought-less) door handles that transfer people from the outside of the museum to the inside, or vice versa. The discolouration indicates the multitude of people who have made the same motion, thus proving the most basic quality of the museum as public space: people come and go.

Van den Berg transforms a museum wall into a gigantic collage and plays as much with paintings as painters play with paint. He fulfils no obligation to the 'master' on the white walls, but overlays image over image like a layered mural. He no longer celebrates the works in and of themselves, but uses them as material to create a new image.

### The invitation

The overarching project of both of these gestures is *Recursive News, Perverted Truth*. It began with an encounter in 2018, in fact even earlier. That year both artists were invited by Vivian Zihel to participate in the fifth edition of *Frontiers Imaginaries*, entitled *Handelsmerken*, which she organised in the Van Abbemuseum. During the installation, the artists bumped into each other. It wasn't an introduction, but rather a reunion. They knew each other from another context. Both had a background in hip hop and street culture. They both had graffiti links, and had organised events and concerts. This background is still present in the work, although it results in quite different practices. The combination of similarities and differences was reason enough to get them together - this time with a specific intention. The museum wanted to acquire work from Van den Berg in addition to the already purchased

work of Thomasse. The artists were invited to organise a dialogue with their own work and the existing collection. In this manner both artists introduced their own work into the collection.

The project eventually became a multi-tiered venture, with several levels. The first was an exhibition in 2021. In a larger space, Van den Berg and Thomasse presented a recent original work in combination with works from the museum's collection. After this part a second level followed in which visitors – such as individuals and companies – were invited to borrow a piece of art and display it in their home or workplace. The third level you are holding in your hands right now: a publication in which levels one and two have been depicted in word and image. In addition to these three parts, a 'turntable lecture' took place, where both artists talked about their work and the project, facilitated by curator and writer Rieke Vos – all musically framed by the playing of records. The presentation of this publication is a final event where Thomasse requested that *Tapis de Sable* (1974) by Marcel Broodthaers will be presented in a special manner. Finally, the transition from the first level to the second was marked with the installation of a façade work by Thomasse: a phrase made of large advertising lettering on the roof/façade of the Van Abbemuseum reading: *Turn Panic Into Magic*. This was also the title of another work that people could borrow to put on display at home or at work. And so the work came full circle, being displayed inside the museum all the way to the moment that the work left the space.

#### *Turn Panic Into Magic and The Most Beautifullest Thing In This World*

Two artworks, or rather a series of artworks, stand central to the project of Thomasse and Van den Berg: *Turn Panic Into Magic* (2021) by Thomasse and *The Most Beautifullest Thing In This World* (2018-2021) by Van den Berg. *Turn Panic Into Magic* consists of five elongated light boxes with the title laser-etched out of the glass. The glass is cracked. The light boxes flicker on and off in a rhythm: two and a half seconds to 'on', five seconds to 'out' and two seconds completely off, and then repeat. It is the rhythm of a breathing exercise to treat panic attacks.

*The Most Beautifullest Thing In This World* is a series of one hundred and one paintings, all 160 cm x 160 cm in size. Each painting is inspired by covers from Van den Berg's personal record collection. One section of the works hangs on the long wall opposite the wall filled with the painting collage. The other section is in gigantic 'record bins' in the gallery. The visitor can browse through them at their leisure - as large paintings are harder to manoeuvre than record covers. The series is named after Keith Murray's 1994 number and album of the same name.

Both artworks establish a connection between different places. The light boxes, a nod to advertising, is reiterated through the version in large luminous letters on the outside of the museum. The cracks are indications of violence. Breaking the glass wall. When Thomasse made these pieces, the fury of the corona pandemic was erupting: a time of fear and panic. In Eindhoven this led to plundered shops and broken windows. The rhythm also touches the most intimate inner space of all: the breath. That primal mechanism that allows us to fill and empty our very bodies with air from the outside world. The paintings of Van den Berg point to the precious private collection of music that he accumulated from a young age - records that tell a story about his own life. In addition to jazz and pop, the records are mostly hip hop and touch on his connection to street culture.

The 160cm x 160cm sizing removes the works from the private sphere. The series' monumental format and hardly lends itself to ever being housed in a living room. An institution is far more fitting. The handy-sized, cherished record covers are blown up

into big, expressive behemoths in the museum gallery. Both series connect inside and out, private and public, with the street – advertising, façade, street culture – as an intermediate stop between both domains.

The works also refer to the museum itself. Both series seem to be made for an art institution. They are too large and difficult to handle for people at home. You're unlikely to see five flashing light boxes and one hundred and one paintings hanging above the sofa. However, one light box, or one painting wouldn't be out of place in a living room or office. This was a concept that was figured out later by lending the works to private individuals and companies. In this way, the works extend the museum as a communal 'living room' for art.

