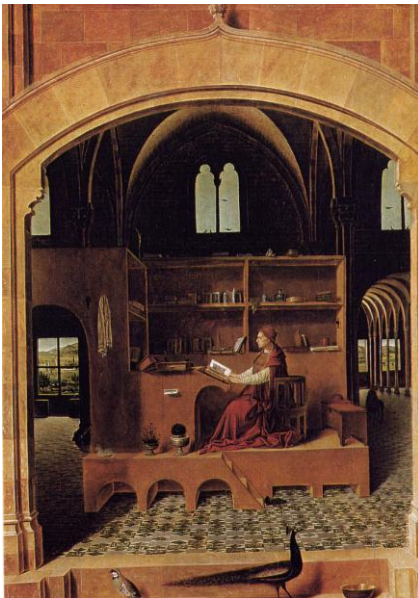


Hikikomori : urban studiolo

Hikikomori means in Japanese to turn yourself away by secluding yourself. Originally this term was used for persons who withdrew themselves to the countryside after their retirement. Recently this term became known in the West because of Japanese youngsters who withdraw themselves in their room and not leave it up to several years. Parents put food in front of the door three times a day. Communication happens only through a closed door and only on a very limited way. The youngsters are keeping themselves busy with computer, internet and games. Hikikomori and recognized as a social phobia, but because in Japanese society there is very little comprehension for different behaviour this is seen as a a-social conduct.

We connect the phenomenon Hikikomori and the renaissance studiolo (specifically as depicted in the painting 'San Girolamo nello studio' (ca. 1474), by Antonello da Messina (now in the National Gallery, London).

The similarities are obvious : one decides to live in a room, away from society. The room becomes an urban contemporary studiolo. In the painting of Antonella da Messina 'San Girolamo nello Studio' lives the principal character as well in his own world, an imaginary space of individual introspection.

