

# *The Chance of a Thought*

by Robin Vanbesien

At the occasion of Olivier Foulon's *Stehimbiss* (07.01 – 14.02.2012, dépendance, Brussels) and *I'm in training — Don't kiss me* (28.01 - 03.03.2012, Marietta Clages, Cologne) Images: <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/2012/02/olivier-foulon-at-dependance/> , <http://anotherartblog.com/?p=530>

*It's fantastic because I've been living thousands of lives, not only my life.*

Claudia Cardinale

## I. *Stehimbiss*

Nine canvases are on display in *Stehimbiss*, Olivier Foulon's second solo exhibition at gallery Dépendance in Brussels. While the longest wall on the left side of the gallery remains blank, all canvases have been hung on the opposite corner-forming walls parallel to the right-hand side. Following the predetermined rhythm of equal distancing, the canvases continue into the open office space of the gallery. Using canvases primed with transparent gesso on stretcher frames as carriers, Foulon creates a reference to the genre of painting. However, instead of using paint or any other colouring substance, each canvas contains seven black and white A4 photocopies, laid out and mounted along the surface in a fixed pattern. By scanning the different canvases, one can rapidly verify that each canvas displays multiple photocopies of the same published text, the infamous *Ten O'Clock* lecture by James McNeill Whistler, held on February 20, 1885, at the Prince's Hall, London. Awkwardly, the seven pages of the complete text, laid out in rows of four and three, have been rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise.

What could have inspired Foulon to select Whistler's *Ten O'Clock* lecture and to mount it on each of the canvases in this peculiar way? Notwithstanding his reservations about the role as a lecturer ('a middleman'), in his dissertation Whistler vigorously defends Art – something that simply *is* – against the malign contempt of educators, critics, and collectors, whom he claims project virtue and Humanity upon Art. In the same way that Nature is seldom right, there never has been an Art-loving nation, according to Whistler. It is a classic pathology of our relation to Art that when we interpret a work of art, for instance a painting, when we so to speak, translate it from canvas to paper, the work is substituted by the translation itself. In *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), anthropologist Michael Taussig rehabilitates not only the resistance of the concrete to any form of abstraction, yet also that which can be deemed crucial to thought that moves us – namely, its sensuousness, its 'mimetic faculty'. For a translation to be more than translation, more than explanation, the objectness of the object in language must be maintained.

For literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the most important characteristic of the *satira menippeia* as a genre (Greco-Roman form of satire, usually in prose; its roots reach back to carnivalesque culture) is the creation of extraordinary situations for provoking and testing any idea or discourse. One could say that the idea that is being tested and provoked in Olivier Foulon's *Stehimbiss* is what is announced by the Marabout Flash cover *L'art de parler en toutes circonstances*, reproduced on the invitation to the exhibition. The idea tested by Foulon is the compulsion to produce discourse – to play the game – in all circumstances, and at all times.

The press release lifts the veil on the convivial provocation Foulon has created in the exhibition, more specifically employing a quote from the text *My Other Painting Is a Car* by John Kelsey: 'Is a joke a material? [...] Material has a way of getting away from us, like language. [...] For example, the neurotic

on the couch who repeats himself (his life) into the tough crowd of the analyst's ear, who's already heard it all before. The joke is about not being able to hang onto yourself, about not being able to tell your own story, and also about transference.' The situation Kelsey's neurotic finds himself in resonates in the adventures of the narrator in Dostoyevsky's short story *Bobok* (1873), where a 'certain person' who is on the threshold of insanity, experiences transference in a context combining elements of naturalism and fantasy. At the cemetery, laying down 'on a long stone like a marble coffin', the narrator suddenly hears a multitude of voices that seem to emanate from beneath the surface of the earth. What unfolds is a carnivalesque world in which a motley crew of corpses is engaged in free and unfettered dialogue, without constraints, censorship or shame. They have nothing more to lose.

The title of Olivier Foulon's exhibition, *Stehimbiss*, refers to a food stand or a temporary bar where snacks, drinks and finger food are served. The term *Stehimbiss* calls to mind the market place or the reception and signals the open mouths of talking, drinking and eating. This metaphor certainly holds the idea of a proliferation of voices and the potential for transference (Plato's *Symposium* comes also into mind, for the festive setting as well as for the nature of the Socratic dialogue.) Furthermore, one could argue that *Stehimbiss* refers to aspects of naturalism and carnivalism, which find their reflection in the various elements of the exhibition, for instance the sensuousness of matter and the accentuation of the gestalts of the paintings (naturalism), but also in the joyful relativity and openness resulting from the provocation and devaluation of the genre of painting (carnivalism). *Stehimbiss* could serve as a contemporary image of the threshold on which we stand as continually unfinished, aspiring, consuming and reproducing subjects.

