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Dirk Braeckman is a photographer living and working in Ghent, Belgium. His work has been recently exhibited in several solo shows at the Museum M in Leuven, Robert Miller Gallery in New York, Zero X in Antwerp, Bernier/Eliades Gallery in Athens, S.M.A.K. in Ghent, De Pont in Tilburg, and the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Deurle. Braeckman's work is included in many important public collections, such as the Sammlung Goetz in Munich, De Pont in Tilburg, MAC's in Hornu, and the Royal Palace in Brussels.

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ENRIQUE MARTY
Enrique Marty is an artist living and working in Saltamecchia, Spain. His oeuvre is driven by a mental fantasy and obsession to depict everything in his environment, using a variety media such as painting, video, and sculpture. Enrique Marty exhibits worldwide and his work is included in major public collections: the Museum Marugame Geijutsu in Japan, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, M.S.C.A.C in Laredo, and the Ouli Collection in Istanbul. The images and scenes he depicts in his work are a vehicle to enter into a state of extreme awareness of a fascination for Brussels.

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Josep De Pauw is an actor, author, and theatre director, living and working in Brussels and Antwerp. He writes, creates, and performs both individually and in collaboration with other directors, actors, visual artists, composers, and musicians. In 1996, De Pauw played his first leading role in a film and he has since then starred in over sixty films and directed two of his own, Vinaya and Ouborg. De Pauw also writes fiction, short observations, and travel stories. His texts have appeared in two books, Nog (2004) and Werf (2006). De Pauw is the creator of many acclaimed theatre plays, which he has also acted in, such as Weg-, Lief-, Uborg, and Rauwe Strangers. De Verre, De Ciel, over de bergen, en De Gehangen. De Pauw is the recipient of several awards for his work as a writer, actor, and director.

SOMETHING FANTASTIC
Something Fantastic is a young architecture practice committed to smart, lodging, and simple architecture. The practice authors and develops books, lectures at the ETH Zurich, and designs for private and institutional clients. Recent titles include Something Fantastic (2010), Re-Inventing Construction (2010) and Building Brazil (2011). Next to Something Fantastic, the partners—Julian Schöhr, Elena Schöhr, and Leonard Steich—operate a creative agency, Belgard, to work within the broader field and context of creative production.

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Ilka Ruby and Andreas Ruby are the founding partners of textfield, an office for architectural communication. Through textfield, Ilka Ruby and Andreas Ruby author and edit books, magazines, and essays; curate exhibitions and conferences; and consult architects and institutions (www.textfield.com). In 2008, they founded their own publishing house, Ruby Press (www.ruby-press.com), with the publication of Urban Transformation. As editors and publishers, Ilka Ruby and Andreas Ruby champion critical, cultural, and innovative approaches to architecture and urban development.

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51N4E is a Brussels-based international practice that concerns itself with matters of space production—architecture, urbanism, design, and spatial analysis. Founded in 1998 by Johan Aertyn, Freek Persyn, and Peter Swinnen, 51N4E gained recognition through key projects such as Lanot (2005), 31/12 Tower Triana (2004-10), C-Mine (2009-10), Skanderborg Square (2008-present) and most recently, large-scale urban studies of Bordeaux (50,000 logements, 2010-present), Istanbul (2011-present), and Brussels (2011-present). Since 2011, the exhibition 51N4E: Double or Nothing has traveled to BOZAR in Brussels, the AA in London, MAD in Ludjia, and the Graham Foundation in Chicago.
Let's start with a basic question: What do you do as an artist?

I consider every project on an individual basis. It all depends on the space, the questions, and the circumstances. I therefore make very different kinds of art works: installations, oil paintings, watercolors, sculptures, movies, or architectural adjustments to exhibition spaces.

You have no general approach; as you say, it all depends on the situation and the exhibition. However, a recurring element in your practice is the fabrication of small creatures, small sculptures that resemble existing people.

