Animal Instinct
Cecilie Carlsen & Max Postma
10.09.26 – 04.10.26
Spaanse Gallery

Tenir la chandelle

Many have died on an ornamental hill called 'preliminary remarks'. But there is hubris in paying attention to such italics, too. Etc. A prior draft included speculations here about how Animal Instinct, *this first collaborative presentation of Cecilie Carlsen & Max Postma, complicates* or *even traps writing for it. The Ark might have left that arc behind, perhaps for a more crucial argument. If* Animal Instinct *entertains reversions or restrictions* (the problem of invoking the 'primal' as a positive negative might be exactly the point), I am inclined to consider these room figures or figurations in terms of textual confines: do I describe, circumscribe, or inscribe, maybe even ascribe them. Only the distinction is relevant.*

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This text is written over a so-called 'figure poem' from one of the circulating 9th century manuscripts of *De laudibus sanctae crucis* by Hrabanus Maurus. "Le célèbre intellectuel carolingien", as the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, where I claimed it from, has a label introduce him. To borrow more of the BnF's unapologetic French: "Cette œuvre de haute voltige offre une suite de 28 poèmes figurés structurés autour du signe matriciel de la croix. Les figures qui y sont intégrées, ici le Christ en croix, renferment des vers pouvant être lus indépendamment du poème principal, tout en s'articulant avec lui." The poem I claim to write this on lets me disgrace its metrical puzzle, its polychrome grid, either ignore or explore the hierarchy of multiple figurative readings it projects in, beyond, and across this Christ, crucified on an absent cross. Does that make him suspended on the page.** In any case, if the poem (and whatever this claims to add to it) doesn't count as covering***, he is naked except for the red loincloth, the purdah separating artificial from real crucifixions. I meant to be opportunistically secular & skip the devotional word vs. flesh framework**** though this historically informed stripping might not be entirely irrelevant. Spaanse Gallery, I would write underneath this loincloth, houses an equally pseudo-nudity. For context: while Cecilie Carlsen & Max Postma are not an artist duo, they are an artist couple. Dissecting the parallels of their trajectories and practices is not the objective here but it is worth noting that they share a background in performance art. Especially since this exhibition seems to stage *our exclusion from* a collaborative performance. Automatically bringing to mind the proto-reverse stenciling in prehistoric caves, this implied performance also seems to restage a classical/classic origin myth about art, painting in particular. (I'm risking the kitsch of continuing on the back of the figure poem to address it.) Painting, Pliny the Elder still likes to make us think or at least reference, originates in "tracing an outline round a man's shadow". A narrative less grounded in certainty than consensus, which is why Pliny varies in his crediting of the gesture. The most narrativized of his attributions tells of a Corinthian woman "who was in love with a young man; and she, when he was going abroad, drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by a lamp."***** While Spaanse Gallery doesn't adhere to shadow-free quality standards, settling for the limits of one another's shadow image on a

wall is not why we're here. Carlsen & Postma exchange the mimetic drive, paradoxically facilitated by the right shadow (enter Plato and Narcissus), for an instrumentalization of the body itself, the physical becoming an obstacle to and therefore distorter of its silhouetting, the aesthetics of possession and submission complicated by the untenability of a traditional artist/model distinction. Carlsen & Postma cosign Carlsen negatively fixing 'Postma' on all fours, or kneeling in a way that wouldn't figure in a Maurus poem. The myth around a shadow becomes the myth's shadow side. This, however (and don't forget these are threshold thoughts), strikes me less as a conspiracy of representing or (spray-)painting than a conspiracy against exhibiting, given the spectacular guise of faux-exhibitionism. One can be cagey in a cage. Which is a secret kept between the walls and this loincloth of a text.

* The restrictiveness, after all, registers a ‘reaction'. We owe this collaboration to the sensual programming of Steve Ozel, the artist behind Spaanse Gallery. (*Animal Instinct* coincides with the 'Gallery' turning 1. Carlsen & Postma were around from the start. The candle in the title doubles as a birthday candle.)

** This implication carries another absent cross: whether I want to state the obvious, that Maurus composed on parchment, i.e. animal skin.

*** Maurus seems to think that only the entire universe can distract from imagining Christ's member: VESTE QVIDEM PARVA HIC TEGITVR QVI CONTINET ASTRA, ATQVE SOLVM PALMO CLAVDIT VBIQVE SVO or "A small garment covers He who holds the stars together, and his palm encloses the entire earth."

**** To the devotional I prefer the dedicational framework. Maurus ingeniously dedicated the poetic corpus to Louis the Pious, co-emperor of the Carolingian empire. (Brilliant as Maurus is, he's no Optatian, his 4th century model, who used figure poems to charm emperor Constantine into nullifying his exile.) Max might be pleased if I (re)dedicate this text, not to the Belgian monarchs as such, but to every single reproduction of their state portraits in state museums?

***** The neoclassicists and romantics loved to ignore that Pliny actually related the story to the invention of sculptural representations. His emphasis is on the woman's *father*, who produces a clay portrait on the basis of her painterly gesture. Seeking negative volumes rather than negative images, Carlsen & Postma kill both father and daughter. This later, iconographic alternative of the story, btw, is probably as zoological as this text will get:



Laurentius Haechtanus, *Mikrokosmos. Parvus Mundus*, Antwerp, apud Gerardum de Iode, 1579, emblem 72

P.S.

The tree escaped the text, but that’s another myth.

Nikolaas Verstraeten