



Philippe Vandenberg & Bruce Nauman: *Live or Die*

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Sofie Van de Velde Gallery

Curator: Brigitte Kölle

In the exhibition entitled *Live or Die*, Sofie Van de Velde presents a dialogue between the Belgian artist Philippe Vandenberg (1952 - 2009) and the American artist Bruce Nauman (b. 1941). The title of the presentation is borrowed from a work by Nauman, and the curator is Dr. Brigitte Kölle (Head of Contemporary Art, Hamburger Kunsthalle), who aims to offer a fresh reading of Vandenberg's oeuvre. The format of an exhibition is ideally suited to such an exercise. The spatial juxtaposition or proximity of works by different artists often reveals unexpected relationships and shared affinities. By means of a sophisticated selection of four works by Nauman and seven from Vandenberg, the exhibition hopes to provide visitors with new insights.

Philippe Vandenberg and Bruce Nauman never met and, until now, their works have never shared the same space. At first glance, their oeuvres would appear to be very different. Nevertheless, the two artists have several traits in common. Both Nauman and Vandenberg are witnesses of the dark side of humanity, of hatred and violence, and of the impossibility of communication between people. But they don't settle for the role of witness, they feel responsible to capture this suffering in their oeuvre.

In addition to being profoundly fascinated by the precariousness of mortal existence, the vulnerability of the body and the many taboos that hinder human interactions, both artists also use words and images in their works. A major shared concern is the role and power of the visual artist in contemporary society and the place of art within a broader sociopolitical context. Neither artist is interested in promoting certainties or in creating a 'nice' and 'cosy' art. Their works are direct and raw, and therefore in both Nauman's and Vandenberg's oeuvres one finds countless repetitions, inflections and variations on the same theme.

What makes Bruce Nauman's and Philippe Vandenberg's art so great is that both artists succeed in creating images that capture the abyss within ourselves, our failings and our cruelty. Their images are direct, uncompromising and distressing. They are not moralizing, yet they are moral in a very powerful and responsible manner. 'It is said that art is about life and death. That may be melodramatic, but it's also true,' Nauman said as long ago as 1978. LIVE OR DIE! Nothing more, nothing less.

Publication

A book published by Hannibal and edited by Wouter Davidts accompanies the exhibition. With an introductory text by Brigitte Kölle, texts by the artists Philippe Vandenberg and Bruce Nauman and essays by John C. Welchman and Anna Dezeuze. Designed by Mirror Mirror.

Philippe Vandenberg (1952-2009)

The work of the eminent Belgian painter, draftsman and writer Philippe Vandenberg is characterised by an inner quest in which various literary, philosophical and art-historical references induce a temporary state of wonder. Using images, words and symbols, Vandenberg challenged the ethical context of the artwork. In so doing, his paintings and drawings remain rooted in the here and now, while also establishing a visually recognisable dialogue with the society in which they were created. Vandenberg was a self-declared 'kamikaze painter': every new work implied the destruction of one made previously. Over the years, he endeavoured to transcend the tangible and to convert paint into light. In the works of Vandenberg, universal themes such as war, religion, movement, sexuality and death are crucially transformed.

Philippe Vandenberg committed suicide in 2009. Shortly afterwards, his three children – Mo, Hélène and Guillaume – established the Estate Philippe Vandenberg with the aim of maintaining the contemporary international standing of their father's oeuvre. Depending on the project, the three children involve specialists from different disciplines: museum directors, curators, art critics, art historians, researchers, artists, film-makers, architects, collectors and entrepreneurs. By forging links and creating dialogues between Philippe Vandenberg's works and those of other artists, the Estate provokes fresh readings of his oeuvre, and strives to keep artist's legacy alive and relevant. The Estate of Philippe Vandenberg is represented exclusively worldwide by Hauser & Wirth.

Bruce Nauman (b.1941)

Bruce Nauman is often described as one of the most important father figures of contemporary art. As an eternal beginner, he jumps time and time again into different media and techniques, thereby remaining immune to categorisation by generation or trend. Nauman explores what it truly means to be an artist. In the late 1960s, for example, he filmed himself in his studio. At the same time, he took the first step towards what would later become an independent art form: simply capturing something, without script or story. Yet the narrative, literary and especially the verbal is important in his oeuvre: one only need think of the neon works incorporating words. Art is what an artist does in the studio. And when he reaches this simple but profound conclusion, art becomes an activity rather than a product. Nauman focuses less on the development of a style than on the way in which a process or activity can become an artwork. For him, the artistic skill thus lies in 'researching the possibilities of what art can be', instead of 'adding an artwork to a collection'. Nauman's oeuvre consists of body art, sculptures, environmental pieces, photography, film, holograms, lithographs, prints, books and drawings and countless neon works and video installations.

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