

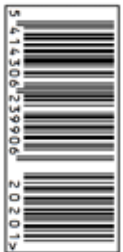
# L'OFFICIEL ART

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## Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven

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# Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven: Riot girl

Interview by Sarah Schug  
Photographer Mireille Roobaert

Kaleidoscopic, hypnotizing animated drawings and photographs dance across a wide screen, flowing into each other in perfect rhythm with throbbing psychedelic soundscapes. Floating from abstract to figurative and back again, the dreamlike sequences are layered with fragments of philosophical text, from thoughts on neural Darwinism and to what extent perception is influenced by personal values to quotes from Nietzsche and Marcuse. Complex, slightly obscure, and definitely thought-provoking, the film is Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's newest work; it's on view at Brussels contemporary art center Wiels as part of the group show Risquons-Tout, which runs until 10 January. Cerebral and visually stunning at the same time, it's characteristic of the artist's extensive oeuvre, which is deeply rooted in counterculture.

**ANNE-MIE VAN KERCKHOVEN:**  
"I THINK THAT AS AN ARTIST YOU PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE WITHIN THE COMMUNITY. IT'S SOMETHING THAT POLITICIANS AND SCIENTISTS FAIL TO UNDERSTAND."





"For many years, in the 80s, I worked under the acronym AMVK - and the only reason I did that was because I didn't want people to see right away that I was a woman."

In Van Kerckhoven's elaborate universe, innovative techniques and themes revolving around women, gender, technology, and science, often socially critical, converge. Active since the 1970s, at the age of 68 she shows no signs of stopping and still has a punky, girlish aura, having preserved the attitude of the underground. Just this year, she performed with her long-time husband, Danny Devos, as Club Moral, an institution in Antwerp's experimental music scene since the 80s. Her big, colorful studio in the city's Borgerhout neighborhood, just around the corner from Zeno X - one of Belgium's leading galleries, which has been representing her for more than 30 years - is full to the brim with artworks new and old, books, paint, brushes, and all kinds of knick-knacks accumulated over the years. Van Kerckhoven comes here every day, although she has a second studio in her home. "Often I start at my house and then continue over here," she says. "This one is computer-free, which was a conscious decision. It's very important to me. Here, it's quiet, and I work with my hands. It's like a different compartment of my head."

**SARAH SCHUG: It's been a challenging year for everybody, to put it mildly. How have you experienced the last months?**

**ANNE-MIE VAN KERCKHOVEN:** At first, I was almost relieved that everything came to a halt. I was able to work in peace and had so much more time on my hands for my film. But that feeling didn't last very long - the situation became too complex and quite isolating, and on top of that, my mother passed away. I am still recovering. I've been finding Antwerp quite depressing, especially with the current evening curfew. It's been a dark atmosphere. Recently, I was able to have dinner again with a few friends, and that was very uplifting. We don't need a lot to get better, actually.

**Are you worried about the effect the pandemic will have on art-making and the art world in a larger sense?**

No. Art will find its way. Especially now, people are realizing how important it is. I feel there is a shift taking place. There has been a lack of spirit, recently, and maybe, everything will become more human again. Perhaps we'll become more like animals:

more open, following our instincts, and less like machines who just do their jobs. I hope this is a moment to rethink and reboot. I see it a bit like a seizure.

**How has the corona crisis affected your personal projects?**

[Curator] Kasper Koenig had asked me to make a giant flower and herb carpet on Basel's Messeplatz on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Art Basel. I had already done something similar for the 500<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Antwerp town hall. My plan was to make something related to alchemy, because Basel, back in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, was pioneering in the field of medicine. First, I was told the project would be moved to September, which would have been quite a challenge, because the seasonal flowers are very different. After all, it will all take place in June next year. At the end of the festivities, the flowers and herbs, which are grown in trays of pots, will be handed out to the locals. It's a project that is critical of the economic realities of the art world. There is no way to commercialize this work; it ends as a present for the city. It's a symbolic gesture.



