



**Angel  
Vergara**

**We,  
the Works  
of Art**



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# Straatman: From Scene to Scene

This book makes it abundantly clear: the work of Angel Vergara is polymorphic, voracious, elusive. It involves public action, words, rituals, history, institutional criticism, the assembly of archives, the setting up of environments, the arrangement of relationships... Its fuel, however, its primary necessity, is painting, the desire to hold it together today, to inscribe it in the magma of images, cities, and crowds. The need to make it into a living and active material, able to meet the movements of the present, to work on the layers of history, to presuppose—in actuality—the possibilities in the making.

However, you'll find no proclamation here, no program, no emphasis, but a stratagem, adopted almost accidentally, in 1988, at the 43rd Venice Biennale.<sup>1</sup> It's *Straatman*: Angel Vergara covers himself with a white sheet, and takes up position on the ground in front of the Belgian pavilion, then occupied by Guillaume Bijl. From beneath this shelter, he paints and draws, and finds himself impressed by what the set-up allows him to perceive: movements, words, bursts of sound, colours and lights, hesitant topographies.

This experience is foundational. A space is born, a nomadic studio which will become the hallmark of a presence throughout the 1990s, will give rise to numerous extensions, will generate paintings, performances, installations, videos... A matrix, a second skin. Even today, although less exclusively assimilated with the practices of Angel Vergara, *Straatman* remains this forward-looking figure who allows one to immerse oneself in social life in order to knead it, disturb it, reveal it, but above all, paint it. *Straatman*, insists Vergara, is above all “a place to paint”.

## INSIDE THE SUBJECT

We must emphasise the specificity of the artistic position thus assumed: Vergara—alias *Straatman*—aims to be in the world as a painter, to intervene in the social field through the painterly act. And this action of painting manifests itself in two ways: for the artist, it is in the concentration and feverishness of the line which seeks to “be there”, to meet the living in its hybridity, its multiplicity, and its confusion. An exploratory gesture that is fixed on the canvas in the Acts and Paintings of the 1990s, guides the movement of the brush highlighting the subject in the video-paintings of the mid-2000s, then adheres coloured materials on the surface of filmed sequences and archival montages, gradually blurring the whole frame, whether it is video projections or, more recently, combinations of LED screens.

<sup>1</sup> *Straatman*'s appearance was not, however, the result of a sudden impulse. The figure in fact had many forerunners which emerged between 1985 and 1987: first, paintings carried in the street, in the form of painted signs or blank banners; then various types of interiors. Here, a camping tent pitched in front of the Palais des Beaux-Arts; there, a white sheet covering the artist perched on a rolling stool encumbering the entrance to MuHKA; elsewhere still, a white flag enveloping the artist and binding him, as if in a shroud, to the pole of a flag, but on the ground (as part of an event proposed by the MuHKA, exposing the flags by artists to the movement of the wind). These prefigurations are symptomatic of Angel Vergara's desire to find a form of portable studio allowing him to intervene in multiple contexts. They also provide information on the formula ultimately adopted. Lightweight, malleable, flexible; at the same time sculptural and, all in all, quite abstract (therefore more polysemous).



fig. 1

fig. 1  
Prométhée, 1987. Cut-out tarpaulin,  
vinyl ink, rope and wood.



**2.**

Interview with Pascale Cassagnau, in *Maisons Cerveaux* (Exhib. Catal.), FRAC Reims, 1995, p.170.

**3.**

Interview with Angel Vergara, *Flux News*, No. 26, September 2001, p.15.

For his environment, *Straatman* acts as a revealer, as a clue. He indicates a ‘work in progress’, marks a ‘will towards art which is at stake in each particular situation.’<sup>2</sup> *Straatman*, in short, contaminates his environment, pictorialises it. When Vergara creates a context, an environment (bar, hat shop, gallery) for his alter ego, he creates a painting, he says. ‘When I open a bar’, he explains, ‘I open a painting that is a bar. I am in the subject. I am in constant contact with this subject which is my painting and which I practice every day by being in the bar, serving drinks, creating moments, moments which make possible the materialisation of each moment.’<sup>3</sup>

*Straatman*, a vector of paint: if he shakes your hand, he risks depositing a handful of colours in your palm. This gesture captures a true purpose: the world, in its most minute details, is a subject of painting. The social relationship itself—materialised by the handshake—is an active pictorial substance, embedded in the midst of the “contact zone”.

## LIFE YET PAINTING (IT)

To paint and, at the same time, to act at the heart of life. This dual orientation is sufficiently atypical that it should be situated within the context in which it emerged, namely, the end of the 1980s. At the time, painting was torn between two poles: that of its impossibility and that of its reification.

Impossibility: this is the legacy of repeated assaults against tradition, against pictorial myth as the base and emblem of the bourgeois conception of art. A conception accused of being decorative, anthropocentric, static, petrified, misleading, moribund... According to this mindset, the painting is the strongbox placed on the mantelpiece allowing the banker or the provincial bourgeois to see the extent of what he has to know, destroy or dominate. Having reached that point, there would no longer be paintings, but rather collages, montages, actions, performances, critical texts, presence in the world. Or else bitter paintings, silly paintings, acid paintings, critical paintings, “reflective” paintings: Picabia, Richter, Polke; taking another tack, BMPT, Art & Language... if one still paints, it is by default, to say that one hates painting, that we only love it because of what it can hate of itself, to confirm at every opportunity to what extent it is and was an illusion.

