

# Collection Vanmoerkerke

## “The Effect of Modern Art on Green Circles”

Curated by Anselm Franke

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Theatrical Exhibition Script by Anselm Franke

This exhibition can perhaps be best understood as playing on the various meanings and connotations of the circle as it emerges from the works displayed itself. The circle here occurs first of all as a motif, a geometric form. But among geometric forms, the circle has retained something mysterious, even irrational, perhaps like its famous but never entirely understood number, Pi. The motif of the circle is thus to be understood programmatic, as the opening up of a conceptualism that, especially where it uses numbers, geometric forms, language and taxonomies, at first appears to be rationalistic, towards the dimension of the irrational, even the mystical. This dimension of conceptual art was already famously exposed when Sol Lewitt called conceptual artists mystics rather than rationalists four decades ago. Today, there are a growing number of exhibitions that devote themselves to the often-paradoxical presence of that mysticism, irrationalism and romanticism in the heritage of conceptual art - a heritage that the entire collection Vanmoerkerke is particularly devoted to. This exhibition, therefore, stages a series of borderline scenarios, in which the definition of conceptual art and its counterparts are put at risk. However, the following associations are not to be understood as rigid and didactic, the presentation remains open to many other chains of association.

Departing from the double-edged wit of the piece that gave this show its name, **Jonathan Monks** *“The Effect of Modern Art on Circles”*, this selection seeks to reveal a particular aspect of the collection, by staging a series of particular encounters. These encounters are structured a) by the motif of the circle in various forms, for example, as geometric form or metaphorically as ‘degree zero’, or as image for circuits, for models of exchange and feedback loops etc., b) by an encounter of two generations of conceptual and ‘post-conceptual’ contemporary artists respectively, and c) by introducing a pictorial, iconographic, at points even expressive tradition that seems at first irreconcilable with conceptualism and that holds close ties to mysticism, and is explicitly not secular, not ‘rational’, and lastly by bringing in a performative aspect (that holds intimate, though often unofficial ties with the pictorial aspect), in which the self and the social becomes the reference point and material, but remains essentially instable (like in the work of **Cindy Sherman**). The exhibition is essentially grouped around these encounters, in which aspects of one work echo and mirror themselves in another, but the mirror is never accurate, has always induced a magic, witty or questionable change, a transformation, a

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mutation, a difference. Jonathan Monk's work, once again, picturing a play of appropriation and difference, provides the whole enterprise with an ironic backdrop and point of reference.

The exhibition is itself organized like a circle in which a certain transformation with the visitor is meant to take place. The visitor enters and find her/himself in front of the piece *Mess Conference* by **Mark Dion** at the end of the room on the left, and that is, the viewer is placed in the position of the spectator, of the journalist attending a press conference. Dion's rather untypical installation animates viewers to take on a costume and assume a role in the US-government, and once the visitor has completed the parcours through the exhibition, she/he will find himself entering the same room once again, thus completing the circle, however, by entering the installation, one enters as the potential speaker this time, as an actor, and no longer as spectator.

Before that, however, in this first and last room, one finds, next to the installation by Mark Dion, a painting by **Jan Van Imschoot**. The painting is the antidote to conceptualism in this accrochage, although it includes written text on the canvas, however, it is clearly referencing a Flemish tradition of painting and therefore a particular pictorial tradition, in which images are closely related to experiences of mysticism, and in which light plays a central role. This motif will find its mirror in the work of **Jack Goldstein** later on, in whose work Californian experimental film aesthetics, pop art and conceptualism took a special turn, often associated with drug experiences and more generally, as an exemplary story of the transition from the 'radical' 70s to the 80s. There are three major works of Goldstein's displayed at the central wall of the exhibition. Their motifs are derived from natural phenomena, and in their spectacular aesthetics, they invoke a particular tradition of images, and hint towards the mystical unconsciousness of American popular imagery.

Back to the beginning: In Jan Van Imschoot's painting there is also a presence of the motif of the circle as a social phenomena, as a gathering, a social circle literally, and isn't what we are looking at perhaps even a conspiracy? What better image would there be for the formation of social circles, and their power to produce a world of its own, then the conspiracy?

**John Baldessari's** work at the entrance is typical for the highly intelligent slapstick qualities of some of the work of this pioneering conceptual artist. *Person thinking about Cauliflower* invokes the format of a portrait, but places an image of a cauliflower in the place of the face and the forehead, in place of the brain. This is a game with the short-circuiting various levels of signs, meaning and reality, the thing and its image, the faculty of the imagination, concepts and names. This work may be seen as introducing the circle and circuit as a symbol for consciousness, for the moment of becoming-conscious, of reflection and self-reflection.

