

[the imaginairy library]

[THE LIBRARY AS PERCEIVED BY THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST]

Contemporary art is fascinated and in awe by the library-as-a-shrine, as a mausoleum. Stefaan Van Biesens installation 'SKIN' incorporates this form of watching. The piece consists out of a reconstruction of an imaginary library, like the one shown in 'San Girolamo nello studio' (ca. 1474), a painting by Antonello da Messina, guarded in the National Gallery, London.

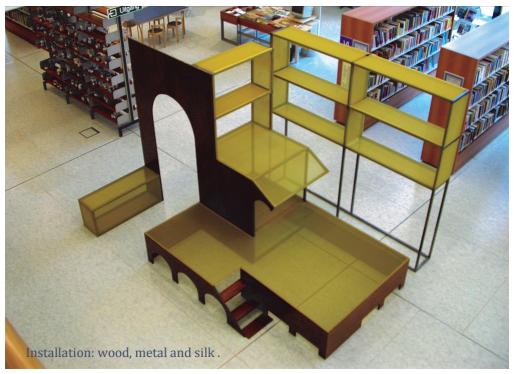


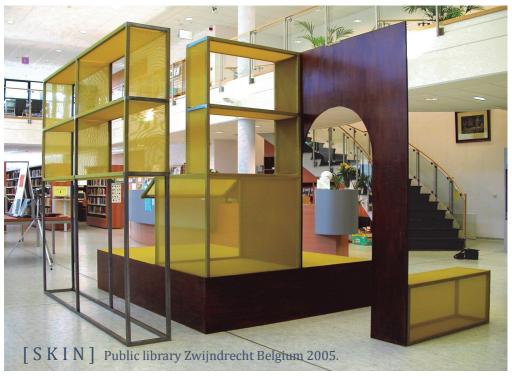


The hermit in the painting reads a book from his private library, a wooden construction, platform-like, in a Gothic space. There are a few eyeholes exposing a serene landscape. The reader is unaware of the setting. Birds wait on the doorstep of the building and sing in an unintelligible language. Van Biesen 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 WORLD OF THE RECLUSE

Stefaan van Biesen's philosophical path

Many will have looked at the painting 'San Girolamo nello studio" by Antonello da Messina in the London National Gallery with certain amazement and questioning eyes. San Girolamo is better known as Hieronymus. The saint is mostly represented as a hermit who lives in poor circumstances. Let's think about the famous painting of Jheronimus Bosch in the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent. We see the recluse who has thrown himself in front of the crucifix, only dressed in his undergarment. Behind him, a serene and most beautiful landscape unfolds, to which the hermit pays no attention.



VOLUNTARY SECLUSION

Antonello da Messina pictures the recluse in his study, an open construction in which the church father withdraws. This wooden construction is part of a bigger picture, an imaginary, gothic room which could refer to a church as well as to a palazzo. Slender pillars and vistas with a view on the landscape, only meant for the viewer, not for the character who has withdrawn in that space. He has retired voluntarily in a firmly structured studio with only walls. The studio is somewhat elevated above the world, it is like a stage.



The learned church father is reading a book and is surrounded by several objects. He observes the world through educational material, not through direct observation. He observes the world in which he has retired. Let's not forget that the man is a monk and a scholar who is responsible for the Latin standard version of the bible, the Vulgate. His cardinalate was assigned posthumously, therefore the red mantle and cardinal's hat, attributes with which he is mostly represented.

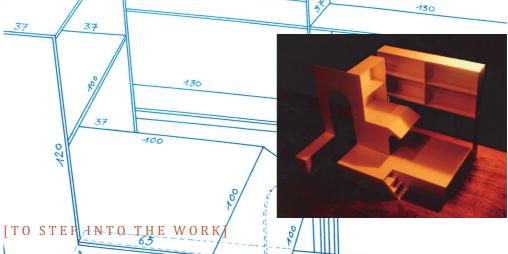


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The imaginary space is something that has been occupying him for years now. The painting of the Messina is a piece of art that repeatedly stood out. The working space of Girolamo is an open place, it is an imaginary room which can only be closed for the eye of the other by thought. It is a place in which you are "inside" as well as "outside".

It is an orchestrated space, a transit zone, a place of being positioned both in and out of the world. The observer is forced into the role of peeping Tom, he can observe without participating. It is a world, which is not or cannot be his.

