

Interview by Dries Verstraete

M HKA – Museum van Hedendaagse
Kunst Antwerpen
Leuvenstraat 32
Antwerpen, Belgium
muhka.be
Through January 6

To start with champagne and then see what happens is a good way to start anything, be it a Sunday with no particular plans or a love affair. On July 21, 1969, a loose bunch of artists, collectors, and intellectuals around the White Wide Space Gallery opened a new “center for art and communication” in Antwerp with a champagne breakfast during the live broadcast of the Apollo 11 Moon landing. The young Kasper König, who was brought in from Germany as a coordinator, named the center A 37 90 89. According to him, “A” stood for “A” or “ABC” or “anti-art”—in other words, for a beginning or for anything—and the number was the house’s telephone number, and somebody would always pick up. A 37 90 89 was made out of a common desire to liberate art from all cultural, political, and institutional dogmas. In only six months between its convivial inauguration and its sudden end, artists from Western Europe and North America put together an impressive, multidisciplinary program, surrounded by a local circle of intellectuals and visionary collectors. Through the exhibition *A 37 90 89: Beyond the Museum* at the M HKA, curator Barbara Vanderlinden unfolds the history of A 37 90 89, using archival documents, photographs, and a film installation.

It seems to have been James Lee Byars, the American performance artist, who—just before leaving Antwerp after a short stay, and in keeping with his own views on art as a way to lift social barriers—encouraged local collector Isi Fizman to start an independent art institute. A TV showing the NASA broadcast was set up at the end of a long table with over fifty guests, bottles were opened, and a wild series of artistic events was to come. Byars turned his World Questions Center into a radically experimental live TV performance; Marcel Broodthaers made a “section” of his *Musée d’Art Moderne, Departement des Aigles, Section XVIIe siècle*; Addi Koppcke, Tomas Schmit, and Robin Page replicated the nearby bar Amadou and turned it into a social sculpture; Jörg Immendorff and his LIDL collective organized the LIDL Sports Week. Other artists, like Panamarenko, Robert Filliou, and Ben Vautier, were involved more loosely. There were important events: Kasper König used A as a platform to publish Daniel Buren’s first essay; there was a concert by free-

jazz musician Peter Brötzmann; A 37 90 89 screened David L. Weiss’s *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger*; and there was a campaign against the messages forbidding Africans to enter, found in the window of many bars in Antwerp at the time.

The history visitors are invited to reconstruct through numerous letters, plans, posters, reports, invitations, financial statements, written proposals, and so on, mostly from private archives and never shown before, is important not only from an art-historical or social perspective but also from an institutional one. The diversity and liveliness of the materials make the excitement of the period almost tangible. The photographs by Maria Gilissen-Broodthaers, then Broodthaers’s wife, which Barbara Vanderlinden retrieved from all over the world and which are on display for the first time, are invaluable. Looking at these materials, it’s easy to see why even after fifty years, A 37 90 89 stands out as a unique instance of alternative, nonhierarchical, artistic self-organization outside and, indeed, beyond the museum. In this interview, Kasper König looks back on this wonderful episode of spontaneous collectivity and fresh experimentalism.

DRIES VERSTRAETE: Mr. König, I just visited the show about A at the M HKA, and I must say, it’s difficult not to romanticize. What was it all like?

KASPER KÖNIG: Well, looking at those events as if in the back mirror, I see that what happened there was very universal. There was an openness. People came from everywhere; there was a connection with Brussels through Broodthaers; and Stanley Brouwn came from Amsterdam, so they knew about it in Holland. It had to do with different kinds of energies and cultural backgrounds coming together. And then me, being German, we all had to deal with our recent past, of course; we were asking our parents what they had done during the war. And we turned away from all of it and adopted some kind of anarchic mentality. In Antwerp I just wanted to let it all happen. It was a spontaneous mix. It wasn’t political as such but rather a result of the mixed political circumstances at the time and at that place.

DV: What role did you play, or how did you all work together there?

KK: To bring me in, there was the idea of four or five people who knew what I had done. I didn’t feel dominated by egos. We called ourselves coworkers, and I was called a coordinator. I was not a director in any way. Of course you had egos, but the system was stronger than any of them.

