**Foreign Places**

**14.08.2016**

Global migrations, mass tourism and labour mobility dominate public debate today. We are increasingly compelled to see the world through the lens of our contemporary conditions of itinerancy. Many of the residents at WIELS know these conditions intimately, which inflect their work in myriad ways.

*Foreign Places* brings together eight artists, all formerly in residence at WIELS, whose work builds upon temporary but dedicated ‘acts of attachment’ to a specific or imagined place. Even when on familiar ground, these urban explorers take to the streets in order to probe the city’s multiple concentrations and historical layers, and give them new uses, forms, or narratives. Some deliberately seek out remote, symbolic sites – from Athens to Accra – to research and produce their work in collaboration with local inhabitants and workers.

As a result, the exhibition emphasizes a host of practices that in a first stage do not rely on a traditional, or ‘fixed’, studio environment, but instead draw inspiration from the context in which the artists situate themselves. *Foreign Places* confronts their distinctive ways of imagining the city and their differing ethics of working with a place, from its larger social fabric to its seemingly marginal manifestations.

With Eglė Budvytytė, Sara Deraedt, Patricia Esquivias, Beatrice Gibson with Alex Waterman, HAiKW/ Toril Johannessen, Fiona Mackay, Emma van der Put, Robin Vanbesien

Curated by Grégory Castéra (Council, Paris) & Caroline Dumalin (WIELS)

With the support of Mondriaan Fund, Acción Cultural Española (AC/E) and Wilgelover

**Emma van der Put**

*Ommegang,* 2015

Emma Van der Put presents an installation of three videos that were filmed in the Brussels’ public sphere, and which are shown here together for the first time. In *Ommegang,* Van der Put used the Grand Place as a ready-made film set. The website of the City of Brussels allows online visitors to control a webcam directed onto the square for 30 seconds each. Van der Put recorded the livestream of the webcam during the annual re-enactment of the medieval Ommegang procession, making the interventions of the anonymous spectators visible. The religious procession dates back to 1549 and was re-introduced on the occasion of the centenary of Belgium. The glitches of the Internet connection and the grainy image quality of this silent black and white film give the impression of old, archival footage of a historic spectacle.

*Rincé Alien,* 2015

For *Rincé Alien* Van der Put took her camera to the Brussels-Midi station, located between her former studio at WIELS and her current residence. The perspective moves between empathy and detached observation. This is one of the few videos in which Van der Put uses ambient noise. The hurried footsteps of travellers are interspersed with close-ups of loud advertising posters. The work takes its title from the enigmatic graffiti tag that briefly makes an appearance, which roughly translates as ‘rinsed foreigner’.

*WTC,* 2016

Van der Put’s latest video *WTC* marks a turning point in her work: not only did she make the choice to work with photographic instead of moving images, she also has never before intervened so radically in the captured material. The work is named after a complex of skyscrapers near the Brussels-North railway station. In the late 1960s, an entire residential neighbourhood was demolished to make way for the construction of the eight World Trade Center towers as part of the megalomaniac Manhattan Plan, spearheaded by politician Paul Vanden Boeynants. Ultimately, only three towers were built, in the early 1970s and 80s. Today the WTC buildings are half empty. Since August 2015, Van der Put and forty other artists have rented the entire 25th floor of Tower I, and divided it among themselves as collective studios. The adjacent Tower II houses the Belgian Immigration Office, where asylum seekers have to register. Trading in her usual video camera for photography, she captured moments in the life of the area over a time span of six months, from the perspective of Tower I. Grainy close-ups of transient encampments and empty beds are confronted with architectural simulations for a future Brussels that she came across in the area. Throughout this diverse image material, Van der Put reinforces the colour blue. A blue filter was often applied on the camera lens during the silent film era, in order to suggest night-time. In French, this ‘day for night’ effect is called *nuit américaine*, after the early adopters of the method. Van der Put also participated in Cinemaximiliaan, a pop-up cinema organized for and with refugees in Belgium. Initiated by Gwendolyn Lootens and Gawan Fagard, it first took place in Maximiliaan Park, an improvised refugee camp situated next to the World Trade Center, with daily film screenings.

Emma van der Put (b.1988, the Netherlands) lives and works in Brussels. She was a resident at WIELS in 2014.