Reification: this is the celebrated “return to painting” of the 1980s. Celebrated but confused, since it includes any reaffirmation of painting, however disenchanting it may be (Richter and Polke in particular, already cited, were active from the mid-1960s, moreover). Nevertheless, and to be sure, there is an impetus that reaffirms painting’s power of sublimation, proclaims it capable of erecting in its field the content of the human drama. These are artists such as Francis Bacon, George Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, later Peter Doig.

In addition, painting soon asserts itself as the medium capable of criticising the reign of the image, of questioning the empire of the media, of keeping under the watchful eye of time and consciousness, the illusionist aberrations of photography, cinema, and soon, the virtual. Moralising or criticising the image: this will be the underlying theme of Luc Tuymans’ work, or again, albeit in a radically different way, Gerard Richter’s work, or even Walter Swennen’s (this time in radical counterpoint, freely deploying the specificity of painting). But anyway: the frame is the painting.

In this landscape—we must emphasise—Angel Vergara’s specificity is to engage painting as an act, to assert *Straatman* producing Acts and Paintings. Acts as paintings: these are allusive topographies crossed by beams, passages, graphic annotations, words, sounds. They are webs trying to catch moments. Subsequently, it will be materials moving on the screen, materials attempting to read, capture, cover the flow of images on the screen. Sequences filmed, found, edited: these are elusive and labile, evanescent components. Painting holds onto them, welds them together, anchors them in a temporality substantialised by its presence. Painting, therefore: living affirmation of materiality, gestures and materials arranged in—and by—the living world.

## UT PICTURA POESIS

There is another dimension that painting, almost necessarily, because of its contrasting heritage, addresses: that of history. A weighty history that is expressed, at the start of modernity, as a horizon of action and organisation (visual, and therefore intellectual). It is the painting as an “open window on history”, the painting as the theatre of the world, of which man is now the centre (the summit, in truth) and that he objectifies by the pictorial method and its rules of organisation. This function—cognitive, narrative, demiurgic—was developed during the Renaissance and founded the visual system of images for several centuries. We are undoubtedly still dependent on it, even though the expectations of painting have been distributed across other mediums (photography, cinema, “audio-visual” as media support).

In the meantime, however, the surface of the painting has become invested with new expectations: those imposed by the violent accelerations of modernity. Transformations of all kinds—technical, social, military, human, emotional, demographic—which affect the unity of the pictorial surface and its interior organisation. A host of burdens therefore which—from the nineteenth century until the 1970s—break down the inherited order to draw other horizons, or—conversely—claim that there is no other horizon than the unwavering uniqueness of the moment, the preeminence of the present; if not annihilation, paralysis, silence.

One of the living forces that irrigates this immense profusion—the tree-like structure of which continues to re-articulate today—is the momentum that brings art to the world. In the real, moving, tangible, current world... unceasing momentum that still carries artists to the heart of factories or suburbs, in the feverishness of cities or the loneliness of fishing vessels, in the blaze of a riot or the strict concentration of a cognitive science laboratory.

## DIDASCALIES

Aware of this vast history—and its relationship to the world—we can see that *Straatman* takes on the risks of the game at every opportunity. Necessarily, as we have said, by the simple fact of installing here and there this painting ghost, this portable studio, this soft and rustling canvas, this action of matter and of the brush. *Straatman*, in a sense, perpetuates this history which intrudes, questions, and updates its paradigms, activates a context in the light of its legacies.

4. Biennial festival aimed at highlighting the cultural vitality of the capital. The festival had three editions: in 2005, 2007 and 2009.

5. Responsible in particular for cultural policy in the territory of the Walloon Region and the Brussels-Capital Region, the French Community of Belgium was officially renamed the Wallonia-Brussels Federation in 2011. The Estates General for Culture gave rise to a summary entitled *Culture Priorities*. (www.culture.be)

6. Hence, of course, the procession of firefighters. This form also refers to a disaster on a rare scale that thrust the country into mourning in the summer of 2004: the Ghislenghien disaster, named after the industrial zone, located on the outskirts of the city of Ath (in Hainaut) where a gas line exploded on 30 July, causing a violent fire. Twenty-four people perished, including five firefighters. *Straatman's* procession is not strictly speaking a tribute to the victims. However, as he clearly inscribes the artistic act in the course of recent history, outlines a potential solidarity between the “social state” of the artist and that of the working world, configured by such an emergency.

Let us be clear: this relationship to history is by no means nostalgic. Its presence is neither votive nor sanctuary. Like painting itself, history for Vergara is an active principle, part of the diversity of the contexts that are approached. And the visibility of this historical component, embodied by *Straatman*, only makes these contexts denser and more fertile. Moreover, history is nothing other than the time we are in, as informed by the processes which generated it and the movements capable of transforming it.

