

Article

The Last Flemish Primitive: Jan Vercruyssen's Self-Fashioning of Artishood and National Identity

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Abstract: In 1989, the artist Jan Vercruyssen (1948–2018) stated that he was “the last Flemish Primitive”. This comment, despite being only a fragment of a lengthy interview with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, became a trope in subsequent writings on Vercruyssen. I argue that the statement was part of a deliberate strategy by Vercruyssen in shaping his identity as a (Belgian) artist. First, I focus on Vercruyssen's *Portraits of the Artist* (1979–1984), a series of photographic works in which he uses the genre of the self-portrait—thereby implicitly referring to the Flemish Primitives—as a means to express the constructedness of artistic identity. Second, I explore Vercruyssen's construction of his identity and his relationship vis-à-vis the notion of Belgian art. Finally, the statement uttered in 1989 will be contextualized within the changing political and cultural context of Belgium and Flanders in the 1980s. I demonstrate how the statement can be read as invoking a radically different conception of Belgian art during this period.

Keywords: Belgium; Flanders; identity; artishood; contemporary art



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1. Introduction

In September 2008, the artist Jan Vercruyssen (1948–2018) tore out an article from the Belgian newspaper *De Morgen* for his personal archive. Entitled ‘Museum M starts a dialogue between old and contemporary art’, the short article announced an upcoming parallel exhibition of the 15th-century artist Rogier van der Weyden and a survey exhibition of Vercruyssen in the newly refurbished museum M in the Belgian city of Leuven. In addition to penciling the date in blue in the lower left corner, the artist also highlighted, with a double line in red marker, a paragraph in the right column. The particular passage contains a quote by then museum director Veronique Vandekerckhove in which she bluntly explains the intention of this double retrospective:

“Vercruyssen calls himself the last Flemish Primitive. We are therefore bringing a dead and a living Flemish Primitive into dialogue with each other. If Vercruyssen wants to measure up to one of the greatest painters from our part of the world, he will have to prove it now.”¹ (Vandekerckhove in [van Beek 2008](#)) (Figure 1)

The 5-centuries-spanning competition set up by Vandekerckhove between van der Weyden and Vercruyssen is not so absurd as it may seem at first. In this exhibition, Vandekerckhove overtly refers to a statement the artist himself made nearly two decades earlier. In November 1989, Vercruyssen declared in a lengthy interview with art critic and curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in the Italian art magazine *Flash Art International* that he felt like being “the Last Flemish Primitive” (Figure 2)—a provocative statement that served as the title for the piece and later became a recurrent trope in subsequent exhibition reviews or articles on Jan Vercruyssen (a.o. [Brayer 1990](#); [Kremer 1993](#); [Parent 1990](#); [Van Mulders 1990](#)).



Figure 1. Jozefien van Beek, "Museum M opent dialoog tussen oude en hedendaagse kunst," *De Morgen* 22 September 2008. In the margins, Jan Vercruyse highlighted the passage in which Veronique Vandekerchove compares him with the Flemish Primitives. (Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruyse Foundation).

For Vercruyse, who did not have the habit of annotating texts, let alone highlighting passages in the many books or magazines he kept in his personal library and archives, this bold marking of a passage in a national newspaper article is striking.² Even if it remains a guess as to whether it was out of irritation or approval, it must have meant much to the artist. This archival document offers an interesting starting point to investigate this inflammatory statement and to explore how it correlates with a deliberate strategy deployed by Vercruyse in order to shape his identity as a (Belgian) artist.

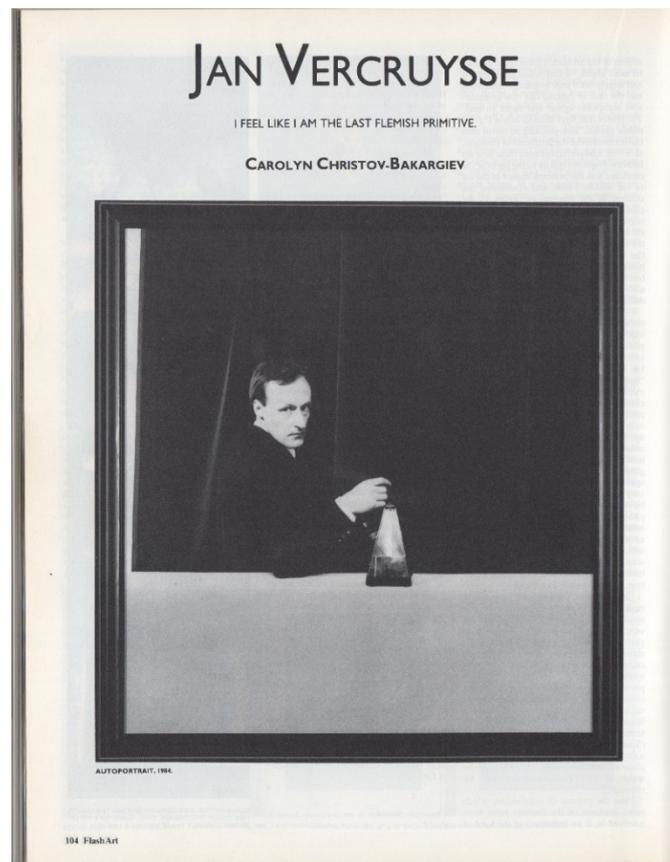


Figure 2. Title page of the interview of Jan Vercruyssen with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, in *Flash Art International* (November 1989). Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruyssen Foundation.

2. Constructing the Identity of the Artist

“The artist is an artist only on the condition that he is dual and does not ignore any phenomenon of his dual nature.” (Baudelaire 1868, p. 378)³

“Even in a self-portrait, of course, we do not see its depicting author, but only the artist’s depiction. Strictly speaking, the author’s image is *contradiction in adjecto*.” (Bakhtin 1986, p. 109)

Vercruyssen’s career as an artist has to be considered as a self-chosen, artificial and rational construct (Verschaffel 1998). As he himself stated in an interview with the artist Bill Sullivan in 1996: “At one point in my life I guess I did decide that I had to leave this normal world and become an artist.” (Vercruyssen in Sullivan 1996) For Vercruyssen, being an artist was a fully conscious process of constructing his own legacy and he understood quite well that—to quote art critic and philosopher Bart Verschaffel—“being an artist, is also an art” (Verschaffel 2011).

A preliminary stage in his growing awareness were his activities in the field of visual poetry during the early 1970s, when he published several poems in the magazine *De Tafelronde* and participated in various poetry contests. In 1974, he decided to turn his back on poetry, a decision which he made public on May 10, in an ambiguously titled exhibition “Weg van de Pöezie”, a phrase which in Dutch can be translated both as “fond of poetry” and “away from poetry” (Brams 2012, p. 68). “Weg van de Pöezie” was his first one-man show at the Gallerij Katherine Bouckaert in Ghent. Subsequently, after a short experience as a gallery manager in the city of Ghent, Vercruyssen formed a collective with Lili Dujourie and Guy Mees. On 5 March 1977, the collective held a one-day event entitled “Presentation of an (the) artist” (Figure 3): the artist Jan Vercruyssen was born and introduced to the public.⁴

