Presenting a city: Brussels and its subjective portraits

Exposer une ville : Bruxelles et ses portraits subjectifs
Een stad tonen: Brussel en zijn subjectieve portretten

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Introduction

1 The image of a “new Berlin”, as conveyed by the media, in particular by an article in the New York Times written by Eimear Lynch [2015], has stuck with Brussels for several years now. After having suffered for so long from a poor image [Leenaerts, 2009; Méaux, 2015], the unpopular Brussels is now experiencing a renewed favour. Its new status as a fashionable city owes much to its connection with contemporary art, galleries, collectors and the presence of many international artists who have lived there for a certain amount of time.

2 It is in this context that we see a rise in the number of exhibits on the city. Independently of the nature and missions of institutions which do not address the same issues in terms of cultural policy, curatorial practices for exhibits on Brussels seem to be developing. Apart from the permanent exhibition spaces devoted to the city such as BIP at Place Royale, let us mention the temporary exhibits Silver Bliss: Portrait of a City at Argos (14 September-26 October 2014),1 BXL Universel, which celebrated the 10th anniversary of CENTRALE (20 October 2016-26 March 2017), the photography exhibit Bruxelles à l’infini at the same venue (26 June-28 September 2014), and at BOZAR, Bruxelles is a Plaizier on the Brussels image bank (16 June-17 September 2017). Less explicitly, Brussels was also at the centre of other exhibits, for example The Absent Museum at Wiels (20 April-13 August 2017), as well as many installations, films and live performances aimed in one way or another at presenting a portrait of the city.2
This observation raises several questions: what are these exhibits/portraits a sign of? What do they teach us about the relationship between art and the territory? So many questions gravitate around one central issue: “What does it mean to present an exhibit on a city?”. Does it involve presenting the works of artists who are particularly connected to an urban territory, local collective initiatives or a specific heritage? Is an “exhibit/portrait of a city” – as we propose to call this type of event – intended to be a summary, show all of the facets or, on the contrary, create a unique experience? Another question is raised as to how an exhibit on a city differs from an exhibit on a country – in the case of traditional universal exhibits as well as the more radical experiences of Harald Szeemann, in particular the famous exhibit La Belgique visionnaire presented at Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles on the occasion of the country’s 175th anniversary in 2005.

Finally, a reflection on the “exhibit/portrait of a city” based on the case of Brussels prompts us to question the specificities of this city, where the notion of identity is related to political and territorial issues more than it is elsewhere. In terms of urban marketing as well, the exhibits on (and often in) Brussels should be placed in the context of all of the current initiatives to develop urban spaces through art.

Three perspectives of the city which we have identified in the curatorial approaches mentioned above will therefore be examined: first, Brussels as a “creative home port”, followed by the continuity between heritage and creation, and finally, the notion of the subjective and diffracted portrait. Among the exhibits mentioned, we focus in particular on the exhibit BXL Universel which was part of a bigger project led by Carine Fol, artistic director of CENTRALE for contemporary art. Proposed as a celebration of the 10th anniversary of CENTRALE, this work has taken the form of a trilogy of exhibits in order to present the diversity of Brussels: the next two parts are planned for 2020 and 2022.

1. Presenting a living environment: Brussels as a “creative home port”

Presenting a portrait of a city first involves finding a way to embody it, by giving it a face. This embodiment often consists in exhibiting works by artists who have a particular connection with the city, because they were born there, they live there, they stayed there during a residency, or more broadly, because the city is part of their personal realm of imagination. Above all, an exhibit about a city therefore involves exhibiting works by artists who have made the city their own in different ways.

This approach focuses on individuals and their unique views of a city. Nevertheless, a collective vision of the city emerges from these unique views. In the case of Brussels, where many artists have deliberately chosen to live, this image is that of the “creative home port” [Fol, 2016: 22]. Neither a random place of birth nor a required passage in the same way that Paris might be, Brussels can be proud that it has attracted a large number of artists who – after living there during their studies or a residency – chose to stay there permanently, even though they travel half of the time.