Be that as it may—and this is, in short, logical—this historical dimension becomes all the more evident as Angel Vergara inscribes his action in the territory of representation, in this case film. Around 2005-2007, a series of works were produced that moved *Straatman's* figure to the videographic terrain. Video paintings, we should say, in which *Straatman* first appears in action, in montages disturbing the perception of his interventions; then, disappears in favour of the action of the line itself, of the painting in motion.

We can see how this is arranged in two stages: *La joyeuse entrée de Straatman à Bruxelles* (2005-2007), and *Monday: Firework – Tuesday: Illuminations – Wednesday: Revolution* (2010).

## DIAL 112!

2005: within the framework of the first edition of BRXL Bravo<sup>4</sup>, Angel Vergara organises a procession of seven fire trucks, which covers, from north to south, the central boulevards of the capital. A route well known to the demonstrators who beat the pavement in protests against war, racism or austerity; the route passes the seats of economic, monetary and institutional power before crossing the working-class districts of the south.

On the cherry-picker of the lead vehicle, *Straatman* points a brush at his temple. He holds up a leaflet (also distributed to passers-by) in which is recorded the conclusion of the basic memorandum drafted in 2004 by the minister responsible at the time, Fadila Laanan, as a preamble to the convocation of the States General for Culture of the French Community of Belgium, organised in 2005.<sup>5</sup> Galvanised by the stubborn repetition of the word “emergency”<sup>6</sup>, the note ends with this sentence: ‘I wish each and every one of you to be the artist of your life.’

‘To be the artist of your life’: we see here as a travesty of the horizon outlined by the activism of the avant-garde throughout the twentieth century. “Art is life”: this is the watchword which brings together, in violently contrasting forms and arrangements, the program of German expressionism, of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, of Dada, surrealism, realism, situationism, pop art, Fluxus, etc. Down with art, long live life, long live art in a renewed life: this is the crux of the “modern project”.

However, the wording here is significantly different: the ministerial declaration requested by *Straatman* calls for creativity as a lever for personal achievement in a general context of competition between individuals (but also companies, cities, states), managerial domination and development of the myth of the self-employed entrepreneur. In this configuration, creativity is mobilised as a tool to improve the competitive position of subjects and groups in a biotope supposedly dominated by predatory mechanisms. The figure of the artist has therefore seen itself moulded, on the threshold of the 21st century, as a model of a possible individuation in a society

of hyper-competitive norms, brutally flattening subjectivities at the same time as it places them in growing material insecurity.

The formula taken from the text of Fadila Laanan does not bolster this conception. It is the symptom of it. Above all, it allows Angel Vergara to register this vision on an urban (and therefore social) scale and to place it in a historical perspective that updates the premises of the debate on the position of the artist in society and the conflicts that run through it.

## MARAT/ SADE

*La joyeuse entrée* is an explicit allusion to *L'Entrée du Christ à Bruxelles* (1888) by James Ensor, a glorious fantasy showing the painter processing through the street at the head of his carnival cohort under the banner “Vive la Sociale”. Even for the (brilliant) hyper-narcissistic petty-bourgeois that Ensor was, aesthetic achievement is still “social”. A new difficulty lodged at the very heart of the modern project: artistic liberation is part of a project of collective liberation, but it takes part in it as a fierce singularity. Courbet said: ‘I am a democrat, a republican, but above all a realist.’ Which means: I am in the world, for the world, for the many, but with the support of my own, free and autonomous vocabulary. This line of tension effectively runs through the entire history of the relationship between art and politics. It makes up a vast spectrum of orientations ranging from downright autistic postures (no less insensitive, however, to collective destinies) and revolutionary cohorts of all kinds (no less attached, however, to their aesthetic independence).

As if to flesh out this perspective, the video edited from *La joyeuse entrée de Straatman à Bruxelles* (2007) adds to the montage fragments of comments by historians situating the engagement of the “accursed artists” of the nineteenth century between an individual revolt leading sometimes to madness (*Straatman's* gesture evokes this image of the “societal suicide”) and adherence to a revolutionary project.

The editing is also syncopated: it goes from positive to negative (from documentary retransmission to pictorial interpretation), it intersects the fragments of radio commentaries with a brief sampling of a haunting musical crescendo. Projected on a large painted canvas (2×3.50m), the video presents itself as a monumental pictorial event, arranging the layers of action and its filmic reading.

## PROÈMES

A polyptych of seven screens produced for and by argos, *Monday: Firework – Tuesday: Illuminations – Wednesday: Revolution* delves into and amplifies the options adopted for the video of *La joyeuse entrée*.<sup>7</sup>

The “search engine” is the place occupied by the Belgian romantic painters in the constitution of a national identity. Around 1830-1840, Louis Gallait, Henri Leys, Gustave Wappers, Antoine Wiertz, and others helped to construct a national fiction anchored in the glorious pages of history (both of the territory and of painting). It is an official, historicist painting (it conjures up Rubens, Jordaens, genre painting...), rarely attempted for the depth of the chasms (Wiertz alone). In this way, it renews this tension of painting between political necessity and aesthetic shifts.

