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**PRESS FILE

PRIMEVAL ATOM – by Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves**

**28 January 2022**

**As of 28 January, a new permanent work of art will have taken its rightful place in Leuven’s city centre. Christened *Primeval Atom*, the piece is a tribute to Georges Lemaître – former University of Leuven professor and father of the Big Bang Theory. It was created by the French artist Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves.**

On 28 January, *Primeval Atom,* a permanent piece by the French artist Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves and tribute to Georges Lemaître (Charleroi, 1894-1966) – father of the Big Bang Theory, priest, astronomer, and University of Leuven professor of physics – will be inaugurated.

Georges Lemaître introduced the first model of a non-static, ever-expanding universe in the early 1930s. This model depicted a universe that consisted of a single ‘primeval atom’ from which all time and space sprang – an idea now known as the Big Bang Theory.

The artwork, developed as part of BANG!the Big Bang City Festival, is the product of over a year’s collaboration between d’Estienne d’Orves and a group of committed Leuven residents that answered KU[N]ST Leuven’s call for ideas to create a new permanent work of art as a tribute to the theories of this cosmological pioneer. These Leuven residents selected an artist and monitored the process from design to creation, guided by Les Nouveaux Commanditaires/De Nieuwe Opdrachtgevers, a non-profit with a singular approach. They encourage patrons to share their ideas and specifications with an artist who, through this dialogue, creates a unique contemporary work of art.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Big Bang was no spontaneous explosion but rather a long, slow process. Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves’ design artistically expresses this reality while simultaneously satisfying the desire of her Leuven patrons for a magnificent work that spans the entire city. They sought a piece that would be a voyage of discovery and rendezvous, inviting observers to wander the streets of Leuven enveloped by a sense of wonder.

The outcome is a Leuven-scale piece, consisting of 80 white bronze medallions engraved with the names of those galaxies recorded from among the thousands of billions that populate the known universe. A raised symbol has been engraved at the centre of each medallion to identify the galaxy’s classification (e.g. spiral, elliptical, irregular, or lenticular). The galaxies are positioned according to their distance from the Earth at different points on the universe’s timeline. Starting from the ring around the centre, representing day zero, time fast-forwards as you move towards the city centre, stopping at the universe’s current age, i.e. 13.8 billion years. And, conversely, if you walk from the centre to the ring, you’ll turn back the clock ten million years for every metre travelled; each step brings you closer and closer to the origin of the cosmos.

*“Primeval Atom” is a tribute to the pioneer, Georges Lemaître, to whom we owe the Big Bang, a genesis story shared by all of humankind. Strolling the streets of Leuven, the piece beckons us to journey through the universe and time, all the way back to our common origin.”* Félicie d'Estienne d'Orves

A giant round medallion, symbolising our present age, lies at the city's centre on the Rector de Somerplein. At the feet of St Peter’s Church, this cosmic axis acts as a real-time display, announcing the names of the celestial bodies over Leuven as they shift in and out of its ‘orbit’.

LED lights embedded in the metal display the names of stars, galaxies, black holes, nebulae, supernovas, and even pulsars arcing through space over the church tower. The current distance from the Earth (in light years) and the speed at which these objects, due to the universe's expansion, are moving away from us are also displayed next to each celestial body. The public gets a glimpse, every day, of the awe-inspiring diversity of objects that inhabit the extragalactic cosmos, virtually unheard of in Georges Lemaître’s day. *Primeval Atom* meaningfully conveys the immeasurable expanse that divides us from these otherworldly ‘worlds’ as well as the impossible speeds to which expansion subjects them.

This perpetual cosmic movement is ultimately captured at the centre of the ring, where a mirrored hemisphere reflects the ballet of pedestrians crisscrossing Leuven’s Pieter de Somerplein. The convex reflection, curiously reminiscent of a Flemish primitive painting, is a door to a hidden reality; specifically, it functions as a portal to contemporary cosmology, meticulously studied by KU Leuven and other researchers following in the footsteps of the great Georges Lemaître.

*Primeval Atom* is a human-scale work at the heart of Leuven that elevates the human perspective; it transforms a walk through Leuven into a tribute to our daily exploration of reality.

The artwork’s blend of ancient and contemporary techniques – from bronze to data-driven electronics – responds to Leuven’s aspiration to position itself as a medieval city of singular historical continuity that is also a renowned university town, dedicated to transcending boundaries through creativity and innovation.