Yes, but I don't "make" these sculptures. I usually take molds directly from the body. It's a different process that's closer to that of taxidermy than that of sculpting. The statues of Giulio and Michel are not sculptures but puppets. Their body parts can move. I cast only their heads and their hands, and they gave me their real hair and clothes. Then I made the two sculptures out of polyurethane foam and covered them with layers of latex. Afterwards, I painted the skin, eyes, wrinkles, and so forth. But the hair and the clothes are real, even though the clothes have been made smaller and the hair is mixed with artificial hair.

Seeing as your models are actually alive, how do you define the term "taxidermy," the process of stuffing dead bodies and animal corpses?

Our idea of taxidermy is somewhat mistaken. It's not simply a process of taking out the intestines, bones, muscles, organs, and replacing them with a more durable material inside the skin. I learned this from a taxidermist. After he received the skin from an animal—let's say from a dead tiger—he makes a real-size sculpture of the animal. He then takes a cast of this sculpture and reproduces it in polyurethane foam, just like I do. He gives the skin to the reproduction and adds a pair of crystal eyes. That's different from what I do. I don't use crystal—instead, I paint everything on the latex, even the eyes. But aside from that, the process of taxidermy is quite similar.

Another analogy to your work can be found in rodent. Voodoo priests make small clay puppets of existing people. Like you, they also use real elements from their subjects: tails, hair, sometimes even a tooth. And then they pierce the sculpture with needles in order to punish and torture the real model.

A lot of people find the use of real hair the most striking aspect of my work. And, indeed, taxidermy also has a somewhat magical aspect. Think about it: Why is real hair and skin so important? It dates back to ancient traditions that tried to preserve the reality of someone by reproducing and simulating their presence even though they were absent, or even dead. Personally, I don't understand why people keep reproductions of dead animals in their houses, as if animals they themselves hunted or a pet they loved for years. It's a phenomenon that keeps intriguing me. I once knew a hunter who, like a casanova, kept a room full of horns from the animals that he had killed. Why? I can't explain it, and the same applies to my work. I don't want to give answers; I want to raise good questions.

Your sculptures seem quite difficult to produce. What strikes me in particular is their close resemblance to their models. Sure, they have the same hair and clothes, but they are nevertheless remarkably similar. Do you think you have a talent for producing likenesses? And in this sense, would you consider your art old-fashioned because you continue to realistically reproduce subjects from the real world? Personally, I know that I couldn't do it.

For me, the technique is only important because it allows me to develop my ideas. But this doesn't change the fact that everything you see in my work is made entirely by me. I do not have a team of assistants at my disposal because I'm the only one who can understand what I want to do and what I want the objects to look like. Others might have the same skills as I—after all, technique is only technique, it's based on practice—but the concept behind the work might suffer.

The close resemblance of these sculptures is on the one hand very important, but, on the other hand, the sculptures are not photorealistic. You present a version of a real person: smaller and certainly not heroic versions that are in a way unhappiness, damaged, even pathetic.

There are several reasons for this. I'm not interested in making copies. I'm interested in the human mind and the human body. When you create art, you create a language—a dramaturgical language. The viewer stands in front of a stage, and on this stage, something extraordinary happens. I don't want to bore the viewer. I want to show him or her something interesting.

Also, most of the sculptures do not wear shoes; they only wear socks, even when they are naked. There is a specific and personal reason for that. When I wear socks, with no shoes, I feel very uncomfortable and vulnerable. I would even prefer to stand barefooted than just in socks. It's the same for the sculptures, I think. They might look angry, but in reality, they're very scared.

With your sculptures, you reveal a dark and bleak view on mankind and the human condition.

Yes. Some people tell me that I make freaks and that I only concentrate on the freaky parts of life. But that isn't true. This is not just a part of life—this is life. Everything is freaky. I see this everywhere. Everything is very strange; life is strange. Normality doesn't exist.

This depiction of suffering bears religious connotations—the most obvious and pure example being the Passion of Christ.