7. A non-isolated attempt, however, as attested by *El Callejero* (*Straatman* in Spanish), a video installation conceived in 2006 for the Cultural Centre of Strombeek. It is a film projected on one of the walls of a velum. The images lay out the recording of a performance conducted during a Mass (*Straatman* painting under his veil), the Mass itself, the painting produced during this action and sequences from *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* by Pasolini. Interrupted by a “quack” from Léo Ferré, the soundtrack combines the sermon uttered during mass and excerpts from the interview between Georges Charbonnier and Marcel Duchamp (France Culture, 1961).



# Acts and Paintings. The Aesthetic Ethics of Angel Vergara

Angel Vergara's work stems from a "necessity of painting": leaving the studio to confront the world, and negotiate the place, status, and role of the artist and of painting. The social and political field is therefore not staged but occupied head-on, as painting is embodied there to interrogate the world. With Vergara, painting becomes an allegory of the world, and the world an allegory of painting.

## BRINGING THE WORLD INTO THE PAINTING

From 1988, Vergara diverts the traditional use of the painter's white canvas to make a sign, a sign stretched over two vertical frames, like a banner with which he wanders through the streets of Brussels and Antwerp, to peddle this first attempt to broaden pictorial practice into the public space. And on the square where the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (M KHA) is located, next to the flags made by the artists that were officially invited by the museum to the current exhibition, he "gets wrapped up" in a large white tarpaulin encircling a tree. Inside, he paints "the tree", a painting in "one act and seven scenes" which, rather than confronting the public square, bears witness to what is happening there.

These intentions, still embryonic, found a new form of realisation the same year, at the Venice Giardini, during the 43rd Biennale of Contemporary Art. While Guillaume Bijl occupies the Belgian pavilion with his *Fami-Home*, a representation of a typical Belgian house, Angel Vergara settles himself on the threshold of this same pavilion, covered by the canvas of a tent. The artist sketches what he perceives and hears through the filter of the canvas: environment, characters, passers-by, hubbub.

Where Guillaume Bijl's *Fami-Home* could only be gazed at, marking a brusque rupture, like its construction materials, between the world of the inside and the outside, the nomadic and parasitic presence of Vergara's tent created doubt as to the border between the space of the work, the artist, and the viewer. A situation both open and closed to the outside (a simple canvas separating the inside from the outside); the designer both present and hidden (he is invisible, but his presence cannot be ignored); a spectator as much as viewer as actor (as the raw material of painting),



fig. 1

fig. 1  
Le bar d'en face. Le reçu – Le récit  
(tarif), 1994. Oil on canvas,  
150 x 200 cm. Private collection.

1. See VERONIQUE RODRIGUEZ, "Atelier ou nomadisme—Un choix de création divergent", in *Lieux et non-lieux de l'art actuel*, Montreal, Esse, 2005, p.20.

2. Note that the *Pavilion of Realism* was built by Courbet—at his own expense—in reaction to the refusal of his *Painter's Studio* by the jury of the Salon of 1855.

3. VERONIQUE RODRIGUEZ, "Atelier ou nomadisme—Un choix de création divergent", loc. cit., p.21.



it is the notion of painting, and hence the modernist values of pictorial art that the artist explores here. The aesthetic autonomy of modern painting is replaced, still tentatively, by an enlarged, extended, heteronomous definition of it, motivated by a fundamental question: how to bring the world into the painting? This question therefore revolves around, in a first variation, a reflection on the role, status, and space of the painter's studio.

### The Painter's Studio, a Real Allegory

Throughout the seventeenth century, the affirmation of the particular status of the artist and of his distinction from that of the craftsman happened by claiming a clean, private space for creation, not unlike the office of men of letters or doctors.<sup>1</sup> The claim of this space dedicated to personal creation, and no longer to the mere execution of a command, is therefore part of the broader movement that we observe at that time, that of the empowerment of the criteria of aesthetic quality, now defined from inside the profession itself. Indeed, because then the studio becomes the place of creation and the origin of the work of art, but also the place where the artist receives his friends, his patrons, and his sponsors, where he instructs his pupils, and exhibits his works, it is, along with the Salon, one of the main spaces where standards for learning, selection, and presentation of works are defined. The painter's studio, this versatile space which will concentrate the exchanges and meetings specific to the art world of the time, will therefore be a key space in the formation of the academic system of art.

Gustave Courbet, in his famous painting *L'Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique (et morale)* (1855) [The Painter's Studio, a real allegory determining a phase of seven years of my artistic (and moral) life],<sup>2</sup> already evoked this centrality of the studio space, as a "natural" place of creation and production of the artist,<sup>3</sup> as well as the social dimension which was then part of its definition.