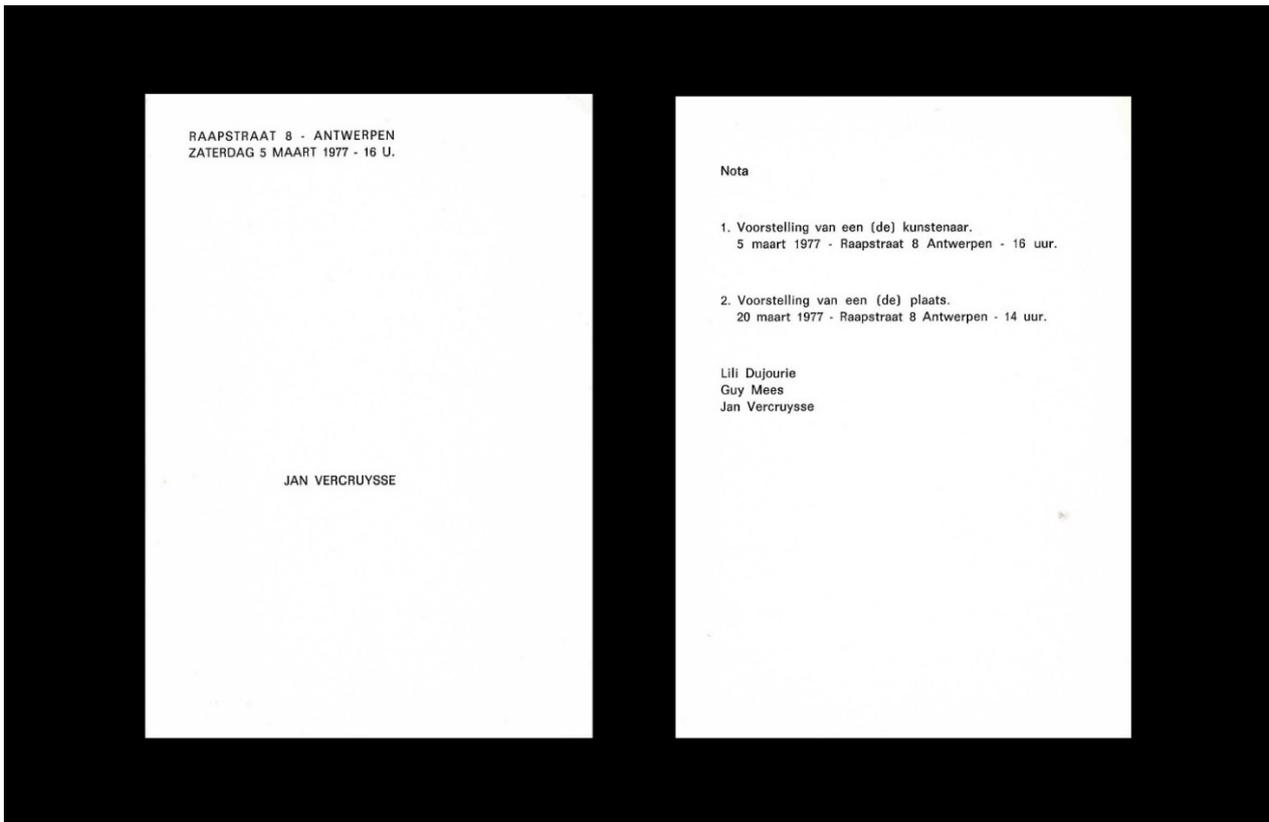


Figure 3. Two invitation cards for the event “Voorstelling van een (de) kunstenaar” 5 March 1977, Raapstraat 8, Antwerp. (Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruyssen Foundation).

In 1997, twenty years after he introduced himself as an artist, Vercruyssen composed a catalogue raisonnée of his photographic work—unique offset prints of photographs—produced between 1977 and 1984. This catalogue, entitled *Portraits of the Artist*, offers a unique insight in the self-construction of the artist. In 1986, Lynn Gumpert, curator at the New Museum in New York City, compared Vercruyssen’s art to the Flemish Primitives in her essay for the exhibition *A Distanced View: One Aspect of Recent Art from Belgium, France, Germany, and Holland*:

“In a 1983 series of self-portraits, Jan Vercruyssen photographed himself in the conventional poses of the Flemish primitive painters. With these works, he not only acknowledges a specific artistic heritage, but some of the conventions associated with the role and métier of the artist.” (Gumpert 1986, p. 12)

One of the works included is an ‘untitled’ self-portrait of 1979: *Zonder Titel (Zelfportretten) III* (Figure 4). In this early work, Vercruyssen creates a composition of four frames. Three of them depict typical painterly genres: the nude, the landscape, and the self-portrait. For this last genre, Vercruyssen reproduces Albrecht Dürer’s *Portrait of the Artist holding a Thistle* of 1493. The fourth and largest frame is a blank canvas in the middle of which the artist enigmatically has reproduced a small empty frame, expressing “the inability or despair of the artist to portray himself” (De Dauw and Van Durme 1982, p. 509).

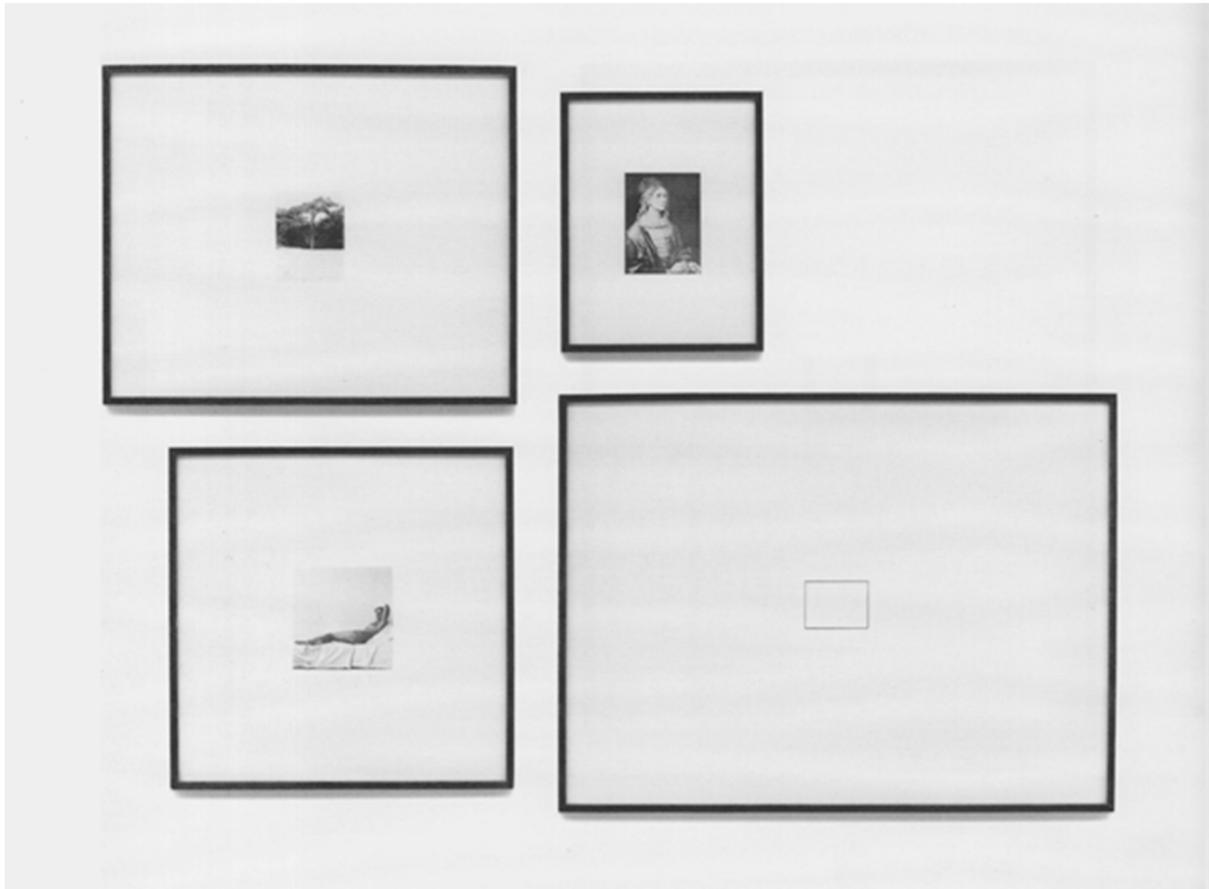


Figure 4. Jan Vercruyssen, *Zonder Titel (Zelfportretten) III*, 1979. Work in four parts, photolitho print on paper. Measurements, clockwise beginning top left: 36 × 44 cm; 27 × 21 cm; 36.4 × 36.5; 45 × 60 cm. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruyssen Foundation.

