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be-DA: Loes Jacobs, *Corporate Scenism*

pae - iDe: Olivia Ardui, *Sur les traces d'un crime*

ipae - erDA: Olivia Ardui, *On the trail of a crime*

translated by Patrick Lennon

ro - erke: Elke Van Campenhout, *Various Artists 3.0*

azfa: VA.LIMMdlMAB, *Title*

illustrations by Various Artists:

cover: VA.MAQDDW

fa-ke: VA.MUMCXM, *Mix & Mux*

iza: VA.ZOOHTH, *23 perfume bottles scanned*

ihy: VA.MUMNEB, *Mário Pedrosa to Pablo Picasso, 1972,*

Corporate Type

ifa-ike: VA.MUMHTH, *Chinese White,*

Aquarelle on Canvas

erza-erhey: VA.DDWOMA,

Collection of Street Forged Keys

azbe-azDA: VA.LIMBLF, *Less not More/Cool but Small*

insert: VA.MUMMAB, *Corporate Colour Wheel*

Corporate Scenism

Various Artists' journey towards Corporate Scenism began in the early 1990s, when a young artist won the prestigious Xavier Lust award at the Jeune Peinture Belge (today known as the Belgian Art Prize) with the installation *Carmella Giansoldati*. Winning the award could have been the start of a solo career on the Belgian art scene with galleries being quite interested in the large-scale installations this young artist was producing. But instead of pursuing this career opportunity, he decided to use the award money to travel to Brazil to visit a friend.

This event marks the first attempt to escape from being considered an individual solo artist. And without maybe calling it as such at the time, Trudo Engels invested in 'being a scenius'.

"The genius is individual, the scenius is communal, is the talent of a whole community.", Brian Eno.

Engels didn't want to become a vertically skilled artist having to adjust to trends, nor to conform himself to the norm of the day. Instead, he started defining his own arena by flirting with the arts scenes in Brussels where he collaborated with a range of musicians, dancers, performers, as a scenographer, visual artist, director, etc. The versatility of roles he took on during these years would later become the core motor of the fictitious collective *Various Artists*.

Around the year 2000 the creation of a scene of one's own became even more institutionalized. By co-founding the arts organization 'nadine', the collective *Various Artists* forged its current structure. As the small arts centre needed to programme over 100 shows per year, the fictitious characters, which had been moulded from the start of Engels' artistic career, joined the stage.

In 2008, not accidentally the year of a major financial crisis, *Various Artists* was officially born. The birth of the collective meant the death of the artist Trudo Engels, as he could no longer function merely as an installation artist. Practising as *Various Artists* meant abandoning the paths of the solo artist as a name or brand. Whereas the characters of *Various Artists* at first operated as various individuals, with their own research and production database, they slowly moved (over a period of eight years) towards an operational system of processes. The collective now functions as a whole, as a community positioning itself in a flux of circumstances, where the *Various Artists* can be seen as processes. The characters have each been stripped of their

personality and reduced to their essence.

By letting the *Various Artists* collaborate, the outcome is unknown. This temporary abandoning of control leads to a state of surrender guiding the work into new directions.

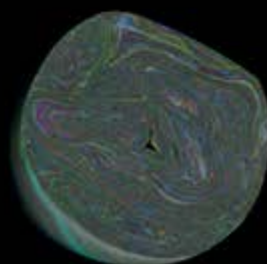
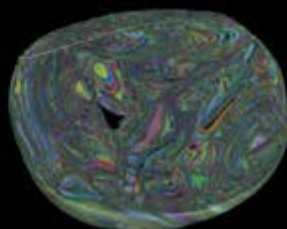
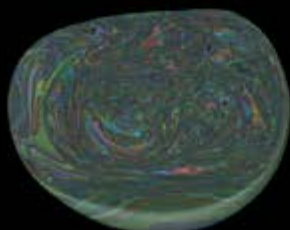
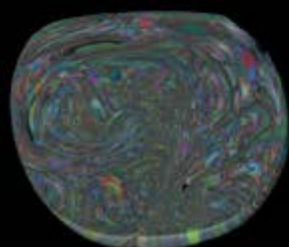
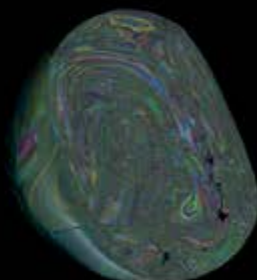
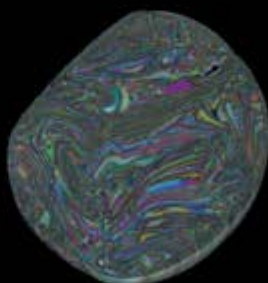
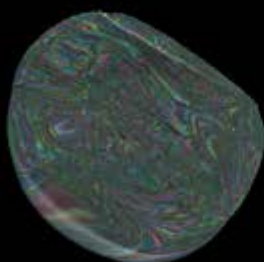
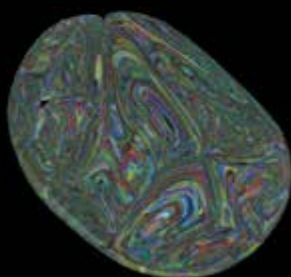
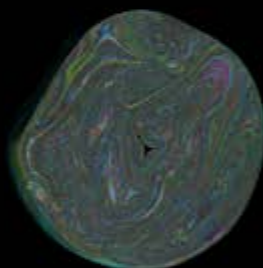
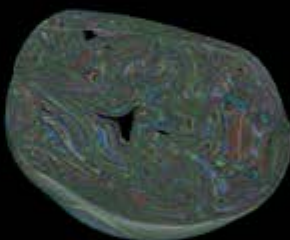
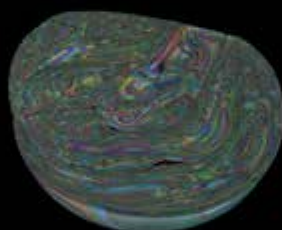
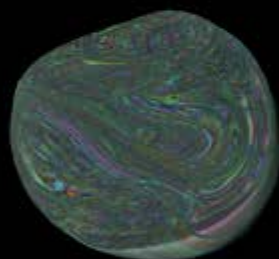
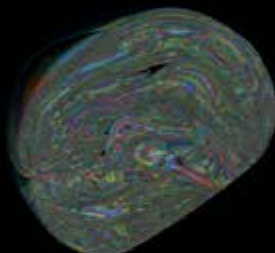
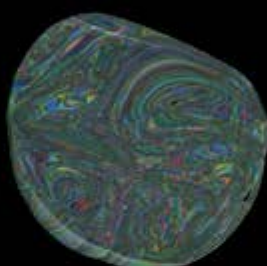
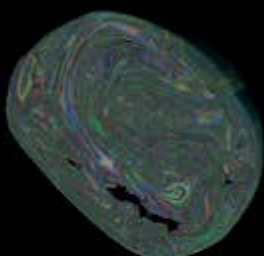
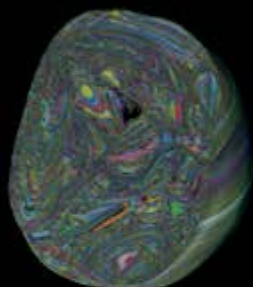
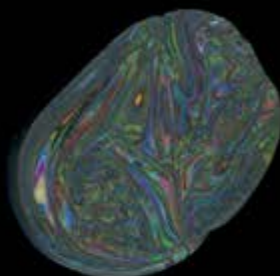
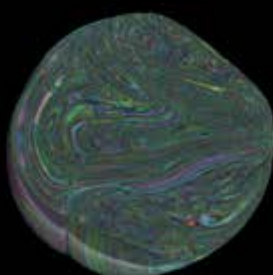
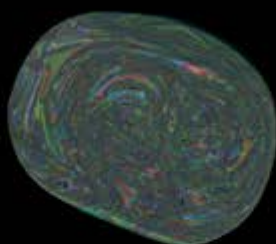
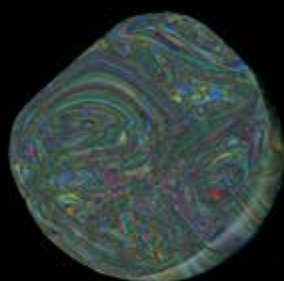
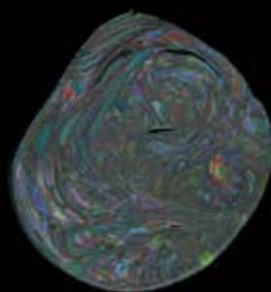
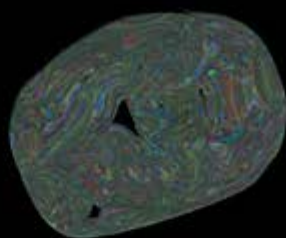
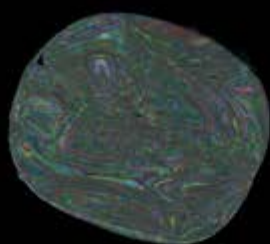
"(...) If you take the ego out of the way, you start seeing the world differently, and valuing the difference. You acquire alertness, you know you're not in control anymore (...)", Brian Eno.