Because while it is affirmed as private and reserved for the creative act, the studio remains open to the world and its realities. As a commentary on this painting, Courbet wrote in a letter he addressed to his friend Champfleury in January 1855: "This is the moral and physical history of

fig. II  
Gustave Courbet, *L'Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique (et morale)*, 1855.

my studio. These are the people who serve me, support me in my ideas, who participate in my actions. These are the people who live by life, who live by death. It is society at its top, its bottom, its middle. In short, it is my way of seeing society in its interests and passions. It's the world that comes to my house to be painted.' To the right, in fact, the shareholders are represented, that is to say, friends, workers, lovers of the art world. We recognise in particular the bearded profile of Alfred Bruyas, and behind him, from the front, the philosopher Proudhon. The critic Champfleury is seated on a stool, while Baudelaire is absorbed in reading. The couple in the foreground personifies art lovers. The left side of the painting rather seems to represent the world of trivial life, the people, misery, poverty, wealth, the exploited, the exploiters, the people who live on death, in the words of the artist. With this "real allegory", Courbet therefore makes painting an animated quote from reality. Representing himself among this entourage, Courbet affirms the influence of the social world on his work. Moreover, he brings the subject into the world of the painting: whether it is the model, the critic, the amateur, the streetwalker or the idle worker, the relation of the painter to his subject becomes the object of the performance. This deconstruction of painting, of the pictorial act and of its reception, was already, two centuries earlier, the subject of Velasquez's *Las meninas*.

Looking beyond his painting, the content of which is invisible, the painter contemplates, beyond his canvas, the space where we are, that we are. 'On the surface, this place is simple; it is pure reciprocity: we are looking at a painting from which a painter in turn is gazing at us. [...] The painter only directs his eyes towards us to the extent that we are in the place of his subject.'<sup>4</sup> And yet, from this game of visibility and invisibility emanates a whole system of permanent exchanges between the looking and the watched, through which the painter leaves the painting while the spectator enters it.

### Leaving the Studio and Becoming One with the Work

Following in the footsteps of a whole generation of artists, active since the 1960s, having questioned the classic definition of the studio, Angel Vergara will work anew on this reflection on the studio as a fixed and permanent place of creation, maintaining ambiguous relations with the space of reality. Not, like the Impressionists, by leaving the studio to only paint nature or the world up close (Cézanne affirmed the need to situate himself *on* his subject), but by seeking to situate himself in the subject.

Moved by what then appeared to him to be a necessity, Vergara gradually gave shape to a certain configuration, or even a scenario, that we can understand as being both a pictorial character and a space of creation: *Straatman* (or the man in the street). Now covered in a white sheet, more able to wrap the body of the artist, this veil, or this canvas thus inhabited, becomes a work or a painting in itself, while it operates as a portable studio.

Filtering light, movements and sounds of the environment, this nomadic structure of artistic production represents for the artist a space of intimacy, a shelter from the world while remaining open to it—a link from inside to outside necessary for the pictorial act of the artist. Affirmed as such, this relationship of the interior to the exterior is furthermore

4. MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Les Mots et les Choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p.20.



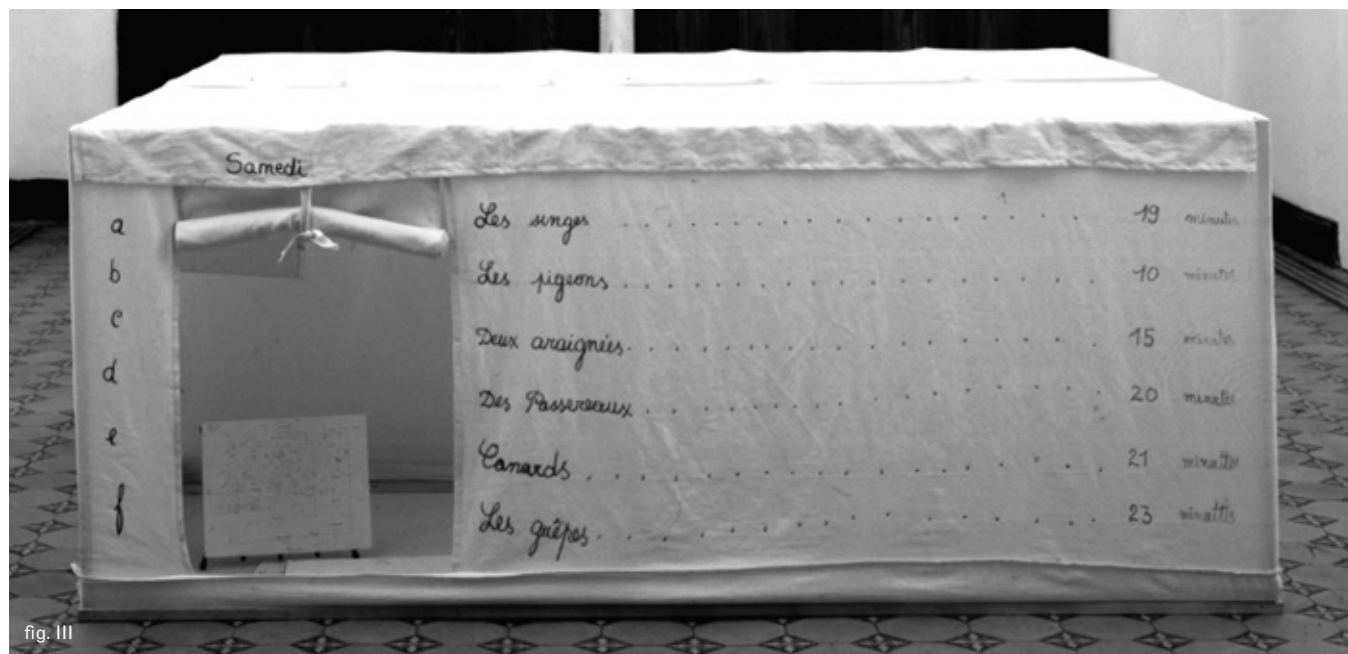
underlined by the artist, by means of a foot or a hand that he often allows to protrude from the veil. An introverted and extroverted space, Vergara seeks to be outside his subject as well as inside it. First of all *outside*, because the veil introduces a distance from the subject, a filter necessary for the realisation of what the artist calls Acts and Paintings. Tracing the journeys, the circulations, the gestures, and the actions of the characters and the things that surround him, noting down words, speech or “bits of sentences” captured in the movement which accompanies them, these “topographical”<sup>5</sup> paintings, which moreover recall the methods of documentary journalism, presuppose a distant observation. *Inside* then, and nevertheless, the body of the artist, by his physical presence “in the middle” of the world—a presence which he incidentally signals by means of drawing *Straatman* in his compositions—which can only be penetrated by him, by his rhythms, his movements, his commotion.