Due to its “unusually colorful attire and tasseled red cap”, as Chapman (2013, p. 196) affirms, Dürer’s first formal self-portrait “suggests both inventiveness and self-assurance.” In Western art history, the emergence of the self-portrait went hand in hand with the increasing self-awareness of the artist. Self-portraiture developed simultaneously both north and south of the Alps during the 15th century (Chapman 2013). At the time, the social status of the artist shifted from a craftsman to a more intellectual personality. Whereas Italian scholars took the lead in raising a new awareness of the intellectual status of the artist by producing artist’s biographies, artists north of the Alps expressed their newly achieved status through the genre of the self-portrait (Edwards 1999, p. 92). The self-conscious artist regarded himself worthy of being portrayed (Chapman 2013, p. 191).

Although Albrecht Dürer is considered to be the first artist to devote special attention to self-portraits, it was Jan van Eyck who supposedly pioneered the genre with *Portrait of a Man*, in 1433 (Chapman 2013, p. 194). Vercruyssen had a great admiration for this painting—it is mentioned in a sketch for an unrealized *Self-Portrait*—and as we also know from the obituary speech by John Murphy delivered during the ceremony at the Brussels Bozar in 2018:

“One of the first things we did after Jan had settled in [in Murphy’s apartment in London] was to go to the National Gallery to look at the paintings in the gallery containing the Flemish Masters. On our way out Jan bought the postcard reproduction of Jan van Eyck’s, ‘Portrait of a Man’ and on returning to the house pinned it to the wall above his desk in his room.” (Murphy 2018)

The small panel-painting, often referred to as *Man with the Red Turban*, features a seated man—believed⁵ to be Jan van Eyck himself—who looks directly at the viewer. An inscription at the bottom of the frame tells us that ‘Jan van Eyck made me on 21 October 1433’, thereby confirming the painter’s self-awareness as an artist. Moreover, as Erwin Panofsky has noted, Jan van Eyck was not only the “first Early Flemish master to sign his works,” but also, “so far as we know the only one to imitate the nobles in adopting a personal motto, the famous *Als ich chan*, “As best I can”.” (Panofsky 1953, p. 179) As Jenny Graham, in her scholarly work on the modern reception of Jan van Eyck, puts it:

“The Portrait of a Man with a Red Turban has been taken to denote Jan’s status as an artist of the proto-modern kind, rather than an artisan, fully aware of the construct involved in imaging himself and others.” (Graham 2007, p. 4)

In a series of 111 works, grouped under the catalogue’s eponymous title *Portraits of the Artist*, Vercruyse sets off to explore how the identity of the artist is given shape.⁶ The works are unique offset prints of original photos made by himself, resulting in a loss of quality and thus “anti-photographic” (Vercruyse quoted in Decan 2007, p. 70). In an unpublished note, Jan Vercruyse explains how this process gave him the opportunity to emphasize the artificial construction of the image as well as to demonstrate his own agency as a “builder” of images:

“The fact that the work uses a photographic image as a material source is then less important as I stress the *mise-en-scène*—character of artworks and as I think that there is a complete misconception about photography in that all theories profess that all photography always captures “something which has really been there”—trying to make the reality-bound essence of photography: The “Images” I show are as “fictitious” as those of a painter—being a “*metteur-en-scène*”.” (Vercruyse 1984)

The result is, indeed, highly staged. The series represents two protagonists: the artist (Jan Vercruyse himself) and a female—often nude—model, staged in a setting with various props such as a music stand, brushes, shells, masks, flowers, clocks, a chess set and mirrors. In these works, Vercruyse explicitly quotes or appropriates compositions and iconographical motifs by Lorenzo Lotto, Giorgio de Chirico, René Magritte or Marcel Broodthaers, among others (Decan 2016). Although the art of Jan Vercruyse has been linked to appropriation artists such as Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger, Vercruyse deliberately distances himself from a politically and socially framed conception of art, adopting instead what he calls an “ontological approach” (Vercruyse in Christov-Bakargiev 1989, p. 107).⁷ Vercruyse borrows his visual language from art only to refer *back* to it, as he explains in an interview in 1979:

“It [my work] is art because it is at least a reflection on art, because it is formulated in such a way that it can ground itself within the cultural field that calls itself art. [. . .] It is also from this intention that you situate yourself as an artist, that you take up a specific position towards art. It is to the extent that you can make a reflection about the way in which your work criticizes—or commemorates—previous art that you situate yourself.” (Vercruyse in Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst 1979)⁸

The main concern of Vercruyssen in *Portraits of the Artist* is the search for the identity of the artist, which he explores through the means of metaphor, allegory and association (Vercruyssen 1983).⁹ Each work in the series carries a title in either Dutch, French or English, all of them variations of the same theme: *Zonder Titel (Zelfportretten)*, *Zelfportret*, *Autoportrait*, *Portrait de l'artiste*, *Self-Portrait*, *Portrait of the Artist*, *Portrait de l'Artiste par lui-même*, *Portrait of the Artist by Himself*, and *Portret van de Kunstenaar door hemzelf*. Although the titles suggest that all are self-portraits, the works barely provide information on the person of Jan Vercruyssen, who in some of them is not even represented (Dompierre 1992). *Portraits of the Artist* are to be understood as allegorical portraits of *the artist* as an archetype, if Jan Vercruyssen is the subject of the portraits, he is not their content. These works are—to adopt an expression by Baudelaire—“portraits de l'artiste, en général,” and not self-portraits of Jan Vercruyssen in a strict sense (Lacoue-Labarthe [1976] 2014; Chevrier and Sagne 1984). In an interview with art critic Anna Tilroe for the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad in 1997, Jan Vercruyssen explains this ambiguity:

“You expect a portrait to reveal the identity of the person being portrayed. I am not doing that. These works are a game full of false traces, winks and symbols, for the sake of the game, not for the sake of the content. They are composed of elements that are shifted time and again and that could indicate an identity—but do not.” (Vercruyssen in Tilroe 1997)¹⁰

The decoupling of the person depicted and the artist becomes most explicit in the last series of the catalogue, *Portraits of the Artist by Himself* (1984), in which Vercruyssen portrays himself dressed in a black suit and holding up a mask against his face. As Louise Dompierre (1992, p. 12) describes these works in her essay for Vercruyssen's exhibition at the Power Plant in Toronto in 1992: “The work acknowledges that portraiture exists within certain codes that result in sets of controlled expectations. Vercruyssen de-stabilizes these conventions, simultaneously releasing other possibilities of meaning.” According to Bart Verschaffel (1998), Vercruyssen's self-portraits are not “psychological portraits” as they do not yield any information on the inner person, turning the portrayed into a constructed ‘persona’.

Een waar verhaal [A true story] (1974) one of Vercruyssen's earliest works consists of a sequence of eight sheets of paper which thematizes the (in)capacity of language as a means to communicate truth. Each sheet consists of a white page, measuring 29.5 by 22.5 cm, with one of the following sentences printed on it in Dutch: *A true story*, *A non-true story*, *A real story*, *A non-real story*, *A fictitious story*, *A non-fictitious story*, *A real story*, *A non-real story*.¹¹ The same concern underlies the *Portraits of the Artist*. The work *Sans Titre (La Feinte)* (Figure 5) from 1982 is a case in point. In the background, the work shows a framed self-portrait as a reconstituted collage of a torn picture. The composition meets some classical characteristics of the genre: neutral background, one arm resting on a table, with, in the background, part of an empty frame. On the foreground, on a table lies a small piece of paper carrying the word “La Feinte” (“The feint”). The identity of the artist, so Vercruyssen seems to suggest, is an artificial—feinted—construction. Strikingly, the Italian term *fingere* , “to pretend, to feign”, is intimately connected to the history of early Renaissance self-portraiture (Woods-Marsen 1998, pp. 16–17). Whereas during the Middle Ages the term was mainly used to describe the activity of poets (inventing or creating myths and fables), it acquired a new meaning during the Renaissance, namely the idea that a person's identity can be self-consciously shaped (Woods-Marsen 1998, p. 17; Greenblatt 2005).



Figure 5. Jan Vercruyssen, *Sans Titre (La Feinte)*, 1982. Photolitho print on paper, 47 × 39.5 cm, framed. Photo: Adam Rzepka. Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruyssen Foundation.

