

The day it all made sense

Life-defining, watershed moments, they don't happen every day. Those incidents and accidents that either reveal an artist's future path or shoved them off the one they were on, the pivotal experiences in the narrative of people's lives that helped them find their artistic identity and fundamentally shaped their careers. From Chantal Akerman's jump from film to fine art to Luc Tuymans' first major solo show, we've dug into the past lives of a merry crop of contemporary art world denizens to shine a light on what they consider to be the most significant moments in their careers. Nine stories about the past's effect on the present, and what it might all mean for the future.

Interviews SARAH SCHUG

STEVE POWERS, better known a **ESPO**, is one of the few graffiti artists who's managed the leap from street to establishment, with his work even exhibited at the Venice Biennial. But it was back in 1979, in a run-down house in Philadelphia where he lived with his parents, five siblings and 24 cats, that an eleven-year-old **ESPO** made a startling discovery.



Steve with his brothers and sisters in the spring of 1979

Courtesy of the artist / Personal archive

In 1979 Chic's "Le Freak" was big in the charts, that I remember. On a typical day I'd go to school, probably get in some fight or argument, get yelled at, come home to an empty house, have the place to myself for a few hours and mess around, eat whatever was in the fridge, watch TV... Then I'd get bored and draw. I'd just do anything but homework. I hung out in my older brother's room all the time for the sense of adventure and solitude. It always smelled like pot in there and he had lots of weapons, and porn. It was a pretty good place to make a drawing. At the time I was copying a lot of album covers by Pink Floyd and sport team logos, something I'm still influenced by now. I basically started drawing as soon as I could hold a pencil. The first drawing I did was when I was three; it was a car. I showed it to my mom and she freaked out about it and put it on the fridge and from that time on I wanted that

reaction every time I did a drawing. Drawing was also the only thing that got me through school. I would have dropped out of fourth grade otherwise. But the teachers let me draw in the back of the room and we all agreed it was for the best. If they didn't let me draw I would just act up in class and try to make classmates laugh and cause trouble. I was drawing whenever the mood struck me, and the mood struck me every day. When I was older I used to go shoplifting to get Christmas presents for my brothers and sisters, who I loved. But in 1979, I was trying to harness any abilities to make presents for them and I found myself copying a photograph of my brother. I'll never forget the astonishment I felt when it actually looked like him. Something that came out of my pencil looked like my brother! I knew something very large had entered the room; I realised I was in possession of something. It was like finding out you're rich. I couldn't fully understand the impact of it at the time, but I felt the power and the excitement and a real joy. That moment, when I realised that I could do that, that I was capable of such a feat, everything changed. Drawing was no longer something I did as a distraction, to get me through the boring hours. It became a real tangible force that I possessed and that I was suddenly responsible for. I've always felt that it was a sin not to live up to your potential. I knew I wanted to be close to it and understand it. It was kind of like finding out I had a kid that I had to take care of and raise and be responsible for in a nurturing environment. So that's what I did. That's all I've done ever since.

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STEVE lives and works in New York



© Joke De Wilde

LUC TUYMANNS had a part-time job as a bouncer when Ulrich Loock offered him a solo exhibition

at Kunsthalle Bern in 1992. Despite having already garnered a solid reputation in his native Belgium, the Bern show put him on the map internationally and paved the way for a spot at Kassel's Documenta. It was a pivotal year for the artist, and one that cemented his role as one of the most important painters of our time.

In 1992, I had a studio in a small apartment in Antwerp. It looked a bit like Francis Bacon's studio compared to the big one that I have now. At the time in Belgium, everything to do with art was concentrated around Antwerp. Most of the galleries and artists were here and it was both a good time and a bad time to be an artist: the art market had just collapsed, the machinery was there and it was opening up for the younger generation – which was me, though it wasn't something I was aware of at the time. Ulrich Loock, who ran the Kunsthalle Bern came to the city to see my gallerist, Frank, because he was doing a show with Raoul De Keyser, who was represented by the same gallery as me. Completely by accident, he discovered my work on the second floor where it was installed for a new show. He asked Frank to drive him straight to my studio. I wasn't aware that he was coming and I was actually about to leave; if he had arrived five minutes later, we would have missed each other. I showed him 150 paintings and he didn't say a word so I thought the entire thing was a failure. But once