A body as both sender and receiver, a protean structure in constant mutation according to the *hic et nunc* of the situation both occupied and transformed by this presence, it is this arrangement which, more than just giving rise to the pictorial work—the studio, as nomadic and minimal as it is, as phase and place of production—generates the composition, the work itself. In short, we can recognise a form of transposition of Courbet’s *L’Atelier du peintre*: a painting composed of the painter in action, in his working environment, surrounded by the world that inspires him and receives his work. The world has indeed entered the picture: the painting on canvas (respecting the frontal relationship between the plane and the subject) representing the world as it is seen and heard; and the act of painting the world in the world, becomes painting. So, if Courbet’s real allegory made painting an animated quote from reality, Vergara, by this effect of deconstruction, turns reality into an animated quote from painting.

Thus, this dual movement of deterritorialisation of the studio and of painting, leads to the linking of the moment and the space of production and dissemination of art: the nomadic studio not only extends the production phase into each space of dissemination, but becomes one and the same

5. See STEPHANE PENXTEN, “Topographies existentielles”, in *La Libre Belgique*, 27 November, 1991, No. 108.

fig. III  
Samedi. Portable studio. Cinema library, Espace 251 Nord, Liège, 1991. Cotton canvas 60 × 60 × 180 cm and aluminium structure, 6 Acts and Paintings, 24 × 30 cm.



phase, one and the same space. The “natural” framework for the creation and display of art is coming apart: as Thierry Davila suggests regarding the work of Pierre Bismuth: “[...] there is some framework—a plural variation, a proliferation of borders between the work and its side issues—but the frame—as a limit essentially identified, locatable, and designated once and for all, which enshrines the work—does not exist.”<sup>6</sup>

### Anyone Can Be a Work of Art

This fusion of the space of creation and reception of art, and the bursting of their traditional frameworks, updates, in an original form, the avant-garde desire of the 1960s to bring art/artist closer together, just like the work/the real and lived world. Many artists of this decade have indeed questioned the role of the work in a democratic system of sharing knowledge and skills, seeking greater accessibility for art by deconstructing the artist-work-viewer relations. From Kaprow to Beuys and Filliou, it is a project of *generalized deterritorialization*<sup>7</sup> of art that emerges, finding a first variation in the fusion of art and life.

Building on the Dadaist heritage, Kaprow initiates, with his happenings, a movement of reduction of the specificity of art, seeking to cancel out its difference with lived experience. Particular attention is then paid to the creative potential of ordinary life, whether it is seen in the domestic or urban space, as well as that of the “human machine”. Body, space, and time therefore become the materials of the work. The physical territory of performance is, above all, the body of the *performer* itself. The body, a machine for thinking, for pleasure, for fantasies, shows itself, from Viennese actionism to the *Workshops of the Free Expression* of Jean-Jacques Lebel, in all its forms, thereby embodying the libertarian demands directed against conventions, and moral and social codes of contemporary society. Also, and in Kaprow’s words, the happening is ‘untransportable in space and not reproducible in time’<sup>8</sup>. This fused space-time in which the act of the performer takes place can appear in the interventionist mode: it interrupts one series of events with another, which produces a cut in a given temporal process. It can also appear on an autonomous level: the actions produced are not grafted onto any external event and are sufficient in themselves. In either case, notions of chance and indeterminacy are instilled into the artistic conception, admitting accidents, improvisation, the unforeseen, and the unforeseeable. The accidental and ephemeral nature of the happening or performance testifies to the claimed freedom of art and the artist, his violent refusal of any recuperation of art by the marketplace and its traditional values. Indeed, neither transportable in space, nor transposable in time, in any case, the performance can lead to a representation or, in other words, to a reification which would reduce art to the material production of a concrete object, subject to entering the art market circuit. In the merged space-time of the performance, the audience, sometimes an actor just like the performer, experiences the work face-to-face, without intermediaries, in the tension of immediacy. Direct confrontation with the public guarantees a concrete exchange, without barriers and without delays. “The creation and its reception, in an instantaneous relationship, even occasionally finding the following opportunity: to evolve one according to the other, to mutate, to correct each other respectively.”<sup>9</sup>

6. THIERRY DAVILA, *In extremis. Essai sur l’art et ses déterritorisations depuis 1960*, Brussels, La Lettre Volée, 2009, p. 165.

