

Vincent Meessen's practice is firmly anchored in research; a plural practice that aims to break down the barriers between disciplines and forms of knowledge. His pieces bring to light unpublished documents, inviting a poetic and political re-reading of modern history from our current angle of post-colonial theory. *Prospectus* is a heterogeneous editorial research space where forms adapt to the singularity of the contents. Conceived as an extension of the artist's artistic practice, it can be considered a space for the open discourse arising from multiple encounters and collaborations with researchers in various disciplines: anthropology, history, and art history, as well as with visual artists, graphic designers, typographers and designers. *Prospectus* is also a place for formal experimentation on and about the book—regarded here as both a paper tool and broadcasting media—in the digital era. It is accompanied by a new open-source typographic system called Belgicka, created in collaboration with Pierre Huyghebaert, a graphic designer, professor and member of Open Source Publishing (OSP), an organization of researchers who share a critical practice on open graphics software. The project also has a pedagogical track, which is activated through the temporary research unit Swerve. Student interns from ENSAV–La Cambre and from erg are invited to actively participate and contribute, both practically and theoretically, to the elaboration of this research.

*Prospectus* is the result of a long process beginning in 2006 with the first volume "Third Form", published by Mousse Publishing (Milan) in 2012. Part of his participation in the Venice Biennale in 2015 included the artist publishing a second opus entitled "Postface to the Scenic Unit: Personne et les autres", released as a supplement to the exhibition catalogue. Three other installments will accompany, prior to or following, upcoming works and exhibitions programmed in both national and international institutions. A third volume entitled "The Other Country", gathers contributions from various participants in the symposium *Let's Build the Hacienda* (Wiels, March 2016) and a visual essay by the artist emphasizing his historiographical work on the Situationist International and its African influences, which were resources for the exhibition *Sire je suis de l'ôtre pays* (Wiels,

2016). The fourth volume, "Patterns for (Re) cognition", released in September 2017, is a renewed appreciation for the practically unknown abstract works by Congolese painter Tshela Tendu (ca. 1880-1950), on the occasion of an exhibition at Bozar (Brussels) from June to September 2017. "The Black Art of Belgicka", title of the fifth volume encompassing the heart of the research for *Prospectus*, is an opportunity to question the heritage of typographic norms and standards across various narratives and critical essays in modernity. Prior to publication, there was a workshop proposed in collaboration with OSP and students from Higher Schools of Art.

The following interview was conducted in writing during January 2018.

(A/R) Is there one or several elements that triggered you to develop this research proposal? What are its origins?

(V.M.) My pieces are based on research that could be described as "documentary" in the broad sense. Almost systematically, I then follow up with a conceptual method and practical framework wherein a "document" from this research can trigger new controversies and polemics. In the end, this brings up many issues stemming from both the work's methods and concrete advances in knowledge-production which are not always entirely legible in all of their richness. You have to recognize the limits of the artistic forms you produce. Some elements are not only formal but also contextual, requiring a discursive framework and the scrutiny of an informed, outside view. Art criticism, or what is left of it, might find itself disarmed when facing issues that exceed what it believes are its field of expertise. My project for A/R was therefore conceived to create an editorial possibility to extend a piece "in the making" and communicate the various issues at stake while doing so. The editorial form gains elasticity and can adapt to the content of each new research. The publications no longer depend on an outside invitation. And so I am free to create, shape and control this tool from beginning to end.

(A/R) Looking back on your initial presentation for the project, how would you define or talk about your research now

that it has started, from both a plastic or formal point of view, and a conceptual and/or theoretical one?

(V.M.) One book has been published. Another one is in the works. They are very different from one another but both fulfill the defined objectives, the pre-established schedule and what I said just now: the issue is simultaneously to experiment with editorial forms, find a plurality of explications, and formulate critique on the international dissemination of content.

(A/R) What was the initial framework?

(V.M.) My intention was to publish three monographs dedicated to ongoing research on different topics. "Patterns for (Re)cognition" deals with abstraction seen through the lens of colonial psychology and the beginnings of modern painting in the Congo; "L'Autre Pays/The Other Country" explores the misunderstood if not completely neglected zones of the Situationist constellation in Kinshasa and Dakar, for example; whereas "The Black Art of Belgicka" examines the future of typography and the fundamental role of technology in the creation of aesthetics, and is a reflection in action about how proprietary software colonizes our imaginations.

(A/R) How has this framework changed? Do you know why and could you say more about it?