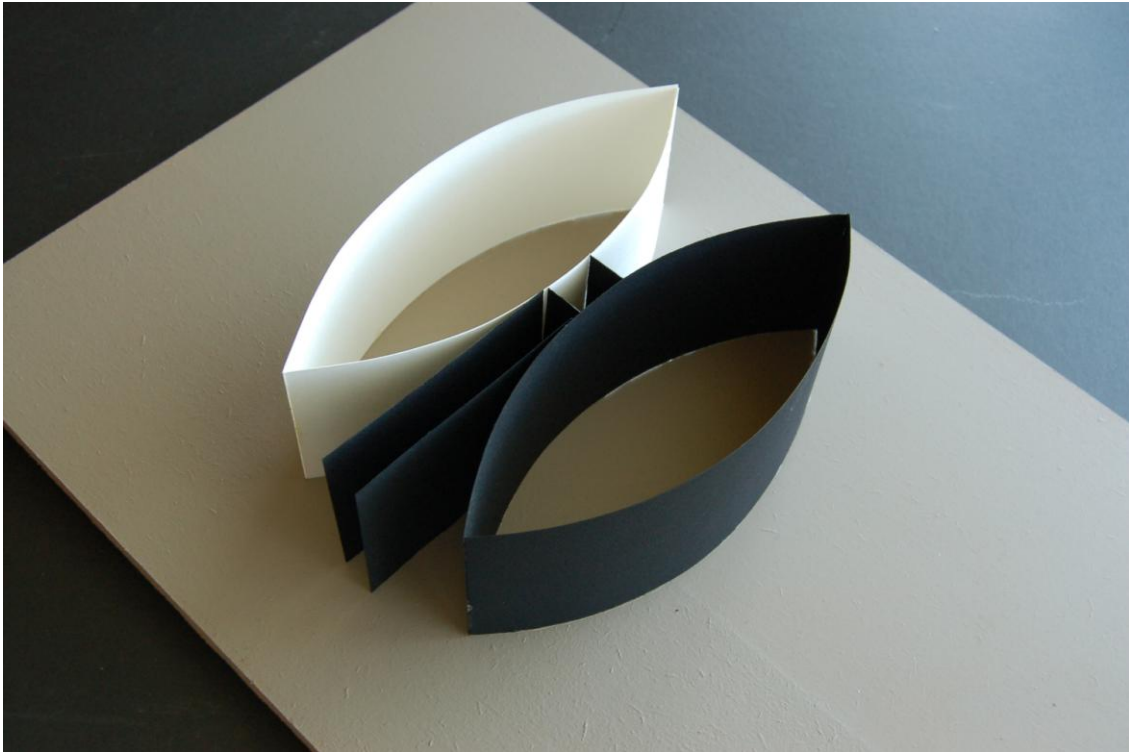


'San Girolamo nello studio' by Antonella da Messina & 'skin' installation Stefaan van Biesen 2004

Hikikomori project : a space of seclusion and meeting

In this project we aim to start a process of seclusion, creation, international exchange and displaying at the same time works of art.

A hikikomori is a space in which artists and scientists withdraw themselves to communicate with the outside world.



Model proposal of a Hikikomori installation in a building by Stefaan van Biesen.

The project reflects about communication and isolation in contemporary life in which there is a global and virtual communication network and at the same time worldwide isolation and loneliness. It reflects about technology, communication, knowledge and society. Unless the growing possibilities of communication we are getting only more separated. We seem more than ever to communicate, we are even more than ever permanently within reach and still we have a permanent feeling of impoverishment. It shows that how more we seem to connect how more we seem to alienate... 'We seem to converse but we say essentially little. It is like we protect ourselves with our own technology. It became an invisible shield, a cyberspace, a cocoon, a transparent harness that prevents us to dispose of our detachment... It is impossible to hide. We are permanently within reach and always traceable. But strangely enough we live with the illusion that we are unreachable, that we are cut from all the others which became a part of our personal universe...

Connected with this theme is the paradox that we live in a society where due to technology there is more knowledge and access to knowledge than there ever was in history, at the same time we're not able anymore to overview this knowledge, to integrate it in our personal lives. Knowledge became an untiable knot in to which

we look overwhelmed and powerless. The technological instruments of science became extremely complicated and developed so that they are capable to expand our knowledge to the world of the smallest but at the same time we are lost in a complete fragmented universe of information.

Integrated in the projects are as well following themes :

“Human interest” How do we look at society? On a passive way, do we see it as an obstacle, or as a complicated knot of ideas and facts? Are all people talking about the same thing if they talk about society? Does society make us indifferent? Are we immobilized by it?

“New Babylon” Although we think that we talk about the same, we are talking often about completely different things. This causes strange situations. The search for common social solutions leads to internal conflicts because of imperceptible different point of views. We seem to communicate, but we don't seem to understand each other.

“Lost touch with the world” ‘How do we look to our place in society? Do we experience it as a sort of anonymity, a feeling to be distant of the world, as a sign of alienation of everything and everybody? Do we feel ourselves cast away? Are we connected with others and with ideas that live in a social fabric? Do we think to be on our own created islands? And what if we experience more and more that our thoughts are further away from the image of society then we imagined?...’

“Human void”. A human void doesn't show emptiness. This apparent vacuity is deceiving, it is a 'spatial and mental' vacuum of thoughts and ideas, a non tangible mentally volume. In the quantum mechanics there is no such thing as 'emptiness': it is always filled with small, moveable, elemental parts, particles: (quarks, leptons ...).'. The human void' is an unspecified field, a metaphor for an invisible cluster of ideas that moves in time and space as an organic stream with potential to change ...

During the project we will build a hikikomori space or in an inside location or via a construction on a open outside location in a city connected with an installation referring to the painting 'San Girolamo nello studio' by Antonello da Messina in a historical inside location. Connecting past and present, old centre of the city with the urban life of the suburbs.

Inspiration and model of the hikomori is the renaissance 'studiolo', an intimate space within a space for reading, creating and storing/exhibiting books, art and scientific instruments, also a place for sitting and talking.

The hikikomori-space on an outside location will contain an empty library, a study/reading-space, a creation and meeting-exhibition space, sleeping facility for two persons, elementary bathroom and heating accomodation, electricity and internet-connection. It will be at the same time an open en closed place. A place of seclusion and observation of the inner self, but at the same time a place of meeting (with the public) and for showing works of art (made on location).