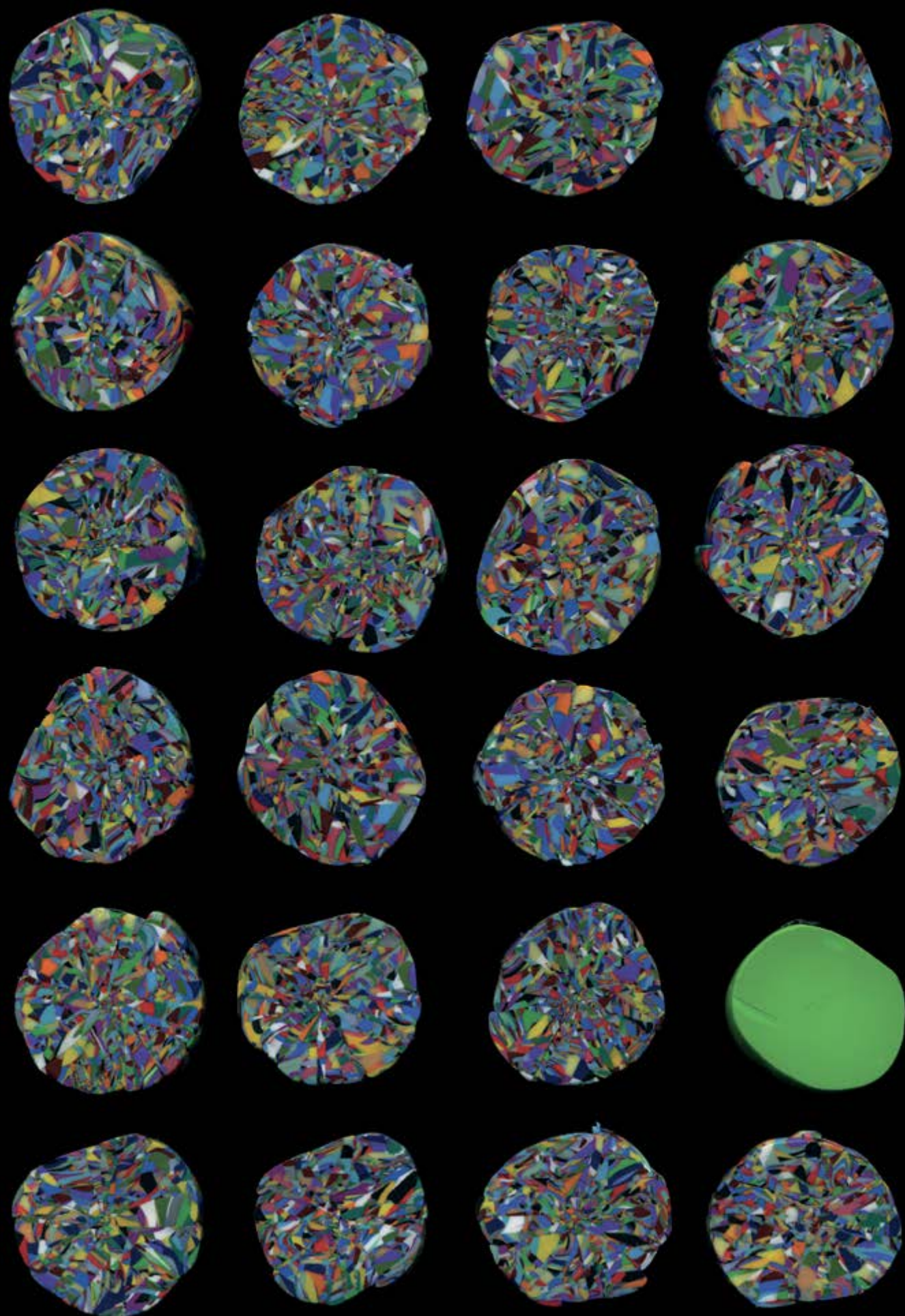
As Corporate Scenism emerges, the works of *Various Artists* almost become as though commissioned. When an idea or concept is dropped into the group, the *Various Artists* 'process it', meaning they all touch, shape, dismantle or change it, and a new idea or product is generated. The 'automated processes' of *Various Artists* can interestingly be connected to our current society, where the robotization of production and services is becoming the norm.

Corporate Scenism can be defined as a work method that processes matters, issues, statements, ideas, etc., resulting in institutionalized methods to generate collective ideas and products. The automatization of *Various Artists* offers an alternative to the contemporary artist working as an individual in an increasingly robotized and hyperconnected society.

'Dannie.0 – Scanned Only' is dedicated to *Various Artists'* Corporate Scenism. With texts by Olivia Ardui and Elke Van Campenhout contextualizing the work methods of *Various Artists*, and visual works by several *Various Artists*.

Loes Jacobs, August 2017





Sur les traces d'un crime

Une série de 24 flacons de parfums rependent des senteurs qui se mélangent, enivrant et confondant l'odorat. Même si l'ensemble provient de 24 ingrédients bien définis et assignés respectivement à un de ces récipients, plutôt que d'émettre l'effluve d'un arôme en particulier, chacun d'entre eux exhale la somme des 23 autres ingrédients, à l'exception de celui qui lui a été attribué. Leur singularité, à peine perceptible à nos sens, réside dans un principe d'exclusion et dépossession de leur essence. La différence entre ces fragrances est subtile puisqu'elles partagent des ingrédients communs avec les autres flacons. La différence réside dans le détail.

Corporate Scents (2016) est une installation olfactive qui marque un tournant dans la trajectoire de *Various Artists*, projet initié en 1995 par Trudo Engels, un dispositif ouvert et en constant cours d'actualisation, qui met à mal l'impératif de singularité de l'artiste et de son œuvre dans le système de l'art contemporain. Avant de nous attarder sur ce nouveau pas dans la déconstruction de l'individualité de l'artiste, il convient de revenir sur les différentes étapes qui ont scandé le parcours de *Various Artists*, œuvre complexe et, par moments, hermétique, qui semble continuellement (se) jouer des tours.

I - Various Artists: work in progress

Various Artists (VA) se définit comme une structure ouverte composée par un collectif de 24 artistes fictifs. Comme le suggère Catherine Bompuis¹, tels des hétéronymes, chacun d'entre eux a une personnalité propre et une trajectoire particulière, développant des œuvres individuelles au sein d'un champ d'action, lui, bien réel: le monde de l'art. Si pour Fernando Pessoa, qui théorise ce concept en premier lieu, il s'agissait de s'adonner à un exercice d'expérimentation de la subjectivité, en adoptant d'autres formes de langage et d'autres styles d'écriture, VA propose un engrenage pour mettre à mal la figure de l'artiste, mais surtout, les mécanismes de légitimation et de valorisation de son nom et son œuvre.

Cette réponse à un système basé sur la notion de capital créatif surgit dans le sillage de *Plateau*, laboratoire de danse contemporaine et performance, fondé en 1989 par Trudo Engels et Ida De Vos. Lorsqu'en 2000 cet espace est officialisé et reçoit des subsides, Plateau donne place à *nadine*. Co-fondé par Ferdinand du Bois, cette initiative prolonge les recherches autour de nouveaux médias ainsi que des arts performatifs. En

¹ *Various Artists*, *Best of*, São Paulo, 2012, ifa.

stimulant une production souvent immatérielle ainsi que des poétiques de l'éphémère, *nadine* est difficilement assimilable par le marché de l'art, et opte délibérément de s'en distancier afin de conserver autant que possible son statut indépendant. Cette résistance à l'égard du système de l'art reste pourtant encore attachée à la notion d'objet d'art, son originalité et celle de son créateur.