7. Ibid., p. 9.

8. ALLAN KAPROW, cited in MATHILDE FERRER and MARIE-HELENE COLAS-ADLER (s.l.d.), *Groupes, mouvements, tendances de l’art contemporain depuis 1945* (1989), Paris, ÉNSB-A, 1990, p. 87.

9. PAUL ARDENNE, “Performance: la face à peine cachée de la religiosité désacralisée”, in *L’Art même*, No. 31, 2006, pp. 12-13.

**Actions**

**1987 → 1999**

1987

## Portraits

**Location:** Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany

**Context:** free event on the public road

**Curator:** the public

**Type:** public action

**Material:** oil on canvas, wooden frame and metal structure, one support

In various areas of the city of Cologne, paintings created from cut-up canvases and superimposed frames are exhibited on the public road by Angel Vergara and other persons he encounters.





## Human Flag

**Location:** MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

**Context:** a large exhibition of flags by international artists is on view in the museum and on the Waalse Kaai and Vlaamse Kaai

**Curator:** Flor Bex

**Type:** public action; standing in public spaces

**Materials:** white plastic sheet, a tree, and a person

Angel Vergara unfurls a flag attached to a tree. The flag envelops his body. Inside it, he paints seven scenes with a tree.



## Hombre-pintura

**Location:** centre of Madrid, Spain, and Antwerp and Brussels, Belgium

**Context:** public art

**Curator:** the public

**Type:** public action

**Materials:** vinyl paint on tarpaulin with holes, a tree or a similar object, and a person

The unfurling in all sorts of ways of the same painted tarpaulin with holes cut in it. Always with one person, in various places and public sites in Madrid, Antwerp, and Brussels.



Walter Swennen at Verlatstraat, Antwerp.



## To Robert Garcet

**Location:** Espace 251 Nord, Liège, Belgium

**Context:** exhibition *Robert Garcet*, Liège, Belgium

**Curator:** the public

**Type:** public action

**Materials:** painting on folded canvas, aluminium structure, and a person

Walking about in Espace 251 Nord with a folded and cut-up painting during the opening of the exhibition *Robert Garcet*.



## Apple

**Location:** MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

**Context:** exhibition by Ben in the MuHKA

**Curator:** the public

**Materials:** painted, cut-up and superimposed canvases, aluminium structure, and a person

Presentation by several persons of a single work in front of MuHKA in Antwerp.





## Signatures

**Location:** the streets of Hasselt, Belgium

**Context:** public art

**Curator:** the public

**Type:** public action

**Materials:** oil on canvas, and a person

As people meet by chance, they sign and exhibit the same work of art, which consists of an accumulation of identities.



