



Fig. 01: Mr. Bean, 'Mr. Bean's Holiday', 2007.

## 'Arm Brussel' and 'Manneke Pis'

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Urban objects, a thing theory for urbanism

### Abstract

My PhD research is about *Urban objects, a Thing Theory for urbanism*. Thing Theory is situated in the domain of Material cultural studies and was initially developed by Bill Brown (2001)<sup>1</sup> as a study of objects in literature. The title refers to two books of Geert van Istendael and by the act of combining both I inscribe them in Baudelaire's tradition of observing the city of Brussels 'through objects'. This paper explores through the object of a fountain and Manneke Pis his act of watering on the city the importance of this naked urban thing. Only 58 centimeters high he owns more than a thousand of costumes. Dressed in his architect's suite he is and remains a peeing '*Brusseleer*' on the center of Europe. Some see in his jets of water spurting an abundance of knowledge and source of wisdom that incarnates a particularly Belgian way of thinking. A '*Don Quixote*' attacking the '*F\*heads*'?

### Keywords

Thing Theory, Speculative Realism, urban objects, manneke pis, Belgium



Fig .02: Michiel Mosijn, 'Plassende putto en putti met een karaf', 1640 – 1655.

<sup>1</sup> Brown, Bill, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (2001) 1-22.



Fig. 03 : Carmaux, Tarn, 'Campagne de sensibilisation : uriner sous la douche pour économiser l'eau', 2016.

## ARM BRUSSEL

The name Brussels comes from the old Dutch *Bruocsella* meaning marsh (*bruoc*) and home (*sella*) or home in the marsh. In his book *Poor Brussels* (Arm Brussel 1992)<sup>2</sup> Geert van Istendael describes how in his '*Bruoscelle*' the water in the form of the once so specific streams, ditches and lakes disappeared. He speaks about the construction of the canals and docks, the ornamental ponds and the overarched Zenne, who, even in the underground, no longer recognizes his own streambed. In the seventeenth century the relationship between land, weather and state of mind was explained by *the theory of the humours*. A person's physical and mental condition was believed to be determined by the balance between the four major fluids (*humours*) of the body. In the Low Countries, by an excess of water, both in the ground and falling from the sky, the '*waterlander*' his balance was in disharmony from birth. What we discover in the book *Poor Belgium* (Pauvre Belgique 1864 - )<sup>3</sup> is how Baudelaire's unhappiness is projected on the city of Brussels and how he tries to explain his state of mind as a direct consequence of the vulgarity of the city and his inhabitants. *Manneke Pis* and *Le Cracheur* (The Spitting) are for him the embodiment of this vulgarity in the form of two fountains that he (re)baptized in *Le Pisseur* (The Peeing) and *Le Vomisseur* (The Vomiting). Brussels and urine is a theme that comes back in Baudelaire's description of Faro, the popular beer brewed with the water of the Zenne, '*as a beer twice drunk*'.<sup>4</sup> '*Half a century before him, Alexandre Dumas had taken a similar view, contrasting the brazenness of the fountain with the uncharacteristic modesty of Parisians, who at least turn their back when urinating*'<sup>5</sup> In Geert van Istendael his biography on *Manneke Pis* (2010)<sup>6</sup> we discover a different relation to his compatriot, he explores the eventful history of the first citizen of Brussels, professor in elegance, decorated and dressed by Kings, Universities and an international community of citizens.

<sup>2</sup> van Istendael, Geert, '*Arm Brussel*' (Amsterdam/Antwerpen, Atlas, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Baudelaire, Charles, '*Pauvre Belgique*' in '*Œuvres complètes*' (Paris, Pléiade, 1961) 1314 - 1457

<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire, Charles, '*Opinion de M. Hetzel sur le Faro*' (1908) in '*Œuvres complètes*' (Paris, Pléiade, 1961) 1462.

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, Catherine, '*Regarding Manneken Pis: Culture, Celebration and Conflict in Brussels*' (London, Routledge, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> van Istendael, Geert, '*Manneke Pis*' (Amsterdam/Antwerpen, Atlas, 2010).