The phrase “lives and works in Brussels”, which is commonly seen on plaques at exhibits, is not as neutral as it seems. It indicates the present place of residence of an artist rather than his or her origins. “Lives and works” therefore contrasts with the
artist’s nationality. This phrase even highlights urban identities rather than national identities, temporary and shifting ties rather than more fixed identities. Brussels, a long-standing “small world city” and more recently de facto European capital, is a perfect symbol of the idea of transit and passage. The city thus seems to go together with the vision of transboundary, globalised and deterritorialised contemporary art, and reinforces the myth of the nomadic and cosmopolitan artist. In reality, the image of Brussels as a city of exchanges and transfers coexists with that of a home port which one is attached to. Behind the simple words “lives and works in Brussels”, there is often a true territorial anchoring and a “sense of something shared” tied to a common place, the city, the municipality, the neighbourhood, the street, the studio, or even housing. This vision of anchored and territorialised art is shared by Carine Fol, who does not want to separate creation from existence, and who considers the emotional bond between artists and a city as essential.

In this perspective, we understand the importance, for the image of a city, of artists’ residencies, which are sometimes part of true “city branding” operations [Genard, Corijn, Francq and Schaut, 2009]. Just as the Erasmus programme was created in order for concrete, emotional, friendly or love relationships to develop between young citizens of the European Union, residencies often seek to create or reinforce the emotional ties between creators and a city [Reverseau, 2016]. In the case of Brussels, Danielle Leenaerts pointed out that the photographic residencies at Contretype were established in 1997 by Jean-Louis Godefroid in order to make up for a lack of photographic representation of the Belgian capital [Leenaerts, 2014]. In the same way, the new residency programme ThalieLab, launched in Brussels in 2017, stipulates that it is intended for “artists and curators [...] who wish to explore the territory of Brussels in its cultural diversity”. The question of the temporary anchoring of artists in residence will be dealt with in the second part of the CENTRALE trilogy, which will concern multicultural Brussels, inviting a Swiss artist who will develop the idea of the external view.

The anchoring in a territory presupposes a certain number of specific places. In Brussels, the Marché aux Puces, referred to as the “Vieux Marché” or “Marché de la Place du Jeu de Balle”, comes to mind first. It is around this “heart of the city” that a certain number of those whom Carine Fol refers to as the “figures of Brussels” gravitate, in particular Jean-Pierre Rostenne, an emblematic figure from the Marolles who died in 2017, and who was a reflection of the city also because he had lived in Africa. The Art & marges museum in Brussels owns a collection of his personalised canes decorated with various trinkets, which were a speciality of this eccentric artist. Other artists from Brussels connected with the Marché aux Puces include Vincen Beeckman, who often works with old albums and family photos, Oriol Vilanova, born in Catalonia, who collects and arranges postcards, and Kendell Geers, born in Johannesburg, whose installation Kode IX (2016) at CENTRALE included collected objects which were immobilised with red and white plastic tape. Apart from the Marché aux Puces, Carine Fol mentions three “figures of Brussels” whom she feels are particularly important: Elvis Pompilio and his shop – which was the place to be in the 1980s and 1990s – Stromae and Arno. These Brussels figures mix experience, work and a city. According to Carine Fol, the city speaks through them. It is also interesting to compare the BXL Universel catalogue with the credits for the France Culture radio programme
Villes mondes, which devoted two episodes to Brussels [Liber, 2016] by getting “figures of Brussels” to speak about their city.

The anchoring is sometimes as real as can be, as in the case of the installation and performance by Lise Duclaux for BXL Universel, which consisted in giving away cuttings of plants from around the city for people to take care of. Apart from the CENTRALE exhibit, we would like to see in the rapid growth of artistic projects involving roaming or forms of mapping – well represented by the Wandering Arts Biennial – this same form of anchoring in Brussels, or more broadly, in Belgium.

