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27.10.2018 - 17.03.2019

DENNIS TYFUS

MY NIECE'S PIERCED KNEES

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EXHIBITION

27.10.2018 | 17.03.2019

DENNIS TYFUS - MY NIECE'S PIERCED KNEES

My Niece's Pierced Knees is the first solo museum show of Antwerp artist Dennis Tyfus (1979). After participating in the Baroque exhibition Experience Traps by adding a new sculpture, De Nor, to the Middelheim Museum, Tyfus now leaves a trail right across the museum's sculpture park. Although this exhibition is not a retrospective and mainly shows new work, the whole constellation could be read as the roundup of a wondrous and self-willed artistic practice, as the summary of twenty years of "doing something," as the artist himself sometimes describes it.

We primarily know Dennis Tyfus as an artist of great independence and self-organization, firmly embedded in and connected to the local Antwerp music and art scene, but with a substantial international network. His work is based on an unbridled drawing practice and a preference for language and words, but the way it appears is always different. The work is constantly moving. The sculptural aspect of Tyfus's work is to be found in the way in which he carefully and consciously deals with the space it occupies. Tyfus's work is everywhere, and often in the public sphere. There are flyers and posters, drawings, paintings and performances, as well as installations, sculptures, videos, vinyl records, concerts, T-shirts, magazines, books, and tattoos. Through his label Ultra Eczema, which by now has produced about 250 releases, Tyfus integrates influences and interests and keeps count of his tangled artistic practice.

THE ARTISTIC PRACTICE OF DENNIS TYFUS

Self-Organization

Incited and instigated by extraordinary initiatives such as the local radio station **Radio Centraal** and the art space **Factor 44**, Tyfus starts his own trajectory in the 1990s, across spaces the specialized crowd usually describes as autonomous, DIY, off-space, or artist-run, a string of words that boil down to the realization that you can do things yourself, not as a reaction to an existing scene but from the obviousness of doing things, from the natural habit of formulating answers to absent questions, from an unstoppable enthusiasm. It's an attitude that almost self-evidently ends up at the holes in a cultural and urban fabric, that doesn't wait in the artist's studio but immediately enters the world and sounds out its boundaries, seeks out its corners. In Tyfus's case it leads to a tangled constellation of collaborations and activities.

At a young age, he starts his own weekly radio show on Radio Centraal, *Tyfustijd*, in which he—to this very day—not only plays music but also looks for a voice, finds it again and again, and subsequently throws it in the air. Radio, more specifically Radio Centraal, is crucial to understanding Tyfus's work. From the very beginning, Tyfus also looks for places where interests, influences, and a growing international network of musician and artist friends might be shared with other people. As an organizer, he contributes substantially to the concerts and events at Scheld'apen, a squat and artistic laboratory in the south of Antwerp. Carried by the flyers and posters he designs for these events, his images enter the public space.

From the summer of 2010, together with artist **Vaast Colson**, Tyfus starts his own place in the city, called **Gunther** and located in a vague outdoor shopping center at the foot of the architect Renaat Braem's police tower. With the exception of the tower, Braem's original plans for the surrounding area in the city center were never realized. Instead, the shopping center in which Gunther occupies a hexagonal space sprang up, originally meant to be a lively meeting point but in reality mostly ignored by the city and its inhabitants. It's a perfect place, in the middle of the city but at the same time oddly off the beaten path. After Gunther, there is Stadslimiet, again with Colson, by the river in the historic center of Antwerp. Stadslimiet occupies a space that is in itself not really a space. It is located under a stairway right across from Het Steen and squeezes itself into the city in an impossibly central location. At Stadslimiet and Gunther, the focus gradually shifts towards showing artworks. Tyfus and Colson use their mothers' last names to start a gallery at Stadslimiet, **Vansteensel & De Caigny Gallery**. It is the forerunner of a new move. By adding the Dutch artist **Peter Fengler**, the duo becomes a trio and establishes **Pinkie Bowtie**.

It would be wrong to conclude that Tyfus's practice only takes place in an alternative scene or that he would settle for his own parallel world. From 2000 he participates in numerous group exhibitions in galleries and art spaces.