## AN OBJECT

Water, essential element for all living things, there's too much of it, or too little. It descends from heaven, wells up from the ground and carves itself a way through the land until the sea. Brussels was built on a spongy and wet swamp. In the fourteenth century three underground pipes were built to feed the fountains in the city. A network of impressive fountains, together with reservoirs and wells, played an essential role in the former distribution of drinking water in the city. The city archive possesses documents that mention a public fountain decorated with a stone statue representing a boy who pees on the actual place of manneke pis that goes back to 1401. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the statue became more and more prominent in the experience and imagination of the city. In 1695 it was perceived as a survivor of Louis XIV his bombardment of Brussels and in 1747 Louis XV gives him the costume of a nobleman of the Order of Saint Louis. Manneken Pis became a precious *Thing* with a growing fame. For big events this naked boy is dressed in luxurious clothes. When in the 19th century he was disconnected from the urban water distribution network he becomes a pissing sculpture, an urban legend. On old postcards is discoverable how we live our life with it. How it becomes a thing in winter. How we imagine it and how it is. How we admire its smallness and would like to scale it up. Through a whole imaginary around the sculpture it gets the status of a symbol of resistance against anything and everything. Rome has his Treviso Fountain and Brussels his Manneke Pis. A museum was erected in his name, he has a feminine alter ego *Jeanneke Pis* (1985) and there is the dog *Zinneke Pis* (1998). He is omnipresent in tourist souvenir shops and nominated among world's most *overhyped tourist traps*. In 2009 *Pro Bruxsel* (re)uses the image that associates him with the essence of the city and it residents in a Magrittian way for political purposes (image 5). From time to time this urban object is front page news like in March 2019 when a leak in his water support system is detected. Apparently he pees up to 1500 liters of drinking water on a daily base and this during several years. Today the water runs in a closed circuit, his contribution to the Brussels environment, and on 1 June 2019 this circuit was filled with milk to denounce the European dumping prices for that substance. On the blog of Tarn Carmaux<sup>7</sup> we find how we, like Manneke Pis, could contribute to the global waste of water by urinating in the shower.

## A THING

Putto and putti are almost always masculine and usually naked plump children's figure's, the name comes from the Italian word and was originally a (bad) name for a little boy from the neutral Latin *putus* (derived from *putare* clean). In 1619 the city asked the sculptor Hieronymus Duquesnoy the Elder to make a look like bronze statue the ancient example of the stone *putti pisciatori*. In the seventeenth century this *spiritelli d'acqua* was not an unconventional theme in art (picture 2) and was an allegory for good health and the purity of water. In his etching of *the pissing farmer's wife* and *the pissing man* (1631) Rembrandt's shows us his talent for capturing images of everyday life in the streets of Holland. When James Ensor makes his etching of *the pissier* (1887) we discover an explicit satirical and constructed image that represents a figure (Ensor?) peeing on a wall with a drawing of an artist at work in a childish drawing style with above the inscription '*Ensor is crazy*'. When at the

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<sup>7</sup> Carmaux, Tarn <http://gravos.blogspot.com/2016/06/prendre-soins-de-la-planete-en-pissant.html>juin, accessed 1 June 2019.

