



Here is a text about  
Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys  
and their exhibition of new  
and recent work titled *Tram 3*.

*Terrifying* is one good way to describe the state of the world today. There is war and the extreme violence that comes with it. There is racism. Disease. Poverty. Natural disasters. There is the feeling of exposed powerlessness in the face of ruthless power. There is the rapist, the alcoholic parent, or the depressed loner and his machine gun.

I could go on.

But the way ordinary people behave in their everyday lives is just as terrifying. We conform and follow norms. We believe what we're told. We produce and we consume. We allow standardization to take over. We Google. We Facebook.



We're all so goddamn *obedient*. Even those who disagree or misbehave are part of the program—dissent is a necessary part of any dialectic.

In an article published in São Paulo's *O Diário* newspaper in 1966, Vilém Flusser writes,

“

I do not have free will; I am not free. I am a functionary of programs that are alien to me; I am an instrument. Not being free I do not surprise. I am predictable. History (as a flux of surprising and unpredictable happenings) has been overcome. I function within a post-historical situation, a messianic situation, I am in paradise.

The lack of surprise, the lack of an unprogrammed future is unbearable. Paradise is unbearable. It bores and nauseates me. I must rebel. Can I rebel? I believe I can. The sensation of boredom and nausea that the programs cause in me are experiential proof that I am not completely programmed.

”

**I know of no better  
description of the work  
of Jos de Gruyter &  
Harald Thys.**



Like Flusser, de Gruyter & Thys  
are critical of a contemporary  
subjectivity that has been beaten  
into submission by norms,  
conventions, and expectations.  
To them

,

Western civilization is drowning in the  
infinite regress of predictable stereotypes  
and ready-made behavior patterns.  
Driving around the well-organized and  
efficient towns of the Flemish Region or  
nearby Germany, for example, all they  
see is an over-regulated world where  
humans are almost redundant.

In response, they do what any  
good artist would do when  
faced with a problem

:

they make it worse.

*Tram 3*, the title of their exhibition, refers to one of the first tramlines in Antwerp, which links, in their words,

“the worst neighborhood to the worst neighborhood.”

It also refers to the Flemish right-wing party, whose members describe themselves as being on Tram 3 when they have 30 percent of the popular vote and therefore consider themselves to be on the right track — which is another way of linking something bad with something worse.

De Gruyter & Thys imagine their films, drawings, sculptures, and photographs as bearing witness to a present moment that's descended into a state of mechanized stupidity. As a result, the works often look a bit shocked, offended, disgusted, distant, and traumatized, but always poised and ready for more. All are speechless, even the characters in the videos, choosing to keep a distance from the language of humans and trusting only the friendship of objects. The artists call them *immobilized*

:

“You can see this occur in animals who are confronted with some bizarre opponent, another (bigger) animal, a human, or a combination of both.”

Their works are tragic, comic, and silent portraits of the human condition. They are *deadpan*, in all senses of the word: funny and blank at the same time. They taste like cardboard.



For example, the *White Elements* (2015) might once have been warm-blooded bodies, but they have become flattened into rigid sheets of steel. They are statues of stick figures, standing nine feet tall and eight millimeters thick, creating the silhouette of a body—or the bare minimum of one, like the pixilated approximation from an old Atari game.



Pencil drawings of faces (traced from anonymous images found online) are pinned to the top of each one, forming a fragile but persistent link to the world of humans but ultimately sabotaging the weight of a statue with the weightlessness of a cartoon.

Twenty-five drawings, *Public Transport* (2013), depict a range of trams or trolley cars that sit stubbornly still, preferring not to move. The people sitting on the trams seem to live entirely inside their own heads.

John Cage's famous phrase comes to mind

“I have nothing to say and I'm saying it”

but in the case of these drawings, and of the people and trams they contain, the opposite is true: they have something to say and they're not saying it.

Their newest video, *Die Aap van Bloemfontein* [*The Ape from Bloemfontein*] (2014), is another heavy blow of speechlessness and sheer eventlessness, but this time with such bright colors and intimate close-ups that it manages to also feel heartfelt and vulnerable. A voice, speaking in Afrikaans, narrates a story of surreal transformations (once again: found online):

Jaap the chicken  
was also a monkey,  
who had a computer,  
that was actually a  
lawnmower, on which  
he watched TV.