Unbridled Drawing

The “something” Tyfus does, is hard to grasp or pin down at first sight. His work seems to be all over the place. It is a personal result of the erratic imagery and atmosphere of the skate culture of the 1980s and 1990s, a paradoxical culture of productive street kids with an excess of adrenaline, and we could say his work continues the historical thread suggested by Greil Marcus in *Lipstick Traces*, a precarious diagonal thread that starts at Dada and Surrealism, passes Lettrism and Situationism, and leads to punk. The basis of Tyfus’s work is clear: a relentless drawing practice, which tries—and has since childhood tried—to combine the hilarious and the awkward, with a preference for what is both light and painful, for what could be called uncomfortable or unpleasant, occasionally with a sexual or parodic undertone, but never just that. The images change, from soft, simple, or even naive drawings of animals (owls and bears) or people (often women) to psychedelic or restless line drawings and back again. It’s a winding path, which has recently arrived at a series of wonderful colored pencil drawings, *Up- and Downgrades*, considered by Tyfus as the definitive way of expressing himself—for now, at least. The drawings show Tyfus in awkward situations in which he is the protagonist. Although he manages to portray himself critically, they are drawings he enjoys a lot—which is rare. The drawings somehow continue the work he and Vaast Colson presented at **Frans Masereel Center** after a residency in Istanbul, a series of grotesque tableaux and scenes of what “really happened” during their stay.

Language and Words

Another pillar of Tyfus's work is language, or words, in his very own way. A conversation with Tyfus is often an endlessly stretched inside joke and demonstrates his interest in wordplay and hidden meanings. But it goes much deeper than that. Tyfus mobilizes words in a material way, as voices, as word combinations playing with the ambiguity of sound and image or as performed, practised language, as if each word starts to work, becomes a work. The word as voice is strongly linked to his activities as a radio producer, and it is this link between the human voice, concrete or sound poetry and experimental sound or music that colors Tyfus's activities as musician or performer **Vom Grill**. The human voice is distorted, by imitating other voices or literally by means of effects and tape recorders, or is considered mere sound, balancing on the edge of meaning.

Tyfus's titles have their own rules. Often, they break away from the work or at least do not really seem to have any descriptive value. For Tyfus, titles are spaces that deserve their own filling-in, new possibilities for doing something. They are one-line poems, warped or twisted quotes that arise from Tyfus's notebooks and are put with or next to something else, without much concern for the relationship between title and context. A beautiful picture of these titles is painted in *Onder de titels*, a chronological collection of blog titles by Tyfus, released by Für Dich Verlag in 2013. Sometimes Tyfus reverses the roles of title and work so that language prevails. The work becomes a physical, material form, shape, expression, or version of the word. For an exhibition in the public space, he mounts a commemorative plaque on the façade of his house, right below his bedroom, with a picture on it and the words "*Hier rust Dennis Tyfus*" ["Here lies Dennis Tyfus"].

Moving in Space

A radical love for language and an unbridled drawing practice are the basis of Tyfus's work, but only rarely are the drawings presented as drawings and is the language printed on white paper. The work is constantly moving and quickly spreads out. That's why Tyfus's work is relevant for an open-air sculpture park such as the Middelheim Museum. Its sculptural aspect is to be found in the way in which he carefully and consciously deals with the space it occupies. The chaos or elusiveness of Tyfus's artistic endeavors stems from a sort of productive restlessness. As the titles of works become their own space for Tyfus to do something new or different, any part, element or square centimeter is an opportunity to contribute, to secretly hide and slip in some work. Flyers and posters for exhibitions often contain images of works that aren't in the exhibition, which gives them an unusual independence. Tyfus's work is literally everywhere, and often in the public sphere. In addition to flyers and posters, drawings, paintings and performances, installations, videos, vinyl records, CDs, concerts, T-shirts, magazines and books, there are also *No Choice* tattoos, in which case the artist himself decides what someone's tattoo looks like, limited by the place and size indicated by its future owner. The tattoos are unique and private, but they are carried into the world by their owners and thus disseminated.

Many of Tyfus's works are editions, and that further multiplies the multiplicity of forms and complicates any overview. Each work is merely a moment, one point of a path, part of a movement that is renewed over and over again.

Ultra Eczema

The simplest way of finding order in the work of Dennis Tyfus is Ultra Eczema (UE). Rather than just a record label in the traditional sense of the word, Ultra Eczema is a sequence of catalogue numbers. Ultra Eczema does not only consist of what is released but is also the thread that keeps Tyfus's various endeavors together, a linear numbering of an artistic practice. Not every work or activity is part of Ultra Eczema, but there is almost always some release connected to anything that happens. Whether it is a gallery show of his own work or the organization of a concert, Ultra Eczema draws a line connecting the dots across the variety of activities.