end of the 19th century, the toilet made his appearance, peeing became a private affair, a potentially shameful activity and representing it in public became taboo. In 1917 Duchamps declares a standard and new urinal, a piece of art and gives it the title *fountain*. When he exposes his '*found object*' it is considered as '*not done*', it is interpreted as anti-bourgeois and creates a scandal. Our little innocent Putto received a status update perceived as a provocative, left-handed exhibitionist who sticks his belly forward and smiles like the Mona Lisa. His *jet d'eau* evolved from an association with pure water to pee. By his act of *watering* he's in a permanent state of violating the good morals. He is *Peeing on*, the artist Phil Gable (2018) inverts this logic when (illegally) he puts tiny statuettes of the President in the streets and parks of Brooklyn with a sign that reads *Pee on Me*. Passers-by, people and dogs, are invited to relieve themselves of any pent up anger or frustration against the president. Under the title *May You Live In Interesting times* the actual art biennale in Venice (2019) focuses on artists who challenges the existing habits of thought and open up our readings of objects and images, gestures and situations. In the Belgian pavilion Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys are sending with their *MONDO CANE* Europe's idealized archetypes to jail. In their exhibition we discover a disturbing world of dressed up mannequins that take the piss out of European idealism. Kate Brown<sup>8</sup> makes the parallel with the historic emblem of Belgium and best-known landmark in Brussels Manneke Pis. *Menneken-Pist*, *Manneke* or *Menneke* is a Belgian variant of the Middle Dutch *mannekijn*, which produced the French word *mannequin*: initially the word refers to a figurine or *mannequin*, then to a characterless person, and finally to a living person. For Kate Brown the Thingness of Manneken Pis taps into a particularly Belgian way of thinking. The Guardian of 26 March 2019 states '*For four centuries the celebrated Manneken Pis has embodied the laissez-faire culture of the Belgians*'. Geert van Istendael would prefer the notion '*tolerance*', that for him is a great *Thing* that embraces modest beauty and shy ugliness. His Manneken Pis is the emblem of the rebellious spirit of Brussels.

## THE FOUNTAIN(HEAD)

When the Salon d'automne (1922) asked Le Corbusier to design a fountain he drew a city for three million inhabitants. A fountainhead is a source (fountain) of knowledge and Corbusier's ego is the fountainhead of what he sees as human progress. *The Fountainhead* (1943)<sup>9</sup> is a 679 page novel written in dialogues by Ayn Rad and was in 1943 adapted for a film. It is considered as the most popular story ever written about an architect. The plot opposes two young architects; the novel's protagonist Howard Roark as an innovative, purposeful, intelligent, passionate architect and his former classmate Peter Keating. He, Roark, sees himself as innovative and refuses to compromise his ideas and calls Keating a *second-hander* who permanently adapt his designs to the will of his clients. The book explores the creative potential of man and is a passionate plea for the individualism and selfishness of the creative person. In the dialogues Howard Roark states the one one-liner after the other like: '*(The creator) held his truth above all things and against all men.*' or '*The creator serves nothing and no one. He lives for himself.*' Roark is convinced that neither the general public nor his clients understand the essence, meaning and implication of his designs and that there opinions and wishes couldn't be a source (fountain) of knowledge and, like Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, his ego is the true fountainhead of human progress.

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, Kate, '*Peer inside the Prison of the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and See a Disturbing World of Mannequins and Old Wite People*', <http://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/Belgian-pavilion-venice-1536859>, accessed 7 May 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Rad, Ayn, '*The Fountainhead*', (London, Harper Collins Publishers, 1994).

## THE F\*HEADS

The word *F\*heads* was created by Lance Hosey<sup>10</sup> to designate the Howard Roark's of our time. In his catalogue<sup>11</sup> of the exhibition *referentie OMA* (Rotterdam 1995) Bernard Colenbrander calls Rem Koolhaas the latest reincarnation of Howard Roark. Koolhaas made his reputation not with a building but with a book. As a superarchitect he travels as much as a supermodel. He is considered as one of the great thinkers of our time, a thinking architect who tends to challenge everything (even his clients). For him it is all about developing a certain intelligent approach to the world. With his debut *Delirious New York* (1978) and his thoughts, realized and (un)realized projects scattered over the 1345 pages of his new bible for architects called *S,M,L,XL* (1995), the once filmmaker, Rem Koolhaas became a reference and a fountainhead. An inspiration source for several generations of architects and urbanists. Ron Kaal<sup>12</sup> starts with the lemma 'Arrogant' in *S,M,L,XL* where Rem Koolhaas derived the definition from Frank Lloyd Wright; 'Today you are classified as arrogant if you refuse to sell yourself.' to develop his analogy between Koolhaas and Roark. He notes that Koolhaas rarely throws anything away with the exception of his project *Byzantium* in Amsterdam, the only building that has gradually disappeared from its oeuvre list. 'I destroyed it because I did not choose to let it exist' is what Rem did in the words of Howard Roark. His innovative ideas and creative proposal was slowly but surely undressed by the requirements of the pesky clients who diluted the project into mediocrity. The realization of his *vertigo* was a failure and the project became a nightmare. Koolhaas asked his 15 year old son, the actual filmmaker Toon Koolhaas, to help by making a comic strip on the making of *Byzantium* that captures 'the eternal struggle – calls it good versus bad'. In the drawings of the 24-hour work day at the OMA office we can read the credo 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. For Kaal *Byzantium* was probably the moment that Koolhaas decided that something like this would not happen to him a second time and would have thought that he had rather not build than this nonsense. From now on he will be 'awkward', 'rigid', and 'stubborn' to protect his vision. It is the architect's job to persist. Since then, every project has been a new venture in which he tries to reformulate the essence of architecture after three thousand years of practice.