Another original feature of Brussels lies in the local networking created by collective projects halfway between the artistic and social realms, such as the Zinneke Parade, which is a hybrid type of Brussels carnival held every two years, with floats made by schools and community centres in collaboration with artists. Like other initiatives launched on the occasion of Brussels 2000, European Capital of Culture, the Zinneke Parade will have great significance in the second part of the CENTRALE trilogy on the multicultural city, planned for 2020.

This hybrid dimension is an integral part of the urban identity, providing a key to resolving the tension between the singular and universal nature of a city when presenting it in an exhibit. The singularity of the city thus appears to lie in its diversity and plurality. As Carine Fol writes in the catalogue for the exhibit BXL Universel: “The title BXL Universel does not only refer to Expo 58: it also underlines the universality of the singularity of Brussels (brusseleire) and the human dimension of a surrealistic city.” [Fol, 2016: 16].

Figure 1. Poster for the BXL Universel exhibit (CENTRALE, 20 October 2016-26 March 2017)

Graphic design: Jean-Michel Demeyer.
Figure 2. *BXL Universel*, exhibit (CENTRALE, 20 October 2016-26 March 2017).

View of the exhibit: works by François Schuiten and Jean-Pierre Rostenne. Photograph: Philippe De Gobert.

2. Showing continuity: Brussels, from heritage to creation

Presenting an exhibit about a city, also involves presenting its history, its traditions and even its folklore. This traditional approach is not necessarily left out of the contemporary curatorial approaches which are not aimed at presenting a summary of the history of the city, but rather at historicising contemporary creations and putting them into perspective. The CENTRALE exhibit had a strong focus on the temporal continuity between folklore and the artists who live in Brussels today. The first part of the Brussels trilogy delved into the past and popular culture, in particular the way in which they were appropriated or were the objects of fantasies.

With the importance given to roots, *BXL Universel* was thus in keeping with the trilogy of exhibits on countries (Switzerland in 1991, Austria in 1995 and Belgium in 2005) curated by Harald Szeemann, who claimed in 2003 that “in a globalised world, roots form the peripheries of subversion” [Duplat, 2003]. Carine Fol, who considers the famous Swiss curator as her mentor, is a specialist in outsider art, and through her exhibits seeks to abolish the boundaries between art and folklore, as well as between art and heritage. She was strongly in favour of opening *BXL Universel* with the work of an outsider artist, Franz Gsellmann, an Austrian farmer who was overwhelmed by the discovery of the Atomium in 1958, and who devoted the remaining 23 years of his life to building the *Weltmaschine*, a complex, labyrinthic and cosmic machine.

*BXL Universel* attached great importance to Expo 58. It has been a long time since Expo 58, but it still plays a major role in the collective memory, which suggests another way to present a city, by showing the memories which the people who live there or have
been there have of it. The curatorial approach chosen by Carine Fol consists in using the past to project it into the present. A contemporary art exhibit centred on a city is thus a way to reorganise the past, as suggested by Ana Torfs in her work *Story Generator* (2015), presented at CENTRALE, which rolls out 500 years of Belgian history in the form of index cards. It is probably also in this sense that we should understand the importance given to the *Vieux Marché* in the Marolles: the objects sold or found at the *Marché aux Puces* belong to the past, but this past comes alive as soon as the object is taken away and is reclaimed.

This fascination with the *Marché aux Puces* and its chance encounters belongs to the surrealist spirit. This spirit, like a local *zwanje* (popular joke or story), is part of the expectations of an exhibit on Brussels. Surrealism was present in *BXL Universel* in the form of a group photograph in front of the tavern *La Fleur en Papier Doré*, but was also seen throughout the exhibit. The sculpture by Thomas Lerooy (*Le Petit Jean*, 2006), which decks out the Manneken Pis with a golden skeleton mask, echoed it, printed in the catalogue opposite a more historical photo by Fernand Hellinckx, *Folklore bruxellois rue des Bouchers* (1959) [Fol, 2016: 204-205]. The effects of disorder and juxtaposition in the double pages of the catalogue (which we shall discuss further) are also a reference to the surrealist spirit.