There are funny anecdotes that come to my mind now, which I find significant, in retrospect. At some point the decision was made to paint the facade of the house in gold. That was probably the influence of Byars, although it wasn’t his idea; my father was a wholesaler in paint, and he gave us the paint. But my father was a conservative man who did not have a high esteem of what we were doing, and he didn’t give us gold paint but cheaper copper paint, which looked like gold paint to us but was actually ground copper. And when we applied it, it looked a bit like gold, but soon the paint started to oxidize and turned into blue and gray-brown and then green and all kinds of gooey stuff. It was not attractive but actually made more sense than the gold because it symbolized the strange alchemy of what happened inside. Ha ha, my father. And then towards the end of A there was a coup; I found a cheap flight to Spain and went on holidays with my wife for a week, and when we came back, Panamarenko had changed the locks. He wanted to take the place over and turn it into something else, into his studio. That made sense too, an artist taking over the whole thing, like some kind of entrepreneur.

DV: Do you see A as a unique situation?

KK: Yes, although A was a very interesting model, it couldn’t have been applied anywhere else. For example, Café Amadou; everybody was hanging out there instead of working in our place. When I insisted they should come over to work, they simply recreated the Café Amadou inside A and continued to booze there. A also had a phantom quality. From the onset, we agreed not to do any public relations around it. We aimed at production and distribution, not publicity. It had to spread out by itself, and it did, like when La Monte Young did these singing performances. He was into Eastern religions then and drinking tea and taking drugs. The hardcore Fluxus people didn’t take any drugs; they were all alcoholics. Maybe the biggest contradiction within A was not political. It was a lifestyle clash between drugs and alcohol [*laughs*]. We had our share of political problems nevertheless. It was unavoidable at the time; there were Americans trying to hang out there. Sometimes we didn’t know who was what, but some were definitely CIA. There was this erotic naïveté in the air, and exciting, unexpected things were happening. We had intellectuals and collectors hanging around like one family, and lots of children, and we did barbecues. I saw that as a typically Flemish situation, those barbecues. I felt like I was in the middle of a Bosch painting. Nice.

Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl: War Games

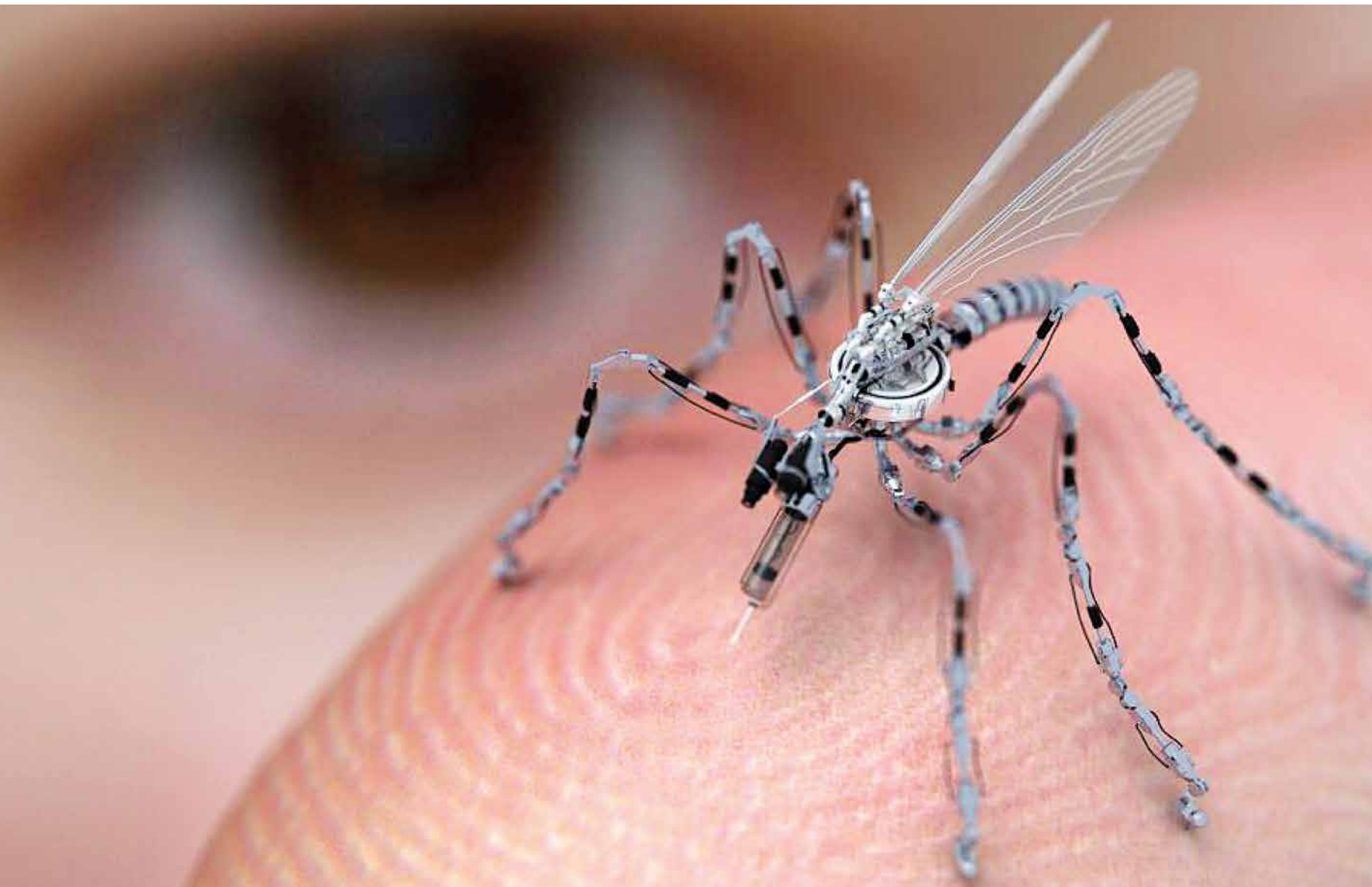
Text by Riccardo Conti

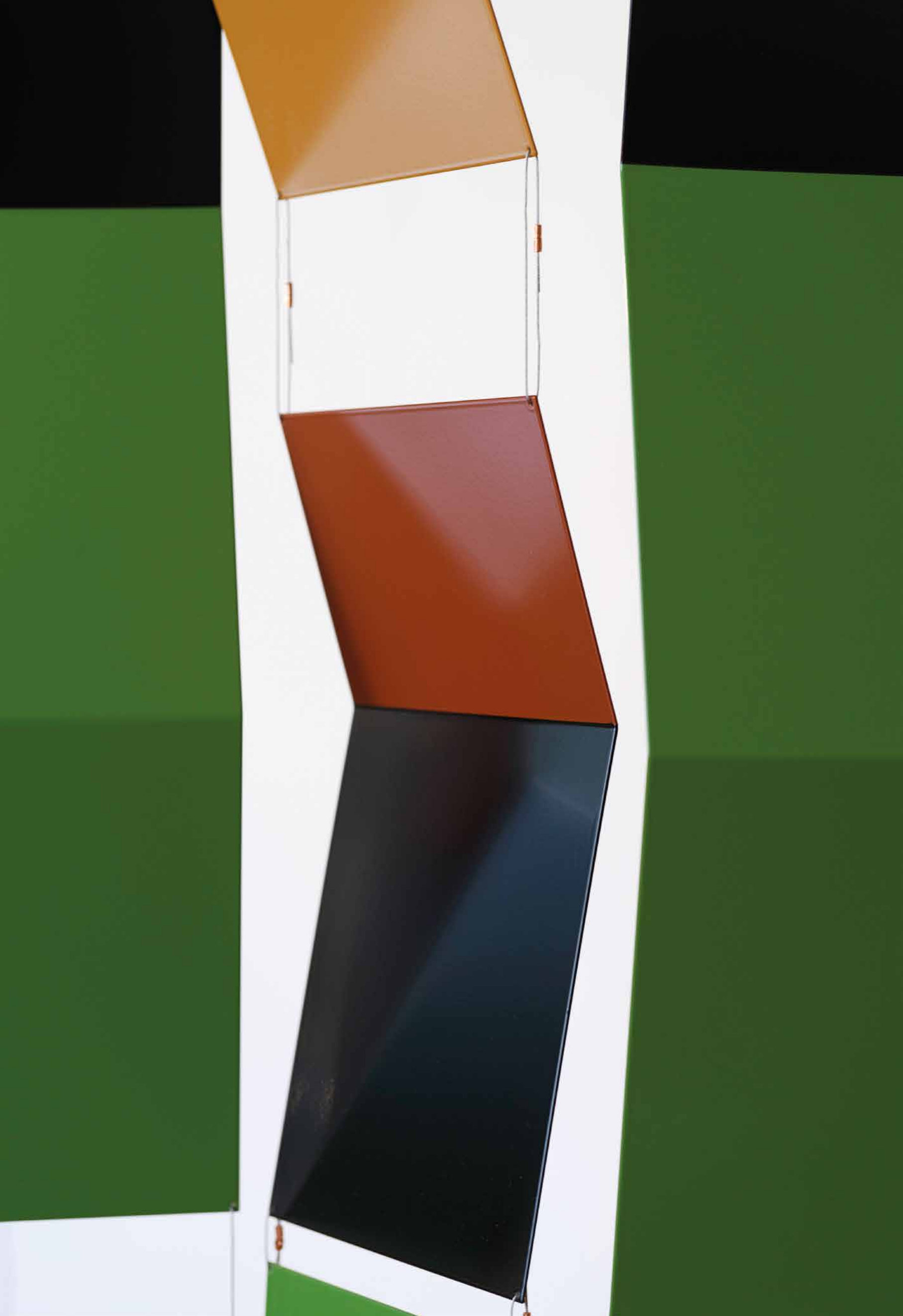
Kunstmuseum Basel
St. Alban-Rheinweg 60
Basel, Switzerland
kunstmuseumbasel.ch
Through December 2