Dans un premier temps, la figure de Trudo Engels se dédouble, se multiplie en une collection d'individus, qui composent les *Various*. Progressivement, le parcours, la personnalité et l'œuvre de chacun de ces personnages ont été élaborés. C'est également à ce moment que s'est établi le fonctionnement interne des artistes, redevable aux règles d'un jeu énigmatique. Ce groupe se constitue en une espèce de secte, de société secrète imaginaire, pour ainsi dire. Un certain mystère entoure ces artistes fictifs et sans consistance, parfois omettant même les traces de leur œuvre. C'est le cas par exemple de Morice de Lisle, dont les performances sont généralement pas documentées, n'existant que dans la mémoire de ceux qui y ont assisté ou encore sous la forme de rumeur.²

C'est également le cas des interventions qui dérivent de *Boucalais*. Il s'agit d'un chemin fixe à parcourir à pied, entre Boulogne-sur-Mer à Dunkerque en passant par Calais qui, depuis 2005, devient un atelier mobile et itinérant que les différents *Various* se proposent à traverser. Au cours de ce trajet, ils revoient, revisitent leur pratique artistique et proposent des nouvelles créations qui se développent en cours de route. Ces œuvres prennent la forme d'interventions minimales dans le paysage, d'assemblages d'objets collectés sur place ou d'objets minimales ou qui n'ont qu'une existence éphémère, qui ne survit pas au voyage. Encore une fois, ces expéditions subsistent souvent que sous la forme de registre, se confondent généralement avec leur documentation. Plus que des traces matérielles, *Boucalais* est une performance en cours qui s'actualise à chaque voyage, qui gagne une couche supplémentaire à chaque fois qu'un *Various* la réalise.³

La multiplicité de voix et le caractère éphémère de leurs propositions font de *Various Artists* une initiative difficile à délimiter et définir. Il semble que le propre intitulé du projet méprenne toute volonté de le circonscrire et décrire avec exactitude. En effet, "Various Artists" tout en synthétisant les propos du projet - à savoir le métier d'artiste et sa démultiplication en un ensemble d'individus, à la fois comme stratégie et sujet, l'appellation est extrêmement générique et vague. Ainsi, le recours à l'ample catégorie de "plusieurs artistes" confond celui qui cherche à retrouver des traces des *Various Artists*. Lorsque l'on introduit "various artists" dans l'outil de recherche Google, par exemple, la majorité des sites renvoient à des expositions collectives qui ne concernent en rien le projet en question.

À cette appellation générique, s'ajoute l'usage d'une langue secrète, *Innumerat*, conçue par *Innumerat Roselare* en 1999. Utilisée pour la communication interne entre les artistes fictifs, elle consiste à permuter des chiffres aux lettres. Le discours masqué par la langue *Innumerat* cacherait-il une vraie révélation sur les intentions cachées de ce groupe d'artistes potentiels, ou serait-elle, elle-même, une farce pour attiser l'imagination et gérer une expectative autour de ces ghost artists? Si *Various Artists* s'assume délibérément comme un collectif factice, probablement le secret si bien dissimulé par la langue *Innumerat* et les autres énigmes que posent les créations de cette famille d'artistes n'est pas celui de la nature fictionnelle du projet. Quelles pourraient être les véritables motivations occultes du game master et de cette société secrète qu'il a conçu?

² *Various Artists, Best of, São Paulo, 2012, zo.*

³ *Various Artists, Best of, São Paulo, 2012, ibehey.*

La fiction et réel s'entremêlent et se confondent dans *Lettres d'Ixelles*, une proposition initiée en 1989, lorsque Trudo Engels déménage dans ce quartier de Bruxelles et découvre une carte d'Albert Saverys (1886-1964) qui situe une série de points de contacts entre des boîtes aux lettres et l'inframonde. Représentant du troisième groupe de Laethem-Saint-Martin, Saverys aurait rêvé que Victor Horta lui signalait la présence de ces passages vers une autre dimension. Engels à son tour aurait rêvé que l'artiste Cildo Meireles lui suggèrait d'explorer ces données qui avaient été abandonnées par l'expressionniste flamand. Les recherches d'Engels à partir du repérage de Saverys alimentent une archive électronique. D'autres artistes peuvent se joindre à l'équipe d'enquêteurs à la recherche des brèches ce monde parallèle et ainsi nourrir cette archive en constante transformation avec des histoires - plus ou moins factices - du quartier.

Quelque soit le degré de véracité des faits, il se pourrait que cette initiative fonctionne comme une métaphore pour penser le propre projet de *Various Artists*. Tout d'abord, le discours qui justifie - ou apparaît comme prétexte? - à la mise en place de cette archive collaborative semble être celui de la transmission d'un secret, d'une génération à une autre, d'un rêve à un autre. La vérité semble résider dans l'abîme. Est-ce que ces fissures du réel, au creux de ces boîtes aux lettres, font référence à une série de points de contacts avec les intentions cachées de ce groupe? En tout cas, *Lettres d'Ixelles* semble, tout au moins, un projet autoréférentiel en ce qui concerne le *modus operandi* de *Various Artists*: une structure ouverte et en cours, activée par une série intervenants autour de boîtes aux lettres, élément trivial qui se fond dans le paysage urbain. La clé du mystère est inaccessible à la surface et réside, encore une fois, dans le détail.

Il semblerait que l'on puisse également déceler dans les entrelignes et le paratexte qui entoure les projets des *Various Artists* des indices subtils sur ces feintes personnalités. La liste des *Various* qui inclue Sufferice ou Albert Savereys, évoquerait-elle, une réminiscence à un "e" près, l'artiste flamand Saverys à la base du récit constitutif de *Lettres d'Ixelles*? Serait-ce une coïncidence que le nom de famille de l'inventeur de cette langue commune, qui cimenterait la communication et qui garde le secret entre les différents *Various* (Innumerat Roselare) soit, à une lettre près, le nom de la ville de Flandre Occidentale où est né Trudo Engels (Roeselare)?

Un coup de théâtre survient en 2009, lorsque Trudo Engels déclare sa mort en tant qu'artiste et décide de ne plus réaliser d'œuvres sous son propre nom. Les 23 autres artistes hétéronymes prendraient la relève de la production d'objets artistiques à partir de là, hantés par le spectre de Wijlen Trudo Engels. Ou peut-être, cette nouvelle direction des *Various Artists* caractérisée par ces 23 présences fantomatiques qui graviteraient autour et en lui, seraient en fait une émanation des multiples personnages d'un jeu de rôle dont il mène la partie. Quoi qu'il en soit, à partir de ce moment, *Various Artists* ne se présente plus comme une collection de 24 individus, bien délimités et définis entre eux, mais un collectif de rôles bien définis, qui peuvent être incorporées par les *Various* entre eux, mais également par des artistes, à la base, externes au projet.

Cet élargissement du projet *Various Artists* a lieu, tout d'abord, lors des sessions de workshops "Being an Artist", qui consistent à mettre les *Various* à disposition d'autres artistes (AV), pour qu'ils puissent se défaire des habitudes et vices propres à leur processus artistique. Les caractéristiques et œuvres des différents personnages de VA sont assemblés dans des manuels d'utilisation numériques, et présentées lors de workshops pour ensuite être mis en pratique. L'unité des *Various* se dissout ainsi dans la pratique de tout individus qui participent de "Being an Artist". Le jeu de rôle esquissé dans la première phase de *Various*

Artists, s'élargit à de nouveaux intervenants externes.

À partir de 2011, l'étendue et la portée participative de *Various Artists* s'étend encore d'avantage, lorsque les « initiés » par les workshops "Being an Artist", les *Various Open Artists* (VOA) peuvent proposer des collaborations fictives ou réelles avec les VA, repenser le passé et le futur de ceux-ci, et donc à revoir les propres instructions qui avaient été transmises lors des workshops de la phase précédente. Cette nouvelle tournure requiert que le meneur de jeu, si fantomatique soit-il, délègue les décisions à des tiers, perdant ainsi en quelques sortes le monopole du déroulement du jeu, tout en restant celui qui en a donné l'initiative.