The first two releases are fanzines by the young Dennis Tyfus. After that, there are many vinyl records with music by others, but also booklets, T-shirts, and posters. From Ultra Eczema 50 on, it becomes clearer that it's not just a label but a numbering, an enumeration, an alternative way of dividing time, a way of following your own footsteps, of keeping count. UE50 is a knuckle tattoo on Tyfus's fist, which was subsequently traded with a tattoo of London label Entr'acte and distributed to 49 other people in art space **LLS 387** and Stadslimiet. Spaces like Gunther and Stadslimiet also have catalogue numbers and become part of a chronological list that by now amounts to about 250 releases.

Apart from an indication of Tyfus's rhythm, Ultra Eczema is also the ideal place to combine interests and influences with his own work. It's an expression of the obsessed collector's effort to find something, riveted to the relentless maker's effort to do something. It's the discovery of influences in the history of punk, experimental music, sound poetry, and visual arts, not as a distant spectator or critic but as a maker in the first row, as someone who wants to take part. Ultra Eczema's particularity is that it shows the extent to which Tyfus considers his own work as something collective,




something that is related to historical influences and interesting contemporaries. In the past twenty years, this attitude has quietly resulted in an informal, but very substantial international network. For Tyfus, the “anxiety of influence” does not seem to hold. If he discovers something or if something interests him, he wants to show it to other people and take part in it. Ultra Eczema releases Tyfus’s own work but also work by friends and by artists or musicians he admires. It’s a fundamental part of his artistic practice, a practice shared with others. Such attitude is quite rare in a world that is so concerned about originality. Tyfus’s work puts all its cards on the table. There’s nothing anxious about it.

De Nor

The 248th Ultra Eczema release is *De Nor*, a recent sculpture at the Middelheim Museum, part of the group exhibition *Experience Traps* in the summer of 2018, in collaboration with architects FVWW. In one image, *De Nor* captures many of the aspects of Dennis Tyfus’s work. It’s a sculpture, but also a place for organizing events, and in that sense it perfectly fits the series of places in which Tyfus has been involved in the last twenty years. It’s a sculptural version of Tyfus the organizer.

The exhibition route starts at *De Nor* (p. 15).

PLAN

-  Parking
-  Info
-  Visitor Guide
-  Café MIKA
-  Toilet
-  Toilet for less mobile visitors
-  Museumshop
-  Start Statuesque Running Trail
-  Entrance
-  Library

 Free WIFI in the park

_Antwerp Free Wi-Fi

ZNA
MIDDELHEIM


268

LINDENDREEF

MIDDELHEIM



HALTE
BUS 21 EN
BUS 32

*You may not touch the artworks in
the Middelheim Museum/Art Park
because this can damage the works.*





EXHIBITION

My Niece's Pierced Knees

Summer's events at *De Nor* were a prelude to the solo show *My Niece's Pierced Knees*, in which Tyfus leaves the edge of the park in order to leave a trail right across the sculpture garden. The title, which is somehow unrelated to the exhibition and started as an ambiguous sound image with awkward undertones, is a beautiful illustration of Tyfus's interest in and approach to language. In no way does it guide us or summarize the show. Still, Tyfus makes sure the title resurfaces in a different form. When the American musician **Alan Bishop** played at *De Nor* last August, Tyfus asked him if he wanted to make a recording, based on the words "My Niece's Pierced Knees." Under the pseudonym **Uncle Jim**, Bishop recorded an improvised story, shooting across the history of popular music and art. The recording ended up on a flexi disc and became an Ultra Eczema release (UE250), which then served as the invitation to this exhibition. The choice of a flexi disc for the invitation is not random. It is the long overdue fulfillment of a secret twenty-year-old desire of Tyfus. The by now outdated combination of vinyl's materiality and the flexi's portability and lightness is a form he appreciates a lot. Despite the abundance, Tyfus's work never dissolves in fully fleeting forms. He has an interest in quick forms, with a certain weight. In that sense, a flexi disc is a wonderful medium, a material object meant to travel or to be handed out or passed on, an immaterial sound carrier from the past.

EXHIBITION ROUTE

1. De Nor (2018)

De Nor is composed of a number of basic elements, all of them shaped in a very particular way. First, we see a fence, an enclosure made out of one thousand poles. If we enter through one of the gates, we see a red-travertine floor, which serves as a stage, engraved with a drawing by Tyfus. Then there is a concrete stand for the audience, a bar under it, and a neon-light name. The name is a product of Tyfus's fascination with the word "*nor*" [slammer, joint, nick, pen, jail], of his preference for cartoon language.

