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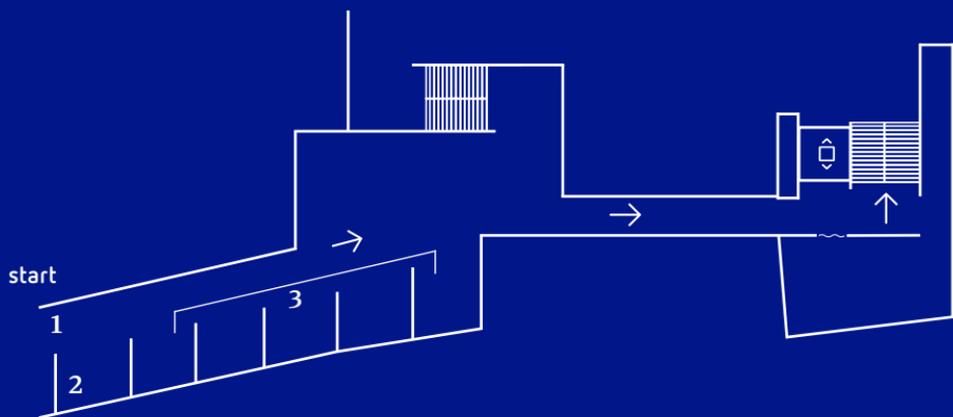
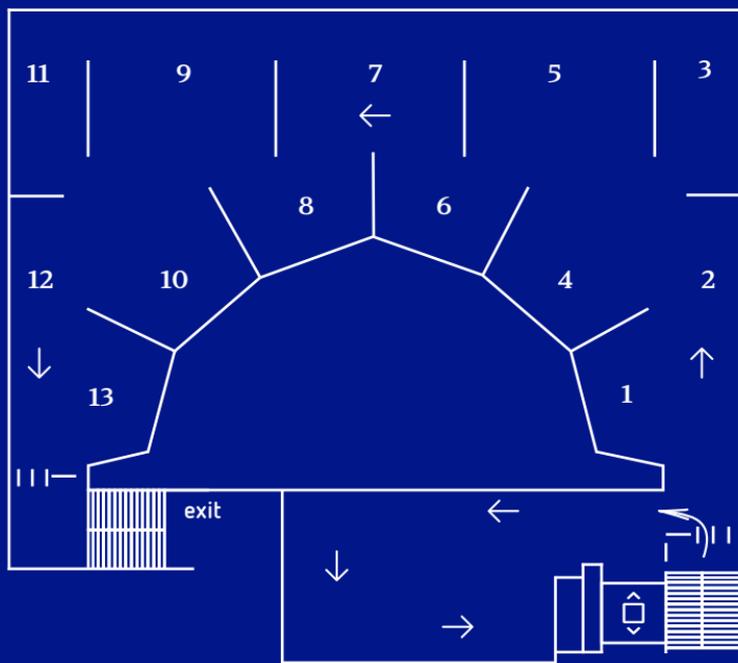


Dotremont

Peintre de l'écriture | Schilder — Schrijver | Painter — Poet

28.04 > 07.08 2022

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A**B**

Dotremont

Painter — Poet

As a major figure of the second half of the 20th century and co-founder of the CoBrA movement, Belgian artist Christian Dotremont (1922-1979) was amongst the first to elevate writing to the level of visual art. Dotremont was an innovator, who invented “logograms”, genuine graphic poems that he drew using a brush with tremendous spontaneity.

Fruit of the collaboration between the Archives & Museum of Literature, which conserve the Christian Dotremont collection (property of the King Baudouin Foundation), and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, this retrospective gives pride of place to the logogram, highlighting its wide variety and experimental sources. By associating themes and forms in a unique approach, the visitors are immersed into the very heart of the creative process of the painter – poet through a selection about one hundred works on paper, photographs, films and previously unpublished archival material.

Enjoy your visit!

A *I write
therefore
I create*

I
—
Christian
Dotremont

1

Christian Dotremont was born in Tervuren on 12 December 1922 into a family of Catholic intellectuals. As a bright yet undisciplined student who favoured poetry over lessons, he was recurrently expelled from the schools he attended. In 1941, he became a member of the Brussels surrealist circles and rubbed shoulders with René Magritte, Louis Scutenaire, Paul Nougé, and Marcel Mariën. During the Occupation, he travelled to Paris where he met Jean Cocteau, Paul Éluard and Pablo Picasso, whose four-handed creations left a strong impression on him. Between Paris and Brussels, he wrote and devoted himself to launching surrealist magazines and publishing. With his ability to