For those who were young in the 1980s, *WarGames* (1983, directed by John Badham) was one of the decade’s most incisive mainstream cyberpunk and political fiction films. In the story, the unwitting intrusion of a

young hacker with video-game intent into national defense information systems sparks a threat of nuclear conflict. But the “war” has changed, and the “games” as well. While on the one hand the contemporary political scene has made the nuclear nightmare new again, the *War Games* proposed by Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl in their new exhibition at Kunstmuseum Basel reflect the pitfalls of a war fought in the folds of media and technology in the present. The show, curated by Søren Grammel, compares the artistic research of the two artists, who are of

different generations but nevertheless have many common threads. Martha Rosler (1943, New York, lives in Brooklyn) and Hito Steyerl (1966, Munich, lives in Berlin) have both distinguished themselves with their tenacious commitment to social issues and critical analysis of the political developments of our time, and have used new media in pioneering and artistic ways. From video art to installations, video essays to visual composites and collages, they have created new visual languages to articulate the interactions of power, money, media, authority, and art. In that sense,





Rosler's work has made visible what Marshall McLuhan noted in his 1970 essay "Culture Is Our Business": "World War III is a guerrilla information war with no division between military and civilian participation."

In many of the videos and photographic pieces on view, it is evident how representations of women and technology are strong themes. Rosler's collages and video artworks convey feminist ideas and counter the power of the myths spread by mass media with alternative representations of women and modern everyday life. Steyerl's works are based on computer animations and the aesthetics expressed by YouTube and other online platforms. Despite their different media, however, both artists are focused on denouncing the privatization of public space, the control of society 24/7, and oppressive authorities that transform the city into a war zone.

The pathway of the exhibition juxtaposes earlier with more recent works in a dialogical display conceived in collaboration with the two artists, who for the first time in their careers present an exhibition in Switzerland; the museum has devoted two floors to the presentation. The place, and the elaborate, high-tech multimedia installations, play an important role in transmitting the themes of the individual works, transforming the whole exhibition into a single, large environment that both fascinates the visitor and seems to feed one's paranoia of a constantly monitored digital condition. If hidden bugs

were the tools of old-fashioned espionage up through the Cold War, drones are the icons of our current condition of low-intensity war. Steyerl's *Extra Space Craft* (2016) is a docu-fiction video set in northern Iraq, where a national observatory is maneuvering drones over Iraqi Kurdistan. The control tower becomes the set of a space agency, which the artist skillfully adopts as her subject to evoke the virtual dimension superimposed on the realities of state-controlled territories and zones under anti-terrorist control. Rosler's *Theater of Drones* (2013) is a sort of visual essay also focused on these protagonists of our contemporary environment. "Welcome to the brave new world of round-the-clock surveillance and the death of privacy!" says one of the slides in the piece, its tone seemingly borrowed from advertising language, highlighting even more, if possible, the contrast between the illusive world of the media and the militarization of everyday life.

It is interesting to note how the works of both authors, whose art is notoriously serious and intellectually rigorous (as most clearly expressed in their theoretical writings) can take shapes and tones that infuse the topics with a surplus of optimism and fun. The multilayered constructions of their narratives reflect our perception of social reality as dominated by contradictory signs coexisting in the same space (and on the same digital platforms), but they also demonstrate their authors' careful study of narrative models and literal references that they have always used to give their operations an immediately recognizable style.