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**The group show at Wiels you're participating in was able to open as planned, fortunately. Can you tell me more about the film you're showing there?**

I just finished it last week – or so I thought. Last night I woke up thinking about several little things I still need to improve. It's 33 minutes long and recounts an evolution in 12 chapters. In a way, it's the history of how the brain evolves, from a newborn until the end. How it evolves through perception, creativity, and imagination. The film works with 76 images from my archive, going back to the 70s - mainly drawings that came right from my subconscious. I made variations and animations of these drawings and found 12 key ideas inside of them. The evolution of a human being, this thought that you can be whatever you want... In the end, there are not that many options available. Like they say in Hollywood: There is a limited number of tales to tell. Every story has its roots in the chemistry of the mind that invents it. The film is very abstract. I've been working on it for five months, in a very intuitive way. At one point, I had to turn the logic upside down. The whole process got really difficult, even

impossible - I was almost hoping to catch the virus so that I would have an excuse for not finishing it.

**You're quite a pioneer when it comes to incorporating digital methods into your work. You were using computers long before they were a common fixture in people's homes. What attracted you to it?**

When I was still a student at the Antwerp Academy, I was involved with a group of students, artists, and scientists who were interested in fringe theatre, Fluxus Art and Deutsche Welle filmmakers like Fassbinder and Hans-Jürgen Sieberberg. We did performances together and organized underground events. One of these people was Luc Steels, who was working on his doctorate in linguistics and knowledge representation. The latter has been a subject that has kept its grip on me over the years. He asked me to create footage for an animation to present his doctorate. We used a video system that doesn't even exist anymore. Unfortunately, the movie has been lost. It was the 70s, when video, computer, and the digital were groundbreaking. There was something

in the air that I was very receptive to. I had been attracted by logic and abstraction from a very young age. I was good at math and finding solutions in a logical way, and at finding a new logic. I read a lot of scientific books that I didn't necessarily understand but found very interesting. I also had a subscription to the New Scientist. These publications made me think about the world and the future, and for my works, I borrowed words and ideas from them. They inspired me.

**Why did you choose art, and not science?**

I'd wanted to go to the Art Academy since the age of nine. It was a fixed idea that didn't go away. Even as a small child I would look at photos in Paris Match of all these existentialists and artists, and I wanted to be a part of this world, maybe even more than wanting to be an artist.

**Where did this come from, at such a young age?**

My father was an artist who abandoned his art, and my uncle, who lived with us, was as well. But they were always creative, in every aspect of life, and my mother's sisters, too.

For me, it was a normal way of being. I had a very complicated inner life, even as a kid. I remember hearing my dad say 'Anne-Mie, she's an artist'. But, being a girl, a woman, you were not encouraged or stimulated to go down that path at all, at the time. Out of frustration at the meager prospects she had in the male-driven art world back then, Swiss Surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim suffered a mental breakdown and had to spend a lot of her life in a psychiatric clinic, and other women artists I knew were upper-class French, Belgian, and German. To me, it looked like you either needed money or you needed to be a man in order to have an existence as artist. I was neither. When I went to art school, it was in the back of my head that I would meet an artist there whose muse or assistant I'd become.

**Because you thought there wasn't even the possibility of making it on your own?**  
Exactly.

**At art school, were there other women?**  
Yes, quite a few. But the fact I studied graphic design might also have played a role. I wanted to draw, to learn as many techniques as possible, and be able to work with text. I had a very hard time then. It wasn't until 20 years later, when I started to teach myself, that I recognized that there was such a big difference between education in the fine arts and the applied arts departments.

**When it comes to being an artist as a woman, have you seen a significant evolution since you started?**  
Yes, a very big one. When I was young, until my mid-20s, it was quite common that as a woman, you were not supposed to have your own opinion. Women were expected to listen to and agree with their boyfriend or husband. You'd transition from the rules of your father to the rules of your partner. It was really shocking to me. This also translated into the Academy: I hadn't known that the status of the female Academy student was completely different than that of a male.

**You weren't taken seriously?**  
No, not at all. There were teachers saying: 'I'm not going to put my energy into these women because when they graduate they'll just find a boyfriend and marry and have kids anyways.' But that didn't stop me.