It's an explicit choice to install *De Nor* at the edge of the park, right next to the main entrance. Just like Gunther or Stadslimiet, the space squeezes itself into the open-air museum in a pretty impossible way. The edge of the park becomes a checkpoint at the border. The work is a floodgate or a lock, a transit home for people who wash up, wait and move on, stay and go. The exact location is largely decided by the shape of the park, by the location of the trees. The fence winds itself through the trees. The stand and the travertine stage are located in a clearing. *De Nor* is an enclosed space with a porous border. Some trees are suddenly part of *De Nor*, and some of the rhododendrons will have to find each other through the fence. Two gates provide some clarity. One makes sure *De Nor* can be accessed from the sculpture park, during the opening hours. This gate is closed when the other gate opens *De Nor* towards the street. The second gate is an alternative entrance to the park, left of the main entrance. When the second gate is open to the street, the park is reduced to the size of *De Nor*, an intimate place, half hidden in the bushes.

The stand welcomes the spectators, who come for what's happening on stage, heads in the foliage. The bar quenches people's thirst.

These are the necessary elements of a place Tyfus loves, the rudimentary building blocks to bring people together. What's crucial, of course, are the events and the people going there as performers or spectators. The summer of 2018 was a long sequence of open-air concerts, readings, and performances.

2. Ultra Eczema 100 (2015) (*outside of the museum at the Beukenlaan*)

The work *Ultra Eczema 100* is a traffic sign, a blue arrow-shaped directional road sign with the words "Ultra Eczema 100" on it. The sign is on a street corner close to the Middelheim Museum. The text on the road sign is an example of the way language is used in Tyfus's work. Essentially a catalogue number of a release on the Ultra Eczema label, the text functions in a completely different way here. In Tyfus's case, titles sometimes determine works instead of the other way around, and here the catalogue number determines the work. It seems as if the arrow points to a place called Ultra Eczema, located 100 kilometers from the sign. On top of that, the arrow really is the 100th Ultra Eczema release, which means it's a special anniversary edition, a reason to celebrate, a milestone that has been reached but that also indicates there's more to come. It's a very simple but at the same time a very intricate work, an image in which several components of Dennis Tyfus's work fold back on themselves.

3. In De Balans (eindeloze zangstonde) (2018) and

4. Juicht (eindeloze zangstonde) (2018)

Two works from the Middelheim collection are provided with a soundtrack: *Het zotte geweld* (1912), a bronze sculpture by the Belgian artist **Rik Wouters**, and *Miracolo* (1951) by the Italian artist **Marino Marini**. Both sculptures suggest movement. Tyfus's soundtrack addition enhances that movement with a twist. For *Het zotte geweld*, he pushes the intensity of the sculpture by means of a slightly overdriving voice loop, which takes away part of the pictured woman's good cheer in favor of a feeling of worry. Marini's sculpture is different, more dramatic. Man thrown from the back of his horse is a representation of the tragedy of human existence. Tyfus turns it into a comical sculpture. The tragic fate of man becomes grotesque.

The short voice loops that Tyfus recorded for these sculptures are a good example of the central role of his flexible voice, in his live performances as Vom Grill, as well as in his radio programme *Tyfustijd* or in his interest in sound poetry. Radio voices are voices without bodies, floating "on the air." Here, the voices are linked to the weight of two bronze sculptures, both historical masterpieces from the museum collection. For Tyfus, a voice is not a way of giving meaning, of speaking from an authoritarian place, but rather a playful expression of the uncanny. Once again, it demonstrates Tyfus's casual and free approach to the Middelheim collection. He doesn't anxiously want to pay respect but tries to breathe different life into the sculptures in order to get them moving.

5. The Pogo Never Stops (2018)

The Pogo Never Stops is a nonstop dance performance by thirteen sky tubes or sky dancers. The work was shown in a smaller version of just three in **art space 1646** in The Hague. The squad is now expanded to thirteen characters.

The work combines several elements of Tyfus's work into one paradoxical performance. He provides the sky tubes with drawings of faces and T-shirts of noise bands. For him, this work is a different version of the bizarre phenomenon of pogo dancing. The mechanical noise of the blowers driving the sky tubes give the constellation an almost animal feel, amplified even more by the dancers' unpredictable lashing. It refers to Tyfus's interest in industrial noises and in music or experimental sound commonly called noise. What's pictured here is the word "blazing," often used in the music scene to describe loud music. It's not entirely clear if the thirteen characters are a music group or an audience, and that emphasizes the complex energy of the piece. Moreover, the installation is not isolated. It is right in the line of sight from the park's castle and thus turns the whole park into a kind of festival. The existing sculptures around *The Pogo Never Stops* get a new dimension, as if they are obliged to relate to the energy of the installation.