Un exemple phare dans la constante déconstruction des VA est *Le Château*, qui s'est déroulée en 2012 dans la Galeria Luisa Strina à São Paulo, et pour la première fois se présentait comme une exposition collective autour d'une thématique commune. Celle-ci proposait une réflexion sur les contradictions et des méfaits de la surproduction dans l'industrie alimentaire à l'échelle mondiale, l'avidité de la consommation, qui génère de la convoitise autour d'un produit à consommer, mais qui est fondée sur une dynamique précaire et une distribution inégale des ressources. *Le Château* présentait de façon cohérente le travail de sept des VA mais interprétés par cinq artistes différents qui pouvaient superposer des rôles et jouer, en même temps, deux ou trois VA.⁴

Un autre tournant fondamental a été la double exposition individuelle Q&A, réalisée avec Cildo Meireles et qui a eu lieu à la Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, entre le 25 septembre 2015 et le 16 janvier 2016. Le projet était structuré autour de 4 thèmes, à savoir, l'eau, l'excrément, la valeur et les mathématiques. Comme le titre le suggère, Q&A étant une abréviation pour *Question & Answer* : pour chacun de ces thèmes, VA proposait une réponse à une œuvre de l'artiste brésilien, tout en établissant des duos entre ces membres. Le classement de l'exposition comme *solo show* est curieuse, puisqu'il est question d'une véritable interaction entre les travaux des *Various Artists* mais aussi d'un dialogue avec l'artiste brésilien. L'identité ambiguë de VA et de ce genre de propositions entre en conflit avec les demandes du marché.⁵ Un nouveau pas dans cette réflexion à long terme a lieu: les différents artistes définis préalablement par Trudo Engels, et modifiables par les VOA, fonctionnent comme des rôles à être joués et réinventés par d'autres personnes, et qui font des expositions collectives entre VA et avec d'autres artistes, qu'ils soient VOA ou pas.

II. La mort des personnalités fictives, crime ultime?

Si Q&A a été une étape décisive dans la trajectoire de *Various Artists*, l'exposition a également démontré les limites des règles qui étaient en place au sein du projet jusqu'à là. Mettant continuellement en place une série de formules pour déconstruire l'originalité de l'artiste et son œuvre par un mécanisme interne autonome, l'individualité se dissolvait dans un collectif d'artistes inexistantes organisés et arbitrés par Trudo Engels, ainsi que par des collaborations externes ponctuelles. Si chacun des 24 rôles pouvaient être joués entre eux ou par des VOA, chacun de ces individus fictifs constituaient une personnalité singulière qui produisait une typologie d'œuvres bien spécifique, qui malgré les variables introduites par celui qui l'incarnerait à un moment donné, suivait certaines lignes de conduite préalablement définies. La prochaine étape serait alors de dissoudre ces personnages, si bien dessinés des phases antérieures du projet, et de progressivement les anéantir suivant une

⁴ *Various Artists, Best of*, São Paulo, 2012, zo.

⁵ "NQdine - Home." *NQdine - Home*. N.p., n.d. Web. [<http://www.various-artists.be/>].



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réflexion plus large sur la constitution de la subjectivité dans le contexte actuel.

Toute identité serait le résultat d'une relation à un dispositif selon Giorgio Agamben : "Il y a donc deux classes : les êtres vivants (ou les substances) et les dispositifs. Entre les deux, comme tiers, les sujets. J'appelle sujet ce qui résulte de la relation, et pour ainsi dire, du corps à corps entre vivants et les dispositifs"⁶. Élargissant la notion préconisée par Michel Foucault dans *Surveiller et Punir*, l'auteur les définit comme des instances répressives à "tout ce qui a, d'une manière ou d'une autre, la capacité de capturer, d'orienter, de déterminer, d'intercepter, de modeler, de contrôler et d'assurer les gestes, les conduites, les opinions et les discours des êtres vivants"⁷.

De nos jours, "plus un seul instant de la vie des individus qui ne soit modelé, contaminé, ou contrôlé par un dispositif"⁸. À la différence des dispositifs traditionnels, les dispositifs contemporains incitent une dépossession de soi-même et la transformation des citoyens en sujets spectraux"⁹: il s'agit moins d'une disparition ou d'un dépassement [de la subjectivité], que d'un processus de dissémination qui pousse à l'extrême la dimension de mascarade qui n'a cessé d'accompagner toute identité personnelle"¹⁰. Cet éclatement de la subjectivité, n'est pas répressif en tant que tel mais limite et encadre l'individu d'une manière sournoise, à savoir, en travaillant "à la création de corps dociles mais libres qui assument leur identité et leur liberté de sujet dans le processus de leur assujettissement"¹¹.

Cette fausse impression de libre arbitre s'accroît au moment où internet envahit - à l'échelle globale et omniprésente - toutes les sphères de la vie publique et privée.¹² Comme l'évoque Boris Groys dans un article récent, les individus ont l'impression de garder un certain contrôle sur leurs données par un système de mots de passe qui les blindent de la visibilité et l'exposition totale. Le sujet contemporain serait donc, non seulement un sujet spectral, mais en premier lieu un mainteneur de secrets: la subjectivité est devenue une construction technique redevable à une série de codes d'accès.¹³ Si ces données sont cachées de certains regards indiscrets, elles sont accessibles aux algorithmes utilisés par Google ou la NSA qui collectent et nous délivrent des informations qu'en apparence nous sélectionnons mais qui en réalité nous sont transmises par un filtre prédéterminé. Mais si la personnalité résiderait dans ce principe d'exclusion, soutenu par des données supposées secrètes, privées de la connaissance d'autrui, mais soumises à une surveillance à peine voilée, où pourrait encore résider un quelconque facteur d'originalité?

Loin d'apporter des réponses définitives à ces incertitudes concernant la subjectivité contemporaine, la nouvelle étape du projet de *Various Artists* les soulignent. Certes, les *Various* sont des personnalités qui existent dans le champ de la fiction, mais ils peuvent être compris comme une métafiction qui permet d'approcher ces réflexions sur la place des dispositifs, principes normatifs et algorithmes sur l'élaboration de notre individualité. En effet, les prochaines propositions seront marquées par une logique d'exclusion et négation de soi : l'œuvre de chacun des 24 *Various* étant le résultat de la somme des apports et opinions des 23 autres. La personnalité et le capital créatif des *Various* existent par défaut et résultent de l'absence et la dépossession de soi, ou encore par l'éclatement de leur subjectivité. Le libre arbitre, l'unicité et l'originalité de

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, , *Qu'est ce qu'un dispositif*, trad. de l'italien par M. Rueff, Paris, 2007, p. 32.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² Boris Groys, "The Truth of Art", *e-flux journal*, [<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-truth-of-art/>]

¹³ Boris Groys, "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive", *e-flux journal*, 45 [<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-workers-between-utopia-and-the-archive/>].

leur œuvre se substitue à un choix arbitraire et imposé de l'extérieur, par un collectif qui est lui même assujéti à une nouvelle règle du jeu.

