

## ILVSX!?: a conversation between sexuality and visual art

The expo *ILVSX!?*, running from 20 to 22 April in Brugian exhibition space De Tank, illuminates some facets of contemporary sexuality through the work of visual artists. The confrontation with this existential theme differs for everyone. Although people always try to unravel sexuality, certain aspects will remain elusive. The title of the exhibition: *I love sex!?*, conceived as an acronym, alludes to the inability of humanity to capture sexuality in its totality. The exclamation mark and the question mark refer respectively to the pleasure and inconveniences that sexuality entails.

A look at the Brugian region shows different points of contact for questions about sexuality. CGSO Bruges (Center for Family Planning and Sexual Education) guides people with their relational development. It's service supports three pillars: information and advice, training and prevention. Safe sex, relationships, lgbt (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender), intimacy and resilience are among the main themes with which the volunteers get to work. The rainbow house Rebus, located in Ostend, is a low-threshold platform for sexual orientation and gender identity in the province of West Flanders. By sharing information and conducting sensibility campaigns, the organisation wants to increase the visibility of lgbt movements and create a positive image of sexual diversity. Fixed on the agenda of Rebus is the monthly support group hosted in the monthly talk session in the Brugian bar The Pub. In addition, some Brugian associations have joined Rebus; the rainbow house supports and cooperates with them. The self-help group Gender Contact West-Vlaanderen focuses on gender identity, transgenderism and transsexuality. The association wants to be an environment to promote self-respect, self-confidence and self-development. Every fourth Friday of the month the association meets in Bruges. The youth movement Jong & Holebi in Brugge specializes in education about sexual self-image. Everyone - gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, transgender, faery or queer - is welcome to join their activities. In addition, the organization also offers training for primary and secondary education. B4Gay is a Brugian association for and by lgbt in North-West Flanders. Sport is central during their weekly meeting and they offer a wide range of activities as well, including parades at home and abroad. Finally, there is the Brugian literary reading society Trozelientje, an association for lesbian, bisexual and trans women.

Just like the organizations mentioned, the expo *ILVSX!?* wants to pay more attention to sexuality. The exhibition presents a status quo through the artworks of eight (international) artists. Each artist accentuates one or more aspects of contemporary sexuality in a personal way: sensuality, eroticism, frustration, virginity, pornography, digital media, gender, voyeurism, exhibitionism ...

Since the sexual revolution, Western people have been constantly in contact with sexually-oriented messages. Newspapers, TV, social media, film, advertising, porn sites flood our world daily and try to break through all kinds of taboos through text and images. These media create the illusion that almost every sexual theme is negotiable. The sexual turn seemed to give us more and more freedom in our dealings with sexuality.

Different individuals questioned this assumption quite quickly. The book *Histoire de la Sexualité: La Volonté de Savoir* (1976) by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was, and still is, exemplary for his critical attitude towards the discussion and freedom of sexuality. The French intellectual states that the dialogue about sex implies an expectation pattern rather than the presumed liberating effect.

Foucault's historical overview starts in the Middle Ages. He points to the confessional as the place where clergymen collected all sorts of meanings about sexuality. As the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment became more and more ground in western society, scientific knowledge grew

accordingly on this topic. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, knowledge became more and more extensive, which Foucault describes with the concept of *Scientia Sexualis*.

For Foucault, the growing insight led to the recording of the truth about sexuality. Domains such as medicine and psychology increasingly determined what *normal sex* had to be, which was accompanied by an increased power over people; a power that manifested itself everywhere. Through much discussion about sexuality, power is exerted due to its connections with social dynamics.

Anno 2018, Anaïs Van Ertvelde and Heleen Debruyne denounce a similar problem. In their book *Vuile Lakens* (2017), both authors state that our sexual desire no longer flows from a personal core. The human longing is pressured by a complex network of social norms, echoes of our upbringing, internalized shame, cultural clichés, power dynamics, genes and evolutionary mechanisms.

After concentrating mainly on written words, we now have to learn to handle a culture of images. Recently sexologists noticed that men increasingly have the feeling of being watched and act accordingly. To feel is no longer central as a way to deal with your own body and that of someone else. People only want to see or be watched. The installation/performance of Hanna Louisa responds in a striking way to this subject. In her intimate cocoon she confronts the viewer simultaneously with voyeurism and exhibitionism.

The representation of pornography in our visual culture has increased enormously in recent decades. Notwithstanding, pornography is something of all times. Just think of the different depictions of rape in Greek mythology or the many harem scenes in 19th-century painting. Since these stories and images seem less realistic than porn, they are usually viewed as innocent. Remarkable is the lack of decisive research on the effects of pornography on the sexual behaviour of people. What is certain, however, is that the distribution of roles in porn corresponds to the widespread cliché image of the active man and the passive woman. The recent rise of porn directed by women goes against this pattern by focusing on the active role of women and their pleasure during sex. The collage of Chego, exhibited at the expo *ILVXSX!?*, pushes the theme of pornography to the forefront. The ubiquity of sex scenes places the artist in opposition to virginity. She points to the failure of schools in giving qualitative sexual education as one of the reasons why certain people remain virgin.