Walks

It will be as well a connection point for artistic walks we design through the city (from the center to the margin of the city). These walks have a strong inner dimension as well, they are designed as works of arts which lead to observation of the inner and outer. In the hikikomori-space the walkers can dwell, rest, meet each other and meet the artists.

In the project an interactive website is integrated. Via this website the human aspect of internet is questioned, a theme which is closely connected with the hikikomori. Communication is a fundamental basis in the vision of this project. We explicitly integrate the communication between the public among each other and as well with the public and the artists. In this sense we identify our artistic process with the musical process in which the direct and live interaction with the public is the essence of the artistic undertaking. Our project questions internet via which billions of people connect themselves in networks like Facebook or Netlog, but where the process of communication is reduced to a virtual experience. Internet is a medium in which communication as a living process does not exist.

In the Hikikomori-project artists and scientists will look for possibilities to transform (parts of the) virtual space of internet in human fields in which feelings and emotions can breed creating a fertile ground for communication. This is the continuation of the dynamics we initiated already with the Dürer connection.

One of the possible answer lies in the concept of Hikikomori which is based on seclusion as a condition to communicate.

Our answer departs from the idea of withdrawing information from internet, making it a place for contemplation. We create room for silence within internet. This undermines the essence itself of the medium which only exists thanks to a continuous collecting of information and avoiding all aspects of silence.

This idea will be studied and elaborated into online instruments by the several artists who will participate to Hikikomori.

A network of hikikomori spaces in Europe

The central hikikomori-space will be a hub and point of connection with several other hikikomori spaces throughout Europe. The hikikomori is a mental space. Hikikomoris can be realised in a room, a church, a museum, a library, an university or school, a cabin in a wood or in the mountains and even in an open space in nature that is defined as a hikikomori.

The only condition is that one or more artists, writers, philosophers decide to stay on the particular location for at least 24 hours, communicating with the outside world and other hikikomori-places in Europe through internet, meeting an audience and creating art on location in interaction with the public.

In cooperation with partner organisations there will be built hikikomori-spaces in UK, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Romania and Greece.

The audience can participate to the hikikomori-process by use of internet. The communication process is realised as well through live conversations with the public and with lectures, adapted to the location and the participation of the audience.

A selection of artists, writers and philosophers will travel through Europe and reside in central hikikomori-spaces in 9 countries. For the central hub we will contact writers, philosophers and artists.

This event is to become an international project in which the artists reshape the space in which they seclude themselves to artistic and art philosophical laboratories. This is an attempt to create an own universe of time and space. The artists are travellers.

An interactive and dynamic internet forum will be dedicated to this event with a site and associated pages on all networking sites.

The project is inspired by the renaissance Studiolo, an intimate place for reading, creating and storing -exhibiting books, art and scientific instruments, also a place for sitting and talking. It is as well referring explicitly to the painting 'San Girolamo nello studio' (ca. 1474), by Antonello da Messina (now in the National Gallery, London).

As part of this project we show the installation 'Skin': a reconstruction of an imaginary library, like the one exhibited in 'San Girolamo nello studio'. The hermit in the painting reads a book from his private library, a wooden construction, platform-like, in a Gothic space. There are a few eyeholes exposing a serene landscape. The reader is unaware of the setting. Birds wait on the doorstep of the building and sing in an unintelligible language. We made a reconstruction of this library, purposely putting the imaginary library into an actual one. A transit space, an open library where one can walk through without entering. A void space in and out of the world. At the same time, it is also a precise reconstruction of the painting's library. The artist makes it literally accessible.

The installation is completed with videos of various libraries, with stills of book walls and interiors of studies (the origin of the word is studiolo) of writers, artists and philosophers. The books are visible but untouchable. The books are present as bearers of knowledge, with an invitation to watch, not to read. The piece communicates a wordless experience, emphasized by large monochrome canvasses. Colours, not words, interacts with the visitor.

This installation will be exhibited in an interior historical location in the old city as connection with the contemporary Hikikomori-space outside (in the suburbs). It also makes a physical link between past and present.