Yes, it's perfect. I hate the word freak. In museums of ancient art, I see raised human beings, blood, torture, decapitations; people are shouting, crying, suffering. Let's not forget that I am Spanish. I have been to the Prado many times, and I am very familiar with the traditions of Spanish Baroque painting. And think of the Flemish Baroque tradition—Rubens is one of my most important references. I feel con- nected to our recent history of art—installations, sculptures, performances—but I think it's necessary to consider ancient history as well.

You are from Salamanca—a dark, medieval town in Spain.

I still live in Salamanca. The city is full of strong ancient symbols. It has been very important to me. As a child, I walked around in its cathedrals and churches—it was a very mysterious city. I was amazed by the figures carved in wood. They were so poetic. But as I said, the Spanish Baroque tradition has been very important to me in general. There is a tradition in art and life that certainly underscores the tragic and dark sides of life, but that—because of this—also pays attention to its healthy, good, and beautiful aspects. You, however, want to show the terrible sides of human life. Is this out of compassion? Do you want to encourage a form of mutual understanding?

It might seem pretentious, but I want to make the viewer conscious. When Michelangelo painted the Last Judgment, he not only wanted to depict something beautiful, he also wanted to terrify people. He wanted to say, be careful, he was here. This is what I give to you: compassionate advice, a warning.

You gave two small sculptures to Julio and Michel, the inhabitants of the house near Kureck. What did they ask for in return?

It was a general question. They showed me their house and the intervention by SinHAE: It's a remarkable design—very extreme, even though it actually amounts to almost nothing. They asked for a work of art, but I was free to produce whatever I wanted. I talked to them about how I felt to live in that kind of house. I saw how during the long construction process and in the presence of the building team, they constantly moved from one place to the other. It was as if they were executing a little performance in their own house. They lived in the kitchen for a few weeks while the living room was furnished. Then they moved somewhere else while the kitchen was painted, and so on. This is how the initial idea to make puppets that can be moved from one room to the other developed.
Another important event from my childhood has been influential to my work in general and this project in particular. Three of my mother's brothers decided to buy a plot of land in Spain and to build three houses on it. I was still a little child the first time I visited these houses. Because of some strange mistakes made during construction—the plan was misread—one of the houses was extremely small. I remember seeing the front door and thinking that it must be the entrance for the cat. But it was the actual front door, and inside, the ceiling was very low as well. However, nobody seemed to mind. This spatial difference was also present in the other two houses. It was completely surreal, but I learned the difference that size makes, the "re-scaling" of only one small part of the world. This was the starting point for this work, together with the "displacement" of the puppets, the movements of Julie and Michel.

Did you ask for their permission to make those sculptures?

I proposed it, and they agreed.

It seems like a strange situation, although a rather ancient one as well. You do not make autonomous art works for a museum or gallery, but you are commissioned a piece by a specific customer or the Museums.

It's true. But the real difference doesn't lie in the way the work is made or commissioned. The real difference is that the work has a second life once I have finished it. Since the puppets moved in, Julie and Michel have constantly been taking pictures of the four of them living together. In this sense, they are enacting a performance with the puppets as physical attributes, but this performance is actually part of their daily life.

And the sculptures live in their house. It's impossible not to refer to Sigfried Fried's Das Unheimliche, "the uncanny"—that which is simultaneously known and foreign, familiar and strange. In this sense, the sculptures are truly uncanny. When Julie and Michel look at these creatures, they know and recognize them. But they are smaller and different to the touch. Their skin is made of polyurethane, their natural hair is combined with artificial hair; their eyes are painted, and so on. In the context of a home, this sensation is even more felt because it is a familiar place, a safe haven. Since the puppets moved in, Julie and Michel's home has become un-humilized. To put it bluntly: Do you think you have made their lives more difficult?