I got home, I got a phone call from Frank telling me Ulrich had been so amazed that he was speechless, that he hadn't seen anything like it since Richter. So I got an offer to do a show at the Kunsthalle Bern that same year. Ulrich's decision was purely instigated by the work itself; we didn't know each other and had never even exchanged a sentence. I was very aware of the impact the show in Bern would have and that's why I immediately spoke to Jan Hoet's assistant to make sure I wasn't going to be included in Documenta that year. I was afraid: I was used to working at my own speed and all of a sudden was being thrown into a bigger concourse. When it was made public that I would be part of Documenta, I went into a small rage. I knew that the Americans would see the work there and global interest would rise and I was concerned about the effect it would have on the integrity of my work. There would be enormous pressure. But it happened so I just had to deal with it. I thought to myself: either I can leave everything to my dealers to take care of – which I couldn't because I'm such a control freak – or I need to make a clear distinction between making art and the art world. I decided that they should not have anything to do with each other. In order to do that, it was necessary to dedicate some energy to the art world in order to keep it out of my studio. I still do that now. It's a quite a schizophrenic way, but it functions. Being a successful artist is not something that falls out of thin air. You need to control everything up to and including the market prices. That's the professional part which should never interfere with the freedom you have to make your art, and it's a method that takes up an enormous amount of energy but it also offers extreme payback. Bern was a very important show because it opened up so many other doors; it led to other shows in Germany and opened up the whole European realm including, of course, Documenta. This again led to shows in the States and to being taken on by David Zwirner. The show in Bern speeded up my career enormously and it proves that you have to have luck in your life but also that you have to act upon it to not lose the momentum. A great deal of my practice as a painter is all about the element of timing and precision. There's no mystery, except that one moment of chance. It was the largest show I had ever done at that point. I wasn't stressed before the opening. I was just happy. The night before, Ulrich drank so much that I had to give the speech in front of the press. For me, the symbol of this turning point was really this little paper with 'These drawings are now owned by the Kunsthalle Bern' written on it, which I reproduced and enlarged in a painting.

*I was very aware
of the impact the show
in Bern would have*



Luc Tuymans and Ulrich Loock at the artist's career-changing show at Bern's Kunsthalle
Courtesy of Studio Luc Tuymans



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LUC's most recent paintings
will be on show at Antwerp's
Zeno X Gallery from 6 November
to 21 December



"D'Est au bord de la Fiction" 1995

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris / New York. © Nancy Robinson Watson

CHANTAL AKERMAN achieved critical acclaim for the film “Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles” when she was in her twenties. She went on to become one of the most important and respected directors of her generation but in 1995 she had a change of heart and shifted her attention from the world of cinema to the freer spirit of art. She’s oscillated back and forth between the two ever since.

In the early 90s the head of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Kathy Halbreich, approached me and suggested I make a video installation, something I'd never done before. At the time, I was looking for funding to make a film and I thought that this could be the solution. In the end the project was put on hold because of lack of funds but I found the money on my own and went ahead and started filming what became “D'Est.” That was 1993. Then in 1995, Kathy approached me again to tell me that the funds had been raised for the video installation so I began playing with the material I had already filmed for “D'Est” and it became a 25-part video installation shown in my very first exhibition called “D'Est au bord de la fiction.” It was exhibited at Brussels' Bozar, at Jeu de Paume in Paris, in Minneapolis and in New York... it basically toured the world. I was living in Paris at the time, working on the most commercial film I've ever made – the one with Juliette Binoche, “Une diva à New York,” – and I realised that I enjoyed making the installation much more than I enjoyed making the film, which really felt mechanical. I had never thought of making art or being an artist until Kathy approached me. I had always had this romantic image of artists that came from the grand masters, like Rembrandt. I saw myself as a director, maybe a writer, but never an artist.