**Beatrice Gibson, with Alex Waterman**

*A Necessary Music,* 2008

Beatrice Gibson returns to WIELS with an older work, developed in collaboration with composer Alex Waterman. *A Necessary Music* is a science fiction film about modernist social housing. A musically conceived piece, referencing the video operas of experimental American composer Robert Ashley, the film explores the social imaginary of a utopian landscape seen through the eyes of the people that inhabit it. Treating the medium of film as a proposal for collective production, *A Necessary Music* engages the residents of New York’s Roosevelt Island as its authors and actors, gathering together texts written by them and using them to construct a script for the film. Casting seventeen residents to enact these lines accompanied by a fictional narration taken from Adolfo Bioy Casares’ 1941 science fiction novel *The Invention of Morel*, the film deploys fiction as a tool to frame and activate the site of its production.

Roosevelt Island is a small sliver of land situated between Manhattan and Queens. Formerly known as Welfare Island and originally home to New York’s largest mental asylum, a small pox hospital, and a range of other nineteenth-century municipal facilities for incarceration, it now houses one of the cities most visible, yet little-known modernist social housing projects. The subject of several architectural competitions during the 1960s that employed the island as a laboratory site, proposing a range of re-imagined futures (from a floating casino, to a Museum of Egyptian Artefacts, to a cemetery, to a Disney-like water and entertainment park), its current status is the result of the winning entry by Philip Johnson. Johnson’s master plan proposed a mixed income and a bucolic concrete enclave, divided into three residential developments. Self-consciously dissolving from attempted realism to imagined narrative, Gibson’s film begins as a process concerned with sociality but becomes instead an ethnographic fiction about place and community, and an investigation into representation itself.

Beatrice Gibson (b.1978, United Kingdom) lives and works in London. She was a resident at WIELS in 2008-9.

**HAiKW/ Toril Johannessen**

*Interpretations,* 2016

Toril Johannessen has for a long time been interested in optical illusions. In the series *Unlearning Optical Illusions* (2014-16), she weaves ideas and forms from perception psychology together with textile history. In so doing, she prompts us to reflect on the visual and cultural factors that influence our worldviews. The project started out as a chapter in the artist’s book *Unseeing*. At the centre of the book are patterned textiles of Johannessen’s own design, which are printed with the geometrical motifs of classic optical illusions. The second part of the series consists of an installation of seven photographs with accompanying texts dedicated to these optical illusions and to the scientists who conceived them, such as Hermann, Müller-Lyer, Poggendorf, Hering and Zöllner. The third iteration is a sculptural installation with rolls of printed fabrics on steel racks, alluding to the aesthetics of the textile industry. All three parts are concurrently exhibited at the Trondheim Kunstmuseum in Norway. The fourth and last part is a casual wear collection made in collaboration with the Norwegian design collective HAiK (Ida Falck Øien and Harald Lunde Helgesen), which will be distributed as of 2017. The prototypes are presented here for the first time. A dressing room has been installed in the exhibition to invite the viewers to try on the sample clothes.

The fabrics for the garments were printed at Ghana Textiles Printing (GTP) in Tema, one of West Africa’s leading wax print brands. GTP forms part of the Vlisco Group, founded in Helmond, the Netherlands, in 1846, around the same time as these optical illusions were theorized. While Vlisco started out by exporting imitation batiks to what was then called the Dutch East Indies, its unparalleled reception in West Africa has since overshadowed its cultural origins. Studies have suggested that cross-cultural variation plays a defining role in the perception of visual illusions. A telling and much-debated example is the Müller-Lyer illusion: the apparent difference in the length of a line whose ends are adorned with arrowheads or tails. The ‘carpentered world hypothesis’ suggests that Westerners, who often live in urbanized societies dominated by straight lines and right angles, are more susceptible to this illusion than people in non-industrialized places with rounder architecture. The implication of this hypothesis – that the architectural environments and cultural landscapes in which we grow up define our perception of the world – raises the question: to what extent are we able to unlearn what is handed over to us and define our own perception, be it visual or cultural?

Toril Johannessen (b.1978, Norway) lives and works in Bergen. She was a resident at WIELS in 2014.

**Fiona Mackay**

*Deep Crush, Snake, Hair,* and *Lotus*, 2016

Fiona Mackay presents a new group of paintings of bold tropical or exotic landscapes. The work began in the winter of 2016, in Mackay’s Brussels-based studio. Rather than taking her inspiration directly from the time and place in which it was conceived, Mackay transports us to a place of warm colours and sensual forms, in what she calls ‘a counteract of the imagination’.