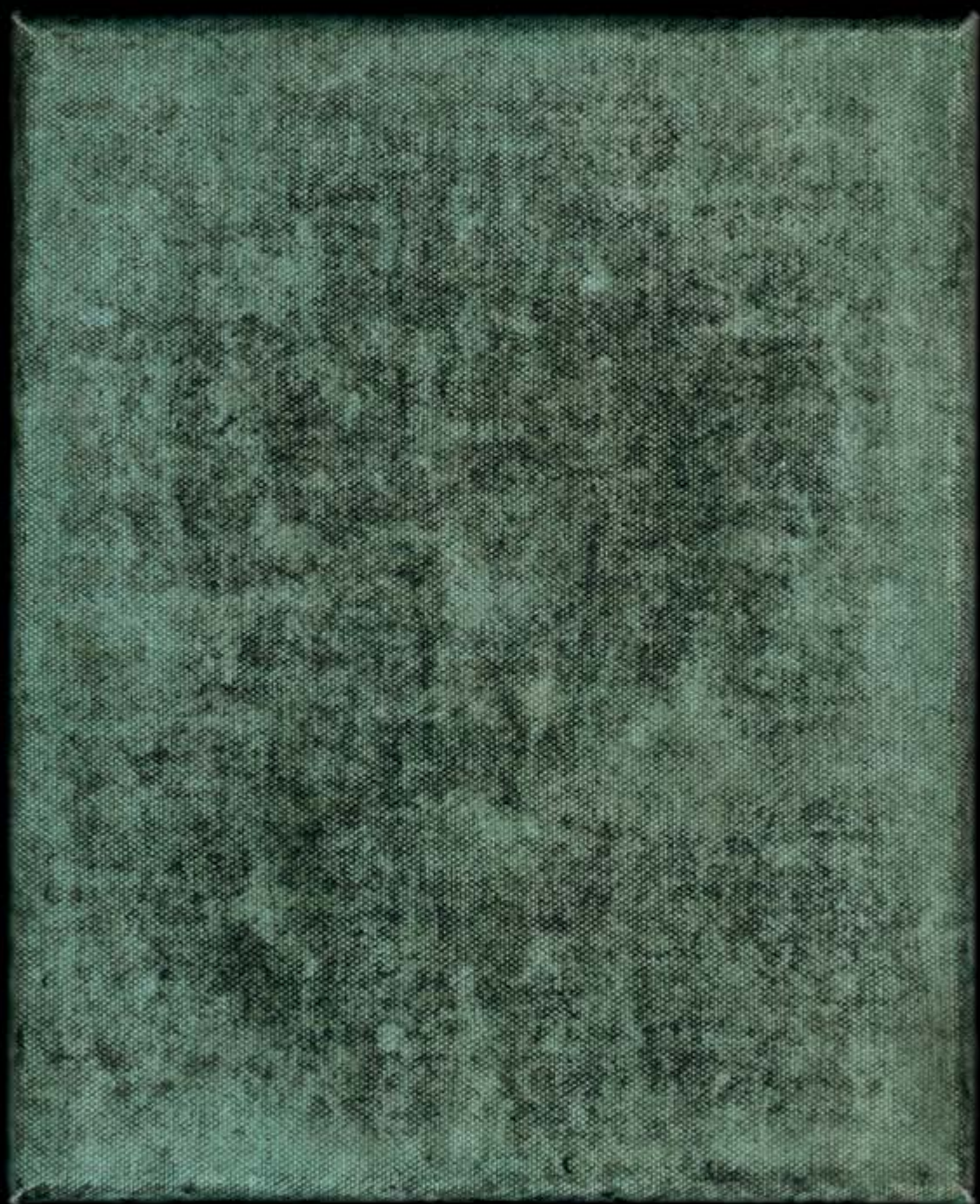
Avant *Corporate Scents* (2016), brièvement décrite dans l'introduction de cet article, *Corporate Colors* (2015) est la première illustration de ce nouveau principe qui orientera *Various Artists* dans les prochaines années. Il s'agit de deux chartes de couleurs. La première (*i*) consiste en une gamme étendue de 24 couleurs, bien contrastées entre elles, attribuées respectivement et à priori à l'un des personnages fictifs membre du collectif. Chacun dispose ainsi de sa propre couleur, de son identité bien reconnaissable pour ainsi dire. Une deuxième charte (*r*) de couleur se présente comme une gamme de 24 tonalités de gris, très proches les unes des autres, mais qui présentent une différence très subtile. Chaque tonalité de gris du deuxième diagramme (*r*) correspond au mélange des 23 couleurs du diagramme précédent (*i*), à l'exception de la couleur qui était attribué à ce *Various* dans le premier schéma (*i*).

Ces deux propositions marquent l'adoption de ce nouvel *modus operandi*, basé sur des formules excluanes, impersonnelles pour ainsi dire. Cette nouvelle voie souligne l'écart entre les critères socialement construits et nominaux qui constituent notre identité et une supposée essence individuelle. Il s'agit de déceler qui a le pouvoir sur l'identité d'un individu et qui établit les taxonomies sociales et les mécanismes d'identification et l'hierarchie entre ces différentes catégories pré-établies.¹⁴ Autrement dit, quels seraient les dispositifs à l'origine de la construction de l'idée de l'artiste, de l'aura qui l'entoure et qui consacre son œuvre? De quelle manière serait-il amené à procéder, produire, parler et exposer son œuvre? Si les catégories sont préalablement définies par des instances et dispositifs, les biographies et œuvres pourrait aussi bien être conçues par des algorithmes ou un générateur automatique qui répondent à certains critères de base considérés importants (nationalité, média utilisé ou genre de problématique autour de laquelle tourne le travail de l'artiste). Les deux exemples cités semblent ainsi assumer l'échec d'un désir profondément humain de reconnaissance d'une originalité, d'une différence par rapport à un autre.

Un paradoxe s'esquisse dans l'évolution du projet *Various Artists*. Dans un premier temps, la création et l'élaboration de différents artistes fictifs rompt avec l'idée de singularité d'une œuvre en travaillant sur la conception d'un artiste multiple, d'abord comme un groupe d'individus et ensuite comme un collectif. Suite à cette démultiplication des personnalités, le projet tend à revenir à une uniformité, tant dans *Corporate Scents* que *Corporate Colors* : les couleurs ou senteurs se mélangent à nouveau pour former une seule et même tâche chromatique ou olfactive aux nuances subtiles, brouillant la délimitation des différents ingrédients. Encore une fois, la différence réside dans le détail, parfois infime, presque invisible et impalpable. Cette absence d'un ingrédient, cette absence de voix et de libre arbitre est le seul indice de la personnalité et constitue la seule différence à l'autre. L'artiste est réduit au vide, à l'anéantissement de soi et ses secrets, à sa propre disparition. Peut être en cela résiderait l'originalité : un groupe d'individus dépossédés d'eux même, des présences fantomatiques qui se manifestent dans les entrelignes et les détails, et dont la singularité se résume à une subtile différence de nuance de gris ou de senteurs contenues dans des fioles. Ou encore : peut être que ce paradoxe – entre démultiplication et anéantissement des VA – ne seraient que des fausses pistes pour masquer la signature indélébile de (Wijlen) Trudo Engels.

Olivia Ardui, March 2016

¹⁴ Boris Groys, "The Truth of Art", *Ibid*.





On the trail of a crime

A series of 24 perfume bottles gives off scents that blend with one another, exciting and confusing the sense of smell. Even if the whole comes from 24 well-defined ingredients, each of which is assigned to its own respective container, instead of emitting the fragrance of an aroma in particular, each one of them exhales the sum of the 23 other ingredients, with the exception of that one which has been assigned to it. Barely perceptible to our senses, their singularity resides in a principle of exclusion and dispossession of their essence. The difference between these fragrances is subtle since they share common ingredients with the other bottles. The difference resides in the detail.

Corporate Scents (2016) is an olfactory installation that marks a turn in the evolution of *Various Artists* (VA), a project initiated in 1995 by Trudo Engels, an open and constantly evolving mechanism which challenges the requirement of singularity of the artist and of his/her oeuvre in the system of contemporary art. Before delving into this new phase in the deconstruction of the artist's individuality, it is worth going back over the different steps that have punctuated the career of *Various Artists*, a complex and at times hermetic body of work which continually seems to be playing tricks (on itself).

I - Various Artists: work in progress

Various Artists defines itself as an open structure composed of a collective of 24 fictive artists. As Catherine Bompuis suggests, like heteronyms, each one of them has a distinct personality and a specific background, and has developed an individual body of work in a field of action which, for its part, is well and truly real: the art world.¹ If, for Fernando Pessoa, who was the first to theorize this concept, it was a question of experimenting with subjectivity by adopting other forms of language and other styles of writing, *Various Artists* proposes a system that challenges the figure of the artist, but also and especially the mechanisms used to legitimize and highlight his/her name and work.

This answer to a system based on the notion of creative capital emerged in the wake of *Plateau*, a contemporary dance and performance lab founded in 1989 by Trudo Engels and Ida De Vos. When this space was officialized in 2000 and began receiving subsidies, *Plateau* made way for *nadine*. Co-founded by Ferdinand du Bois, this initiative continued to research the new media as well as the performative arts. By

¹ *Various Artists*, *Best of*, São Paulo, 2012, ifa.

stimulating a production that is often immaterial as well as a poetics of the ephemeral, *nadine* is not easily assimilable by the art market and deliberately chooses to distance itself from the latter in order to retain as much as possible its independent status. However, this resistance to the art system still remains attached to the notion of art object, its originality and that of its creator.