In reality, the expected historical elements regarding Brussels were present in the CENTRALE exhibit as well as in the Argos exhibit, but in a shifted manner, for example through the article on the Atomium and the role of the imagination published by Marcel Broodthaers in *Le Petit Patriote* in 1958. While the objective at CENTRALE was to present contemporary artists alongside the fritkot painter (Gillis Houben), Toone puppets and caricaturists (GAL, Kroll), the relationship between art and heritage was presented in a more ironic manner at Argos.

This type of presentation of the city plays a major role in the current perception of Brussels as a city opposed to its being turned into a museum, like an anti-Paris. It is a type of promotion of the famous Brussels freedom, in particular its irreverent and good-natured aspects. In the relationship to heritage, which receives such rough treatment, there is also a Brussels singularity, which was seen in the exhibit *The Absent Museum* at Wiels. As a way to oppose the imagined city and the real city, as well as the past and the present, the young German artist Jana Euler reproduced the covers of old German travel guides for Brussels in four paintings, opposite the actual view of the south part of the city from the top floor of Wiels. And not so far away was the wallpaper by Lucy McKenzie representing emblematic buildings in Brussels.

The exhibits on Brussels do not escape the paradox of the portrait of the city, being a partial and directed perspective at a given time while aiming at a form of universality. Likewise, the tension between the past and the present of a place is a central part of every portrait, and is even “inherent to the genre”. “Highlighting the coexistence of the past and the present” through juxtaposition and “asserting a continuity or complete identity of the past and the present” through analogy: the two processes which David Martens [Martens, 2017: 244] identified in a collection of illustrated books from the 1950s to the 1970s are found on the walls at exhibits and in catalogues.

More broadly, this tension between the past and the present seems to be at the heart of all questions regarding identity. Exhibits on a city lean towards a lasting representation: they are made to stay. Nevertheless, they never escape current events, as underlined by the terrorist attacks in Brussels, which took place during the
preparatory phase of the *BXL Universel* exhibit. At CENTRALE, 22 March 2016 triggered a reflection on the role of the event in the portrait of the city and the question of balance between what is universal and what is individual. Carine Fol explains that the trilogy on Brussels has taken a different turn, in particular in the catalogue, which deals extensively with the attacks through the texts by Caroline Lamarche and Khaled Khalifa, a Syrian writer who was in residence at Passa Porta at the time. With respect to the project, the terrorist attacks in Brussels therefore reinforced the significance of experience and the idea of the city as a shared space. The status of current events and the present in the CENTRALE exhibit also seems to be linked to a changing Brussels identity. Generally speaking, the portraits of cities differ from portraits of countries because they are more sensitive to change, and because the urban identity is by nature hybrid and developing. The Brussels identity, like any urban identity, is less stable than the national identity, which is however not firmly fixed in the case of Belgium.

This is the position of Eric Corijn [Corijn, 2018], as well as certain researchers – historians of literature and photography – on the portraits of territories. In an article which we wrote with Susana S. Martins, we compared “portraits of countries” and “portraits of cities” which “tend to emphasise urban transformations and rhythms, as well as exchanges and movement” [Martins and Reverseau, 2017: 134]. This more dynamic identity seems to call on the subjectivity of authors in portraits of cities, whether it involves writers, photographers or video artists. Finally, while portraits of countries are generally aimed at presenting a national spirit or the “soul of the people” however vague that may be, portraits of cities often recognise the multiplicity of identities, and even the hybrid nature of their urban population [Corijn, 2018].

In the case of CENTRALE, their exhibits are never aimed at presenting a summary. The choice of the trilogy is explained by the necessity of an approach which is fragmented and diffracted into many subjective points of view.