That's what I want to figure out. I told them that they have to live together, the four of them, and later tell me what had happened, and not the other way around. But it is indeed a realisation of the uncanny, the unexpected and unknown that manifests itself in your own daily life—even in your own house, the place where you think everything's under control. It is very important and frightening, and it might make life more difficult. But at the same time, as Fried said, it's cathartic. An improvement takes place when you go through it. Your life is better after the experience.

The presence of art in the house is always somewhat bourgeois. That is, it sits in my house and I look at my paintings. I feel comfortable, rich, and successful. It reminds me of the opening phrase of Manfredo Tafuri's Architecture and Utopia, in which he says that "to avoid engulfment by understanding and absorbing its causes seems to be one of the principal ethical exigencies of bourgeois art." But in your case, the opposite happens. The inhabitants of the house ask for art, but you give them a version of themselves.

And it's true, this version is no simpler; it will never entirely ease their fear. The inhabitants will always recognize themselves in these sculptures, but they will never feel comfortable with their presence. Change will always be necessary.

You should talk with Julie and Michel about this. Julie, for instance, is a person that is constantly evolving, thinking of new questions, travelling, and changing. I don't know whether my artworks are responsible for these qualities, but I certainly hope to confront and question. The making of these puppets should have consequences, as in the case of window, but with different means and ends.

In that aspect, there are a lot of similarities between what you have created and what the architects of SINKE have. Geert Rekowsk writes that "they're not afraid of the ordinary, but they make it extraordinary by reimagining it, giving it a new look and a new use." The existing house of Julie and Michel is enlarged. It looks the same as before, but it certainly isn't the same. In your work, you present the owners with a scaled-down version of reality.

The new house altered by SINKE is in the same way the old one, but in a simple and extreme way. It took me a while to define the house as open or closed, but it's actually both. It has views to the surroundings from inside and outside and it provides shelter, but the wall offers neither security nor real safety.

The architects were prepared to work within the existing situation. For them, the original, formula — a "classical" Belgian villa — was not taken. They almost left it like it was and tried to reinforce what was already there. This is not as common as it might seem, Today, many architects still consider "modern" architecture as totalitarian; it causes hybrid architecture styles and it also has to create its own site. This is not the case for SINKE, for whom the site is a mixture of presence and change. This also bears a resemblance to your own artistic strategy. You don't make autonomous installations; instead, your practice is defined by a very literal acceptance and manipulation of what is already there.

Yes, that's true. I totally agree.

In this regard, it strikes me that your work is unsettled, or does it have a title?

No, it doesn't. You could call that a problem, but it isn't. It's obvious that it does not have a title.

This might have to do with the fact that it's actually an ongoing performance. Maybe the puppets can only be named once the performance is over.

The way that Julie and Michel live with the sculptures is a performance. It's a performance in the way that marriage is a performance. Hidden with symbols, contractual agreements, rules, problems, and happiness.

"I'll die when they part." I was recently told that the sculpture of Michel has a broken leg. Julie broke it when she tried to place it on a chair. I'm thinking of making a plaster of the leg. It was an accident, but accidents can happen. They are part of the process of both life and work. This only proves that the puppets, just like architecture and the idea of the home in general, are a mental situation. It's about thinking, posing questions, and feeling.

There is a famous advertisement for a brand of Belgian beer. "My home is where my Stella is." In other words, I feel at home wherever I have a glass of beer in front of me. Could you say the same for Julie and Michel and their puppets, their other eyes? Modern people need a home, but not a perfect home. We need elements of estrangement to feel at home: a perfect home, where everything is always in the right place, quickly becomes both scarp and unlivable. Both architecture and art can mirror the difficulties of life.

I have to admit that when I first saw Julie and Michel's house and the intervention by SINKE, I thought of a bunker. But since you enter, everything changes. A menacing wall opens up the house. Once inside there's a lot of light and warmth. There's no closure or isolation whatsoever. Maybe it's the same for the situation with the puppets. At first you might think that this must be hell, too frightening, too weird. But that's actually exactly what engenders new questions and starts to open up new possibilities.