The public museum's origins literally began by opening a private palace – the Louvre – to the public, shortly after the French revolution, which marked the starting point of the transition of an aristocracy to a bourgeois society at the end of the eighteenth century. Later in the twentieth century the public changed these private spaces into more clinical, white walled museums (aka the 'white cube') in which art was exhibited – conceptual, large, minimalistic. It was increasingly less suitable for a regular living room. The museum changed from a private room made public, into a new sort of public space. One that was exclusive and enclosed by walls, but no longer connected to the living room.

And so the museum marked a shift the relationship between public and private. The old, open palace made little effort to hide its aristocratic origins and shamelessly communicated to the new petty bourgeoisie that it was honoured to enjoy the art treasures of the elite. The subsequent 'white cube' lost that contact with the individual, and exuded more of a clinical universality. You were no longer in the borrowed space of an actual person, but in a neutral environment where 'the' visitor could admire art in its natural habitat. The artists that were celebrated in this room (for example A. R. Penck, Per Kirkeby, Gerhard Richter, Hermann Nitsch, Arnulf Rainer, all present in the exhibition) were equal part individual genius and representative of 'the' art. This then led to new sort of universality, owing to certain personality traits of these artists (for example, that they are all white and male). The old aristocratic model was blatantly transparent in this practiced inequality. The ruling white, male class naturally surrounded itself with similar artists. This took on new meaning in the white cube. No specific elite of aristocratic individuals was celebrated here. They were neutral, public places for all citizens. Never mind the fact that the commoners celebrated as artists happened also to have the exact same characteristics. It suggests that citizens with these particular traits are the ones that mattered.

And this applies to museum directors and curators. This explicit inequality of the past translates into an implicit inequality, and one that is actually more problematic.

Thomasse and Van den Berg are critical of established museum culture. Their artistic sources are also broader than classic museum art history. They also find inspiration from hip hop and street culture. Both domains - museum art and street culture - are equally dear to them. Their reaction to historic inequality is therefore more complex than merely rejecting it in exchange for another. The fact that some of the artists they chose are part of the white, male elite is not a reason for them to disqualify art. Moreover, the artists they have chosen are fellow artists they deeply appreciate. At the same time their project is also about inequality, only in a unique and profound way.

*Recursive News, Perverted Truth*

The project of Thomasse and Van den Berg makes a subtle point. It avoids a simple contradiction of street culture versus museum culture. The cultural expressions from both domains are appreciated. What it does, however, is address the mechanism in which both forms of culture production exist. Hip hop records are magnified into hefty, expressive paintings with museum allure. A work displayed on the façade (which means it already has one foot on the street) and a design language that links to advertising, combined with reference to public counterculture (the broken glass is a salute to broken shop-front windows) is presented in a form related to the minimalist concept from the 1970s and 1980s. The artists do not so much conform to either form of culture production, but use both to create a new space.

They subvert the development of the museum and invite visitors to bring museum art back home: the living room of very different people as a foil for the clinical, white cube. The 'neutral' museum gets its universality back by associating with the 'pluriversality' of all sorts of different visitors with wildly varied personality traits. They put museum art back into a social reality that acknowledges a greater diversity than the homogenous group of artists forming the collection of the museum. This exclusive club of museum artists thus become part of wider society again, and their art can take on new meanings in this context.

This is how Thomasse and Van den Berg break through the endless conveyor belt of the same museum artists in the same way. They don't wage a culture war from one (sub) culture against the other. They use both artistic forms through each other. It's not about graffiti elevating itself as art, but to recognise that (museum)art can learn from graffiti, just like it can work the other way around. This cross-pollination opens new doors and prevents us from getting stuck in clichés pitching high against low, or elite against street, public against private. Let everyone understand their house as a place where the public is born, because each of us - whether we go out mentally or physically - is an indivisible part of the public community.

It's right there, expressed philosophically in the title of their project: *Recursive News, Perverted Truth*. They question how we arrive at shared values and truth, and which role institutions have to play in all that. Museums have traditionally maintained their apparently neutral, universal position and constantly place new and old works in their galleries. The new is a variant of the old: a new set that follows on from what was, art history as an endless, white brotherhood with maybe a few women and people of colour at the end. That is the truth of art as promoted by the museum; a perverse truth. In response you might want to abolish the museum as obsolete and superfluous, but that would be throwing the baby – the artwork itself – out with the bathwater. It's not really about just the artwork, but how we treat it. If we open the museum as a place to other places in society, then new connections come about and other insights can emerge. Then the museum is no longer the house for 'the' story, but a place that only gains meaning in dialogue with other places, like living rooms and the interior spaces of shops, companies and other institutions. Then the museum no longer houses 'the' art history, but material that can provide each new user group with meaning. Their vision is summarised in a last art piece selected by Thomasse and Van den Berg by the activist, feminist Guerrilla Girls: a poster that reads: You're seeing less than half the picture (1989). If you do not take the outside world into the museum's inner world, you literally only see 'half of the picture'. And half an image is not really an image.