## II. *I'm in training – Don't kiss me*

*I'm in training – Don't kiss me*, Olivier Foulon's debut at gallery Marietta Clages in Cologne, opens three weeks after *Stehimbiss*. Two objects are on display. The objects are positioned side by side at the same height on the wall on the left-hand side, close to the entrance of the gallery. Both objects represent a Homburg—a formal felt hat, a Tyrolean-style fedora, characterized by a 'gutter crown' and a stiff brim. The two Homburgs are one work: *Mirror Object* (2012). The Homburg on the right is made entirely of mirror glass with a hatband made of blue glass. The viewer can see himself in its reflection, framed in the backdrop of the blank wall on the opposite side of the room. The hat on the left is made entirely of wood. This inert version recalls the form of a model. Both hats are hung upside down, as if they are—even just for a second—primarily extras in a greeting gesture instead of hats as such.

Flemish writer Paul van Ostaijen's poem 'Bersaglieri Song' (1928) describes an encounter between two gentlemen. As they pass each other, they salute with their hats. The encounter receives a compositional surplus value due to the fact that these gentlemen meet 'right in front of the shop of Henryson and Wenryson / the famous hatmakers / ... / one gentleman takes his high hat in his right hand / the other gentleman takes his high hat in his left hand'. In this way, the encounter receives a theatrical grandeur, as the repetitive rhythm and symmetric composition of the detailed description creates the illusion of a much more extended time-lapse. However, as both gentlemen in the poem continue to follow their respective routes without pause or hesitation, one can argue that no real 'encounter' actually took place. 'The right and the left the one going up and the one going down / once past each other / put their hats on their heads again / don't misunderstand me / each puts his own hat on his own head / that is their right / that is the right of these two gentlemen'. As in a Bersaglieri march, the choreography of the two gentlemen is profoundly mechanized. The subjects act like automatons that are introduced in a formal and ritual act. It is only when they pass by the shop window of the hat makers Henryson and Wenryson that the idea of an 'outsourcing of performance' also finds a compositional affirmation. Against the backdrop of the hat makers' shop window, it becomes apparent that these gentlemen's 'bloody own high hats' are part of an arrangement whose premises are above all mechanical.

As a throw of the dice will never abolish chance, it is chance that gives the number its urgency.

However, today's number – of polls, bills, budgets, credits, stock markets, lotteries, executive compensations, shareholder loans, etc. – seems to have lost this quality. Through the annulment of the Bretton Woods system in 1973 (when the U.S. decided to end the convertibility between dollars and gold) a symbol (money) itself became the commodity. As a consequence of this materialization of the ultimate representational system of value, today's economy is one in which all symbols have started to behave like commodities. Today's 'blind numbers', as Alain Badiou calls them, are subject to an unparalleled variability as they stand more than ever in a direct relationship with opinions and fluctuations engineered by the market. The numbers have become (duplicable and manageable) objects, just like anything else. (Alas, today it seems so hard to get in touch with the numbers that matter: those of the oppressed, ecological disasters, poverty and hunger, etc.)

In today's animate world the original and the copy seem no longer defined by their category, but by the relationships these quasi-subjects maintain. Possessive desire/distinction is replaced by a non-possessive interrelationship. Original and copy can in fact be considered like best friends. But then, as Maurice Blanchot writes, 'we must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential, by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement.' So it is a friendship that is defined by the recognition of a common strangeness. Only when we realize how the relationship between the two friends of *Mirror Object* makes each of them different and undefined, it is apparent that both are part of an arrangement that is cast by the chance of a thought. As Foulon states: '*Marabout Flash* is choosing *a subject—your subject—*and applying it.'

The canvases of *Stebimbis* are, despite their identical look and feel, presented as nine different works. (After all, all form expresses a throw of the dice.) In contrast, *Mirror Object* is an edition. After the exhibition in Marietta Clages thirty copies can be dispersed in as many spaces and interiors. The working title of the exhibition was *Hello Walls*. Now it is *I'm in training – Don't kiss me*. Our friends remain in pursuit of any chance.