3. Constructing a Belgian Identity

“As for my anonymous biographer, what do you want me to send you in order to please him? I have no biography. Send him whatever you think will please you. [...] I think that the writer should leave only his works. His life matters little. Get rid of the rags!” (Flaubert 1859)¹²

An early example of Vercruyssen’s *self-fashioning* as an artist took place in 1979, on the occasion of the exhibition *Contemporary Art in Belgium. Insight/Survey–Survey/Insight* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent. For this exhibition, the museum published a special newspaper entitled *19 portretten* (19 portraits) in which all participating artists are portrayed with their photograph, their work as well as a short interview. The only exception is Jan Vercruyssen. In a disclaimer, the editors summarized the stance of the artist with regards to biographical data:

“Jan Vercruyssen does not want a portrait photo in this newspaper, no detailed biography, no interview that has been transcribed completely, no explanatory and/or descriptive text for the work he makes (unless he writes the text himself). “Jan Vercruyssen, born 1948, lives and works in Belgium” may suffice as a marginal reference to his work.”¹³ (Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst 1979)

Equally exemplary regarding the artist’s *self-fashioning*, are the answers to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s Flash Art interview in 1989 when Vercruyssen claims to “have forgotten” his own biography, thereby casting a veil over his life:

CCB: How did you begin to be involved in art?

JV: What kind of a question is that?

CCB: I know that you studied law at University, that you were a poet, that you did not go to an art academy and that, later, you opened an art gallery in Belgium.

JV: I have forgotten.

(Vercruysse in [Christov-Bakargiev 1989](#), p. 105)

Although Jan Vercruysse clearly shows an aversion to communicate his own biography, his personal library contains numerous biographical works on writers, artists, philosophers and musicians.¹⁴ Among them is a short biography on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, written by the Mexican essayist Octavio Paz.¹⁵ Paz starts his biography by stating that it is useless to try to write a biography of poets, since “their work is their biography.” ([Paz 2012](#), p. 18)¹⁶ Jan Vercruysse would certainly agree with this assertion. Vercruysse deliberately fashioned his self-image by designing his own exhibition catalogues—working almost exclusively with the same authors (Alain Cueff, Pier Luigi Tazzi, Denys Zacharopoulos and Marianne Brouwer)¹⁷—turning down several group exhibitions, or by taking control of the curating process ([Gielen 2008](#), p. 200). Additionally, every time Vercruysse is invited to participate in a group show, he explicitly refuses to provide a biography. Instead, he prefers to offer a personally selected bibliography, suggesting that only through publications—catalogues, articles, and exhibition reviews—a genuine image, or portrait, of the artist Jan Vercruysse can be revealed. Vercruysse’s archive contains an intriguing artefact that makes this thought explicit: On the cover of a copy of the catalogue which he designed for his one-man show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent in 1982, the artist wrote the word “Biografie” (Biography) with a blue fountain pen (Figure 6), suggesting that the artist’s bibliography—of which this exhibition catalogue is a part—replaces his biography.

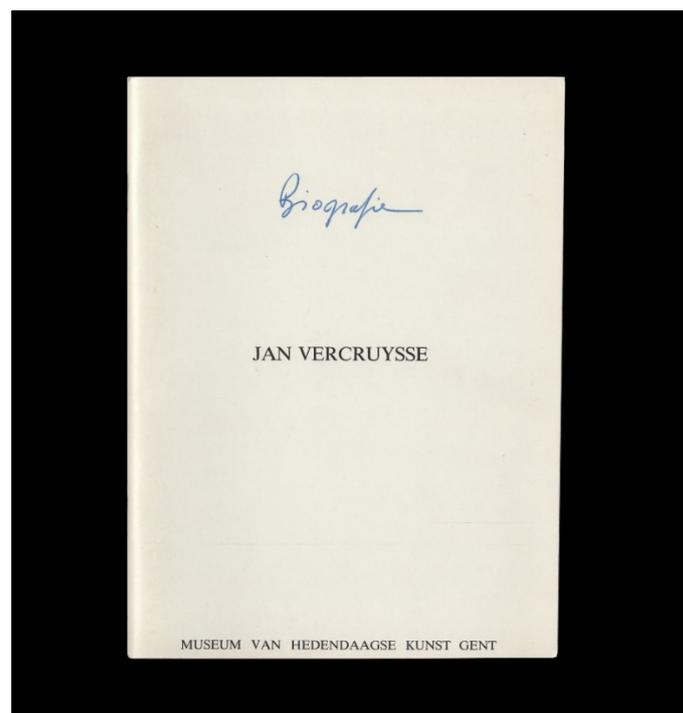


Figure 6. On the cover of a copy of the catalogue of his one-man show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent in 1982, Jan Vercruysse wrote the word “Biografie” with a blue fountain pen. (Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruysse Foundation).

An exemplary work in this respect is *Je* (1990) (Figure 7), in which the artist prints the sentence “Je est un autre” followed by “et vous aussi” on a large sheet of paper, alluding to the famous sentence by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud in his letter to Paul Demeny in 1871 ([Rimbaud 2015](#), p. 67). For Arthur Rimbaud, the person of the poet is not important: he is merely the spokesman of the genius who is absorbed in him. The author and the self cannot be equated ([Burke 1995](#), p. 303). In the same fashion, *Portraits of the artist* do not ‘portray’ the *author* Jan Vercruysse, but the portrait of *the artist* in general, making

visible the two “I’s”. The *person* Jan Vercruyssen is decoupled from the *artist* Jan Vercruyssen, thereby echoing the statement of the French novelist Marcel Proust who, in his critique on 19th century literary critic Sainte-Beuve who used to focus on biographical data of the author, wrote: “a book is the product of a different *self* [un autre *moi*] from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices.” (Proust 2019, p. 127)¹⁸ [original italics]



Figure 7. Jan Vercruyssen, *Je*, 1990. Two colour offset printing on Moulin de Gué paper. 95 × 65 cm. Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruyssen Foundation..

His aversion to be pinpointed as an artist, according to biographic data, leads him to emancipate himself from their supposed capacity to transmit an objective ‘truth’. In various exhibition catalogues, Jan Vercruyssen plays with different fictitious birthplaces. Although born in Waregem, West-Flanders, in 1948, the catalogue raisonnée of the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent, for example, mentions no less than five different birthplaces: Ghent, Marke, Oostende, Waregem and Elisabethville (De Baere et al. 1988). On several occasions, throughout the 1980s, Jan Vercruyssen named this latter city of the former Belgian Congo—today Lubumbashi—as his birthplace, a statement with clear political overtones to remind the public that the Belgian state owed its wealth to a former colony (Trio and Vercruyssen 2006).

The deliberate manipulation of biographic data sheds a light on how Vercruyssen positions himself vis-à-vis “Belgian Art”. As he explained in a 2006 radio interview, the swapping of birthplaces was a deliberate strategy to question the definition of a “Belgian artist” (Trio and Vercruyssen 2006). For the group exhibition *Initiatief 86* at the Saint-Peter’s Abbey in Ghent—a joint-effort of Ghent-based art galleries and independent art initiatives to promote the Belgian artists in an international context—Vercruyssen mentions as his birthplace the historical harbor town Sluis, located in The Netherlands next to the Flemish or Belgian border.¹⁹ Vercruyssen was the only artist in the catalogue to include a place (and not only the year) of birth. By identifying himself as born across the border in a project

on *Belgian* artists, Vercruyssen made clear that he distanced himself from the commonplace definition of “Belgian art”.