*Figure 3. BXL Universel, exhibit (CENTRALE, 20 October 2016-26 March 2017).*

View of the exhibit. Lise Duclaux, *Plantes de Bruxelles.*
Photograph: Philippe De Gobert.
3. Accepting diversity: diffracted portraits of Brussels

Presenting an exhibit about Brussels means presenting visions of Brussels and the tension between them, playing with the ways in which they fit together. The works of the group MICM-Arc Culture, mobilité, territoire as well as those of Eric Corijn, emphasise what all urban identities – in particular that of Brussels – owe to their newcomers and to all of the residents who come from somewhere else. Carine Fol subscribes fully to this vision, as according to her, the BXL Universel exhibit is “a linguistic, folkloric and artistic melting pot”: “Far from claiming historical rigorousness, this subjective portrait is a heterogeneous and generous assembling of many different creative personalities and universes” [Fol, 2016: 18]. The catalogue in particular emphasises what the foreign perspective adds to the portrait of a city, which is particularly common in Brussels. In “Variations sur un thème”, Caroline Lamarche writes: “This influx of artists from abroad who make Brussels a mirror – and we let them do so, as we are curious about our blind spots – is a constant in our experience of the city and its most vibrant places” [Lamarche, 2016: 80].

In an exhibit, playing on the diversity of perspectives means presenting heterogeneity, which the BXL Universel exhibit lent itself to remarkably well: alongside the monumental installation of stuffed animals by Charlemagne Palestine (Sssttrrrrrraummmmiiinnngggg [...], 2012) and the conceptual work Vortex des Délices (2009-2016) in which Christoph Fink presented soundscapes orchestrated in an impressive machine, more modest works could be seen, such as a video in the Brussels dialect by humorists Stefan Liberski and Frédéric Jannin (from the group called the Snuls), and an interpretation of Les Bonbons by Brel.
In this type of portrait of a city, heterogeneity goes hand in hand with subjectivity. *BXL Universel* did not have a documentary approach or an introduction to the history of Brussels, or an explanation of its special status in Belgium and Europe. Visitors were immersed directly into a series of unique visions of the city. The original assembly of photographs by Vincen Beeckman at CENTRALE was a perfect illustration of the idea of the subjective portrait. *RETROVERSO* (2004-2016) was made up of many self-portraits over several metres, mixing images of everyday life and portraits of encounters, testifying to the photographer’s anchoring in the city. The catalogue introduction by Carine Fol asserted this subjectivity as it involved “inviting artists who live [in Brussels] and presenting an intuitive view of the diversity of identities which bring life to the city” [Fol, 2016: 6], taking inspiration once again from the work of Harald Szeemann, as well as from Spoerri’s “sentimental museums”. Thus, each work could be considered as a portrait of Brussels, and their subjectivity was expressed in a documentary approach to the city, such as the work by Marie-Françoise Plissart, as well as in the imaginative work of François Schuiten, who transformed Brussels into an imaginary city (Brüsel).

This bias of subjectivity suggests that the singularity of a city depends on the singularity of artists, who – more than one might expect – have a big role to play in the identity building of territories. The last two examples and the way in which Plissart and Schuiten are often called upon to illustrate Brussels for publications or the press, show how artistic creation acts as a mirror which artists use to reflect their territory. It seems to be a widespread approach to ask artists and authors to deal with questions of identity. More and more, artists are expected not only to describe cities, take stock of them and use them as inspiration, but also to transform them. The task of “meeting a social challenge” [Corijn, 2016: 196] given to artists is described in the *BXL Universel* catalogue by Eric Corijn, who also discusses the limits of what is expected of the “cultural sector”. This perhaps means encroaching on other domains and obliging singular imaginations to align themselves with other realities.

