

THE LIAR'S CLOTH

Kader Abdolah, Mahmoud Bakhshi, Gwenneth Boelens, Louise Bourgeois, Dirk Braeckman, Thomas Hirschhorn, Abdoulaye Konaté, Liz Magic Laser, Moshe Ninio, Ana Torfs

GRIMM Frans Halsstraat 26

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Curated by Nathanja van Dijk



Gwenneth Boelens | *Liar's Cloth* | 2017 | installation view at MIT | Courtesy of the artist and Klemm's, Berlin

Before we get to the truth...

How true are images that lie? This inquiry lies at the heart of the group exhibition *The Liar's Cloth*, which aims to renegotiate our troubled relationship with truthfulness, in the midst of the so-called "post-truth" regime. Not by posing statements about the falseness or faithfulness of images, but rather by probing the difficulty of getting at the truth. Instead of embarking on a hopeless quest for truth, the artists in exhibition *The Liar's Cloth* create space for the lie.

The exhibition departs from the piece *Liar's Cloth* (2017) by Gwenneth Boelens, which is inspired by a West African pattern of the same name –nkontompo ntama. The liar's cloth originated in the 19th century during the Ashanti Empire. It is said to have been worn by the king when holding court, 'to confute people of doubtful veracity'. This implies that there is a truth to be told and, furthermore, that there is an authority that decides on what is true. The shifting lines in the original pattern may be understood as reflecting 'the liar's speech', changing course, telling one thing, than the other.

In her essay *Truth and Politics* (1967) philosopher Hannah

Arendt notes that claims about the truth are, by their very nature, authoritarian and exclusionary. The lie on the other hand denotes the ability to imagine the world the way we would (or would not) like it to be. Arendt states that 'truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings'. The power, or rather political force of the lie, does not depend on the status quo of this or that reality, but in the imagining of another reality, a potentiality for the transgression of the boundaries of 'truth'.

Following these lines of thought, the artists in *The Liar's Cloth* propose images as sites where truth and lie neither deconstruct one another, nor unite, but are inextricably interwoven. They operate at the border between language (what can be said) and image (what can be shown) and disrupt conventional, one-dimensional truth production, questioning the use, power and efficacy of images in relation to perception and to consciences. Their images appear as uncertain truths, reminding us of the distance between the viewer and what he sees, between the actor and what he does.

... we must examine the lie

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The title of **Ana Torfs'** slide installation *Du mentir-faux* (2000), which translates as "About lying falsehood", alludes to idolatry, a belief in "false" images. The projected images alternate between close-up portraits of a young woman and text slides containing questions from the inquisition trial (1431) carried out against Joan of Arc's – a highly fictionalized heroin who was, amongst others, condemned for having worshipped false images. *Du mentir-faux* deals with the inevitable fictional character of historical narratives and can be understood as a reference to the difficulty of access to truth, in spite of all the testimonials and documents, or in a broader sense to the insoluble tension between fiction (constructing, narrating, lying) and genuine reality.



Ana Torfs | *Du mentir-faux* | installation view, Fotomuseum, Winterthur, 2007 ©photo: Ana Torfs

Like *Du mentir-faux* Torfs' photograph *Toast* (2003) alludes to the complex relation between text and image, reading and visualizing in relation to the search for truth. We see a man with his back to the camera, raising a toast to an empty projection on the wall. On the photograph, in the empty projection, we read the word 'verité' (truth). Torfs' image reminds us that 'truth' is but a projection, an illusive image.

The tension between text and image, words and visualization, is also present in **Mahmoud Bakhshi's** project *Night, Blackness and other stories* (2017) consisting of a publication of stories without words and a series of black granite tablets. Drawing inspiration from poetic tendencies in Persian literature – where complex similes, semantics and fable-like storytelling are understood as devices that allow artists to encode their opinions in complex cultural and political circumstances – the works title refers to often used metaphors for oppression. A method that appeared in early modern literature during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (early 1900s) and reappeared during the Islamic Revolution (1978-79). However, today the once powerful metaphors have become a commonplace in contemporary popular literature, depriving them of their multi-layered shades and semantic potential.