However, in spite of his artistic attitude of breaking down, blurring or expanding boundaries, Jan Vercruyssen was repeatedly put forward as a typical Belgian artist (Figure 8), who should not be missing from the major retrospectives of Belgian art.²⁰ Undoubtedly, the many cross-references to Marcel Broodthaers or René Magritte in the work of Vercruyssen have enhanced this assertion as it was erroneously seen as being a “continuation” of their work:

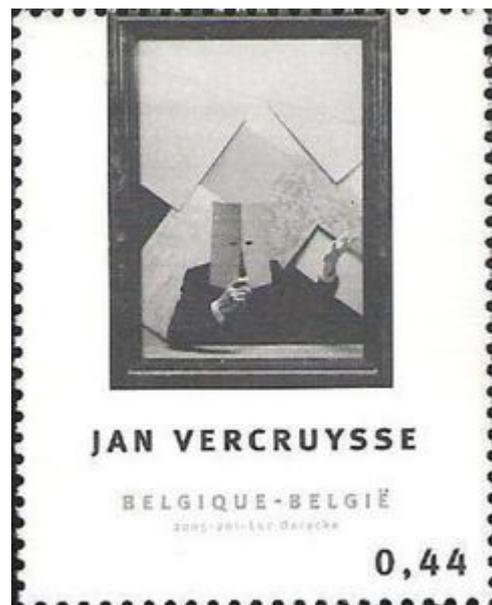


Figure 8. Postal stamp issued by the Belgian Postal Company in 2005. The stamp is part of a series on Belgian contemporary art, entitled “This is Belgium”. Other artists included in the series: Joëlle Tuerlinckx, Jef Gys, Ann Veronica Janssens, Lili Dujourie, Panamarenko, Marthe Wéry, Luc Tuymans, Jan Fabre and Michel François. Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruyssen Foundation.

“Vercruyssen’s work is the result of deliberate thinking, of a questioning and scanning of art on the whole, the ways of approaching it, its function in society, and its conditions. This results in complex compositions, not always relevant to the spectator. The artist eliminates certain relations and creates in this manner a refined detachment. In this sense he continues the tradition of the Belgian artists Magritte and Broodthaers.” (De Dauw and Van Durme 1982, p. 509)

Even more so, according to the Italian art critic Pier Luigi Tazzi, Vercruyssen not only emulates, but even surpasses his famous ‘predecessors’ Magritte and Broodthaers, as stated in an *Artforum* article published in 1987:

“Its elaboration of enigma, illusion, and deception is both more extreme and more ancient than those of Vercruyssen’s Belgian compatriots and predecessors René Magritte and Broodthaers.” (Tazzi 1987, p. 93)

Indeed, in several self-portraits Jan Vercruyssen explicitly refers to compositions of René Magritte (most directly in *Autoportrait*, 1982; *Personnages*, 1982). The reference to Marcel Broodthaers becomes most clear in *L’Art de Voir*, *Les Choses* (1976–1979), a series with which the book *Portraits of the Artist* opens. The series consists of twelve screen prints on paper, each measuring 70 by 100 cm. The first eleven works each contain two reproductions of late 18th or 19th century paintings.²¹ Many of the paintings reproduced in this series are also to be found in the postcard collection of Broodthaers’ *Musée d’Art Moderne Section XIXe Siècle*: Courbet’s *Le Sommeil* (1866), Girodet’s *Le Sommeil d’Endymion* (1791), Gérôme’s *Phryné devant l’aréopage* (1861), Giraud’s *Un marchand d’esclaves* (1867), and Delacroix’ *La*

mort de Sardanapale (1827). The major difference, however, is that while Broodthaers worked on the idea of art, Vercruysse—who is aware of Broodthaers’ legacy—focuses on the idea of the artist and his gaze (Verschaffel 1998). In a radio interview of 2006, Vercruysse explains that the comparison with Magritte and Broodthaers is based on a misunderstanding of his own work:

“Yes, but the misunderstanding is, or would be, that those references to Magritte and twice to Broodthaers, but several times to De Chirico and many times to certain Renaissance paintings, that those would determine the meaning of the content of the work. And that is therefore the risk I took. Which created the misunderstanding that the content of my work would be that reference. Or that historical reference, which is not the case.” (Trio and Vercruysse 2006)²²

Also, Vercruysse condemned the way Broodthaers contributed to the stereotypical creation of Belgianness in contemporary art. Instead of putting forward rather negative values as “typical Belgian”, Vercruysse advocated for the creation of a positive myth of Belgianness:

“Broodthaers was certainly the first artist who created a consciousness of the “Belgianness of Belgian Art”—in and through his work. But he did this in a negative way, confirming the international image of the Belgian artist as The Underdog. I always thought that this Belgianness should be turned into a positive force, a positive myth: I have seen too many interesting Belgian artists in the seventies nearly disappear, mainly because they believed themselves that they were the unhappy underdogs.” (Vercruysse in Christov-Bakargiev 1989, p. 105)²³

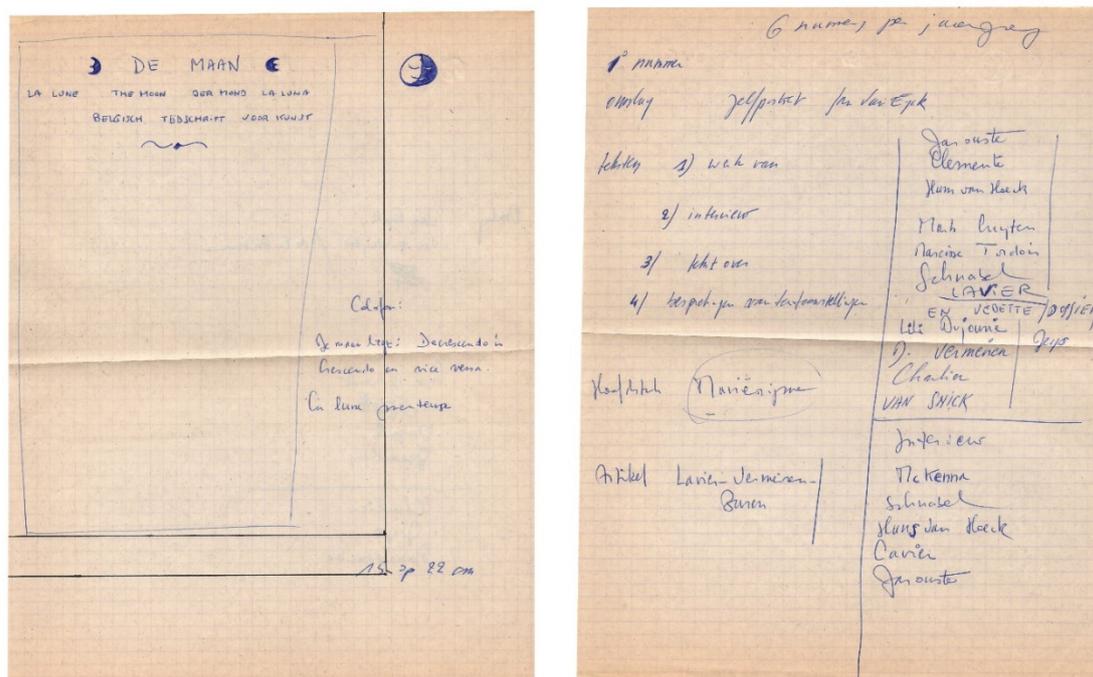


Figure 9. Sketch for “De Maan (La lune, the moon, der Mond, la luna). Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Kunst.” (1982). The sketch contains an outline of the content for the first issue, whose cover would reproduce the self-portrait by Jan van Eyck. (Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruysse Foundation).

In 1982, Jan Vercruysse fostered the plan to launch a “Belgian Magazine for Art” oriented towards an international audience, which can be read as an attempt of creating a ‘positive myth’ of Belgian art.²⁴ Although the plan would never be implemented, Vercruysse’s personal archive contains a handwritten draft of the summary of the first issue. (Figure 9). A noteworthy detail is the fact that on the front cover Vercruysse planned to

place a reproduction of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man*, thus linking the probably most internationally renowned Flemish Primitive to a *Belgian* artistic project. But how Belgian are the Flemish Primitives?

