

## **Johan Clarysse, an introduction, 2014**

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As an introduction to this introduction I reread the article I wrote in 2000 under the title 'Johan Clarysse's floating constructions of image and text' (<http://johan-clarysse.be/downloads/artikels/Willem-Elias-2000.pdf>). I know that it is always a risk to reread your own text. You ask yourself whether that 'tower of Babel' that you have built around the work of the artist has been able stand time or whether it has become a hollow frame, a torrent of words disguised in a swan song (in French, in an ambiguous meaning: le chant des signes/signes – swans/signs). It happens far too often that a text doesn't survive the dying sounds of an expiring art opening. But in this case I remain satisfied by the way I then introduced Johan Clarysse's work. And so this is something I don't have to redo here. A short introduction will be enough as a kind of stretching before the interesting texts of Hans Theys and Isabelle De Baets can be read. And certainly this introduction should try to erect a signpost which points the way to the images and the fascinating overview of the artist's works in this book.

An important difference with other artists is the fact that in his life's project (a nice concept derived from existentialism) Johan Clarysse certainly had alternatives to utter his social engagement. But the fate of an artist is often that, in order to let his or her inner volcanoes erupt in a less or more controlled way, he is not able to choose other means than those of art. Before being an artist Johan Clarysse had already realised his involvement with the world as a psychologist with strong feelings for the situation of those rejected by the world. Afterwards he also learned to use concepts from the history of philosophy in order to give birth to thoughts out of the womb of the so called mother of all sciences. But also this theoretical approach was not enough for him. At 28 he started a retraining as an artist by taking partial courses of Art Education in Louvain and Bruges. And finally at 40 he became a professional artist. It was a switch that few can make successfully. It is a fact that those who take a second change seldom transcend amateurism. But when they succeed they are often strong and powerful. This was the case with Johan Clarysse. From his first exhibitions onward he was remarkably present and found an immediate and rather general appreciation. Anyhow he certainly stands my test of professionalism, namely that without any additional information one can recognize his work. A 'Johan Clarysse' is clearly a 'Johan Clarysse'. This tautological

metonymy is fully valid: only from his images one can derive the hand which is the driving motor of his mind and emotions. In passing it is useful to mention that when talking or writing about him his first name always must be added and this certainly shows the seriousness of being named: there is also the painter Clark Clarysse ...

Now what is the particularity of Johan Clarysse's images, one could ask. Well, he found that own painterly signature in 1996 after a period in which he had used paint in a rather generous way. From 1996 on there was no more searching, there was and is only finding. From then on he managed in an impressive way to use and bring together the most communicative possibilities of two systems of visual expression that man has ever invented: images and characters or letters. Both have proved of being able to express man's narrative needs. Since – let us say – Homer the weaving of letters, words and sentences into a text has found numerous highlights in poetry and novels. When we add the pre-Socrates period to this and go forward until nowadays philosophy, while overlooking the various sciences that have emerged since then, one can certainly feel what the power of a combination of twenty-six characters was and is. Next to this and certainly earlier the need for narration has also expressed itself in the whole history of painting and prints that has developed since cave paintings and that has probably speeded up since the invention of film and comics. Sequences, stages ... everything that follows in a linear way has filled and fills our definition of the 'narrative'.

It is true that words and images do have other possibilities. Images can last and words can be brief and to the point. It is especially photography that gave images a direct and touching impact. Publicity and propaganda have been quick to use this characteristic. Sentences and words can be lapidary, that means: short and affecting in their briefness. The term has been derived from the Latin word 'lapis', meaning 'stone'. Carving an inscription in a stone is so intensive that it is useful to avoid any superfluous effort and to search for the essential. In language this characteristic brings us in the domains of sayings, dictum, political slogans or even the oracle. Words that arouse thoughts, clearly or mysteriously, philosophical or ideological words, or holy or profane. In any case not narrative. Often they are a command or a prohibition, authoritarian or suggestive and encouraging. Anyhow it is always a miracle what a bunch of letters can do whether or not in combination with an image, a still taken from reality like in photography or film stills and caught at the right moment. Abstracted from the flux of facts and happenings, that need or need not being preserved as history, those images gain a certain veracity even if this veracity is a negation of another truth.

All this brings me to the peculiarity of Johan Clarysse's work. In his paintings he examines the power of two media that clearly have their own power and characteristics but that in combination are able to strengthen or undermine each other. Johan Clarysse shares the recent esthetical conviction that language and image never fall together, that they even don't need each other but that they are always in search for each other.

It is also important to mention here that letters sprang from images of which they are a simplification. The pictorial appears at the origin of our need for memory support and at the same time of our need for a channel that can pass on our thoughts and emotions while we are physically absent. Picture writing has not vanished. In our accelerated times it even plays an important part in the appearance of logotypes, symbols and emblems. In his paintings Johan Clarysse uses this phenomenon in such a way that the system of signs is questioned. Especially in his 'Confessiones' it is often present, probably because philosophy is the counterpart of clear signs. Not seldom a complete and sophisticated philosopher's work is reduced to the platitude of a key concept such as Nietzsche's 'Wille zur Macht', Sartre's 'engagement' or Derrida's 'deconstruction' ...