In a first stage, the figure of Trudo Engels proliferates, multiplies into a collection of individuals which make up *Various Artists*. Progressively, the background, personality and work of each of these characters are elaborated. It is at this moment too that the internal functioning of the artists was established, indebted to the rules of an enigmatic game. This group forms itself into a kind of sect, an imaginary secret society, so to speak. A certain mystery surrounds these fictive, intangible artists, sometimes omitting even the traces of their oeuvre. This is the case, for instance, of Morice de Lisle, whose performances are generally undocumented, existing only in the memory of those who witnessed them or in the form of rumours.²

This is also the case of the interventions that derived from *Boucalais*. This is a fixed journey to be made on foot, from Boulogne-sur-Mer to Dunkirk via Calais and which, since 2005, has become a mobile and itinerant studio that the different members of *Various Artists* have travelled. In the course of this journey, they review, revisit their artistic practice and propose new creations that grow en route. These works take the form of minimal interventions in the landscape, of assemblages of objects collected on site or of minimal objects or objects with only an ephemeral existence, which do not last beyond the journey. Once again, these expeditions often only survive in the form of a record and generally blend with their documentation. More than material traces, *Boucalais* is a performance in progress that updates itself with each journey, gaining an additional layer each time a member of *Various Artists* journeys along it.³

The multiplicity of voices and the ephemeral character of their proposals mean that the *Various Artists* initiative is difficult to delimit and define. It seems that the very title of the project challenges any desire to demarcate and describe it with precision. Indeed, although it synthesizes the terms of the project – i.e. the profession of artist and its proliferation into a number of individuals, both as a strategy and a subject – the name '*Various Artists*' is extremely generic and vague. Thus, resorting to the vast category of 'various artists' confounds whoever is looking for traces of *Various Artists*. When we search for 'Various Artists' on Google, for instance, most results refer to collective exhibitions that in no way concern the actual project.

Besides this generic name, there is also the use of a secret language, Innumerat, conceived by Innumerat Roselare in 1999. Used for the internal communication among the fictive artists, it consists in replacing letters by numbers. Does the discourse masked by the Innumerat language hide a true revelation on the hidden intentions of this group of potential artists, or is it itself a farce to stimulate the imagination and to generate hopes around these ghost artists? If *Various Artists* deliberately positions itself as an artificial collective, it is likely that the secret that is so well hidden by the Innumerat language and the other enigmas posed by the creation of this family of artists is not that of the project's fictional nature. What could be the real occult motivations of the game master and of the secret society he has conceived?

Fiction and reality mix and merge in *Lettres d'Ixelles*, a project initiated in 1989, when Trudo Engels moved to this commune of Brussels and discovered a map by Albert Saverys (1886-1964) locating a series of postboxes

² *Various Artists*, *Best of*, São Paulo, 2012, zo.

³ *Various Artists*, *Best of*, São Paulo, 2012, ibehey.

acting as points of contact between this world and the underworld. A member of the third group of the Laethem-Saint-Martin, Saverys allegedly dreamed that Victor Horta had pointed out to him the presence of these passages towards another dimension. Engels in turn allegedly dreamed that the artist Cildo Meireles encouraged him to explore this information that had been abandoned by the Flemish expressionist. Based on the locations identified by Saverys, Engels' research feeds an electronic archive. Other artists can join the team of researchers in their exploration of these openings into this parallel world and thus feed this constantly changing archive with (more or less artificial) stories of the area.

Regardless of whether these allegations are true, this initiative could function as a metaphor for pondering the very project of *Various Artists*. First of all, the discourse that justifies – or appears as a pretext to? – the establishment of this collaborative archive seems to be that of the transmission of a secret, from one generation to the next, from one dream to the next. The truth seems to reside in the abyss. Do these fissures of reality, in the depths of these postboxes, refer to a series of points of contact with this group's hidden intentions? In any case, *Lettres d'Ixelles* seems, at the very least, to be a self-referential project as regards the modus operandi of *Various Artists*: an open and ongoing structure, activated by a series involving the postboxes, a trivial element that blends into the urban landscape. The key to the mystery is inaccessible on the surface and resides, once more, in the detail.

It would seem that we can also detect, between the lines and in the paratext surrounding the projects of *Various Artists*, subtle clues regarding these feigned personalities. Does the list of *Various Artists* that includes Sufferice and Albert Savereys evoke – notwithstanding a change in spelling – the Flemish artist Saverys, who underlies *Lettres d'Ixelles*? Is it a coincidence that the family name of the inventor of this common tongue which cements communications and which ensures secrecy between the different members of *Various Artists* (Innumerat Roselare) is – notwithstanding a change in spelling – the name of the town in West Flanders where Trudo Engels was born (Roeselare)?

There was a dramatic turn of events in 2009 when Trudo Engels announced his death as an artist and decided to no longer create works in his own name. The 23 other heteronymic artists would take over the production of artistic objects from then on, haunted by the spectre of Wijlen (the late) Trudo Engels. Or perhaps it is the case that this new direction given to *Various Artists*, characterized by these 23 ghostly presences that gravitate around and in him, was in fact an emanation of the many characters in a role play of which he was the master. Whatever the case may be, from that moment on, *Various Artists* no longer presented itself as a collection of 24 individuals, clearly delimited and outlined among them, but as a collective of well-defined roles, which can be embodied by the *Various Artists* among them, but also by artists that were, initially, external to the project.

This broadening of the *Various Artists* project took place, first of all, during the sessions of the 'Being an Artist' workshop, which consisted in making the *Various Artists* available to other artists, so that they could rid themselves of the habits and vices specific to their own artistic process. The characteristics and works of the different characters of *Various Artists* are gathered in digital manuals and presented during workshops so that they can then be implemented. The unity of the *Various Artists* thus dissolves in the practice of any individual that participates in 'Being an Artist'. The role play outlined in the first phase of *Various Artists* broadens to include new external contributors.

From 2011, the extent and participatory scope of *Various Artists* broadened even further, when those 'initiated' by the 'Being an Artist' workshops, the *Various Open Artists (VOA)*, could suggest real or fictional collaborations with the *Various Artists*, rethink their past or future, and thereby revise the very instructions that had been passed on during the workshops of the preceding phase. This new turn of events required that the master of ceremonies, as it were, no matter how ghostly, delegated the decisions to third parties, thereby losing in a sense the monopoly of how the game unfolds, all the while remaining its initiator.

A key example of the constant deconstruction of *Various Artists* is *Le Château*, which took place in 2012 at Galeria Luisa Strina in São Paulo, and which for the first time presented itself as a collective exhibition around a common theme. It proposed a reflection on the contradictions and ravages of overproduction in the food industry on a global scale, the avidity of consumption which generates desire for a product to be consumed, but which is founded on a precarious dynamic and an unequal distribution of resources. *Le Château* presented coherently the work of seven *Various Artists* but interpreted by five different artists who could superpose roles and play, simultaneously, two or three *Various Artists*.⁴

Another key event was the double solo exhibition *Q&A*, made with Cildo Meireles and which took place at Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, between 25 September 2015 and 16 January 2016. The project was structured around four themes: water, excrement, value and mathematics. As the title suggests, *Q&A* being an abbreviation of 'Question and Answer', for each of these themes, *Various Artists* proposed a response to a work by the Brazilian artist, all the while establishing duos among its own members. The classification of the exhibition as a 'solo show' is intriguing, since it involves a genuine interaction between the works of *Various Artists* but also a dialogue with the Brazilian artist. The ambiguous identity of *Various Artists* and of this type of proposal conflicts with the demands of the market,⁵ leading to a new step in this long-term reflection: the different artists defined previously by Trudo Engels, and modifiable by the *Various Open Artists*, function as roles to be played and reinvented by other people, and who make collective exhibitions among *Various Artists* and with other artists, whether *Various Open Artists* or not.

II. The death of the fictive personalities, the ultimate crime?

If *Q&A* was a decisive phase in the evolution of *Various Artists*, the exhibition also showed the limits of the rules that governed the project so far. Constantly establishing a series of formulas to deconstruct the originality of the artist and his/her work by an autonomous internal mechanism, the individuality dissolved in a collective of non-existent artists organized and arbitrated by Trudo Engels, as well as by occasional external collaborations. If each of the 24 roles could be played among themselves or by *Various Other Artists*, each of these fictive individuals constituted a singular personality that produced a very specific typology of works which, despite the variables introduced by the one who embodied it at a given moment, followed certain previously defined lines of conduct. The next step would then be to dissolve these clearly defined characters of the earlier phases of the project, and to progressively destroy them following a broader reflection on the constitution of subjectivity in the current context.