The significance of the imagination in urban representations might be what allows such an exhibit to be referred to as “poetic”, as its curator Carine Fol does not hesitate to do. But what is a “poetic” exhibit? Is it a non-documentary approach, a type of impressionism, a haziness in the message and in the approach, or a presentation guided by intuition? Carine Fol asserts this type of approach and explains that she persuaded the artists to adopt it, such as Ann Veronica Janssens, whose work – which is usually more conceptual – she describes as “poetic”. The climax of the exhibit, *Ciel* (2003), was a projection in real time of the sky above Brussels. In addition to its simplicity and its obviousness, there is also one other characteristic of the so-called “poetic” curatorial approach: its existential dimension, as it involves getting visitors to experience the city.

This “poetry” is also a “certain something” which allows a semblance of unity, despite the extreme diversity of perspectives and works. Recent works on portraits of territories have shown that the search for unity in diversity was the inescapable *topos* of the genre [Martens, 2017; Reverseau, 2017]. In the case of exhibits, the role of binding agent is vested in the curator. It is the singularity of his or her perspective which makes the portrait of the country. The poetic dimension of *BXL Universel* is even more pronounced in the catalogue and is even amusing, as the works appear to have been mixed like a pack of cards. Archival photographs, reproductions of original works, advertising leaflets, installations, postcards and excerpts from films are thus on a par.
with each other. With no division into chapters, there is a strong impression of haphazardness, in particular in the mixing of time found in the double-page spreads which show the past and present of the *Vieux Marché* [Fol, 2016: 72-73], or the groups of women in evening dress [Fol, 2016: 98-99]. The experience of the catalogue and the experience of the exhibit are necessarily different, and the catalogue for *BXL Universel* seems to go further than the principle of a surprising juxtaposition and of a portrait of the city which is diffracted in opposite directions, when it places Ann Veronica Janssens’ sky opposite a poster of *Le Grand Jojo* [Fol, 2016: 66-67].

In this case, the portrait approach is a curatorial approach. While some of the works exhibited in *BXL Universel* may be considered as portraits of Brussels, it is the vast ensemble which they form and the collection itself which constitute a portrait of the city. In the same way, a portrait of a country illustrated with photos – a book – is made up of a group of images of various types (cards, photographic portraits, landscapes, etc.), literary quotations, prefaces and practical information. The text – in particular the literary text – is an essential addition to exhibits/portraits of territories. Seldom mentioned until now and under-represented in Carine Fol’s exhibit – unlike Szeemann’s very literary thematic exhibits – they move about in the catalogue in the case of *BXL Universel*. These texts by Marc Didden, Thomas Gunzig, Khaled Khalifa and Caroline Lamarche explore the tensions, the difficulties and the singularities of the city which are suggested in the presentation, to the extent that they suggest others.

**Figure 5. BXL Universel, Le Vieux Marché.**

Source: FOL, C. (ed.), 2016. *BXL Universel*. Brussels: CFC-Éditions, pp. 72-73. Photograph: Benoît de Pierpont
Conclusion

“The exhibit/portrait of a city” represented in this study by the first part of the Brussels trilogy at CENTRALE, is faced with the same challenges as any portrait of a territory: reconciling the singular and the universal, the past and the present, diversity and unity. As a portrait of a city, its specificity is nevertheless to emphasise the shifting identities, flows and current events – a dimension which is all the more sensitive as the borders of the city being presented also fluctuate according to whether Brussels-City or the Brussels Region is being considered.

BXL Universel was an exhibit/portrait of a singular city, in particular because the relationship between urban identities and national identities is especially problematic in the case of Brussels. But also because the object of the representation itself required that the perspective of foreigners should be emphasised, as well as the notion of passing through the city – a metaphor which is easy to use in the case of a city which is literally crossed by trains, with the North-South railway junction, and where a large part of the population is “passing through” or “in transit”.

This first comparative approach centred on Brussels has allowed an identification of the challenges involved in presenting an exhibit on a city, and has highlighted the concept of “an exhibit/portrait of a city”. This work may be explored further in several directions: in a broader perspective, by comparing the exhibits in Brussels with exhibits in metropolises such as Paris, London and Berlin, or in smaller cities, in order to have a better understanding of the specificity of Brussels portraits; or, in an intermedia perspective, by placing the exhibits/portraits of cities in a broader context of portraits of cities on the radio, on television, in newspapers, blogs or travelogues. A
wider perspective would allow the artistic, curatorial and editorial approaches to presenting a territory to be considered together.