It was a turning point for me – an extraordinary renewal in my life – in the sense that I totally embraced the freedom of making art. It gives you so much more freedom than cinema. Films are so complicated, you have to write a script and follow it, and even though I make films that are quite out of the ordinary, it's always going to be much more formulated than with art. Films are always made as part of a team, there's a system. Art I can make all alone in my studio. This feeling of being able to push further and further and be more and more free – that's what interests me about art. I really didn't know much about art in the beginning, and I just followed my intuition. I can't say that I'm part of a school or anything. I also don't want to know what sells and what doesn't because then you're restrained again. I still make films and write books – I do a bit of everything. And I'm still driven by the same forces as in cinema. What I like best, apart from the freedom, is the relationship with the space. It's so different from being in a cinema where people sit down in a room. Every time I have to install something, I have to adapt it to the space and it makes me feel a bit like a magician.

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CHANTAL lives between New York and Paris. Her latest book, “Ma mère rit” is out now on Mercure de France



American artist KIM JONES emerged from the performance art landscape of 70s southern California. His Mudman alter ego – a shaman-like figure who strolled the streets of LA – was as well-known as his controversial Rat Piece performance, in which he burnt rats alive. Here, he takes a look back at the LA of 1979, the year when Jasper Johns bought some of his drawings.

In 1979 I was living in a one-bedroom apartment on Venice Beach with a bathroom and a closet for \$125 a month.

I didn't have a proper job; apart from making art I did some modelling here and there. I was basically living out of my pants. I was known a bit for my Mudman performances and I had already done a few exhibitions, mostly in alternative art spaces, but it was hard. My Rat Piece performance in 1976 meant that lots of people didn't want to have anything to do with me. But I had a lot of energy and I used to go from gallery to gallery to present my work, but most of the time they'd just say "We'll give you a call" and I'd never hear from them again. Then I got invited to the LAICA in '78. It was around the same time that High Performance Magazine was launched, which put a lot of us performance artists on the map. I was more connected to the people on the Venice boardwalk than to anyone in the art world, but all of a sudden lots of things started happening and I got invited to participate in a panel talk with Paul McCarthy. One day I ran into a friend that I had met in art school in '72-'73, Tony. He worked at a printmaking company called Gemini on Melrose Avenue, and he offered me a job there as a janitor. I started working two

nights a week. The place made prints for major artists like Hockney, Rauschenberg or Jasper Johns and all these guys would come to Gemini and we got to talk to them. Everyone who worked there was an artist. Sometimes I would draw on one of the printmaking stones and one day Jasper noticed it. It was a small drawing of a baby being torn apart by two wolves. He was surprised I could draw and asked me if he could see more of my stuff, so I brought my portfolio along the next time and straight away he bought five of my drawings. It's a good feeling when someone you respect likes your work and it's nice when someone buys your stuff. But of course it doesn't really matter for my art. I just get a kick out of making drawings. It's hard to say, but I probably would have kept doing it anyway, even if I hadn't succeeded. After buying those drawings in 1979, Jasper continued to support me. When I moved to New York in 1982 because I was tired of LA, he recommended me for a performance grant at the American Academy of Arts. And my first gallery only called me up because Jasper had told them about me. We were never really close but were in contact on and off and he helped me as much as he could. I don't think you can do it on your own, I just can't see that happen. You always need somebody to support you. It's got a lot to do with contacts and getting help. Without Jasper's support things would have been very different – he made everything so much easier. I mean, without him I would have never gotten together with my first gallery in the 80s, which was such an important step. I'm not sure when was the last time I spoke to Jasper, but I'll never forget the doors he opened for me.

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Today, KIM lives in New York. A retrospective of his work will run from 12 November to 28 February at Seoul's Museum of Modern and Contemporary



One of the drawings purchased by Jasper Johns. Untitled, 1980, Ink on Paper, 9 x 12"

Image courtesy of the artist and Pierogi Gallery



Venice, California, 1980

Image courtesy of the artist and Pierogi Gallery

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A drawing of Sam's made at age 14

© Wim Van Eesbeek

*Ever since
I discovered Van
Gogh I never
stopped painting
and now I'm 48*



Jack Kerouac, taken from Sam's recent writers series

© Wim Van Eesbeek



Belgian painter SAM DILLEMANS, whose work is firmly rooted in the old European tradition, is perhaps best known for his powerful portraits of boxers and writers. Having practiced drawing old masters from a very young age, it was a gift from his mother that inspired him to pick up a paintbrush for the first time.