**Martha Rosler, Christopher Williams** and **Cindy Sherman**, as artists who have made the image, indeed photography the main subject of a conceptual practice, are introduced in this exhibition as possible links between the rational/irrational sides, between conceptual abstraction and

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semiotics and the above mentioned pictorial tradition, between critical iconoclasm and a devoted iconography. The circle motif here is present as a motif of production, the circle is the degree zero of the production of the individual, a degree zero version of framing, a frame in which a world is conjured up. This frame that encircles and thus, to a certain degree, produces a reality (like Cindy Sherman produces identities) is literally before anything else the lens of the camera. In the conceptual photographs of **Joachim Koester**, later on in the parcours of the exhibition, this tension between production and documentation of reality takes an interesting turn (which also resonates interestingly with the role of light - divine light, and light of consciousness - in the pictorial tradition invoked above) - *Day for Night* uses the filter that is used in cheap movie productions to create night scenes, and Koester uses it to portray Christiania, a hippie enclave in Copenhagen, thus “enchanting” it, encircling it, and rendering it unreal by turning it into a movie set.

A series of works play on what happens between a work and its viewer, with the moment of recognition, with the mirroring effects involved in moments of recognition. What kind of reflection is induced by an object, by its autonomous existence, its materiality? **Richard Serra's** work, placed next to excerpts from Cindy Sherman's famous series, although untypical for the artist, is a work of minimalism, and minimalism has famously been accused of its theatricality, that is, of the attitude of its objects to 'look back' at the viewer. Placing Cindy Sherman next to Serra is to confront to very different notions of the 'theatrical', and asks questions about the exchange between viewer and artwork, the circuit of perfection and consciousness occurring between works of art and its viewers. And about materials, reflection and self-reflection, and last but not least self-referentiality. This self-referentiality is taken elsewhere with the motif of the mirror image, the portrait and self-portrait, ironically exposed in two other works, *Self-Portrait* by **Mark Wallinger**, a painting that perhaps can be seen as yet another degree zero of conceptual painting, where the canvas is measured out by the letter “I”, and the work *Brain* by conceptual pioneer **Allen Ruppersberg**, showing the same comic strip of a man in front of a mirror twice in different size and colours, us glazing at his unhappy face(s) revealed in the mirror image, mockingly using the codes of American pop culture and pop-art and commenting on the pursuit of happiness, and a monument to the moment of self-recognition, and perhaps even more, of recognizing oneself as different, as other, and the moment of surrender that often follows it.

In this exhibition, it is the ephemeral work of **Guy Mees** who comes closest to articulating a poetics in which the conceptual and the pictorial, and space and material are reconciled. The paper cut works by Guy Mees explore the medium of painting beyond painting, and while they turn the entire space into their medium, they occur immersed in self-contemplation. The circle, of circuit here has turned onto itself, but it remains open, always inviting us to step into it.

**David Claerbout** explores the pictorial tradition in question in precise and meditative video installations, in which time and space are subjected to manipulations, and in which movement and stasis enter into captivating constellations, and light plays a crucial role as a transformative force. In

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*'Dancing Couples'*, which was inspired by a Lee Russell photograph of couples at a square dance in Oklahoma, the motif of the social circle, and its ultimate romantic formulation in the idea of the "dance of life" (the opposite of 'conspiracy') occur again, however, the dance is estranged from itself, slowed down almost to stillness, and not only the dancers, but the entire scene stares back onto the viewer, as if seeking to close a circle, but being caught in an impossibility to do so. In the final room we encounter the work of **Diana Thater**, a pioneer of video and film works whose work crosses genres and traditions, a variation of the idea of dance and choreography - but the choreography here, crucially, is the choreography of play - what we see is a double exposed film of tigers playing with a pool in California's Shambala Preserve. *'Perfect Devotion One'* offers a different image of relation between the rational and irrational, a form of experimental and however, a structured and structuring engagement with the world, in which the rational often occurs as the outcome of its opposite. The way Diana Thater uses light in her installations - here the room is filled with green light induced by using foils - mirrors the previously mentioned photographs by Joachim Koester in the same room, which also use coloured foil to manipulate light conditions. Finding itself just before one enters the stage of Mark Dion's press conference and the painting by Jan Van Imschoot, it seems in the room of Diana Tater and the photographs of Joachim Koester we encounter a 'conspired' world, and once we step out onto the stage, we may ask ourselves what are the powers, and which images are needed, for us to invoke, to conjure up, to simultaneously represent and produce 'a world', as a speaker, too.