**Taking all this into account, how did you find your way as an artist?**  
I was never frustrated because I was just busy working all the time. From the beginning, I always had part-time jobs besides my art. It was a way for me to distance myself from the art world. For a while I had quite a hostile attitude to it due to the fact that most people calling themselves the

'art world' didn't value women artists as highly as themselves. As I already touched upon, women in general were considered another class, and in relationships it was a constant struggle to hold up your own opinions against those of your boyfriend or husband. You were expected to accept how things were and how they always would be. As soon as I realized all this, it felt like society as a whole was my enemy. I loathed the organization of the world I had been dropped into. For many years, in the 80s, I worked under the acronym AMVK – and the only reason I did that was because I didn't want people to see right away that I was a woman. In the meantime, a lot has changed. We're experiencing a turning point and I feel much more at ease. Also, because over time, I have met more and more people who feel the way I do. To come back to your question: I have always been asked a lot to do exhibitions – that was never a problem. Often in off-venues, which I really like. It's where I felt best. And then from the age of 31, I was with Zeno X gallery.

**That's not an off place at all, though!**  
Back then, the gallery was just starting out, and not part of the establishment as it is today. We grew together. They really were the best partner for me.

**Do you think being represented is a key to your success and has helped you keep going so long?**  
Yes. Although, in an ideal world, it'd be the way Russian icon painter Andrei Rublev imagined it. Living in a community, where you work and study with like-minded people, where you don't have to deal with money questions. I think that as an artist you play an important role within the community. It's something that politicians and scientists fail to understand. They don't understand the necessity of art. They think it's just for leisure, for pleasure, which is not true. Art is an intricate element of evolution.

**The female body has been a recurring element in your work throughout the decades. What is behind that?**  
It started out as something ironic. In the beginning, I used naked women to promote abstract ideas, texts, and theories. Even as a young child, it had shocked me to see half-naked women in bikinis posing on cars at a car show. I didn't understand it, and didn't like it, but I found it intriguing. After graduating from the Academy, one of my part-time jobs was at a company that sold, among other things, Geiger counters, metal boxes with lots of knobs, measuring radioactivity. One of the leaflets I had to design depicted a woman in a bikini holding the device. I don't remember my exact thoughts, but this made me make things, and from then on out,

I never stopped. Did you know pin-ups were painted on bombs? There was this commodification of desire, which is part of capitalism. To keep the economy running, you need to give people a reason to buy new things. And this desire has to come from somewhere. They use subliminal messaging, sexual desire, to make men good warriors, and make them buy things. It's perverted. All this relates to ideas about male and female, good and bad, morals... Trying to unravel these entanglements has been a big element of my work.

**Another recurrent component of your oeuvre is the brain...**  
People often say that, but I prefer to call it knowledge representation. That has been my main interest since the 70s. Reading books about artificial intelligence back then, it was so fascinating. It was like a new theology. I even attended conferences all over Europe about the topic, and it gave me fuel for my art. It's related to so many other fields such as psychology, philosophy, and mysticism. For example, the question of what makes people creative. What is human. All these theories are in constant flux. In the late 70s until the mid-80s, everybody was convinced that it is language that sets us apart from animals. Now, that's not the case anymore. People who were involved in knowledge representation at that time wanted to know everything about knowing. And the art world wanted to know everything about art. It was a kind of inbreeding that characterized the era. I found myself somewhere in the middle of art and science, and it of course gave me a bit of a strange position slightly outside of the art world. To some, it all looked kind of theoretical and un-arty. Some people still don't think I'm a good artist in the 'normal' sense of the word. Too bad. This is what I do, and I can't do anything else. I find it fantastic that I'm old now, and still the same. And I'm not even thinking of stopping. I remain interested and interesting, and I never stand still.

**What are your next projects?**  
I'm preparing an interactive piece with a sound artist for deSingel in Antwerp. It will be a collaboration with the musical ensemble Zefiro Torna, and I'm developing the visuals for it. Additionally, I am working on screenshots from my films in an old-fashioned way, reminiscent of Van Eyck. I use wooden boards, three layers of gesso, a plaster-base like in the Middle Ages, a layer of paint, sandpaper... The technique gives the digital prints a deeper reverb effect. The image becomes less flat, because there is more absorption.

**What do you want the viewer to take away from seeing your work?**  
I want to open the mind.



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