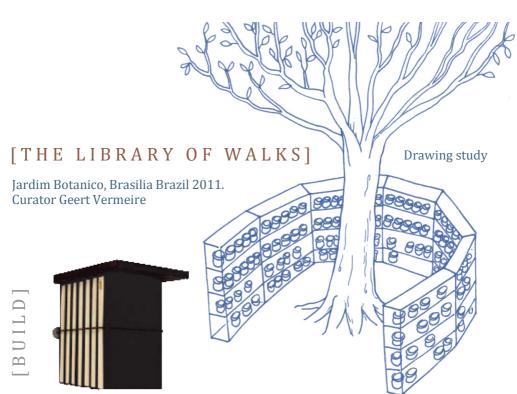


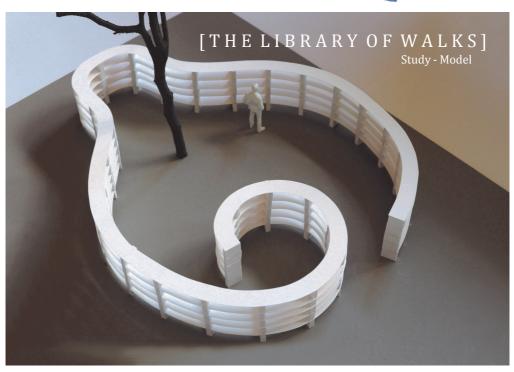
Stefaan van Biesen titles his project skin-hurd- peau-pelle'. He wants to reflect the layers that are hidden in his work. The project exists of a precise wooden reconstruction of the studio, which is represented on the painting. The reconstruction is stripped of every anecdotic style, he shows the study it three-dimensional and pure, naked form, so it can really function like that. It can be entered by everyone and can be filled out one way or another or used as mental space.

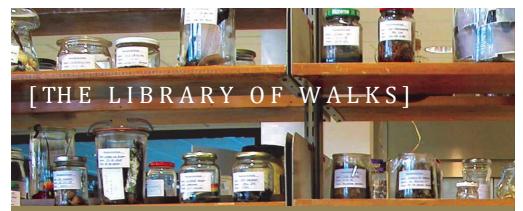
The data visible on the painting are being respected accurately, however, the completion of the non-visible parts remains. The gate on the left-hand side is being completed. The back is a different story. In this the artist is not tied, and he foresees a flexible installation with tables and videos. On the video screens shootings can be seen of some acquaintances' and friends' libraries. The book holds all the knowledge, and is one of the means to explore the world.

D A A N R A U [Openbaar Kunstbezit, June 2002].









The installation is completed by a 'walking library'. A few bookcases are placed amidst the identical cases of the guest library.



The artist invited a hundred people to fill these cases with a worthwhile moment of a walking journey captured in a glass jar. This library of experience dialogues with the thousands of (other) books. The glass books mirror their concealed forms of experience.



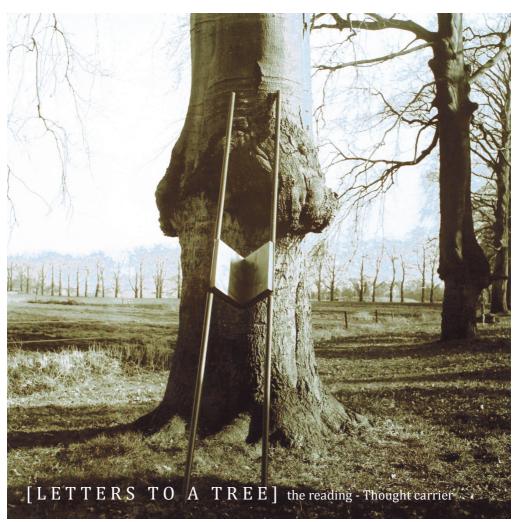


Photo: Joris Herregods 1992.

[Book - Beuk - Buch]



'Letters to a tree' by Stefaan Van Biesen (1996-1997) puts fundamental questions about communication and language into words. Experiencing nature cannot be expressed. Van Biesen's 38 letters constitute an intimate, vulnerable library, safely put and closed away in a case, a shrine. Only the image remains. What comprises the existence of language then? In these pieces the public is depraved of the certainty of text, they are drawn to themselves with the question 'Who am I without language? What does a wordless world mean to me?' The pieces of Van Biesen are libraries of the imagination. They put vulnerable words in a shrine. They take words for butterflies, strong in their flight, fragile in their rest.

GEERT VERMEIRE [Bibliotheek- & Archiefgids, nr. 4, August 2003.]

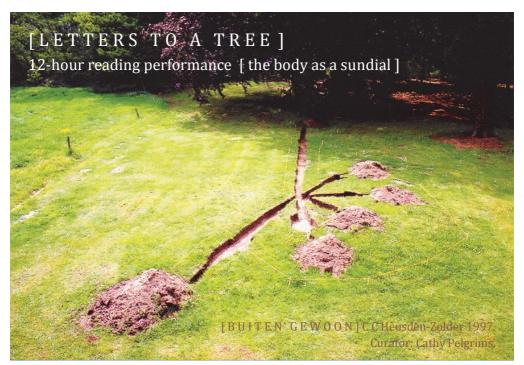


Photo: Jan Kempenaers.