4. (De)Constructing the Belgianness of Flemish Primitives

"What is traditionally called 'Flemish painting' is 'Belgian painting'." (Poirier (1949) quoted in ((Deam 1998, p. 13 (n41)))²⁵

The concept of "Flemish Primitives" first appeared in France around 1850 (Sulzberger 1959, p. 14). The 19th century was the age of nationalism and the creation of the nation state in Western Europe. So, it comes as no surprise that not only France but also Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany were keen to appropriate the Flemish Primitives as part of their own national heritage. Although present day scholars prefer the term "Northern Renaissance" to label the innovations that took place in the arts north of the Alps in the 15th century, previous generations debated whether van Eyck and his contemporaries should be entitled as "Flemish" or "Netherlandish" (Deam 1998, p. 2). As art historian Wessel Krul (2005, p. 253) points out, in the late 19th century the Flemish Primitives have been claimed by the Dutch, French and Belgians to demonstrate that the Renaissance was not an exclusive Italian affair and that their respective nations also contributed to the renewal in Western art, thereby deliberately ignoring the fact that the political situation had changed considerably:

"But, of course, the political situation of the fifteenth-century did not correspond to the present borders: the realm of the Burgundian dukes had been divided among the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, which allowed patriotic souls in all three countries to claim the glory of early Netherlandish painting for their own. This debate accentuated not only the differences with Italy, but also those among the three northern nations." (Krul 2005, p. 253)

The North versus South debate as applied to Renaissance painting has been echoed in the national Belgian debate. As an independent nation state, Belgium had been artificially created in 1830 on the crossroads of two European cultural areas, the Germanic on the one hand and Roman or Latin on the other. This duality of Belgian national identity soon became a trope of Belgianness as can be traced in nationalistic historiography such as the work of Henri Pirenne (1902) for whom the unity of the Belgian people resulted from a fusion of Latin and Germanic cultures. The projection of this national trope on the Flemish Primitives led art historian Hyppolite Fierens-Gevaert (a contemporary of Pirenne) to conclude that Hubert and Jan van Eyck were prototypical Belgian artists since they had adopted the Latin influence without neglecting their Germanic identity:

"[. . .] these masters who so loudly proclaim the Flemish glory were Belgians avant la lettre, Belgians according to the modern formula, faithful to their native aspirations and freely associated with the radiance of the ancient Latin splendor." (Fierens-Gevaert 1928, p. 78)²⁶

In 1902, an exhibition of the Flemish Primitives organized in Bruges in order to promote Belgian nationalism and cultural identity, the 'Flemish Primitives' were explicitly staged as Belgian artists (Krul 2005, p. 275). Very soon it became clear that the Belgian communitarian debate would permeate the art historical interpretation of the Flemish Primitives, opposing a Flemish and a Belgian appropriation.

Additionally, the period in which Jan Vercryse defined himself as the "Last Flemish Primitive" is quite significant, as it was profoundly marked by this typically Belgian communitarian context. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Belgian art scene was in the international spotlight. Many exhibitions focusing on "Belgian Art" were organized both in Belgium and abroad, and many art critics and curators were eager to define what made up Belgian Art (Brams and Pültau 2005). Ironically, however, while exhibition organizers and art critics were trying to define the notion of "Belgian Art", the Belgian

nation-state was involved in a process of federalization with far-reaching autonomous competences for Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, making the notion of “Belgian Art” almost obsolete (Brams and Pültau 2005). By claiming the Flemish Primitives as his artistic precursors, Jan Vercruyssen takes a stand in that debate.

During the early 1970s, the Dutch speaking community gained cultural autonomy, as a result of the first State reform. This was an important leverage to develop a self-confident cultural identity as stated in the 1982 declaration of principles by the first autonomous government:

“The Flemish Community is now facing a major challenge. This challenge consists of confirming, promoting and publicizing the identity of our Flemish people. [...] The announcement of our identity implies that the Flemish people become recognizable and recognized beyond our borders, in Belgium, in Europe and in the world.” (Geens quoted in Brams and Pültau 2005)²⁷

In subsequent State reforms, the Belgian unitary State was progressively dismantled. This process went along with the economic growth of Flanders, a region that increasingly distanced itself from a Belgian national sense of identity. At the end of this process, in 1993, the Belgian unitary State ceased to exist.²⁸

It was in this Belgian political context, with a shifted cultural landscape increasingly drawn by regional boundaries, that Vercruyssen made the claim as being the *last* Flemish Primitive. The historical Flemish Primitives lived “In an era of such great itineracy, in which artists were often called to different location by courtly or economic considerations, identity may not have been categorically equated with birthplace.” (Deam 1998, p. 25) In the same way, Vercruyssen deliberately challenges the value that is attached to the birthplace in order to define the identity of the artist, by systematically mentioning different birthplaces. Also, the linguistic diversity is one of the characteristics of Vercruyssen’s work, recalling a sense of fluidity of cultural boundaries in the cosmopolitan environment in which the Flemish primitives, regardless of their place of birth, lived and worked. As an early 20th century art critic pointed out:

“The van Eyck brothers were both born in the small town of Maes-yck-sur-Meuse, “on the borders of German, Flemish and French,—remarks the Count of Laborde—to better show that genius speaks all languages and that art alone is the universal language.”” (Fierens-Gevaert 1928, p. 51)²⁹

In 1988, on the eve of the definitive demise of the Belgian unitary state, the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts organized a survey-exhibition on Jan Vercruyssen. Curiously enough, up until today the Palais des Beaux-Arts is the only institution of contemporary art that has not been federalized (i.e., split up according to the linguistic communities), and thus the only surviving bulwark of what can be considered “Belgian Art”.³⁰ This was a stepstone in Vercruyssen’s career as it was the very first survey-exhibition dedicated to his work. As usual, Vercruyssen himself compiled the exhibition catalogue. On a blank page preceding the title page of the book appears the word Brussels written in Persian alphabet (بروکسل). This enigmatic opening epigraph should be read as part of a sequence in which the artist reveals his positioning vis-à-vis Belgian politically created cultural boundaries. On the next title page, appears the artist’s name followed by a bilingual text (Dutch and French) mentioning the organizing institution, place and year. The third page mirrors the first page with the Brussels inscription. This time, on top of the blank paper, the epigraph reads “à la mémoire de ce qui n’a jamais existé” (to the memory of what never has been). Combined with the previous two pages, and in relation to his ambiguous relationship with the notion of Belgian art, this poetic sentence can be interpreted as a suggestion of the end of the inexistent myth of a Belgian identity, including “Belgian Art”. After this opening sequence, without any further transition or introduction, the artist “presents himself” in ten self-portraits. In the first one (*Zelfportret* 1981) (Figure 10), the face of the artist is blurred.

In an unpublished note, Vercruyssen explains this particular self-portrait by associating it with the notion of displacement:



Figure 10. Jan Vercruyssen, *Zelfportret*, 1981. Photolithoprint on paper, 69 × 53 cm, faded. Photo: Philippe Degobert. Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruyssen Foundation.

“The mechanism is one of displacement. If the aim is to define the identity of the artist, his face has become illegible and the identity-definition is displaced [. . .]” (Vercruyssen 1984)

Displacement has to do with the denial of Vercruyssen to be pinpointed on one fixed cultural or national identity. As in the 1980s, Flanders defined more and more its own political borders based on cultural and linguistic homogeneity, the artist Vercruyssen claimed his freedom to create an identity based on shifting boundaries by contesting the political appropriation of art for a nationalistic agenda.³¹ In this sense, when Vercruyssen labels himself as the Last Flemish Primitive, this has little to do with a self-identification with Flanders as a contemporary political entity. Instead, the Flemish Primitives, particularly the van Eyck brothers, stand as the metaphor of the freedom of the artist to create his own fluid identity. This cultural agency to define, blur or redraw boundaries is, in Vercruyssen’s view also the quintessence of Belgianness:

“The only ones who have remained mentally Belgian are the artists. They share the same histories up to and including the most recent ones. They also live in the same art history. You can safely say that I am a Belgian artist. I know Van Eyck. It is mine, in a manner of speaking. Magritte: idem. This separation of image and language in the work of Magritte; a Frenchman would never think that his language does not correspond to the image that he sees. We also live with two cultures, with two languages. Magritte is Belgian; his work can never have been created by a Frenchman. The same for Broodthaers.” (Vercruyssen in Decan 2007, p. 73)³²

5. Conclusions

In order to conclude, I would like to draw attention to a unique filmed interview that Vercruysse gave in 1990 for Flemish television. As an object of study, this interview is remarkable in two ways. First of all, the interviewer—the television producer Jef Cornelis—was a close friend of Vercruysse, resulting in an intimate portrait of the artist. Secondly, the notion of a portrait is enhanced by the very composition of the film—the artist seated at a table against a neutral background, directly facing the camera—which resembles the many self-portraits from the series *Portraits of the Artist*.