bring people together and his involvement with the Communist Party, he helped launch the *Surréalisme révolutionnaire* in May 1947. Subsequently, he played a pivotal role in the creation and development of the CoBrA artistic movement (1948–1951), whose name he invented—an acronym of the three capitals from which its founding members came (Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam)—and in which the joyous practice of word-paintings flourished. In 1951, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. His time spent in the Silkeborg sanatorium and passion for a young Danish woman became the themes of his only published novel, *La Pierre et l'oreiller* (1955). In 1962, after years of experimentations, he devised the logogram. In spite of the official demise of CoBrA, Dotremont went on to produce a large number of works with Asger Jorn, Serge Vandercam, Karel Appel, Pol Bury, Hugo Claus, and most importantly, Pierre Alechinsky, a close friend of his. Plunged into poverty for many years, he only gained recognition at the end of his life, when his logograms became widely known among collectors

and were displayed in prestigious galleries. He died on 20 August 1979 in Buizingen's Rose de la Reine sanatorium.

upside down

si(g)nification

2

In 1950, in a founding text entitled *Signification et sinification*, Christian Dotremont relates a literally staggering experience: while reading the manuscript of his text *Le Train Mongol* in transparency, upside down and vertically, he discovered an unimagined graphic universe: "My French sentence now appeared to me as the encrypted cover of an indecipherable poem." He concludes: "True poetry is when writing has its say." This experience marked the beginning of a process of poetic rethinking and aesthetic reflection on the relationship between text and image, which would lead him to invent the logogram twelve years later.

*writing
words just
like they
move...*

laboratory
— gesture —
process

3

While the experience of *Le Train Mongole* proved decisive for the subsequent emergence of the logogram, it was embedded in a long process of fascination for writing captured in its intrinsic materiality. For Dotremont, writing is an overflowing gymnastic, a series of *irruptions, interruptions*, and *eruptions* in a constant state of movement. "Everyone who writes makes logograms without knowing it": the most banal manifestations of cursive writing—a child's notebook, a writing manual, a simple handwritten note—demonstrate the organic dimension of the movement, which, in Dotremont's case, becomes a creative force.

Demonstrating attention to the material production of language or “real linguistics”, the “construction” of the logogram does not obey the traces of calligraphy. It is not about seeking “beauty or ugliness, [but] verbal-graphic unity.” A logogram describes, in a spontaneous movement from the legible to the visible, the poetry of the pictorial activity. Through a natural and lively elan, the painted words take on a poetic form.

Not allowing any deletion or retouching, the creative process takes precedence over the finished work. Elated by these first experiments, Dotremont pursues the experience with several of his artist friends (Pierre Alechinsky, Jean-Michel Atlan, Corneille, Karel Appel, Mogens Balle, Hugo Claus, or Carl-Otto Hultén). By gradually pushing writing to the limits of its legibility, the practice of these painted poems participates to the invention of the logogram.

B *hello
Cobras*

—
painted poems
—
four hands

1

*I am but a
breath...*

disease —
breathing

2

In 1948, soon before the official formation of CoBrA, Christian Dotremont and Danish painter Asger Jorn produced a dozen four-handed artworks, where the completely spontaneous dialogue between word and image was formed in a quasi-synchronous manner through mutual inspiration.

In 1951, while visiting his friend Asger Jorn, who was being treated at the Silkeborg sanatorium in Denmark, Dotremont was told that he too was ill with tuberculosis. This unexpected turn of events spurred the official end of CoBrA and permanently shaped his life, which was henceforth lived on borrowed time, interspersed

with stints in treatment centres. The experience of a battered and immobile body fuels his work with new life. Simultaneously, a genuine obsession with the stain materialises. It is omnipresent in his work, much like his illness, which he tries to tame using humour. Many of his logograms show signs of a sick body, which has become both a subject and a source of inspiration.

*the
mathematics
of the
tenuous*
series
—
small formats

3

Before adopting the upright position and large formats specific to visual artists, Dotremont started tracing logograms in the restricted space of the page. As an experimental space for the tenuous, the page gives room

to a plethora of small logograms that can be combined into series. After an initial and intensive use of coloured pastels and ordinary ink, Dotremont gradually moved on to Indian ink, which he applied with a pen, and then worked mostly with a brush or even a tube. Each method is rated according to the “verbal-graphic” alchemy it facilitates. The accumulation of letters, the geometric drawing, the logic of the “trilog” or “quadrilog”, and even the intentional effect of simplicity are just some of the techniques that unfold in small versions, like so many avatars of the large logograms.