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NOTES

1. This exhibit was part of the trilogy of exhibits on Belgium and Brussels presented at Argos in 2014: Silver Bliss #1: DCA Screenings (4 May 2014-29 June 2014), Silver Bliss #2: Portrait of a City (14 September 2014-26 October 2014) and Silver Bliss #3: a Certain Love, a Certain Irony, a Certain Belgium (09 November 2014-20 December 2014).

2. For example, the film Brussels, 2016, made by Sara Sejin Chang (Sara Van der Heide) during her residency at Wiels, presented at the Brigittines in April 2017, 100% Brussels, a work by Rimini Protokoll, presented at Halles de Schaerbeek in the framework of Kunstenfestivaldesarts in 2014, and more generally, the programmes of Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Halles de Schaerbeek, Recyclart, etc.

3. Apart from her personal interest, Carine Fol justifies the Brussels theme in the CENTRALE programme due to the fact that the venue was founded by the city: presenting an exhibit about Brussels is therefore one of its missions.

4. This study is in keeping with my post-doctoral research on the collaboration between writers and photographers on the portraits of cities and countries, financed by FWO between 2015 and 2018, as well as in the research group on portraits of territories led by David Martens (KULeuven). It is based in part on an interview with Carine Fol at CENTRALE on 26 April 2017.

5. [VANDERMOTTEN, 2014]. The image of Brussels as a deeply cosmopolitan city is long standing, as seen for example in the recent article by Clément Dessy [DESSY, 2018].

6. See on this subject the exhibit COM ∩ COM TIES at ISELP (23 September 2017-17 December 2017) as well as the conference with the same name, from 25 to 28 January 2018. Programmes available at: https://iselp.be/fr/expositions/com-ties [retrieved on 16 January 2019].

7. Available at: http://www.artsplastiques.cfwb.be/index.php?id=15626 [retrieved on 16 January 2019].

8. And to whom the museum devoted a retrospective exhibit: Jean-Pierre Rostenne (5 October 2018-10 February 2019).

9. Among them, François Schuiten, Philippe Geluck, Marie-Françoise Plissart, Thomas Gunzig, Caroline Lamarche, etc.

10. See the works by Chantal Vey and Satoru Toma on boundaries, for example, the walks of Bruno de Wachter and the Wandering Arts Biennial: http://nadine.be/other/nadine [retrieved on 16 January 2019].

11. This phenomenon should probably be likened to the fashion seen in all of the big cities, i.e. the interest in alternative visits and travel guides, as though discovering a city today means overlooking its heritage and seeing it with new eyes. In Brussels in particular, let us mention the
initiatives by inhabitants to present their city, for example the “petites visites guidées” of Marolliwood, created by Flore Grassiot and Jeanne Boute with the inhabitants of the Marolles, and then part of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts: http://www.marolliwood.org/category/petites-visites/ [retrieved on 16 January 2019].

12. The presentation of the second part of Silver Bliss at Argos specified that: “Mara Montoya, Sarah Vanagt and Alexandra Dementieva look with contemporary eyes at the historical city of Brussels. They interpret traces from the past and lend them new meaning”. With Little Figures (2003), in particular, Sarah Vanagt plays with the historical characters of Brussels: http://www.argosarts.org/program.jsp?eventid=70c1445ca3d6416cbf2f6818d24d761a# [retrieved on 13 March 2018].

13. Even more ironic was the exhibit/portrait of a country, centred on Belgium: Silver Bliss #3. See also the programme for New Stories for Brussels. Strategies for a dissident reading of the city. On the image of the Belgian capital in recent video art, at Cinéma Arenberg (26 February 2005-27 May 2005): http://www.argosarts.org/program.jsp?eventid=0d5d5b894c6244e883aebd366a1cd358 [retrieved on 13 March 2018].