It has always felt natural to make art. I couldn't live any other way. I never asked why or thought about it or made a conscious decision. I've just always had this urge to draw, especially the works of the old masters, even as a very young child. I first started to paint when I was 14 years old and living with my grandmother near Leuven. My mother gave me one of these big, heavy, expensive books about Van Gogh and I was blown away. He completely churned me up. I had already made lots of drawings inspired by the old masters – around 100, I think – but it was the discovery of the work of Van Gogh that really enflamed my urge to take up a paintbrush. I had to go to school during the day which meant I could only make art at night. Grandpa wasn't to know what I was doing because he wanted me to be fresh in the morning, so I had to close all the little gaps in the door so that he couldn't see that the light was still on in my room. I would sleep at school the next day. Ever since I discovered Van Gogh I never stopped painting and now I'm 48. Discovering his work was a major turning point for me, just like my discovery of literature, especially Russian novelists like Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy and Pushkin. Van Gogh opened my eyes to what is good and what is not good. It's pure, it's oil on canvas, there is no system. He is so direct and lucid, and so fatal. He doesn't show images of sentimentalities, but rather he depicts

trees and faces and changes art just with that. Totally simple themes, just like Picasso. Most of the big champions try to incorporate political or contemporary issues like wars etc. but they're so lost in their subjects that they forget to paint. That's why Cézanne changed art with a few apples and Van Gogh with a field and El Greco with a hand. Themes are not important, they're even dangerous. Now they're writing booklets to explain art pieces – but art is not literature. When you need to explain an artwork like that, there's something wrong with it. Even today my art is still inspired by Van Gogh and the other grand masters I discovered as a kid. Stravinsky said that without the old masters we cannot be modern, we cannot renew. There are a few like Francis Bacon who didn't copy the big masters in the beginning, but that's very rare. My teachers were the old masters; and I only went to art school to get material for free. Studying their work, understanding why they would paint a line at a certain spot and not anywhere else, that taught me a lot. In the 80s, with Joseph Beuys and all that, this idea was not very popular, so I was quite isolated but I always stayed on my path. Sometimes I feel like I was born in the wrong era. I don't feel like working with most Belgian galleries anymore. Why would I give them 50 percent of the selling price for hanging my pictures on the wall? For handing out glasses of sparkling wine? They don't give anything back. Today's art world is fucked. Art, literature, music... these are the things that count. I'm influenced by great writers and painters, but that's not to say that there is a direct link to the books I have read, but it created a psychological platform to start from. After Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy and Pushkin, I read Flaubert and German writers like Stefan Zweig or Hesse. Strange, perhaps, for someone so young, but these books completely changed my view of the world. They showed me that life isn't that simple. They showed me that humans are not that great, actually, and that people can be dangerous and barbaric. Balzac's characters are bad people – but there's humour at the same time. The influence of the grand masters puts you in your place, makes you humble, keeps your feet on the ground. They're the best teachers – and it's all for free.

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SAM lives and works in Antwerp. He is currently working on the last of his writers series. His book Authors is out now on MER. Paper Kunsthalle



South African artist **KENDELL GEERS** is famous both for his art and for pissing into Duchamp's Fountain at the 1993

Venice Biennial. He has enjoyed countless international exhibitions, been invited for breakfast by the Queen of Holland and scored a retrospective at Munich's Haus der Kunst. But there were two occasions in his life when he opted out of the art world altogether.