⁴ *Various Artists, Best of*, São Paulo, 2012, zo.

⁵ "NQdine - Home." *NQdine - Home*. N.p., n.d. Web. [<http://www.various-artists.be/>].





According to Giorgio Agamben, any identity is the result of a relation to an 'apparatus': 'There are therefore two classes: living beings (or substances) and apparatuses. Between the two, as third parties, there are the subjects. A "subject" is what results from the relation and, so to speak, from the clench between the living beings and the apparatuses.'⁶ Broadening the notion introduced by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, the author defines them as bodies that repress 'anything which has, in one way or another, the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control and assume the gestures, behaviours, opinions and discourses of living beings'.⁷

Nowadays, there is 'not a single instant of the life of individuals that has not been modelled, contaminated or controlled by an apparatus'.⁸ Unlike traditional apparatuses, contemporary apparatuses incite a dispossession of the self and the transformation of citizens into spectral subjects⁹: 'It is less a question of the disappearance or exceeding [of subjectivity] than a process of dissemination that pushes to the limit the dimension of masquerade that has continued to accompany every personal identity'.¹⁰ This fragmentation of subjectivity is not repressive as such, but it limits and frames the individuals in an insidious manner, that is, by working on 'the creation of docile but free bodies that assume their identity and their freedom as subjects in the process of their subjection'.¹¹

This false impression of free will increases when the Internet invades – on a global, ubiquitous scale – all the spheres of public and private life.¹² As Boris Groys claimed in a recent article, individuals have the impression that they retain a certain control over their data by a system of passwords that screen them from total visibility and exhibition. The contemporary subject would thus be, not only a spectral subject, but in the first place a keeper of secrets: subjectivity has become a technical construction indebted to a series of access codes.¹³ If this information is hidden from some indiscreet eyes, it is accessible to the algorithms used by Google and the NSA that collect and give us information which we appear to select but which in reality is transferred to us through a predetermined filter. But if personality resided in this principle of exclusion, supported by allegedly secret information, kept private from third parties, but subjected to a barely veiled surveillance, where could any factor of originality still reside?

Far from providing definitive answers to these uncertainties regarding contemporary subjectivity, the new step of the *Various Artists* project underlines them. Certainly, the *Various Artists* are personalities that exist in the field of fiction, but they can be understood as a metafiction that makes it possible to approach these reflections on the place of apparatuses, normative principles and algorithms on the elaboration of our individuality. Indeed, the next projects were marked by a logic of exclusion and negation of the self: the work of each of the 24 *Various Artists* being the result of the sum of the contributions and opinions of the 23 others. The personality and creative capital of the *Various Artists* exist by default and result from the absence and the dispossession of the self, perhaps even by the fragmentation of their subjectivity. The free will, unicity and originality of their work are replaced by an arbitrary choice imposed from outside, by a collective which is itself subject to a new rule of the game.

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Qu'est ce qu'un dispositif*, trad. de l'italien par M. Rueff, Paris, 2007, p. 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Boris Groys, "The Truth of Art", *e-flux journal*, [<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-truth-of-art/>].

¹³ Boris Groys, "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive", *e-flux journal*, 45 [<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-workers-between-utopia-and-the-archive/>].

Before *Corporate Scents* (2016), briefly described in the introduction of this article, *Corporate Colours* (2015) is the first illustration of this new principle that will orient *Various Artists* in the coming years. It involves two colour charts. The first (*i*) consists of a wide range of 24 colours, clearly contrasted from one another, attributed respectively and a priori to one of the fictive members of the collective. Each member thus has his/her own colour, his/her own clearly identifiable identity, so to speak. A second colour chart (*r*) presents itself as a range of 24 tones of grey, very close to one another, but which present a very subtle difference. Each tone of grey of the second diagram (*r*) corresponds to the mix of 23 colours of the preceding diagram (*i*), with the exception of the colour attributed to that *Various Artist* in the first chart (*i*).

These two proposals mark the adoption of this new *modus operandi*, based on exclusionary, impersonal formulas, as it were. This new path underlines the gap between the socially constructed and nominal criteria that constitute our identity and an alleged individual essence. It is a question of finding out who controls the identity of an individual and who establishes the social taxonomies and the mechanisms of identification and the hierarchy between these different pre-established categories.¹⁴ In other words, what apparatuses are at the origin of the construction of the idea of the artist, of the aura that surrounds him/her and that consecrates his/her work? In what way would s/he be led to proceed, produce, discuss and exhibit his/her work? If the categories are defined beforehand by instances and apparatuses, the biographies and works could just as well be conceived by algorithms or an automatic generator that meet certain basic criteria which are seen as important (nationality, media used, type of subject around which the work of the artist revolves). The two examples given seem to suppose the failure of a profoundly human longing for the recognition of originality, of differentiation with regard to one another.

A paradox emerges in the evolution of the *Various Artists* project. Initially, the creation and elaboration of different fictive artists broke with the idea of the work's singularity by developing the conception of a manifold artist, first as a group of individuals, then as a collective. Following this proliferation of personalities, the project tended to revert to a uniformity, both in *Corporate Scents* and in *Corporate Colours*: the colours or scents blend once more to form one and the same chromatic or olfactory task with subtle nuances, blurring the boundary of the different ingredients. Once more, the difference resides in the detail, at times minute, almost invisible and intangible. This absence of an ingredient, this absence of a voice and of free will is the only indication of the personality and constitutes the only difference with regard to the other. The artist is reduced to a void, to the annihilation of the self and his/her secrets, to his/her own disappearance. Perhaps therein lies the originality: a group of individuals dispossessed of themselves, of the ghostly presences that emerge between the lines and in the details, and whose singularity comes down to a subtle difference of nuance of greys or of scents contained in phials. Or: perhaps this paradox – between the proliferation and annihilation of *Various Artists* – is only a false trail concealing the indelible signature of Wijlen (the late) Trudo Engels.

Olivia Ardui, March 2016

¹⁴ Boris Groys, "The Truth of Art", *Ibid.*

VARIOUS ARTISTS 3.0

The artist as a donor body

The artist is no longer. Managed into production-slavery, or experimenting himself into oblivion, the creative act has become formulaic, or has disappeared into oblivion. Caught in the binary trap between the 'to be' and the 'not to be', the individual artist has shrunk before his own recuperation. Or embraced the market to the point of his own extinction.

Or should we just stop name-calling and look at alternative ways of conceiving of the art's coming-into-being process. A Copernican turn might be needed to free the art work from being flattened by labeling and art promotion. And let it reappear, free from signature, there where it always came home to itself. In the middle of life, in all its mechanical beauty and decay. In this interview with the caretaker of the artists collective *Various Artists*, another perspective is opened up on the production process of art works, as collective, scripted, and mechanically induced processes of transformation. Goodbye to expression, welcome to the corporate culture of art making!

Various Artists 1.0 tot 2.0

"*Various Artists* developed basically in three phases. The 1.0 phase was not so much a comment on the arts scene as it was a way out of a concrete deadlock the facilitator of the *Various Artists*, Trudo Engels, found himself in. After winning the Price of the Jeune Peinture, I no longer saw myself developing work under my own name. Because I didn't know whom I should become: a painter? an installation maker? a carpenter? My mother already told me early on that I was unable to concentrate on one thing, that I was kind of herky-jerky. And this tendency translated into my creative process. When a - now famous - artist visited my first exhibition at the time, he called me an artist bricoleur, and he didn't mean that kindly. But I kind of embraced that derisive term, and started to see myself as a puppeteer. Not making art for myself but for other artists.

Between 1990 and 2010 several of the *Various Artists* started to emerge at the workspace Plateau (later nadine). They all had their own names, characters, biography and their specific aesthetic strategies. It became my ambition not to have to be an artist, but still to create art. The *Various Artists* started to proliferate and consolidate into a critical mass, that could produce work as a group. In 2010 I realised that this *Various* group of artists created within its body probably more specialist knowledge than whatever individual specialist could sustain. Instead of the idea of 'the' artist, the work become the outcome of 'an' artist. And this shift translated

into the *Various Artists* 2.0.