"Tomorrow's swashbuckler will not be in a plane, but at a screen": Martha Rosler borrows this sentence from Régis Debray as a prophecy regarding our new home environment dominated by touchscreen devices and laptops, and their anesthetizing effects, which are not that far from the effects of TV image-bombing, a phenomenon that Rosler has analyzed over the last past four decades in renowned collages such *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972), in which pictures of "American dream" interiors from the glossy magazine *House Beautiful* collide with documentary shots from the Vietnam War. Manipulation and decontextualization are instruments Rosler frequently deploys to criticize power structures, represented in urban environments and public space by advertising campaigns as well by ideological symbols, as in her installation *Unsettling the Fragments* (2007). Steyerl contemplates both physical and virtual spaces in the essayist documentaries that she has produced as a filmmaker and author. In recent works such as *The Tower* (2015), the editing and images present a radical visual language capable of embodying digital information streams, pointing out how reality has been augmented by technologies and virtual processes. This central theme of the image, which runs through the whole exhibition in the dialogue between the two artists, represents an important moment of reflection on the feminine and feminist gaze, of which these two artists are certainly among the most important living representatives.

Leonor Antunes: a thousand realities from an original mark

Text by Michele Robecchi

Marian Goodman Gallery
5-8 Lower John Street
London, United Kingdom
mariangoodman.com
Through July 20

At the core of Leonor Antunes's work there seems to be a desire to challenge two basic foundations of sculpture—the epic notion of the single object as an authoritarian entity capable of renegotiating the viewer's spatial perception by standing in the middle of the room, and the negation of the floor as the most logical place on which to stage this process. The latter point is possibly the most intriguing as it shifts the focus to the one surface of the six that conventionally make up the sides of an exhibition space on which one would be least inclined to seek out the presentation of a three-dimensional piece: the ceiling. This is particularly evident with the *Alternate Knots* series on view on the ground floor of the Marian Goodman on the occasion of Antunes's first outing with the London gallery.

The dangling brass tubes and bulbs elegantly filling the environment successfully create an explorative itinerary drawing on a relief by the late British artist Mary Martin, but a quick glance at the geometrical pattern of the ropes holding everything together—reminiscent of some of Anni Albers's works—is sufficient to make us realize that such arrangement goes way beyond its functional role and it is, in fact, an intrinsic part of the project. Even when we are faced with works standing on the ground, such as *Alternate Climbing Forms*, the balance never leans towards the lower part. Their lightness makes them look more like fragments floating in the air than

solid partitions, giving an unexpected dynamism to what is already a sparse but organic composition. Shaped prior to their assembly, the screens in *Alternate Climbing Forms* introduce a more implicit common denominator in their reflecting the exact same size of the glass panels used by Alison Smithson and her husband Peter when they built the Upper Lawn Pavilion in Tisbury in the late 1950s: an example of "transparent architecture" and one of the early alternatives to the existing suburban model popular at the time that Antunes studied and researched extensively for this exhibition.

The presence of these three muses—Albers, Martin, and Smithson—is evidently not coincidental. Over the years, Antunes has often referred to female architects, artists and designers in her practice, both as a way to instigate a debate over gender issues as well as a reminder of how the present is often used as a smokescreen to cover up the mistakes of the past. Now universally acknowledged as leading figures in their respective fields, these women had in fact endured years of work in a state of almost total isolation. This is especially true for Albers, who was forced to attend a weaving workshop instead of a design class due a policy of gender discrimination in vigor at the time even in an allegedly open-minded school like Walter Gropius's Bauhaus. The fact that all three were also the better halves of equally creative partners (Josef Albers, Kenneth Martin, and Peter Smithson) is a further indicator of the necessity to attach themselves to their male counterparts in order to find more opportunities for their work to be made and viewed. The title of the exhibition, *A Thousand Realities from an Original Work*, is a reference to Smithson's interest in polythene, and leads to another significant aspect

in Antunes's work, namely the wide range of materials (brass, leather, and polycarbonate) she deploys and how she is an artist essentially enamored with her craft. Some modules and structures are repeated but never to the extent of coming across as impersonal or serialized. It is rather the idea expressed by Giulio Paolini in his *Mimesi* sculptures of duplication as a moment of temporary displacement and subsequent adjustment that comes into play, with the difference that while Paolini subscribes to the strategy of the *objet trouvé*, Antunes accomplishes this effect through the idea that construction and production are two sides of the same coin.

In an interview with Maria Lind in 2015, Antunes stated how her choice of materials is determined by the need to establish a presence within the space as well as their ability to put across contents and uses. "I tend to think about materials the same way I think about people, how they age and tarnish." This exercise in animism is what ultimately accounts for the extraordinary degree of intimacy Antunes's work emanates, not just when in solo-show mode but also in a group setting, as seen recently with her participation in the exhibition *Machines à penser* at the Fondazione Prada in Venice, where her sculptures provided a welcome moment of warmth and self-reflection.