*my blonde,
black beast*
love
—
humour

4

In 1951, when he learns that he suffers from tuberculosis, Dotremont meets a “danoiselle” [contraction of Danish and

Demoiselle, Miss in French) in a Copenhagen café. She overshadows all his previous loves. As the instrument of the lyrical and the tragic, she enabled the artist to complete the fusion of eros and logos, according to her appearances and disappearances. In his logograms and in his more personal notes, the poet imbues the words of absence and excess with an allegorical dimension. His blonde bête noire (blonde, black beast), whose passionate love torments and satisfies him in equal parts, becomes, in turn, Gladys, Ulla, Boule d'or, Gloria, ... "I write to Gloria – it's my job – I am a writer to Gloria – in order to seduce her" Love and "catastrophe" converge through words in a black-and-white "movement" that is occasionally relieved by humour.

Dotremont's involvement with surrealism opened his eyes to photography. His elders' theoretical texts and experiments prompted him to formulate his own ideas, which he introduced with the essay *Le Procès de l'œil* (1941–1942). From an amateur photographer, he became the advocate of his peers when he organised a CoBrA exhibition in Paris in 1950, *Les développements de l'œil*. By altering the perception of reality, photography re-joins writing when it ceases to exert the exclusive referential function: both expressions become the instruments of a poetic, radically non-formalist revolution. In 1953, at the Eupen sanatorium, Dotremont followed his own journey by creating "luminous writings", inspired by the works of Albanian photographer Gjon Mili. This was the first step towards the alchemy between writing and image, which Dotremont later crystallized with the logogram.

mixed sight and vision

optics

—

photography

celebrating the scant everywhere

drifting
—
poverty

6

Dotremont is one of those artists who have raised drifting to the rank of a form of poetry. For him, travelling is essential, while the sedentary lifestyle frequently imposed by illness is suffered as a straitjacket. From his birthplace of Tervuren, he continued his nomadic lifestyle to the north: after Denmark, he went to Norway, and Finland, in his beloved Lapland and the village of his “rebirth”, Ivalo. Beyond the fantasy of the expedition and its obsessive elements, Dotremont’s work combines writing and wandering. As an antidote to stasis, the large logograms executed in Tervuren allow the thwarted migrant to rediscover movement. His suitcases, loyal travelling

companions, hold the scant possessions of the artist. For many years the writer-painter lived in poverty. Once he started to gain recognition, he never moved to a more opulent home than his rented room in Pluie de Roses (Tervuren) which burst to the seams with objects, books, and papers that formed the delicate layers of his existence.

thread to thread

echoes
—
sign

7

The dialogue between text and image reinvented by the logogram falls within the scope of a movement initiated by the literary and artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century – Guillaume Apollinaire, then Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, or René Magritte. The climate prevalent between 1950 and 1970, at a time when an entire generation was fascinated

by the scriptural sign, paved the way for the emergence of new experimentations. Personal experiments joined the general enthusiasm: here, people were inspired by non-Western calligraphic arts to give life to dancing inks and asemantic codes; there, artists endeavoured to distort the lines of musical writing or to revive a visual poetry. When placed in dialogue with that of his contemporaries, Dotremont's oeuvre reveals both a familiarity and an inherent distinction: that of granting intrinsic legibility to logograms, whilst simultaneously glorifying the aesthetic significance of signs.

*my fragile
super-
impositions*

geopoetics
—
strata

8

Dotremont has always been fascinated by maps, urban blueprints, and geological surveys. Logograms, both in their text and in their graphic execution, bear the trace of this fundamental geopoetics, which imposes itself as a red thread. In 1950, in *Signification et sinification*, Dotremont already asserted the indestructible link between cartography and writing: "When printed, my sentence is like the map of a city; shrubs, trees, objects, and even I have vanished." The topographical imagination nurtures the poet's aesthetic thought and his vision of the world. Following CoBrA's example, he drew up a map of a superimposed hybrid city: Louverick, a contraction of Leuven and Limerick.

*whiteness,
I'm coming*

Lapland
—
nature

9

Dotremont first travelled to Lapland in 1956. The first scenes of a regular encounter with the Great North were played out in Rovaniemi, then in Ivalo. The experience of the pristine whiteness, the bright light, and the inhabitants of these wild lands transformed Dotremont permanently and shaped his art: “Sometimes, when I draw a logogram, I have the impression that I am like a Lapp travelling on a fast sled on a white page, and that I am greeting nature as if it were passing by, through the very form of my voice or my song, or both combined.” Amidst this “calligraphy of nature”, Lapland and its infinite landscapes appear like a huge open-air experimental laboratory. In 1961, Dotremont produced his *Dessins lapons* (Lappish drawings), whose motifs presaged the logogram. In 1963, the artist drew his first *logoneiges* which, like their paper counterparts, place the graphic gesture at the very heart of the material.

ace in diversions

variations
—
experimen-
tations

10

As an eternal experimenter, Dotremont broadened his research by exposing fixed poetic elements to all sorts of distortions. Inherently separate from the logogram, these series were intended to “profoundly renew [writing], by multiplying the relationships between form and content”. Thus, in 1963–1964, the “spaced writings” emerged. They entailed writing the same word in a variety of physical and mental situations. Then came *Le oui et le non, le peut-être* (1965), a series of 130 pastel graphics inspired by the dialectic of *nja* – a contraction of *ja* (yes) and *nej* (no) in Danish, suggesting hesitation. Finally, mimicking a printing catalogue with fanciful names, the *Typographismes* (1971) joined the

arsenal of Dotremontian “writings”.