## Christian Boltanski's CV

**Location:** in front of Galerie des Beaux-Arts Galerij, Brussels, Belgium

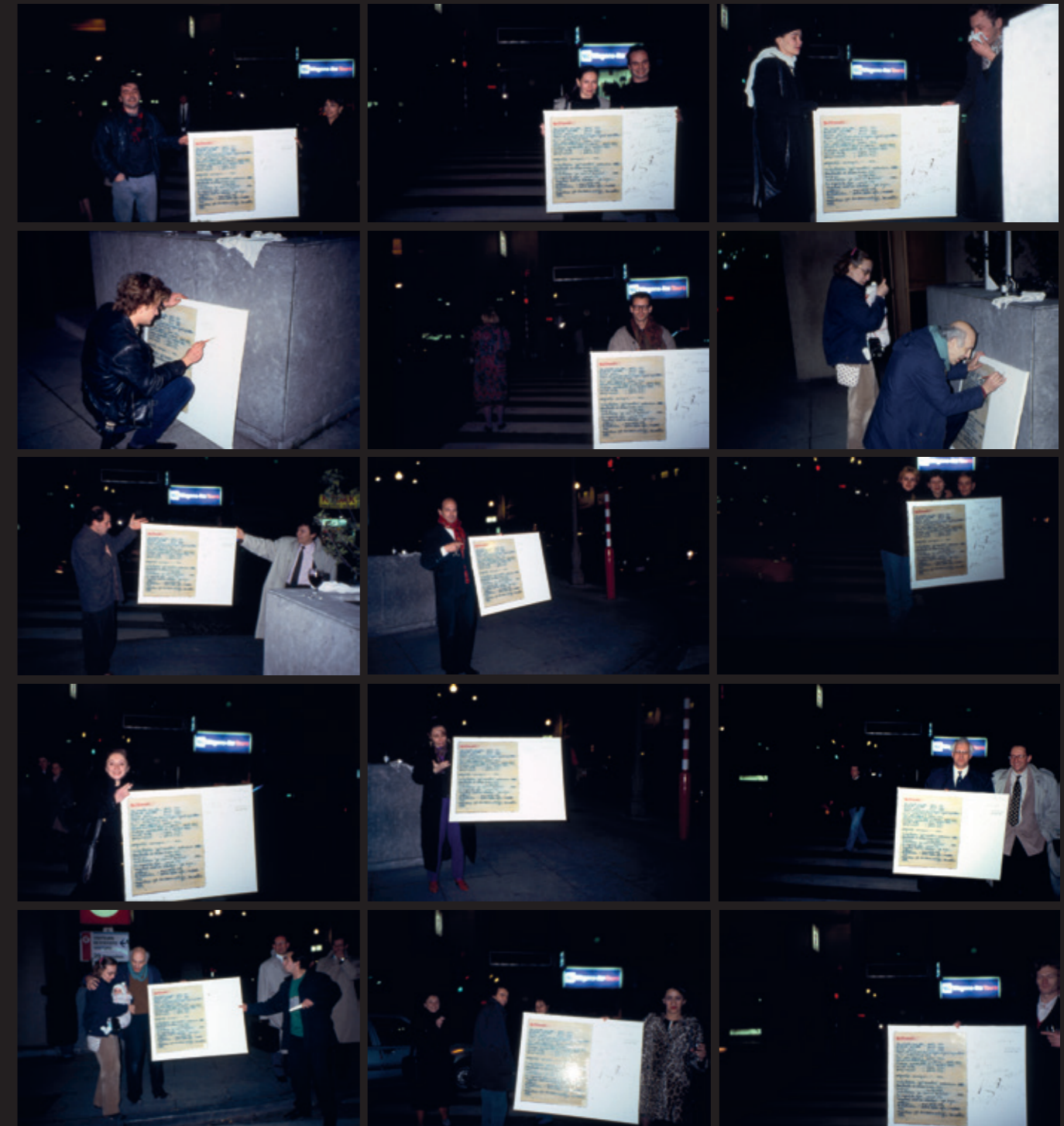
**Context:** opening of the exhibition *Christian Boltanski* at Galerie des Beaux-Arts Galerij, Brussels

**Curator:** the public

**Type:** public action

**Materials:** oil on canvas and several individual persons

In front of Galerie des Beaux-Arts Galerij, the public and friends sign a canvas on which Christian Boltanski's curriculum vitae has been painted. The canvas is presented to everyone visiting the exhibition.





## Art Tent Camp

**Location:** rue Ravenstein, Brussels, Belgium

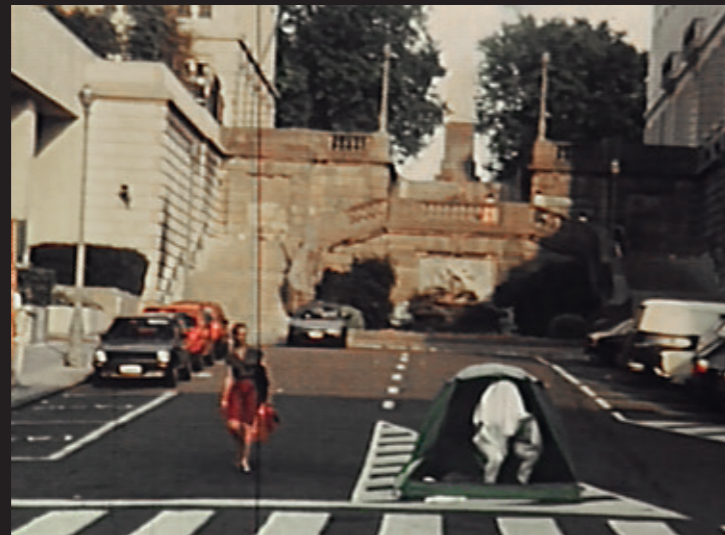
**Context:** opening of the exhibition Monica Droste and Guy Rombouts at Galerie des Beaux-Arts Galerij, Brussels

**Curator:** the public

**Type:** public action

**Materials:** tent, sheet, easel, tie belonging to Jasper Johns, watercolours, an issue of the journal of the Biennale, the street

*Straatman* (Street Man) made his first appearance at the Venice Biennale, in front of the Belgian Pavilion with Guillaume Bijl's work, and in front of the American Pavilion with work by Jasper Johns, who was awarded the Golden Lion. *Straatman* appeared in Brussels in a tent and covered with a sheet, while capturing what happened around him on canvas. He documents a situation that took place for a certain period of time, having taken up position in the rue Ravenstein, near the Galerie des Beaux-Arts Galerij, CINEMATEK, Bozar, and the bank BNP. At times, *Straatman* uncovered himself and showed Jasper Johns's tie to the public.



## The Brazier

**Location:** rue Ravenstein, Brussels, Belgium

**Context:** opening of the exhibition of Thierry Decordier at Galerie des Beaux-Arts Galerij

**Curator:** the public

**Type:** public action

**Materials:** sheet, easel, cardboard, pencils, brazier, paving

It's wintertime. *Straatman*, hidden in the lights, warms himself at a brazier installed in the street by Thierry Decordier, this most hospitable man, man of earth and shadows.