Fig. 04: OMA, 'European Flag', 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Hosey, Lane, 'The Fountainhead: Everything That's Wrong with Architecture' Metropolis magazine October 11, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Colenbrander, Bernard, 'referentie OMA' (Rotterdam, NAI, 1995) 4.

<sup>12</sup> Kaal, Ron, 'Rem Koolhaas, de Tom Poes onder de architecten' in De Gids. Jaargang 168 (2005) 867-877.



Fig. 05: Pro Brussel , 'BruXsel Forum', 2009.

## TABOO

Fascinated by its urban legends, sometimes, designers and researchers give this to popular and overlooked manneke pis some attention. In his funny and serious text<sup>13</sup> Willem Jan Neutelings compares this 'naked boy' on a Brussels street corner with what he calls '*naked architecture*'. He expresses his fascination for the extensive wardrobe with decorative costumes who remain him the long architectural tradition to decorate. After an obsession of the ('honest' and 'democratic') Dutch modernism with showing the inside on the outside and transparence '**DECORATION**' is a taboo among architects. Where famous fashion designers like Ann Demeulemeester (2001) and Gérard Wathélet (2008) are still making creations to dress our naked Maria sculptures in our cathedrals and churches dressing Manneke Pis is still considered to decorative and folkloric to be taken seriously unless you are Jean Paul Gaultier (2015). For Neutelings decoration becomes again relevant, it adds the layer of composition that, as a suit, charges the building with meaning. We have to mention that just before writing his article on Manneken Pis he wrote '*Team 10 after the Sex Pistols*'<sup>14</sup> where he acknowledges the impact of Team X. Who, for the 1968 Triennale of Milan, focused on; 'invisible ornaments', 'urban ornament', 'the city and its transformations by events' (Alison and Peter Smithson) and 'the importance of the small scale', 'minor objects', 'non-serial production', 'imaginative freedom and fantasy' (Aldo Van Eyck).

The second taboo of architecture on which there is a collective obligation to remain silent, is what I would call **POOR ARCHITECT**. The Fountainhead film and the image of the star architect had and still has an immense impact on the public perception of architects and architecture, as on architects themselves. Inspired by this idealistic image of the F\*heads legions of young people who wanting to become architects. To experience their 24-hour work day byzantium moment of torturous labor those poor architects accept working under the tariffs, or even for free. This desire for personal freedom or worse denying the architect's right to self-expression is for Frank Gehry still like denying democracy. The Poor Architect taboo is incarnated by Howard Roark and represents everything that's wrong with our profession. The agenda for the future of the world is different, we are faced with the task to reinvent and demonstrate the relevance of our profession for the society and the

<sup>13</sup> Neutelings, Willem Jan, '*TATTOO, DECORATIE EN TABOE*', Archis, 4-2000.

<sup>14</sup> Neutelings, Willem Jan, '*Team X After the Sex Pistols*', Archis, 8-1999 79-80.

planet. To develop *'a certain intelligent approach to the world'* it would be better to focus on or everyday nuanced live instead of looking up to the shining stars.

