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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 group 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. He produces 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.

1. Self-Organization

Tyfus's artistic practice shows a remarkable sense of independence and self-organization. From the 1990s, Tyfus starts his own trajectory across spaces often described 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 an unstoppable enthusiasm. 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 or sound but also looks for a voice (and finds it again and again). As an organizer, he contributes substantially to the concerts and events at Scheld'apen, a squat and artistic laboratory in the south of Antwerp. From the summer of 2010, Tyfus starts a series of self-organized places in the city, in collaboration with other artists (e.g. Vaast Colson and Peter Fengler). First, there is Gunther, located at the foot of the architect Renaat Braem's police tower. Then comes Stadslimiet, located under a stairway right across from Het Steen. Nowadays, there is Pinkie Bowtie.

De Nor, a recent permanent sculpture at the Middelheim Museum, falls into this category as well. In one image, *De Nor* captures many of the aspects of Dennis Tyfus's work and forms a kind of prelude to the

exhibition *My Niece's Pierced Knees*. It's a sculpture but also a place for events. It's a sculptural version of Tyfus the organizer.

It would be wrong, however, 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.

2. Drawing and Language

Tyfus's work is hard to grasp or pin down at first sight. It seems to be all over the place. It is an idiosyncratic 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. Tyfus recently showed a series of wonderfully sharp self-portraits in colored pencil in Pinkie Bowtie and in Bologna. The work ***Strafstudie (1)*** is a three-dimensional continuation of these drawings. It's a hyperrealist sculpture of Tyfus and two close friends getting punished in a very colorful way by a tennis ball machine and loud goa trance.

Another pillar of Tyfus's work is language, or words, in his very own way. 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 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. In the works ***In De Balans (eindeloze zangstonde)*** en ***Juicht (eindloze zangstonde)*** Tyfus uses his own voice to playfully breathe different life into two classical bronze sculptures from the Middelheim collection.

The title of the exhibition, ***My Niece's Pierced Knees***, is a beautiful illustration of Tyfus's interest in and approach to language. The title is somehow unrelated to the exhibition and started as an ambiguous sound image with awkward undertones. In no way does it guide us or summarize the show. It occupies its own space, just as *De Nor* has been called *De Nor* [the slammer, the nick, the joint, the jail] because of Tyfus's preference for cartoon language.

3. Moving in space

Tyfus's 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. 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. The work moves and gets us moving.

In the installation ***The Pogo Never Stops***, Tyfus's drawings are hidden in the faces he draws on thirteen colorful sky tubes or sky dancers. They represent Tyfus's fascination with pogo dancing and turn the lawn across from the Middelheim Castle into a kind of festival. The blowers also serve as the soundtrack to the art piece and refer to Tyfus's love of the beauty of constant, repeated or mechanical sounds. In ***Stampersgat-Fijnaart (deel 2)***, a sculpture of 160 stamps at the Braem Pavilion, his drawings are hidden in mirror image on the stamps. They only become visible when the visitors take an empty book and use the stamps to "print" their

own personal copies of the book. In *De Nor* the drawings resurface in the neon-light name or in the drawing engraved into the travertine stage or dance floor, which is again a reference to the way in which Tyfus gets the spectator moving. Maybe his *No Choice* tattoos are the clearest example of Tyfus's drawings moving in space. The artist 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.

4. 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. The definition of a release is quite broad. For example, 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 have become part of a chronological list of about 250 releases.

There are three Ultra Eczema releases in this exhibition. The invitation (UE250) is a flexi disc with a recording by American musician Alan Bishop of his pseudonym Uncle Jim telling a story loosely based on the exhibition title. The empty book to be stamped in the installation *Stampersgat-Fijnaart (deel 2)* is UE249. The clearest reference to Ultra Eczema is the work **Ultra Eczema 100**, 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. 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.

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. For Tyfus, the "anxiety of influence" does not seem to hold. 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. In this exhibition, it shows in the way the sound works relate to the existing bronze sculptures or in the way the surrounding sculptures of the museum enter into a physical dialogue with the installation *The Pogo Never Stops*.

Simultaneously with the exhibition, the 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 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.