(V.M.) Another research made its way into my work following an invitation by the Centre Pompidou to exhibit in Paris this spring [*Omar in May*, March-May 2018]. So I decided to go to Dakar and I was able to allocate part of the budget, thanks to a partnership with Bozar and the publishing house Snoeck, who agreed to provide some financing, to thinking about the relationship between this film-in-the-making and the publication, which is also in progress. In the field of art, when an institution invites you to do something, it sometimes makes you very reactive. It turns out that this research in Dakar was associated with Georges Pompidou as a person and, consequently, this context became a unique opportunity to delve into a project that was planned for a later date. My research in Kinshasa and Dakar are both related to May '68. It was not about re-directing a Parisian mythology, rather about taking an interest in Kinshasa and Dakar, two very important centers where

the student International emerged to change the course of History.

(A/R) How would you measure the difference in the way you speak about your research today and the way you did so one year ago? Or if not, how was the work useful for you, what was it useful for in general? How would you justify it?

(V.M.) A book exists and there are good chances that it will go down in history, even if that takes time. Aside from talking about “Patterns for (Re)cognition”, a research and exhibition project I started in 2013 and that has been the subject of three exhibitions to date, this publication provides a comprehensive catalogue of the abstract oeuvre of Congolese painter Tshela Tendu. It is the fruit of research that started well before I received the support of A/R, but this support allowed me to create a work that was completely new. Tendu’s oeuvre may now symbolically return to the Congo to be discussed long before an exhibition and additional critical effort might be dedicated to it in the Congo, I hope. For many artists, finding time, energy and finances to invest in publication might not be a priority, or could be difficult to access. Part of my work is to recover missing documents, obscured narratives, and investigate the deeper sources of certain historical denials, to contest the predicates of written History by showing the critical resources available in art and the importance of contemporary sensitivity to all and any re-emergences of the past. The editorial form also makes it possible to establish a rapport within the “time of the book” which is not the time of the exhibition or of the conference. As an artist, I am not just concerned with inventing forms but also with arranging them in a context, to disturb history. In other words, I try to create forms that simultaneously challenge and participate in reconstructing a horizon based on other values.

(A/R) Did you draw on any theoretical resources and if so, which ones? What do you think they contributed to your research?

(V.M.) Theoretical resources are an integral part of all of my research and are often even at their origin. “Patterns for (Re)cognition” started after reading Roland Barthes for a previous project, which led me to Edgar Morin. Both talk about the experiences of Ombredane, a French psychologist who worked in the Congo on behalf of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, which in turn was operating on behalf of the Belgian State. For the third publication in the series accompanied by A/R, and facing the impossibility for some authors to write within deadlines they esteemed were too short, I decided to produce this content with all of the invited guests through dialogue. This naturally meant there would be more work, but it also led to an editorial form more in phase with my project: each form produced in this exhibition

was the fruit of collaboration with an invited guest. This collaboration in pairs continued with the five people invited for the book: Jan Vansina, a Belgian ethno-historian, two doctors of Art History, Elena Filipovic and Yasmine van Pee, the artist Toma Muteba Lutumbue, and the publisher Guy Jungblut.

(A/R) Knowing that in scientific research, the methodology is always carefully explained because the results are evaluated and critiqued solely in reference to it, could you talk about the methods you used, the reasons why you chose them, the importance of respecting them, and their use in how you evaluate your research?

(V.M.) Your question has the merit of being clear but remains problematic for me. The results of scientific research are not only evaluated and critiqued based on their methodology. They are also evaluated on how they are received and on their social effectiveness. There are also critics that operate on them in many aspects of society, including directly or indirectly in the fields of politics and art. These two fields are certainly the most interesting. And even if this kind of criticism is not received, heard or taken seriously by many scientists who may be completely ignorant to their existence, they still have an effect, sometimes even a deep one.

By retaining their autonomy and specialization to a sometimes obscene degree, the sciences have all too often lost their ability to notice the transversality of the very facts they observe, isolate, objectify and above all, co-construct.

As for me, I borrow what I can from the researcher but the difference is that, when facing the restrictions imposed by the academic field in the larger sense, I allow myself to welcome the “uncalculated”, to branch off, to recognize how time and context are a part of fabrication. The successful artistic method is one that is based above all on experience, and maybe we can compare it somewhat to musical improvisation: “What in reality has not yet been through representation, through narratives, scenarios, market studies, what has not yet completely folded to the order of languages”, as Carles et Comolli say about *free jazz*<sup>1</sup>.

(A/R) Would you say that there are results from your research or do you find this term inadequate? If there is a result, how is that different than an artwork? If this term “result” is inadequate, how would you name this work?