**PRESS DETAILS**

**PRACTICAL**

**Webpage link:** [**www.oeratoom.be**](http://www.oeratoom.be/)(English version available mid-February)

**Press photos link:** [**https://bit.ly/3fF4mKj**](https://bit.ly/3fF4mKj)

**Link to Google Maps and medallion locations:** [**https://bit.ly/3qK64QQ**](https://bit.ly/3qK64QQ)

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[www.bangfestivalleuven.be](http://www.bangfestivalleuven.be)

[www.instagram.com/knalfestival](http://www.instagram.com/knalfestival)*Primeval Atom* is part of BANG!, a KU[N]ST Leuven vzw initiative and joint venture between KU Leuven and the City of Leuven. Every two years, KU[N]ST Leuven vzw organises a special themed city-wide project. KU[N]ST Leuven teams up with actors from the cultural, scientific, and tourist sectors to develop an exciting programme that approaches the theme from different angles and fields. For four months in the autumn of 2021, Leuven set the scene for BANG! *Big Bang City Festival.* A shared sense of wonder, tangible in the fascinating exhibitions, music, and events, is what tied this cultural festival together. The sensational work of art – *Primeval Atom* – was commissioned to conclude the festival with a BANG!

**Félicie d'Estienne d'Orves**

[www.feliciedestiennedorves.com](http://www.feliciedestiennedorves.com/)Félicie d'Estienne d'Orves (Athens, b. 1979) is a French visual artist. Her oeuvre coalesces light, sculpture, and cutting-edge technology. Her research focuses on vision, how it works, and how it is conditioned. Her immersive installations take a phenomenological approach to reality, emphasising the perception of time as a continuum. Since 2014, Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves has made the relationship between astrophysics and space and the study of natural light cycles her focus.

Her works have featured at, among others, Centre Pompidou - Nuit Blanche (Paris) - New Art Space / Sonic Acts (Amsterdam) - Watermans Arts Centre (London) - Elektra Festival / BIAN (Montreal) - Maison des Arts of Créteil (Créteil/FR) - Le Centquatre / Nemo International Biennial of Digital Arts (Paris) - OCAT (Shanghai) - ICAS (Dresden), and Aram Art Museum (Goyang /KR).

**De Nieuwe Opdrachtgevers/Les Nouveaux Commanditaires**[www.denieuweopdrachtgevers.be](https://www.denieuweopdrachtgevers.be/en/home/)
[www.instagram.com/nieuweopdrachtgevers](http://www.instagram.com/nieuweopdrachtgevers)

*The New Patrons [De Nieuwe Opdrachtgevers]* is a Brussels-based non-profit founded at the start of the 21st century. They provide citizens, associations, and cities with the opportunity to commission artists with a work tailored to their expectations and specifications. As a non-profit association, *The New Patrons* are a collective of cultural mediators – curators and contemporary art experts – that assists patrons with defining the content and nature of the artwork they would like to commission an artist with. They help co-assess the relevance and feasibility of the request and propose the most qualified artist based on their practice, experience, and the quality of their works. The next step is to arrange a meeting between the patrons and the artist; that meeting in intended to gradually give shape to the future artwork. The New Patrons shepherd the project from the design phase to the artwork’s inauguration.

Seventy projects have already been successfully commissioned and completed in Belgium by cultivating privileged links with municipalities and local associations – mainly in Flanders and the Brussels Capital Region – which prioritise themes such as heritage conservation, environmental protection, landscape restoration, and urban renewal.

**CREDITS**

***Primeval Atom*, 2022**

A work by Félicie d'Estienne d'Orves

Tribute to Georges Lemaître’s ‘Primeval Atom Hypothesis’, 1931

Scientific consultants: Thomas Hertog, Jean-Pierre Luminet, Fabio Acero

Scientific data: Fabio Acero

Programming: Fisheye

Manufacturing: Fisheye (central ring), Atelier Michel Delarasse (bronze medallion)

Design consultant: Sebastien Wierinck Workshop (SWWS)

Production: Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves & KU[N]ST Leuven

Producer: Nicolas Wierinck / Archer & Weaver

An initiative of KU[N]ST Leuven, the collaboration between the City of Leuven and KU Leuven, with the support of The New Patrons.

Mediators: Louise Goegebeur and Julie Goossens

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