## SPECULATION

Following the Nice Summit in May 2001, Romano Prodi and Guy Verhofstadt organized two brainstorming sessions with some of Europe's most prominent thinkers and cultural professionals to generate debate about the future of Brussels and the EU. Umberto Eco and Rem Koolhaas introduced the debate on the European capital among the participants was Geert van Istendael. During his life, Eco, focused on the shared history and shared culture as an immovable foundation on which cooperation can and should be built. His hopeful vision for and emphasis on the 'soft' cultural aspects of what the European Union could be was quite different from Rem Koolhaas. Who made graphic material to present his double approach for the capital of Europe. The first is through communication, both verbal and visual. The second through the physical substance and buildings of the European Institutions. *'The buildings of the EU adds no meaning to the European project, expresses the temporary status of Brussels as capital of Europe and are indifferent for quality'*. Geert van Istendael, invited for the debate, added different and harsher explanations, dealing with 'urban speculation'. On his presentation Koolhaas advocated a barcode to act as symbol for the EU, an apparent allusion to the consumerist dimension of European integration. As a reaction on this presentation and a statement against the architectural pomp that capital cities often inspire, Umberto Eco argued that Manneken-Pis was the most appropriate symbol. In the *Final Report on BRUSSELS, CAPITAL OF EUROPE*<sup>15</sup> we read that the soft cultural aspects emphasized by Eco were often perceived as opposed to the hard urban planning ones emphasized by Koolhaas. But that Brussels as 'the capital of Europe' has the capacity to mix (*un compromis à la belge*) those ingredients. More buildings, monuments and physical objects would mean more cultural networking functions and Geert van Istendael would add: more urban speculation end demolition in his bureaucratic and megalomaniac Brussels who cannot get enough of its role as a capital of something, no matter what. It should therefore not surprise us that Brussels is treated as a capital which squeaks and sighs already under the weight of the European institutions.

## REALISM

Architecture is a profession trained to put things together, not to take them apart. But for the exhibition *Elements of Architecture* in his 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale *Fundamentals* Rem Koolhaas defines 15 major elements of architecture as the fundamentals of our buildings: the floor, the wall, the ceiling, the roof, the door, the window, the façade, the balcony, the corridor, the fireplace, the toilet, the stair, the escalator, the elevator and the ramp. They are used anywhere, anytime and by any architect but he, Rem Koolhaas, looks to them under a microscope to discover how they evolved true different cultures, collided with modernity and are starting to mutate in the digital age. In the exhibition we come across toilets and floors that record health and diagnose illness and start to realize those elements, which were for thousands of year's mute, now collect information, develop a degree of digital consciousness and are constantly anticipating on and communicating with each other and us. To respond to the sub-theme *Absorbing Modernity* of the

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<sup>15</sup> The Group of Policy Advisers (GOPA), *'BRUSSELS, CAPITAL OF EUROPE Final Report'*, (Brussel, European Commission, 2001)

theme *Fundamentals* developed by the biennale curator Rem Koolhaas the curators of the Belgian Pavilion visited 260 homes around the country. The main idea of *Interiors. Notes and Figures* was 'if we look at architecture from the inside not from the outside we can see new things'<sup>16</sup> what they discovered behind the permanence of the facades was the unknown land of the Belgian domestic landscape. Inside the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale the records and analyzes of the domestic landscapes and its process of transformation is presented as both a spatial organization and a visual relationship. Back to basics, for Rem, and back to reality for the Belgian clique. For them it is a question of seeing beyond the form, to define the attitude, the belgitude. The Belgians, object of all fantasies, the very one who, according to legend, takes care of bread slices to feed Canard WC. The Belgian, yes, this Belgian. The Belgian thinks differently about *Elements of architecture* with a focus on appropriation and those little details that make the difference. He explores the limit of the real and it's possible.

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<sup>16</sup> Frearson, Amy, 'Belgian Pavilion at Venice biennale exhibits components of modern domestic interiors', <https://www.dezeen.com/2014/06/09/belgian-pavilion-venice-architecture-biennale-2014/>, accessed 9 June 2014.