Having grown up in post-revolutionary Iran, Bakhshi turns to an older generation of writers who were active in the student resistance movement, organizing first against the Shah and later in opposition to Ruhollah Khomeini and his administration, such as the Persian-Dutch novelist **Kader Abdolah**. They employed fiction as a form of activism, allowing them to resist through the illumination of the horrors hidden by the shadows of power, censorship and propaganda. In the context of the exhibition *The Liar's Cloth* Abdolah has been invited to respond to Bakhshi's *Night, Blackness* and other stories during a public performance, as an intergenerational and interdisciplinary conversation about the use of metaphors and fables, without falling back into clichés and unreliable symbolism.

With her video *The Digital Face* (2012), **Liz Magic Laser** explores the political implication of an image in relation to language. She isolates and examines the studied body language of two politicians: the former American presidents Barack Obama and George H.W. Bush senior. Two dancers replicate the wordless movement from their State of the Union addresses (2012 and 1990 respectively). The performative dialogue between the two dancers reveals how gestures have been embraced and codified by politicians and their handlers over the past two decades. The gestural images persuade the public, masking the content of their speeches with movements designed to induce empathy through well-rehearsed and often subliminal cues. Laser traces the origin of these techniques to the ideas of François Delsarte who developed oratorical theories and exercises in the early 19th century.

Liz Magic Laser's other work on display, *The Invisible Cube* (2013), also refers to Delsarte. The crystal cube serves as a tool to teach the precise meaning of Delsarte's oratorical hand gestures. His work focused on declamation, which became the basis for melodramatic acting in silent film: a technique that is used today by politicians to convince their public.

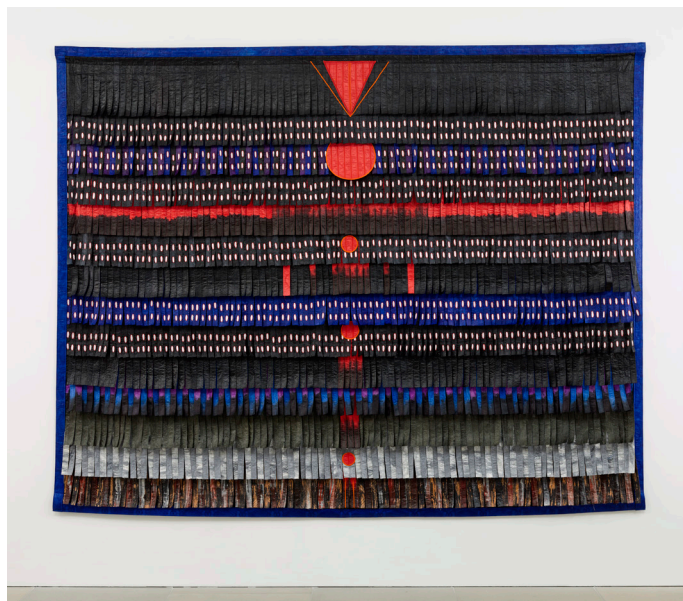
Dirk Braeckman's large-scale photographs in shades of grey do not tell elaborate stories, but rather reveal ambiguous images: desolate spaces, the texture of furniture, curtains and wallpaper, fragments of nudes. These glimpses into Braeckman's immediate surroundings convey a sense of quietness that is charged with a suggestive force. However, codes instead of titles deprive us from any allusion to a specific narrative. Although every detail is very precisely composed, the images are disconnected from their original source. Meaning and truth remain out of reach in Braeckman's secluded world. All we can do is fill in his 'negative space' with our own absence.

Her research into the history of textiles and in particular into the liar's cloth has led **Gwenneth Boelens** to try and

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figure out how a lie is produced, and perhaps enact this lie. In a sense, the weaving itself is 'lying', since the movement of the three grey lines is, for all its deceptive simplicity, a technical impossibility. She eventually chose to hand-weave her *Liar's Cloth* (2017) with reflective, conductive and aramide threads. Common applications of these include Faraday and electromagnetic shielding, radio frequency antennas, impenetrable fabrics and safety wear. The work thus literalizes the communicative application the cloth's title suggests, but also articulates her ambivalence towards appropriative strategies.