14. Apart from the works by David Martens and mine on the subject of portraits of countries illustrated by photos, see the exhibit Pays de papier. Les livres de voyage and its catalogue at Musée de la photographie in Charleroi (25 May-22 September 2019).

15. ULB working group MICM-Arc Culture, mobilité, territoire. Émergence et transformation de l’identité métropolitaine bruxelloise (18e-21e siècles): http://micmarc.ulb.ac.be/ [retrieved on 16 January 2019].

16. This reflection is based on our work with Nadja Cohen on the use of the term “poetic” outside literature: COHEN, N. and REVERSEAU, A. (eds.), 2017. “Un je-ne-sais-quoi de ‘poétique’: l’idée de poésie hors du champ littéraire (XXe-XXIe siècles)”. In: Fabula-LhT [online]. April 2017. No 18. Available at: https://www.fabula.org/lht/18/ [retrieved on 16 January 2019].

ABSTRACTS

Based on BXL Universel – the first part of the trilogy of exhibits on Brussels proposed by CENTRALE for contemporary art – we explore the concept of an “exhibit/portrait of a city”. The 2017 exhibit met the challenge of presenting a city by making Brussels a “creative home port”, by showing the continuity between its past and its present, and by making portraits of it which were diverse as well as subjective. The exhibit created by Carine Fol is put into perspective, both in the context of other exhibits devoted to Brussels in recent years, and of recent research on portraits of territories. This article thus intends to lay the foundations for an analysis of exhibits/portraits of cities in general, and proposes several approaches to the specificity of Brussels as a city being presented, by insisting in particular on the significance of folklore, the foreign perspective and the collective dynamic.

À partir du premier volet de la trilogie d’expositions sur Bruxelles proposée par la CENTRALE pour l’art contemporain, BXL Universel, nous nous proposons de réfléchir à ce qu’est une « exposition-portrait de ville ». L’exposition de 2017 répondait au défi d’exposer une ville en faisant de Bruxelles un « port d’attache créatif », en montrant la continuité entre son passé et son actualité et en en faisant des portraits aussi divers que subjectifs. L’exposition conçue par Carine Fol est mise en perspective, à la fois dans le contexte des autres expositions consacrées à Bruxelles ces dernières années et dans les recherches récentes sur les portraits de territoires. Cet article
entend ainsi poser les bases d’une réflexion sur les expositions-portraits de ville en général et proposer plusieurs pistes concernant la spécificité de Bruxelles comme ville exposée, en insistant notamment sur le poids du folklore, du regard étranger et des dynamiques collectives.

Het eerste deel van de tentoonstellingstriologie over Brussel, voorgesteld door de CENTRALE for contemporary art, *BXL Universel*, vormt ons uitgangspunt om te reflecteren over wat een “expositie-stadsportret” is. De expositie van 2017 was een antwoord op de uitdaging om een stad te tonen en Brussel daarbij voor te stellen als een “creatieve thuishaven” door de continuïteit tussen zijn verleden en heden te tonen en er even diverse als subjectieve portretten van te maken. De door Carine Fol ontworpen expositie wordt zowel vergeleken met andere exposities die de laatste jaren aan Brussel werden gewijd als getoetst aan de recente onderzoeken over portretten van territoria. Dit artikel strekt er aldus toe de grondslagen te leggen voor een reflectie over exposities-stadsportretten in het algemeen en verschillende mogelijkheden voor te stellen om het specifieke karakter van Brussel te tonen en daarbij de nadruk te leggen op het belang van folklore, de blik van buitenaf en de collectieve dynamische processen.

INDEX

**Keywords**: Brussels society, culture, heritage, multiculturalism, history, photography

**Mots-clés**: culture, patrimoine, multiculturalisme, histoire, société bruxelloise, photographie

**Trefwoorden** cultuur, erfgoed, multiculturalisme, geschiedenis, Brusselse samenleving, fotografie

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