In 2000, when I was living in London, my artworks were part of an exhibition curated by Jan Hoet, who I consider one of the best curators in the world. On the morning of the opening I was supposed to go have breakfast with the Queen of the Netherlands. You could say that I had pretty much reached the peak. But I fell ill that day and couldn't even get out of bed. When I went to the doctor he couldn't find anything. I'm convinced I had lost faith in the art world, in the whole system. I just couldn't see myself continuing under these circumstances and needed a time-out. And it was then that I decided to stop. It wasn't difficult to stop creating, it was great actually – like going back to the drawing board. I just

read books and did some research. I needed to find a new spirit, a new virtue, another personal dimension to be able to continue. I was still committed to being an artist because that's something that never stops. I was just tired of the machinery around it. It was and is too easy for an artist to get recognition and participate in exhibitions, and anyone can be a successful artist nowadays. In the end I decided to just ignore it all, the market and everything. I had a kind of spiritual calling where I realised that art needed to be something magical. I make what I make and if the art world likes it that's great, but I'm not creating anything for the art world. All my galleries freaked out quite a bit when I took that break, but they need us more than we need them. Last year, I did pretty much the same thing all over again. It was because of the retrospective about me at the Haus der Kunst in Munich at the time – the curator there didn't want me to be involved at all! I can't stand how artists are viewed as mere suppliers, how they get instrumentalised. There is just no respect anymore for artists and their work. I fell into a depression and cancelled all my projects. It's important to stop sometimes and take a step back and just live your life. That would be my advice for young artists: stop making art and live. And take hallucinogenic drugs too. That helps. Let the art follow your life and not the other way round. It's important to understand that art is not a career but a calling. I feel like today a lot of art is empty because the artists are missing experiences. All the extreme, strong, transformative moments that challenge you beyond the everyday are things that can later be incorporated into your art. The time I spent taking a break from it all I experienced so many things and if I hadn't put everything on hold I would never have started painting, for example. It was only possible because I had no pressure, no deadlines, no exhibitions. It was rock'n'roll.

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KENDELL lives and works in Brussels. Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg will be hosting a solo show of his work in April 2014

SOZYONE GONZALEZ was born in Brussels and spent his youth immersed in hip hop culture, tagging up trains and ripping up the mic with rap outfit De Puta Madre before making the switch from street to scene. Here he talks about two seminal events that changed everything: the release of the album “Une Ball Dans La Tête” in 1995 and his first major gallery solo show in 2005.

Courtesy of the artist © DWL



In 1995 my life was just like the TV series “Fame.” In my school, it was exactly like that show. There were about 40 of us, a loose-knit tribe of people hanging out together and everyone had different projects on the go. A bit like a collective. There were four of us in De Puta Madre and our music was closely related to our graffiti style. Making tags and doing rap concerts was our life. We saw ourselves as an artistic project, not a band, and we made music just to accompany our graffiti. People had told us that it was impossible to make a real hardcore rap album in Belgium but we didn’t see why, and in 1995 we released “Une Ball Dans La Tête” which made a lot of noise. It brought us on tour to Canada, France, Switzerland... all over the world. It was crazy. We’d only made this album for fun and our style

was “Fuck everything.” That album marked me. Ten, 15 years later people say it was an important album but at the time I didn’t realise how important it was, and how important that year would turn out to be for me. We were pioneers without even knowing it. We lived in the moment and we were spontaneous and we tried to avoid over-thinking anything. We forced ourselves to be natural and I’ve been trying to stay faithful to this spirit in my work, even now. Since then I’ve told myself: if we’re able to make an album that was sold in shops, bought by loads of people and written about by music critics... we can do anything. So we made films, and more albums, short movies, exhibitions. The success of the album really opened my eyes to the fact that it’s possible to live the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle. It gave us confidence and motivation to continue. It made me realise that it’s possible to survive financially from art, that I’d never have to work again in my life. In 2005, I was living in Brussels and making graffiti and I decided to start making artworks on canvas. It took me a while to get to that point because even though I’d been to art school, I had a problem with contemporary art and the fancy bullshit that surrounds it. But then Alice from Alice Gallery contacted me and invited me to do a test project in this abandoned building. There was a whole new generation of gallerists that had emerged at the same time as street art and Alice was one of them. She was really cool. It was the first time I had worked for a gallery and it was a mini expo and it went really well, so we decided to do the real deal. So many other things happened after that. Someone from Carhartt was at the show and he told me he wanted to work with me for their new campaign. That gave me worldwide visibility. They organised a European tour of my work and ever since then it’s been like a domino effect. So many doors have opened. I guess it was just the right time, and the right gallery. I was so surprised and happy that lots of people wanted to buy my stuff but I was almost sad about it, too, because I haven’t got a single piece from that exhibition. It’s a huge motivation to know that there are people behind me who like what I do and when I make a new mural, a new tag, I want it to be impressive because I know there are all these people behind me.