Mackay has developed a painting technique with water-soluble pigments on very thin canvas. Partly due to the unpredictable nature of her medium, the painting process is slow and layered. Once applied, the line or colour field cannot be undone. She paints with direct and flowing gestures, occasionally allowing some parts to bleed into one another. In these paintings, which tend less towards pictorial abstraction than their predecessors, our eyes are guided by Mackay’s figurative allusions – somewhere between a lotus flower, a sunset and genitalia.

The clash of the familiar with the displaced is what we could describe to be ‘foreign’ about the work. The hot, bright colours hint at this, rather than that they coincide with the subject. The aesthetic seductiveness of the work (colour, material, painterly blurs, delicateness), combined with sensitivity in production, adds to the viewer's difficulty of trying to grapple with the kitsch, taboo and popular culture of these potential associations in the imagery. The possible associations related to kitsch, taboos and popular culture add to the viewer’s difficulty of trying to grapple with the imagery. It looks towards yet remains far removed from the world of the sublime.

Fiona Mackay (b.1984, Scotland) lives and works in Brussels. She was a resident at WIELS in 2009.

**Patricia Esquivias**

*Beni Boufrah Late XXth Century, Early XXIth Century,* 2014

The work of Patricia Esquivias investigates the manmade surfaces of a city, such as decorated sidewalks and facades. In addition to highlighting these neglected forms of architecture and local craftsmanship, she sheds light on the contexts in which they came into being. In the exhibition, Esquivias presents a sculpted wall that re-enacts a popular artisanal technique for the decoration of facades in the Rif Mountains. The Rif is situated in Northern Morocco and separated from the Spanish mainland by the Strait of Gibraltar. Esquivias travelled to the Rif, following in the footsteps of Spanish sculptor and painter Alberto Sánchez Pérez. Her starting point was Alberto’s emblematic work, *El pueblo español tiene un camino que conduce a una estrella* [The Spanish People Have a Path that Leads to a Star], exhibited for the first time at the Spanish Republic’s Pavilion in the 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris. Built at the peak of the Spanish Civil War with the participation of artists including Pablo Picasso, Luis Buñuel and Julio González, the pavilion was used to denounce the horrors of war and to raise support for the cause of the Republic. The book that is displayed in front of the wall connects it to Alberto’s sculpture, and by extension to two events in Spain’s recent history: their occupation of the Rif in Northern Morocco and the Spanish Civil War.

*Walking Still,* 2015

In *Walking Still*, we see Esquivias strolling/scrolling through the streets of small Colombian towns via Google Street View. She is looking for paving with pre-Columbian motifs similar to those she had drawn in another village. Now worn and crumbling, they were made in the 1950s when, as Esquivias sings, ‘things in the country started to get ugly, sidewalks got beautiful’. She tells about her search for someone who could link the modern process of decorating these sidewalks with a similar cylinder stamping process that was used in pre-Columbian times. To her disappointment, she didn’t find anyone with the answers she was seeking. After bringing rubbings of the patterns home, however, she encountered a woman who started to cry after seeing them. These drawings had the same pattern as the floor of her childhood home. Esquivias is interested in is popular knowledge, transmitted orally through songs and stories. She often uses her computer desktop and browser in a performative way, as a place from which the world can be mapped and reconstructed. The title of the work makes reference both to the important role of walking in the city in Esquivias’ practice and to her virtual ‘walk’ in the video, all the while remaining still.

Patricia Esquivias (b.1979, Venezuela) grew up in Madrid, where she now lives and works. She was a resident at WIELS in 2010.

**Robin Vanbesien**

*assembly for an Oresteia,* 2016

Robin Vanbesien presents a prelude to his forthcoming film *vision for a citizen* (due for completion in spring 2017), a fictional story based on his research into grassroots solidarity movements in Athens. In *assembly for an Oresteia*, Vanbesien interviews his actors and the real-life protagonists of local solidarity organizations: Kaiti Mendoni (Solidarity Piraeus), Christos Giovanopoulos (Solidarity4All), Christina Padapopoulos (Time Bank Syntagma Square), Christos Korolis (Mesopotamia Solidarity School in Moschato), Georgia Bekridaki (Time Bank Exarchia) and Christos Sideris (Metropolitan Community Clinic at Helleniko). The conversations, conducted collectively in a circle, reflect the ethics and the potential of self-organized democratic processes, at a time when the increasing lack thereof is felt all over Europe. The video was shot at Green Park, Athens, on 19 April 2016. Nine months before, to the day, the abandoned building of this former popular café had been occupied and reactivated by artists in reaction to the country’s overall instability and the absence of infrastructure for contemporary culture. *vision for a citizen* is conceived as a present-day adaptation of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, originally staged for and by Athenians in their city-state in 458 BC. Orestes had taken the law into his own hands and killed his mother to avenge the murder of his father, and is thus brought to trial before the goddess Athena and a jury of citizens. By referring to the dramatic tradition of the polis, Vanbesien simultaneously invokes the roots of politics.