Since this interview took place less than one year after the *Flash Art* interview with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in which the artist declared that he considered himself to be he felt to be “The Last Flemish Primitive,” it comes as no surprise that Cornelis asks about this provocative declaration. As Vercruysse explains:

“Something everyone always wants to know about every artist is who influenced him, who were his predecessors, his forefathers. And every artist gets a list balanced forcibly on his shoulders. Without argumentation, without justification. To give short shrift to that I said I’m the last Flemish Primitive.” (Vercruysse in [Cornelis 2020](#))

Indeed, as we have seen, this assertion can be related to the ambiguous relationship of Vercruysse with his inclusion in the canon of Belgian art dominated by figures such as Magritte and Broodthaers. This ambiguity was even sharpened by the national context of regionalization and the claim put on artists to serve a political agenda. Instead of accepting the common idea of being an heir of his two compatriots, Vercruysse self-consciously constructs his artistic identity by taking control of his public image as cast in exhibitions and catalogues. Following his self-proclaimed artisthood in 1977, the self-portrait became his genre of choice to shape his self-image as an artist. However, in none of these works the person Jan Vercruysse becomes fully knowable. This elusiveness is related to his conception of art and artisthood, as he explains in the above-mentioned television interview:

“What the true artist would certainly do... is circle around, skirt around the truth. Point to it but certainly never formulate it and never divulge it. Because then... if the truth is revealed, then life is at an end. Truth is fatal. And... One of the strengths of art is that art circles it and, as a result, is able to carry on. It is a fire you can burn yourself on, so you have to stay away from it. And you stop everything. If you reveal the truth, you stop everything.” (Vercruysse in [Cornelis 2020](#))

The artist, in order to survive, to continue his artistic journey may not give away his true identity. As Vercruysse states later on: “Self-analysis is the end of being an artist, full stop.” (Vercruysse in [Cornelis 2020](#)) (Figure 11).

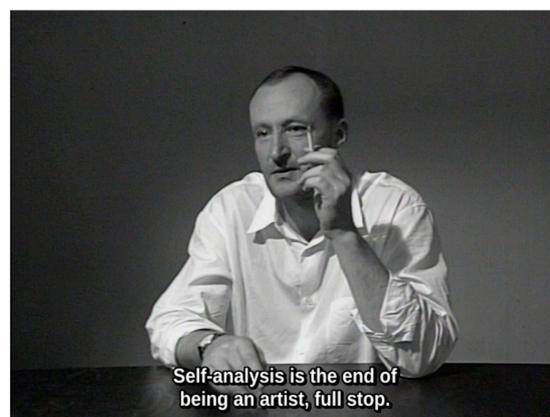


Figure 11. Jef Cornelis, broadcasted in December 1990 on the Flemish Broadcasting Company (BRT). Reprinted with permission from Jan Vercruysse Foundation and Argos.

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Notes

- 1 Translated by the author from the original: “Vercruyssen noemt zichzelf de laatste Vlaamse Primitief. We brengen dus een dode en een levende Vlaamse Primitief met elkaar in dialoog. Als Vercruyssen zich wil meten met een van de grootste schilders uit onze contreien, dan moet hij dat nu waarmaken.”
- 2 This article is based on extensive research in the personal archives of the artist Jan Vercruyssen, held by the Jan Vercruyssen Foundation in Brussels.
- 3 Translated by the author from the original: “L’artiste n’est artiste qu’à la condition d’être double et de n’ignorer aucun phénomène de sa double nature.”
- 4 For a more detailed analysis of the early years of Vercruyssen’s career, see (Brams 2012).
- 5 Although most scholars agree that this work is a self-portrait by Jan van Eyck, the hypothesis also has its opponents. For a discussion of this debate see (Calster 2003), especially pp. 478–83.
- 6 The central question of these works is, as Vercruyssen has indicated: “How is identity determined? How is the identity of the artist determined?” (Vercruyssen in Decan 2007).
- 7 “The distinction I made between “light” presence and “strong” presence is based on the distinction between a “sociological” approach and, say, an “ontological” one.” (Vercruyssen in Christov-Bakargiev 1989). For a comparison with the Appropriation artists see, for example (Celant 1988). Also significant is the fact that Vercruyssen turned down the exhibition *Un Art de la Distinction?* at the Centre d’art Contemporain de Meymac in 1990, a thematic exhibition departing from the theories of Jean Baudrillard, with among others Sherrie Levine, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, Allan McCollum and Haim Steinbach. Vercruyssen turned down the invitation stating that “Je ne fais pas d’exemples d’illustrations de strategies ou d’analyses.” [I don’t make illustrations of strategies or analyses.] (Vercruyssen 1990).
- 8 Translated by the author from the original: “Het is kunst omdat het in ieder geval een reflectie inhoudt over kunst, omdat het op zo’n manier geformuleerd wordt dat het zichzelf kan funderen binnen het culturele veld dat kunst noemt. [. . .] Het is ook vanuit die intentie dat je jezelf als kunstenaar situeert, dat je een specifieke positie inneemt tegenover kunst. Het is in de mate dat je een reflectie kunt maken over op welke manier je werk kritiek inhoudt op—of een herdenken betekent van—voorafgaande kunst, dat je jezelf situeert.” With this description of his work, Vercruyssen leans heavily on the Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth whose work he exhibited in his gallery in 1976 and whose texts he translated into Dutch for the ICC (Internationaal Cultureel Centrum, Antwerp) in the same year.
- 9 In a subsidy dossier for a film project in 1983, Jan Vercruyssen explains his artistic strategy as follows: “Un des themes de longue durée est l’autoportrait—qui doit être compris comme “portrait de l’artiste” et non comme un portrait “personnel” (d’une personne) [. . .] Ces oeuvres sont faites de, fondées sur le métaphore, l’allégorie, l’association—et la rhétorique [. . .] (Vercruyssen 1983).
- 10 Translated by the author from the original: “Het zijn geen zelfportretten, zoals ook de foto’s van de vrouwen geen portretten van een persoon zijn. Van een portret verwacht je dat de identiteit van de geportretteerde zichtbaar wordt gemaakt. Daar ben ik niet mee bezig. Deze werken zijn een spel vol valse sporen, knipogen en symbolen, omwille van het spel, niet omwille van de inhoud. Ze zijn samengesteld uit elementen die telkens worden verschoven en die een identiteit zouden kunnen aangeven—maar dat niet doen”.
- 11 Translated by the author from the original: “Een waar verhaal, Een niet-waar verhaal, Een echt verhaal, Een niet-echt verhaal, Een fictief verhaal, Een niet-fictief verhaal, Een reëel verhaal, Een niet-reëel verhaal.”
- 12 Translated by the author from the original: “Quant à mon biographe anonyme, que veux-tu que je t’envoie pour lui être agréable? Je n’ai aucune biographie. Communique-lui, de ton cru, tout ce qui te fera plaisir. [. . .] Je pense que l’Écrivain ne doit laisser de lui que ses œuvres. Sa vie importe peu. Arrière la guenille!”
- 13 Translated by the author from the original: “Jan Vercruyssen wil geen portretfoto in deze krant, geen uitvoerige, tot in de details opgemaakte levensschets, geen volledig uitgeschreven interview, geen verklarende en/of beschrijvende tekst bij het werk dat hij maakt (tenzij hij de tekst zelf schrijft). “Jan Vercruyssen, geb. 1948, woont en werkt in België” mag als randvermelding bij zijn werk volstaan.”
- 14 In the work *Autoportrait* (1982), the artist holds a copy of *L’idiot de la famille*, Sartre’s biography on Gustave Flaubert. During his lecture “Curating the library” in Antwerp in 2005, Vercruyssen presents Sartre’s biography on Charles Baudelaire and Gerrit Borgers’ biography on Paul van Ostaijen as his favourite books. Other biographies included in the library of Jan Vercruyssen