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Today SOZYONE is based in Los Angeles where he lives with his wife Claire. He is working on a graphic novel with Jaba Mathieu to be released in January and will participate in a group show in Charleroi in spring. He’s also working on a few new De Puta Madre tracks with Smimooz



Cindy with a self-portrait made at age 24

© Joke De Wilde



Baconcube, 2010, Oil on linen, 125 x 140 cm

Courtesy Galerie Van De Weghe

As a young student at Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the nineties, CINDY WRIGHT made a startling discovery in a magazine that led her to London on the trail of a certain troupe of Young British Artists. It proved crucial in shaping her work.

Discovering the work of Lucian Freud was a revelation. To see his vision of humanity, the rawness of his brushstroke, his sense of detail... it was incredible. I remember this self-portrait of his, it had a three-dimensional feel to it. The paint really became flesh. I ripped the image out of a magazine and I think I still might have it in a box in my attic. From early on I had a thing for British painters. I came to Antwerp in 1996 and every morning I'd go to the Academy at 8:30 and practise model painting. I'd spend the whole day in the Academy, at noon I'd go out for lunch, then I'd come back to the academy and stayed there until the guard would lock the doors and kick me out. Sometimes we'd go to the bar around the corner afterwards but mostly I'd just go home and start another painting. One night at the bar I met a few British guys, they were artists and they had a show in Antwerp. I heard them speaking English and went over to them and told them that I just loved the work of Lucian Freud. "Do you have more in London like that?", I asked them eagerly. "Just go to Saatchi," they told me, amused. I went as soon as I could. The gallery wasn't next to the Thames at that point, it was just one big white cube and it was only in its beginnings, but it was quite sensational. I was so excited when I came back and I wanted to tell everyone about it. Nobody in my school knew anything about it. I took a catalogue of Jenny Saville to my teachers and I said: "Look what I discovered there! Why can they do that over there and not here?" I didn't understand why we didn't have this figurative kind of work anymore. It was almost taboo. Actually, painting was under fire at the time and Jan Hoet and other curators were saying that painting was dead. Of course there were Rubens and Van Eyck, but in the

contemporary world there was no one to really show me how to deal with the interpretation of the world around me. We had Luc Tuymans, a good artist, but it wasn't really what I was looking for. I could only find it in London. These days it's so easy, you just go to Google and you can find anything. But we didn't have that kind of access at the time – we had to take a boat! I started going to a lot of galleries in London. Every month I'd take my backpack, hop on the bus in the morning and come back in the evening because I didn't have money to stay overnight. Sometimes I'd have to sit for five hours at the station waiting for a bus. The Young British Artists I had discovered at Saatchi impressed me as much as Lucian Freud. They showed the same rawness and the same confrontation. When I saw how delicately Ron Mueck could show how skin looked – the veins underneath, the amount of detail, the sensitivity he could recall... And Jenny Saville, with the expression of her brushstroke, the energy in the work, the monumentality, the expressiveness... all that was very important in the development of my own work. These artists showed me a solution, in a contemporary way; a vision of how you could look at humanity. I loved how they could confront people with their own existentialism, and create a certain tension which attracts the viewer but repulses them at the same time. It was interesting, this horrific beauty. It was very important to me, and this fragility and fleetingness still play a crucial role in my work. I wanted to use the same paint as Lucian Freud because I was so fascinated by it. But then you start searching and experimenting. It really was a revelation. I learned how to paint from looking at other painters but at a certain moment you have to let go and evolve into your own direction. But the encounter with the YBA was really essential for me. I still feel the connection today.

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CINDY lives and works in Antwerp. Her work will appear as part of the exhibition *Museum to Scale 1/7* at the Royal Museum for Fine Arts in Brussels from 12 December to 2 February. She will also participate in "Happy Birthday Dear Academy" in Antwerp until January 2014