Employing material native to Mali, namely woven and dyed cloths, **Abdoulaye Konaté** creates large-scale abstract and figurative compositions, in which he balances his exploration of formal color coordination with reflections on the history and current challenges of the artist's homeland in relation to global socio-political and environmental concerns. Reminiscent of the Ashanti's liar's cloth, Konaté refers to the West-African tradition of using textiles as a means of commemoration and communication. His compositions are influenced by the colors of the garments of different ethnical groups in Mali. For example, the colors in his *Composition en Blue* (2015) derive from the deep blue clothes of the Tuareg in the north of Mali to the white attire that the Arabs in Mali wear.



Abdoulaye Konaté | *Noir-bleu aux triangles et cercles rouges* | 2017 |
Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern

Fabric has played an important role throughout **Louise Bourgeois'** life. She grew up surrounded by the textiles of her parents' tapestry restoration workshop in France, where from the age of twelve she helped the business by drawing in the sections of the missing parts that were to be repaired. Although Bourgeois worked with fiber medium from the '60s onwards, mainly in sculpture, fabric 'drawings' – assembled from discarded clothes, sheets, towels and

similar material from her personal collection – became her central focus in the last decade of her life. Stitching together a life-long hoarder of garments and household items into abstract, geometric grids, Bourgeois transformed her lived materials into art, into an image, trying to reconstruct the past. Her wardrobe and linen closet became representative of elusive, yet highly personal memory.



Thomas Hirschhorn | *Pixel-Collage* | installation view at Kunsthall Aarhus, Denmark | Courtesy of the artist and Kunsthall Aarhus, Denmark

With his *Pixel-Collage* series (2015–2017) **Thomas Hirschhorn** opposes the common use by the media and governmental institutions to hide the inconvenient truth of war and extreme violence: the image of death and mutilated human bodies. To pixelate can be understood as a protective gesture and an authoritarian act, because it decides what is revealed and what remains hidden. Furthermore, pixelating is currently understood as a guarantee of authenticity. In defiance of this, the artist appropriates images of destroyed bodies, all of vague provenance and origin, hence, cannot be considered verifiable or factual. He combines them with fashion imagery, which is blurred by pixels. The horror is left uncovered. Hirschhorn interrogates the decision-making about truth, because "nothing is un-showable. What cannot be shown is what has no form."

Moshe Ninio's *Glass II* (2010 – 2011) sequence nullifies the divide between image and (historical) event. What we see is the historic glass booth where Adolf Eichmann sat during his trial in Jerusalem in 1961, photographed for the first time from the inside. In an ordered sequence composed of three pieces, each a stage in a process of transition from photography to image, simple manipulations (duplication, superimposition) conjure the apparition of a ghostlike "stain" – a Gestalt – in the middle of the image. Ninio's photographs are taken from a viewpoint that is literally opposite of an historical, documentary point of view. Glass dissatisfies the mediums intrinsic proposition of 'making visible' of 'evidence'. The image withdraws from exercising potentiality for 'documenting' or illustrating historical narrative.

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About the curator

Nathanja van Dijk (1984 NL) is co-founder and director of A Tale of a Tub in Rotterdam, which provides a testing ground for artists and other professionals to explore new ideas. Throughout her activities she seeks to create connections between the arts and timely socio-political issues based on her academic background in art history and philosophy. She previously worked as director of Frankendael Foundation, the 18th century manor for contemporary art in Amsterdam (2012-2015) and as the artistic director of 21rozenaal, Enschede (2010-2012). Recent projects include the interdisciplinary research project *Acts of Orientation* in collaboration the Schering Stiftung & Humboldt Universität (Berlin), the publication *Navigating Noise* with Verlag Walther König, the traveling filmprogram *The Migrant (Moving) Image* and *A User Guide Towards 2024* at Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv. Van Dijk also works as advisor. In collaboration with Carolyn H. Drake she established the Robeco Art Collection and the Pereira Collection.

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