*Logogus
has a
sudden urge
to make a
logogram*

studio
—
Pluie de Roses

11

In the modest boarding house in Tervuren where he has rented a room since 1969, Dotremont had access to a small studio in the attic. This is where *Logogus*, his alter ego, entered the stage. This is also the place where he began producing an astounding number of logograms, most of which were either destroyed or discarded. A few close friends or amateurs were able to visit this now mythical place. For example, Pol Bury: “He takes us into his studio – in the attic. The door is

open, apparently forced open by a heap of drawings, which pours out like a steady stream. The entire floor is littered with logograms on which we tread. Three people can barely fit in here. The table under a skylight illuminates the paper adequately, but he complains about the drying process, which forces him to routinely throw away the four or five logograms produced during the morning and to keep only one.”

*the form
is always
there in the
background*

supports
—
materiality

12

Besides paper, whose size, granularity, and colour changes, the logogram can be found on numerous unusual media. In 1963, the “photologs”, based on the

photographs that Dotremont himself had taken in Dublin or in Lapland, appeared. Using the principle of “stratification”, Dotremont blackened the front pages of Finnish newspapers with oil pastels, poured candle wax on cardboard boxes, and applied Indian ink to a number of objects, most of which he had gleaned during his travels: envelopes, train tickets, reader’s cards, geographical maps, schoolbooks and notebooks, logarithm tables... Each medium “imposes or suggests other rhythms, other desires, other tones, other speeds”.

hands full of harmonies

paintinglogs

—

collaborations

13

In the 1970s, Christian Dotremont started working with four hands again, mainly with the former members of CoBrA. Liberated

from the constraint of legibility, the logogram is now confronted with the strokes of the visual artists: “There are many ways to be two on the same surface of the paper. When one artist abandons a line, the other picks it up again, in a surprisingly opposing, complementary, decorative, or explicative sense.” (P. Alechinsky) The collaboration with Pierre Alechinsky intensified considerably and was revealed to the public in real time (at the Galerie Maya in 1973 for example), or eventually entered the public arena when the two artists decorated the Brussels metro station Anneessens with a large-scale fresco entitled *Sept écritures* (1976), which can now be admired at the Delta metro station.

Journée d'étude (FR—05.05 2022)

Christian Dotremont Entre textes et images

En marge de l'exposition organisée pour le 100^e anniversaire de la naissance de Christian Dotremont, les Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique et les Archives & Musée de la Littérature vous convient à une journée d'étude consacrée au « peintre de l'écriture ».

Homme de plume et de lettres, animateur d'art, inlassable chercheur de nouveautés, Christian Dotremont est l'une des figures essentielles de l'avant-garde européenne de la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle. Né et mort en Belgique mais grand voyageur, il a déployé son activité dans plusieurs pays, en relation avec des artistes de toutes nationalités, explorant sans cesse les marges des genres institués. Même si plusieurs monographies lui ont été consacrées, ainsi que quelques travaux académiques, sa trajectoire reste en partie méconnue, sans doute précisément parce qu'il a toujours refusé d'emprunter les chemins balisés de la littérature ou de l'art. La présente journée d'étude met d'abord l'accent sur son exploration de l'entre deux : lorsque le verbe fait image, lorsque le texte prend appui sur la page, lorsque le corps se fait signe et entre dans le paysage. Dans une seconde partie, ce sont de nouvelles pistes de recherche que l'on voudrait explorer : la photographie et le cinéma, la musique et la géographie, la fabrique de l'auteur tel qu'il s'expose

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Special Day (FR | NL—22.05 2022)

Dotremont, Marat & Co

Performances, visites guidées, workshops...

Une après-midi créative et instructive pour découvrir les expositions *Marat assassiné* et *Christian Dotremont, peintre de l'écriture* à fleur de peau, de lignes, d'histoires et de mots.

Séances de tatouages poético-éphémères, lectures performatives par des autrices et auteurs, visites guidées, workshops animés par des artistes, atelier BD...

Performances, rondleidingen, workshops...

Gedurende al deze activiteiten kan u tevens de twee tentoonstellingen bezoeken: *De moord op Marat* en *Christian Dotremont, schilder-schrijver*.

performances door schrijvers, vluchtige en poëtische tatoeëersessies door de schrijvers, rondleidingen, workshops door de kunstenaars, een atelier rond beeldverhaal...

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