In the past, Tyfus explored the link between machine, dance, and music in different ways. From dreadlocks attached to fans with reggae playing in the background at **Beursschouwburg** in Brussels to dance video loops, of himself in an attempt at contemporary dance, or as a house DJ in a packed concert hall, and of a friend endlessly dancing to the hit song *Girl From Ipanema* against a fluorescent background in the railway station of Mechelen.

6. Strafstudie (1) (2018)

Strafstudie (1) is the first of what should become a series of sculptural versions of the colored pencil drawings *Up- and Downgrades*, which were exhibited recently at Pinkie Bowtie and in **Gelateria Sogni di Ghiaccio** in Bologna. While the drawings show impeccably sharp self-portraits, Tyfus now adds two close friends. It's a hyperrealist sculpture of three men getting punished to the beat of a tennis ball machine. Tyfus's love for the beauty of repetition, of sound loops or repetitive rhythms, is striking. Here, the cadence is especially hypnotic. Tyfus's idea of school detention—which is the English translation of the title—is very colorful, with tennis balls landing in the artist's face from a short distance and goa trance blasting from two speakers close to the ears of one of his friends. The dreadlocks Tyfus used at Beursschouwburg now end up on his friends' heads. The facial expressions of these three characters inevitably evoke the faces of the classical sculptures in the park.

7. Stampersgat-Fijnaart (deel 2) (2018) at the Braem Pavilion

Tyfus's trail across the Middelheim Museum comes to a symbolic end with an empty book. Actually, what Tyfus presents here is a sculpture of 160 stamps. A first version of this work was an installation at Pinkie Bowtie where Tyfus used a series of stamps of rudimentary geometric shapes to fill a book with stamp drawings. The installation is now expanded and the visitors have the opportunity to stamp their own book.

The 160 stamps hide 160 drawings by Tyfus. The stamps are a sculptural way of both hiding and showing the drawings. As in other works in the exhibition—engraved in the stage of *De Nor*, as faces on sky tubes or in 3D in *Strafstudie (1)*—Tyfus's drawings are shown indirectly. Here, they are hidden in mirror image on the stamps and

they only become visible through the act of stamping. Stamps are, like vinyl records, flexi discs or tape recorders, a form Tyfus has a strong affinity for. Stamping is a physical process, demands a certain amount of handling and manipulating, but is nonetheless a quick medium, originally meant to solve the boring and tiring repetition of writing by hand, as a precursor of the printing press. The book the visitors can “print” here is the 249th Ultra Eczema release.

8. Book “I know this sounds quite ridiculous, but I just follow the line.” Nico Dockx talks with Dennis Tyfus 12/07/2017-12/07/2018 (2018)

Simultaneously with the exhibition, a book with a long interview with Dennis Tyfus by artist and friend **Nico Dockx** is published. It contains a one-year e-mail correspondence between both artists, at the rhythm of one question and answer per day. It’s a tangle of names, references, and interests, supplemented with images, which presents us with a fragmented view of his artistic practice of twenty years. It’s also the confrontation of two different practices that sometimes show remarkable similarities. The book is for sale at the museum shop.

The text in this visitor’s guide was written by **Sis Matthé**, who has been closely following Tyfus’s practice for quite a while. Curators of the exhibition: **Sara Weyns** and **Pieter Boons**.

On Offer to the Public in Conjunction with the Exhibition:

Introductory film

In NL en ENG

On view in the entry hall of the Middelheim Castle

Also available on www.middelheimmuseum.be and on ARTtube.nl

Free tours for individual visitors

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Closed on 1 November, 25 December, 1 January

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D/2018/0306/141

For the acquisition of art works for the collection, the Middelheim Museum is supported by Middelheim Promotors en Ackermans & van Haaren, Argo Law, Art Secure by Vanbreda Risk & Benefits, BASF, BNP Paribas Fortis, CMB, Cordeel, Delen Private Bank, Deloitte, Deme, Grant Thornton, Hubo, Hugo Ceusters, inno.com, KBC, Laurius, Leasinvest Real Estate, L.I.F.E., Mathieu Gijbels, Pamica, SipWell, Soudal, Antwerp Port Authority.

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