Never sharing the bed with someone or not having sex for a long period of time is part of life for some people. There are people who consciously choose to do so. With this in mind, we have to ask ourselves if we need to focus, as a society, on the finite nature of virginity; clearly there are more than two ways to answer the question "*Have you had sex?*". Our limited vocabulary fails when trying to facilitate an open dialogue on the matter at hand. Eventually this has led to the creation of an extremely charged moment in time: the first time. A more nuanced approach to the debate could help to release the pressure.

Shame is often linked to the idea of privacy. The artists take up the challenge to explore the zone between the public and intimate atmosphere. The interpretation of shame is strongly influenced socially and does not necessarily have a negative response. The feeling of not being in accordance with the norms and thereby bombarding humiliation regulates manners, so that living together for the majority of people remains pleasant.

In recent centuries, shame has become more and more personal. Today, shame is a matter of self-control, the concrete cause is less visible. For example, the discussion about male sexuality is still in its infancy. Many men struggle their own sexual experiences openly with their environment. Usually they do not get any further than tough talk or shy grumbling. The work of three male artists succeeds in opening this debate. A gold coloured self-blowing man is central to the new installation of Flor Maesen. The erotic desire for oral self-gratification represents the artist as a symbol of human greed and the

self-centered society. The artworks by Jans Muskee show each time a scene between man and woman. The drawings always raise one or more issues with the viewer. In a subtle way his work brings us into contact with personal desire. The oeuvre of Philippe Somers is characterized by many sexually related motifs. The relationship with his wife is translated on the pictorial carrier through the subconscious. Responsible dealing with borders is necessary to create an environment in which men and women are free to experience their lusts more carefree. It seems obvious that if women are no longer overburdened with embarrassment when they express their sexual desires, they will act much more in that way. By doing so men would no longer feel as if only they are overpowered by lust.

The imposition of sexually transgressive behavior is unfortunately inseparable from man. The worldwide phenomenon takes place daily in the broad sections of the population. In his new painted drawings, Peter Jonckheere discusses this problem among people in war and poverty areas. The fact that both male and female aid workers have sexual relations with adults and children in need was the starting point for Peter's creation process. Often this small group of welfare workers force the needy into sexual acts in exchange for primary means such as food. A very harmful situation for the victims as they are in an unequal position of power and they are completely dependent on the help of the social workers. Acting against such abuses is difficult because the aid organizations usually do not have the control. Often, the reporting of such cases remains out. The majority of the victims do not dare to report the abuse for fear of punishment. When this happens, nothing is regularly taken out of fear that the organization would no longer offer help in the area. These reports also do not ensure that the sexual abuse stops. Organizations often tell that they are not aware of the abuse by their employees. Some people in a state of emergency therefore refuse to go to centers for help. Afraid that they have to offer their bodies for food.

In recent years, the concept of gender has received increasing attention in our society. We are all born in a body that partly determines who we are. Depending on the gender, we automatically link all sorts of meanings and expectations to that body. Often it is about the differences between woman and man and how they should behave. The division between pink and blue starts at a young age: the decoration of the nursery, the choice of toys, clothing, leisure time, study and career. Most of the time, these stereotypical visions give shape to our own identity. Also the impact of sexist commercial messages from advertisers should certainly not be underestimated.

Today many parties are working to get rid of the division between man and woman. Certain clothing chains bring gender-neutral collections to the market and the idea of gender-neutral toilets is on the rise. But the Belgian government also endeavoured to support transgender people in their wishes: since May 2017, when they want to change gender on a legal level, transgender people will no longer have to undergo a surgical procedure. Because trans people do not always opt for a complete gender reassignment. On the other hand, gender registration remains one of the most important points of criticism. Fortunately, a world in which all possible gender variations may co-exist is gradually taking shape. For this the youth is the leading population group to make this turn possible.

The artworks of Elisabeth Van Dam and A. Liparoto strongly break the prevailing social norms of femininity. With their own interpretation of femininity both artists want to stimulate both women and men to express themselves according to their feelings and ideas. Dolly Bing Bing, the alter ego of Elisabeth Van Dam, experiments with the interaction between female and male sexual fantasy. From the cyber culture the artist creates a hypersexual world. Elisabeth transformed her body into a muscular sculpture that functions as the most important tool in her artistic practice. The video of A. Liparoto is the result of an intense research into gender identity. The viewer comes into contact with the different gradations of the grey zone between man and woman through the life of Andrew and Abigail.

The exhibition with the eight participating artists hopes to provide a clarifying view of all sorts of facets of contemporary sexuality. Only a nuanced vision can make it possible to make all kinds of intimate contact between people smoother and more enjoyable. Each person is challenged to put binary thinking and acting as quickly as possible aside.

Benedict Vandaele