On another level the decomposing character of Johan Clarysse's pictorial language is united in series. A series presupposes common features or at least one of these: f.e. all tea cups or all tea cups with a broken ear. The artist always fancies an indistinct title for his series. That kind of 'darkness' belongs to the relationship between the visual art and the art critic's word and it avoids the didactic approach. Now if we should be able to find the link between the different series we could come close to the structure of Johan Clarysse's oeuvre. What is common is the finding that all human communication needs a form. Artists and philosophers taught us that this can even be silence or emptiness. A form is necessary when we want to generate meaning. But creating a form is also manipulating meaning. Anyhow this process does not stand an ending standstill. A monument at least reflects the active life it was erected for. Film would be a more appropriate means but unfortunately it doesn't outlast weather conditions that much. This tragedy is the theme of Johan Clarysse's work. Ancient Greeks such as Parmenides and Heraclites talked about 'being' and 'becoming'. Clarysse clearly shows this inevitable fate in human culture and he tries to avoid the old trap by introducing disturbing elements in his paintings. Take f.e. his 'Is evil of great importance to the good?' (2007 – 2009). Religious and political ideologies do not only exist in books and in the so called 'great stories' as Lyotard called them. They are also expressed in a physical way. What Nietzsche called the Christian hatred against the sensual body is uttered in the rites of repentance of

processions. Disguised as ghosts sect members whip up fear. But once the rituals have ended the same bodies are willing and joyful when they are photographed. Johan Clarysse is fascinated by this kind of ambiguity.

There is also his series 'Confessiones' (confessions) of 2008 – 2009. The word is often used when one talks about the writings of Augustine. For a philosopher the words 'admission' or 'acknowledgment' might be of better use. He shows his attitude towards the world. And also the reader as a follower, an opponent or an interpreter can recognize himself in this. Meaning is the meaning of philosophy.

Someone's philosophy is more than the meters or centimeters of his oeuvre on a bookshelf. It also sprang from a body. It arose out of the diseased body of Nietzsche that was not able to get in real touch with the female ... maybe or maybe not as a result of a far too opulent moustache full of soup residues? And how resistant was the body of the protesting May '68 Lyotard against the illusions of a revolutionary ideology? Which chemical process made Adorno decide to resign as a professor when two women students showed their naked breasts on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1969? This is anyhow something that I myself haven't experienced until now and it would certainly not encourage me to an early emeritus status (a reaction which is of course a matter of a different chemical programming). A little moustache under the nose – something of which Duchamp showed the non-verbal power in L.H.O.O.Q. – awakens thoughts on Hitler or Chaplin when we see the military portrait of Heidegger. In this way Johan Clarysse in his work provokes us to regard in an ironical way the discrepancy between the philosopher as a body and the philosopher as someone who produces ideas and opinions.

In 'Change is coming' (2010) physicality appears through special perspectives. The body is beyond question. Nature and culture are in a tense relation with each other. It is as in ethics where talking about 'Sein und Sollen' often looks like quarrelling on what is versus and how it should be. This kind of relation was expressed by Brecht in the phrase 'Erst kommt das Fressen dann die Moral'. In the series 'Suspicious portraits' (2011 – 2012) another partition is focussed on: ab/normal. What we could at least learn from structuralism is that this distinction has no natural but a cultural base. So here ideology rises again. Claude Lévi-Strauss spoke up for the so called 'savages'. Michel Foucault took the side of the outcasts in prisons and lunatic asylums. Starting from Freuds insights Jacques Lacan carried on the strive for the liberation of

people with neurotic disorders. At the same time anti-psychiatry made a plea to consider maladaptive social behaviour as normal. Inspired by photos of psychiatric patients and of his friends Johan Clarysse painted portraits and mixed them in his exposition thus instigating questions on (ab)normality. The normality of the fool and the foolishness of the normal are interwoven.

The same goes for another classical genre in the history of painting that is taken up in the series 'Suspicious landscapes' (20012 – 2013). We see nature and the landscape through cultural eyes. Landscapes are classified in categories that have little to do with nature. The Dutch philosopher Ton Lemaire described this in a clear way. He revealed the passage through time from the attitude of Augustine, who called for introspection, to that of Petrarca, who enjoyed the landscape from the top of Mont-Ventoux. Lemaire pointed this out as the shift from the medieval spirit to the exploratory attitude in modern times. The landscape is a screen for our cultural imagination but it also remains a mystery. Is it the work of the gods or pure coincidence? In the landscape Clarysse mirrors the ideological aspect.

The series 'Looking at (for) the invisible' puts an end to a series of series without ending it. It stays close to the method of phenomenology. In painting disguise and the hiding of tones are similar mechanisms. A painting shows the look of the other, of the artist. But it also lingers for the look of the spectator who must complete it. It is an endless process. Every painting is mixed with the subjectivity and the life experiences of a spectator and thus becomes a multiple, the sum of all looks and views that cannot escape from themselves.

In order to inspire my present contribution Johan Clarysse wrote in the post scriptum of a mail that he adressed to me on June 5<sup>th</sup> (5:31:33 p.m.): 'A possible interesting perspective might be my evolution from a painter who chooses to use images (see my previous book in which the painterly aspect is more in the background) to a painter who uses images and who by painting deconstructs these images in a subtle way.'

Well, I hope that I have succeeded in this text to show this, but whatever the text says one may not forget that the images themselves are that what really matters.

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