The Formula

The *Various Artists* at that point started to work in couples, and we organised a series of workshops called 'Being', in which you could participate to get the transmission of the formula of the work of one of the artists. Which would then make you eligible for becoming a producer of that artist's works. In other words: the work became somehow reduced to a formula. Which could be interpreted as a critique on the contemporary arts production mechanism. In which the formula, or a particular esthetic philosophy is used as a kind of vertical movement: you focus on one thing and then dig in deeper and deeper, using repetition and variation to sustain the assembly line.

Whereas I have always been attracted to artists for whom the soup of works was the way they wished to produce their art. Which always has been problematic to the art market. Philippe Vandenberg was one of these artists changing his work every two years. He alienated himself from the collectors and buyers that rather wanted to continue on a winning streak. If your work is hitting a nerve, the market kind of forces you to stay in line.

All this has to do with branding logics of course. And these are more powerful than ever. My question from the start was to see if it was possible to produce 'brandless' art. You can choose to become anonymous, and start painting street walls never to be claimed. Or you can choose to become radically generic, a 'typical' artist, universal and ubiquitous. The problem with this second choice is probably quality, which I tried to break down through quantity. Through sheer production, ongoing creation, letting the work develop offspring and spin-offs, a growing complex network of branches, allowing all forms of speciation to come into being. That can seem like a frustrating and demanding practice, but it is also very satisfying if you keep track. Works that would normally take you a week to finish, now get done in two days, because you, as a 'caretaker' become so skilled in managing your microtime, your minimal actions, to goad each of the artists along. Time seems to be the key factor in this process. Time and peace of mind probably.

Corporate Culture

So the first phase 1.0 was rather a game, in which the puppeteer brought a whole group of artists to life, and let them live out their biographies through their works. In the second phase, 2.0, the resonance between the artists became much more important, and the works kind of lost their recognisability, they evaded any form of branding. The *Various* started to copy and parasite one another. Not consciously maybe, but in retrospect it became clear that some formulae started to travel throughout the work of different artists. Which made it

also possible that some artists, that did not really produce anything themselves, started to influence all the others. A good example, and the leveraging influence that brought the *Various Artists* into phase 3.0, was the appearance of the Japanese artist Mu Mei, who introduced the idea of corporate culture into the group. This idea was in her case not a conceptual proposal, but could be distilled out of her earlier works, and then got picked up by the other *Various Artists*. The principle is to let 23 of the Artists work together to produce the work of the 24th, who then becomes visible in his absence. If you pour 24 buckets of paint together, or you allow 24 musicians to play at the same time, there is probably not so much to perceive. But if you take away the 24th and develop all variations on the one missing factor, you create 24 blurs that all are essentially different, through subtle variation. You do still see a kind of physical or mental monochrome, but the subtlety is so profound that the visitor almost has to start doubting himself, and his capacity to perceive difference in seeming repetition.

There are also other examples of collaboration, for example nebusi and Mu Mei rewriting important historical letters, like the one from William Borroughs writing to the Noble Prize committee about why Henry Miller should be honored. That letter gets rewritten by replacing every letter by all the other letters typed on top of each other. The result is a kind of blurred page, impossible to retrace the original message, but full of the suggestion of information.

The same corporate system is used in a series of aquarelle paintings on canvas, for which every time all except one of the colours of the aquarelle box get used. Twelve colours make up twelve canvases, every one of them missing one of the colours. These concepts coming from the work of Mu Mei, but executed by the other artists.

About snow and confusion

I am myself fascinated by a kind of noise in art, a kind of blurring in which distinction is both drawn and rescued. My favorite TV show is snow. In the 1980's I produced snow by painting every flake pixel by hand. You could see that the work of the *Various Artists* is demanding in that sense, that you can not see the forest for the trees. But it is the kind of work that is produced at the end of an era, on the verge of the age of artificial intelligence. In which robots will work more efficiently than we do, which they actually already do, but also will produce better art. Maybe I want the *Various Artists* to become an artificial intelligence artist machine. Fed by a program that designs artistic formulae that have to be maintained through micro-actions. You could even delegate that work, as a student job for example. Or you could further divide the artist into different actions, like 24 micro-actions, that could be done by different agents.

So on the one hand we move beyond the individual. And this in an age in which people get more hyper-individualised. Where the selfie becomes an inborn reflex, to put yourself out there, in the world, all the time. But on the other hand, it is also a fact that any kind of shift in the constellation of the *Various Artists*, has a huge impact on all the others. Mu Mei led the whole production structure of the group into a new phase. Maybe we have to see it more as a game. Artists are often seen as the mirror of society, and in that sense

anything is possible. Some artists try, every day again, for 8 or 9 hours, to realise the artist ideal of a Rodin. We, as a machine, water down all that excitement and euphoria, we let go of the endorphins and the aha of transcendence, and reduce the whole process to a mechanical wonder of formulaic repetition, hazard and diligence. I always resented seeing my name published in a program note. It somehow felt too personal. I am hyper narcissistic, but in a reverse sense. I want to keep myself to myself. I like to look at myself from the inside out, not from the outside in. I refuse to be reduced to the image that is produced by the outside.

Production Processing

The working ethics of the *Various Artists* is on principle quite mechanical. Marcela.B who can be considered to be a female version of Marcel Broodthaers, actually only worked with spreadsheets, cataloging everything. And this way of working became the instrument for all the *Various*, who develop their practices through a series of ten or more spreadsheets that list the actions that have to be taken to produce their work. In fact, all I have to do is to work my way through these lists. Some of them are taken care of by nature, like molding or decay processes, that just have to be supported from time to time. Other tasks ask a more active contribution from my side. Like a painting that needs 200 layers, and gets one added every day. Some actions take 5 minutes, but they can last only up to 22 minutes. And I kind of try to perform about 50 actions per day. But an action can for example also be to contemplate on a possible collaboration between two artists. That pitch is then stored, and might later on be added to the spreadsheet actions to become realised.

You might think that these mechanical processes alienate you from the work process, but actually all the works get a biographic colour: the water I drink, the coffee I buy, the amount of hours I sleep, all becomes part of the spreadsheets. In that sense I am a data-donor, in a biographic sense. But not in an experienciable or expressive sense. This mechanisation is part of me. I could probably have become an artist like Roman Opalka, obsessive and monomaniac. But on the other hand I always wanted to do everything, so I could never invest enough time in becoming an expert in anything. Maybe I am only interested in the story, or in the rhythm. Maybe all the rest is only camouflage.

Or maybe the whole point is to use techniques that are kind of mismastered and start to produce unexpected outcomes. Like layering aquarelle paint on a canvas, until it starts to look like mold. Or letting things decay, and observing the process.

Evolution and Life

I find it magical to think that life and thoughts are built up out of basically dead matter. Life is an art work that is constructed in a painstakingly beautiful way. It is so horrifying the way we treat this magical gift, how we live our lives so blindly. Culture has created such a distance towards life, that it is basically trying to suffocate

it over and over. Culture is tyrannical, and the only way to escape from that tyranny is by diving into the work, into the mechanism of things coming into being.

The most important point Darwin made was that life is designed, but not by an exterior force, but by itself, in a poetic transformation of amoebes into more complex life forms. Some really absurd, like the coccyx that survives the loss of the tale, or the split up two sides of the brain. There is such wonder in there, even a cancer is so beautifully constructed that it inspires awe in anyone that dares to look. The fantastic thing about Darwin is that he can point that out. Every detail, every hair can be reverse engineered, the story traced back to its starting point. That is probably what I try to do in my work as well. To create a complexity that the viewer does not necessarily need to pick up on, but that somehow unconsciously manifests itself in the act of perception. A kind of grace that comes from within, not from a divine author.

Elke Van Campenhout, August 2017



Title

Allowed
We heard it
What a game
I will
Not everything
at this time

I want to change myself
the work
Spanish fiction
...
Photos
Country

Get production
Pant
The destruction of life
But this is a problem
He knows more

that's all
Questions and answers
that's all
Photos
He was sitting there

First
the work
Where is
...
Photos
I agree

Get production
I know the Creator
Terms
But this is a problem
He knows more
Is

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