(V.M.) The research designates a kind of practice of its own, since any self-respecting artwork comes “from research”. But it is also “in research”, to distribute it requires that one address it, that it be directed toward an audience—even if the latter

doesn’t yet exist—and so the research not only looks to produce affects but also effects. We can call this a result in the sense that we stats what is there, in the sense of taking stock rather than limiting the result to quantification or reaching a conclusion.

(A/R) How do you know when your research has reached an intermediary stage that would allow you, for example, to notice what it is? What punctuates or accentuates the work? Or is it a movement with no end?

(V.M.) It’s funny, I’m actually editing an intermediate form of a longer film. I entitled the short form “Just a Movement” even though it is spurred by the question of circulating and re-appropriating the meaning of what may have been covered by the word and event “revolution” at the end of the 1960s for certain radical activists in Africa. Everything is always in movement, the “result” and the “fact”, the fruit of a reconstructed unit. Let’s say that for me, to put it shortly, anything that is presented to the public is considered to be a satisfying result, even if it is an intermediate one.

(A/R) What are some of the personal results you might have from this experience?

(V.M.) I think that the A/R grant is crucial for the future of our practices in art research and I am very happy with everything it enabled me to do. Plus, it is always an extreme pleasure to work with people I admire, like the graphic designer and typographer Pierre Huyghebaert, who in the meantime has become the head of a typography Master’s at La Cambre. I am lucky to collaborate in the launch of his program that looks at the future of digital practices and inventing new, personalized tools, and meeting motivated and curious students.

(A/R) And what effect do you anticipate from this experience? In other words, what kind of impact do you think it can have on society?

(V.M.) Considering the public attention and interest in my practice, especially in the social sciences (contemporary history, post-colonial studies, *visual studies*, literary criticism...), I’m convinced that this kind of work will help redraw the lines well beyond the field of art. The most recent invitations do not deceive: they come from art institutions that have close ties to research programs or university galleries.

(A/R) Was the work collective? Is this dimension already a mode of transmission for the research or does it fulfill another function?

(V.M.) The publication and editorial work builds on a long-term collaboration with Pierre Huyghebaert who has been a long-standing collaborator of mine. Then there are many people who were invited to contribute to the critical content. I’m interested in avoiding the habits surrounding how an artist book integrates contributions on the artist’s work. In “Patterns for (Re)cognition”, I tried to ring the perspectivism of the project to the forefront.

## Vincent Meessen

In the new book currently in progress, none of the invited contributors were asked to write about my work. I invited these historians to write instead about their own research subject. So the book will highlight the way in which these parallel tracks, theirs and mine, produce areas for branching out.

(A/R) Did you have any public encounters? Are they also a mode of transmission?

(V.M.) One encounter was organized for the book launch at Bozar. Two of the five participants, art historian Yasmine van Pee and artist/curator Toma Muteba were present, and three other invited guests were there, including Morad Montazami [editor and researcher, Tate Gallery] and Bambi Ceuppens [Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervueren], which in a way enabled us to extend the published

dialogue and, on the other hand, make visible the diverging opinions on how to approach the history of early modern painting in the Congo.

(A/R) Were there encounters with students? Do you see them as a way to circulate your research, to transmit knowledge or get the students to engage with the work?

(V.M.) I worked on a unit that addressed the relationship between contemporary art and typography (one of the underlying questions in “The Black Art of Belgicka”) for a lesson at La Cambre but, more than a transmission, it was a real stance that I took in support of, and to nourish, the students’ own research. At MACBA, the public was for the most part made up of university and art school students.

I was also recently invited to talk at MuCEM in Marseille and Toulouse before many students. And for my exhibition at Centre Pompidou, I have activated a micro-cell entitled *Swerve* at La Cambre, which I defined in my proposal as a zone for branching off, a space for reciprocal exchange and friction.

1. Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli, *Free jazz Black Power* [1971], Paris, Gallimard/Folio, 2000.

### CAPTIONS

- fig. 01-04 Images from the research unit *Swerve*, at the junction between artist, professors and students from La Cambre as part of the *Prospectus* project by Vincent Meessen and his solo exhibition at Centre Pompidou, March 28–May 28, 2018. With Pierre Huyghebaert (Typo), Marianne Corte (Printmaking), and students Julia Lebrao Sandra (Printmaking) and Amelie Vancoppenolle (Typo).
- fig. 05 Vincent Meessen & Tshela Tendu, *Patterns for (Re)cognition*, Bruxelles, Bozar Books & Snoeck Editions, 2017.