

Steven Baelen & Benoît Vandenbroucke

“And then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.
[...] Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.”¹

In the almost-white world, where non-whiteness is supposed to integrate into the rest of the picture (or to have itself integrated – by unspoken rules of a ‘universal law’), everything is *drawn* with same lines: neither objects nor their background have their own solution inside the given frame. This supposedly unquestionable condition seems to have always been taken for granted during the last two thousand years of Christian patriarchy or, so to say, ‘from the beginning to the end of the world’. This world. The white world: the world of a modern, capitalist, and colonial masculine rule.

When you look at the *drawing*, there is nothing strange about it: black pencil on white paper; een tafeltje met een cactus (and a few more personal things, for routine, quotidian consumption); an intimate daily situation. It could be anywhere in the world. This world. The white world. An almost-white world: wherever the language of blackness, through materiality of graffiti, gradually permeates an environment apparently unaccustomed to dark tones; the world of ‘pure’ surfaces, the environment constructed –both vertically and horizontally, inside and outside– upon the idea that this idea of purity, despite multiple appearances of otherness of every kind, must be maintained (and defended) at all costs, anywhere. It could be Europe. Flanders. A village of Machelen, for instance.

Right next to the renown Raveel’s Museum there is a less known space, almost-white, which used to serve religious purposes ever since 1870 (even though its function has considerably changed over the last decade): a chapel, devoted to a woman, the holy and *pure* woman – a virgin intact. As it can be witnessed nowadays, some of its purposefully ruined parts (touched by the corporate logic of real estate businesses) are but a testimony of recent interventions, due to which both upper and lower parts – the ceiling and floor, as well as all the statues on top of the little pedestals (now missing) - have been damaged.

However, this ‘female’ space has been touched anew, though in a different manner, by two men. One after the other, they disclosed its ever-present intimacy layer by layer, while, at the same, time re-creating its overall physical and spiritual atmosphere. By patterns of thought turned into images – first through two-dimensional, black colour-lines spreading over the walls in a rhythmical, ‘free-style’ and organic-like fashion, then through a series of small-scale three-dimensional objects applied over those mural drawings – they kept ‘destroying’ (with great care and, even, piety for the place itself) the uniform architectonic language prescribed by a clerical

¹ Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness”, in Back, L. & Solomos, J. (eds.), *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, London & New York: Routledge, 2000, 257.

order into a *pluri-form* setting. Thus they allowed for new and many possible visual languages to emerge inside this serene scenography that was meant to invoke the sense of human humility and powerlessness in front of the all-mighty power of God (in the past), whereas nowadays a new sort of worship is meant to occur, the one that will please both the ultimate power of (real estate) capital and the chapel's new owners. Without doubts, its new function will convert the space in an unforeseen direction in the near future, be it another girls' boarding school (as it happened to be the case for a while), a restaurant, a night-club, or even a gift-shop. Who knows...

"All that whiteness, that burns me" is now explored again, on a temporary basis, this time as an exhibition-space where the 'two men who touched Maria' intervened in a way proper to their artistic skills and potentials: converting this already 'convertible', market-driven zone of urban planning interests, into a temporary shelter for their own shadow-theatre; a kind of *home* where some extravagant remnants of the more recent past (such as a single comic book found under the bed in a sleeping unit inside) coexist with the light full of colours, penetrating old stained glass windows on rare sunny days and dancing on the black-and-white surfaces of 'almost-white' walls; but also a *home* for new gazes and encounters where, besides old and scary hooks and screws in the walls, now 'strange' objects stare at their own onlookers while triggering their attention in all expectable and unexpected directions, left and right, up and down, towards fragmented puppets hanging all around the space in a frenzy.

This orchestrated vertigo of small visual shocks deliberately counters previously well-calculated, measurable, cerebral and "for-sale" atmosphere therein. As a gloomy version of home full of objects, that builds upon an earlier, intimate version of another man's living-room (turned into murals), this double-bind intervention by Steven Baelen and Benoît Vandenbroucke makes a point where it is probably least expected: in the mind of an observer-believer-consumer, whose preconceptions of faith and devotion, now transformed in line with the market-oriented logic of 'survival' vis-à-vis Christ-oriented logic of 'salvation', shed new light on hidden layers of racial asymmetries in contemporary world: the white world, almost-white world, etc. (always already conditioned by either of two logics, and by both of them together).

Through the ritual of hosting each other's work in a common space, predefined by the power of religious propaganda and real-estate marketing, Baelen and Vandenbroucke rely upon the power of purely visual rhetoric to dispel prefabricated myths about the Other: their 'analogue' pieces of information, now virtually re-created in ever more digitized minds of a self-centered community they address, offer a new insight into the never-too-white world defined by tensions among colours. Inside an 'almost-white' cube, where the 'white' man has been reflecting its own, narcissist image for far too long, Baelen and Vandenbroucke put on display *the fact of blackness*: they are pointing at it by pointing their 'fingers' directly at local viewers, who are now invited to reconsider some misinformed perspectives about the *never-enough-white* world while facing their own, preconceived fears and assumptions anew in this two-men show – phantasmal, ghoulish and macabre as much as humorous, alluring, and timely.

---Marko Stamenkovic

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