Set atop successive scenes of immobilized human figures, the text becomes the cartoon animation, performing exuberant flips and mutations, since the characters prove unable to do so. Instead, they look *stunned*, like ancient archeological treasures displaced into a new world.

Five framed watercolors  
accompany the film and  
are almost demonic in  
their simplicity.

It's rumored that Charlie Chaplin worried that cartoons would put him out of a job because they would always be better at performing feats of physical comedy. Any wooden spoon, for instance, could easily stand up, go for a walk, light up a cigarette, set itself on fire, burn to the ground, and get back up again, unharmed.

Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys might agree, but for different reasons. To them, objects, puppets, or animals will win because they are far more skilled at coping with boredom, vulgarity, embarrassment, and powerlessness. They don't suffer if they look ugly or if they come across as rude. They simply don't want or value the same things we do, and for de Gruyter and Thys

,

what people want matters much less than what objects want.



Laughter, Henri Bergson argued, is less about sympathy or kindness than it is about humiliation and domination. As such, humor is an irritant

;

a mixture of pain and joy that is capable of disarming logical and rational thought.

That space between pain and joy is brutal but still funny, populated by Louis C. K.'s jokes, Bruce Nauman's tortured clowns, or 4chan's /b/ board. It's a place of pathos and perversion that a civilized bourgeoisie can't digest. De Gruyter & Thys use it to help the powerless caricature the powerful.

In J. G. Ballard's novel *Millennium People* (2003), residents of a middle-class suburban town outside London pursue liberal educations and applaud civic responsibility. One character, Kay, sees it as a prison full of constraints

:

“Try getting drunk at a school speech day, or making a mildly racist joke at a charity dinner. Try letting your lawn grow and not painting your house for a few years. Try living with a teenage girl or having sex with your stepson. Try saying you believe in God and the Holy Trinity, or giving a free room to a refugee family from black Africa. Try taking a holiday in Benidorm, or driving a brand-new Cadillac with zebra upholstery. Try bad taste.”

**Jos de Gruyter &  
Harald Thys are  
drawn to all that  
society can't digest  
or domesticate — the  
people, ideas, places,  
experiences, gestures,  
habits, images, and  
objects that exist in the  
margins and that any  
mainstream culture  
will always find hard  
to swallow.**

**In a cultural context where change  
happens quickly and loudly, their  
work sits still and stays mute  
and warns of the exhaustion and  
immobility that comes with speed,  
efficiency, and communication.**

**\***

Jos de Gruyter (b. 1965, Geel, Belgium) and Harald Thys (b. 1966, Wilrijk, Belgium) live and work in Brussels and have been working together since 1987. Recent solo exhibitions include Kunsthalle Vienna (2014), M HKA, Antwerp (2013), Mu.ZEE, Oostende (2012), Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover (2011), Kunsthalle Basel (2010), Culturgest, Lisbon (2009), and Le Plateau, Paris (2007). Their work has also been included in the 2013 Venice Biennale and the 2008 Berlin Biennale, among many others. In the fall of 2015 they will have a major solo exhibition at Raven Row in London. This is their first exhibition in the United States.

*Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys: Tram 3* is on view at CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, in San Francisco, from January 21 through April 18, 2015, and at MoMA PS1, in New York, from May 3 through August 30, 2015. It is curated by Anthony Huberman, Director and Chief Curator at CCA Wattis Institute.

Erik Thys presents an organ performance at the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption (1111 Gough Street) on January 22, 2015.

*Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys: Tram 3* is made possible by the government of Flanders, Belgium, through Flanders House New York, with special thanks to Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie and Galerie Micheline Szwajcer.

The CCA Wattis Institute program is generously supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, and the Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation; by CCA Director's Fund contributors Patricia W. Fitzpatrick, Judy and Bill Timken, Ruth and Alan Stein, Robin Wright and Ian Reeves, and Laura Brugger and Ross Sappenfield; and by CCA's Curator's Forum. Phyllis C. Wattis was the generous founding patron.

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