are, among others: on Arthur Rimbaud (Izambard, Georges. *Rimbaud, tel que je l'ai connu*. Paris: Le Passeur/Cecofop, 1991; Starkie, Enid. *Arthur Rimbaud*. Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1984; Robb, Graham. *Arthur Rimbaud*. New York: W.W. Norton & co, 2000); Ludwig Wittgenstein (Waugh, Alexander. *De Wittgensteins*. Geschiedenis van een excentrieke familie. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2014; Monk, Ray. *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The duty of genius*. Londen: Vintage, 1991); Marquis de Sade (Pauvert, Jean-Jacques. *Markies de Sade in levenden lijve: pornograaf en stilist 1783–1814*. Baarn: Uitgeverij de Prom, 1993; Pauvert, Jean-Jacques. *Markies de Sade in levenden lijve: een natuurlijke onschuld 1740–1783*. Baarn: Uitgeverij de Prom, 199; Sollers, Philippe. *Sade Contre l'Être Suprême*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1996); Casanova (Sollers, Philippe. *Casanova l'admirable*. Paris: La Librairie Plon, 1998; Roustang, François. *Le Bal Masqué de Giacomo Casanova*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1984); Plutarch (Plutarchus. *Makers of Rome*. Londen: Penguin Classic, 1987; Plutarchus. *The rise and fall of Athens: Nine Greek lives*. Londen: Penguin, 1990).

15 It comes as no surprise that Vercruyse admired Pessoa, a poet known for his play with biographical data. In 2005 Vercruyse created the work *Places (III.1)*, in which he incorporates a poem by Alvaro de Campos (heteronym of Pessoa), and as guest lecturer at the Fine Arts Academy in Ghent (KASK) in 2008, he gave a course on Pessoa.

16 The library of Jan Vercruyse contains a Dutch translation of this essay (Paz 1990).

17 As René Pinggen, in his PhD dissertation on the Van Abbemuseum, described the writings of the French critic Alain Cueff as “abstruse, parallel prose” that instead of clarifying things, edify “clearly an additional barrier” around the work of Jan Vercruyse. (Pinggen 2005, p. 477) (My translation).

18 Translated by the author from the original: “un livre est le produit d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices.”

19 The project ran parallel to the much-acclaimed exhibition *Chambres d'Amis* (from 21 June to 21 September 1986). The aim of the project was to enforce “opportunities abroad for Belgian artists.” To this end, the organization invited three internationally renowned curators Kasper König, Jean-Hubert Martin and Gosse W. Oosterhof, to each make a selection of Belgian contemporary art. Jan Vercruyse was selected by Dutch curator Gosse W. Oosterhof, together with the artists Walter Swennen, Jacques Charlier, Lili Dujourie, Narcisse Tordoir and Luk Van Soom. (Cassiman 1986).

20 Such as: *L'Art en Belgique, Flandre et Wallonie au XXe siècle. Un point de vue* (Paris: Musée d'art modern de la ville de Paris, 1990), *Kunst in België na 1980* (Brussels: Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten, 1993), *Artists (From Flanders)* (Venice: Palazzo Sagredo, 1990), *Flemish and Dutch Painting: From Van Gogh, Ensor, Magritte, Mondrian to contemporary artists* (Venice: Palazzo Grassi, 1997), among others.

21 The left image of each depicts a solitary figure (Narcissus), while the right image depicts groups of people (the twelfth and last work of the series is an exception; only one image is reproduced, *Jeune Homme Nu Assis au Bord de la Mer* by Hippolyte Flandrin (1836) and is accompanied by the caption “ou l'utopie”). For Vercruyse the figure of Narcissus embodies the method or definition of artistic practice. As Liesbeth Decan has pointed out, “art, for Vercruyse, is about a self-conscious artist looking at things and—from that self-awareness—shaping the world.” (Decan 2016, p. 179).

22 Translated by the author from the original: “Ja, maar het misverstand is of zou zijn dat die verwijzingen naar Magritte en twee keer naar Broodthaers, maar meerdere keren naar De Chirico wat.. en veel keren naar bepaalde Renaissance schilderijen, dat die de betekenis van de inhoud van het werk zou bepalen, en dat is dus het risico dat ik genomen heb en dus . . . Waardoor het misverstand ontstaan is dat.. de inhoud van mijn werk zou zijn, die verwijzing. Of die historische verwijzing, wat dus niet het geval is”.

23 Interestingly, in the same issue of *Flash Art International* in which the interview with Jan Vercruyse appeared, art critic Terry R. Myers (1989) reviewed a show by Belgian artist Leo Copers in New York, thereby affirming the many clichés existing about “Belgian Art”: “The miniscule portion of twentieth-century Belgian art promoted in New York these days is increasingly in danger of being considered initially on the basis its sight-gag potential alone. Visual jokes, historically exemplified in (and for the most part admirably transcended by) the work of Magritte and Broodthaers, for example, have become almost parasitic in the output of many contemporary Belgian artists”, Terry R. Myers, “Leo Copers,” *Flash Art International*, October 1989, p. 132.

24 The magazine Vercruyse envisioned was bilingual (Dutch-English). At that time, the only Belgian magazines discussing contemporary art were *Kunst & Cultuuragenda* (published by the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts) and the Brussels based magazine *+0*. The magazine *Artefactum* was founded in 1983. For a discussion on Belgian art criticism in the early 1980s, see (Van Mulders 1984).

25 Translated by the author from the original: “Ce qu'on appelle par tradition 'la peinture flamande', c'est 'la peinture belge'.”

26 Translated by the author from the original: “[. . .] ces maîtres qui proclament si haut la gloire flamande furent des Belges d'avant la lettre, des Belges suivant la formule moderne, fidèles aux aspirations natales et librement associés au rayonnement de l'antique majesté latine.”

27 Translated by the author from the original: “De Vlaamse Gemeenschap staat nu voor een grote uitdaging. Deze uitdaging bestaat in de bevestiging, de bevordering en de bekendmaking van de identiteit van ons Vlaamse Volk. [...] De bekendmaking van onze identiteit houdt in dat het Vlaamse volk herkenbaar en erkenbaar wordt over onze grenzen, in België, Europa en in de wereld.”

28 Interestingly, that very same year, Jan Vercruyse was selected to represent Belgium at the Venice Biennial. As a result of the federalization process, since 1972 the task of choosing an artist for the Belgian pavilion is alternated by the Flemish and Walloon

communities. Consequently, the exhibition catalogue of Vercruyssen's contribution to the Venice Biennial in 1993 mentions the "Flemish Pavilion" (Padiglione di Fiandra) as opposed to the Belgian pavilion.

²⁹ Translated by the author from the original: "Les frères van Eyck sont nés tous deux dans la petite ville de Maesyeck-sur-Meuse, "sur les confins de l'allemand, du flamand et du français,—remarque le comte de Laborde—pour mieux montrer que le génie parle toutes les langues et que l'art est à lui seul la langue universelle.""

³⁰ Belgium has three remaining Federal Cultural Institutions: The Palais des Beaux-Arts (BOZAR), The Belgian National Orchestra, and The Federal Opera House (La Monnaie/De Munt).

³¹ On 10 October 1989 Vercruyssen was rewarded for his artistic career by the Flemish Community (Vlaamse Gemeenschap), and in 2001 he received the Flemish Culture Prize for Visual Arts (Vlaamse Cultuurprijs voor Beeldende Kunst).

³² Translated by the author from the original: "De enigen die mentaal Belgisch zijn gebleven, zijn de kunstenaars. Zij delen dezelfde geschiedenissen tot en met de meest recente. Zij leven ook in dezelfde kunstgeschiedenis. Van mij mag je gerust zeggen dat ik een Belgisch kunstenaar ben. Van Eyck: ik ken Van Eyck. Dat is van mij, bij wijze van spreken. Magritte: idem. Die ont koppeling bij Magritte van beeld en taal; een Fransman zou er nooit aan denken dat zijn taal niet overeenstemt met het beeld dat hij ziet. We leven ook met twee culturen, met twee talen. Magritte is een Belg; zijn werk kan nooit door een Fransman gemaakt zijn. Hetzelfde voor Broodthaers."

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