*project for an exhibition: citizen without qualities,* 2015-16

The film is accompanied by four paintings from Vanbesien’s most recent and larger series *citizen without qualities*. He used readymade textiles for his canvases, the colours and textures of which are predetermined by their original function as costume or T-shirt fabric. They portray ambiguous, roughly sketched and painted characters that lie down or sit up sleeplessly: are these reclining figures vulnerable victims or rather politically dormant citizens? In the words of Vanbesien: ‘The dream-figure of a citizen without qualities has been haunting my imagination while making this series of paintings. Someone who can only be noticed by her appearance, yet is without any special properties other than her lived experience. Someone who neither belongs nor is entirely excluded and uncounted, a person dissociated from the current state of affairs, unrepresentative, as she doesn’t point to a place to be occupied; a common stranger. In my dream, this figure embodies the material for a society where the social can no longer be defended by an image of order, but remains as the irreducible core of a life lived in spite of political and economic circumstances that undercut it.’

Robin Vanbesien (b.1979, Belgium) lives and works in Brussels. He was a resident at WIELS in 2013.

**Eglė Budvytytė**

*Skateboard Prayer, or Head Below the Heart,* 2016

In this work,Eglė Budvytytėexplores a choreography of restriction in relation to the semi-public context of the art centre. The performance takes place at a scheduled time during the first three days of the exhibition, not unlike an opening ceremony. Seven performers slowly trace a line throughout the various visible and invisible spaces of WIELS, which usually are not accessible to the public. With movements reminiscent of various spiritual traditions, they cross the building like a landscape, seemingly indifferent to the rhythm and presence of the audience. At the end, the skateboards used by the performers are dispersed in the gallery and their clothing and rugs are hung on metal bars, where they will stay for the remainder of the show. Performed by: Chris Harrison-Kerr, Kurt Vandendriessche, Ana Victoria Iommi, Paola Zampierolo, Irina Lavrinovic, Kevin Trappeniers, Benjamin Kahn

*Magicians,* 2011

*Magicians* is a short film featuring owls, old men, swamps and children. They all gather together in the narrative that, by using the logic of a radical misreading of the urban surface, connects places and events that would not otherwise have met. While the camera cautiously registers everyday and staged scenes – in the street, in the park, or on the sportsfield – Budvytytė provides her own poetic commentary on passers-by in a voiceover.

Eglė Budvytytė (b.1981, Lithuania) lives and works in Amsterdam and Brussels. She was a resident at WIELS in 2013.

**Sara Deraedt**

Sara Deraedt has made a monumental intervention in the space, which is nevertheless likely to go unnoticed. She removed the temporary exhibition wall that had covered the large windowpane at the front of the building during previous exhibitions, which stood in contrast to the space’s otherwise irregular surfaces. The functionality of this ‘foreign’ element in the room, intended to display artworks, partly masks the original functionality of the industrial building. The wall was hiding not only the lower parts of the silos of the former brewery tower, it also blocked the outside light inwards and vice versa, and was very conspicuous from the street.

In the information booklet *Blomme,* published by WIELS in its first operational year, 2007, we can read about the history of the Wielemans Ceuppens Brewery and its architecture by Adrien Blomme: ‘Precisely because a real modernist building was to be designed ‘from the inside out’, architects attached great importance to night lighting. These photographs show how the electric light floods out of the large strip windows with their delicate thin profiles, so that, when darkness falls, one gets what amounts to a kind of negative image of the building. In the daytime, the walls were lit in their entirety; at night, only the glass surfaces and the interior of the building were illuminated. The building would become transparent, as it were.’ (Jos Vandenbreeden).

For Deraedt, showing and looking at work goes hand in hand with paying attention to the surrounding space. For *Foreign Places* she chose to expose the exhibition space itself by taking something away, rather than adding her own representation of a place.

Sara Deraedt (b.1984, Belgium) lives and works in Brussels. She was a resident at WIELS in 2010.