

All We Can Do
Is What We
Are Actually
Doing Already

Chaim van Luit
*ALGEMENE STUDIES/
ETUDES GENERALES*
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III. Made In Brussels

Artists who have chosen to work in places unfamiliar to them often feel compelled to make work directly related to the place to which they have moved or otherwise landed. It's worthwhile to try to orient oneself in one's surroundings, and artists can sometimes uncover a richness and depth of experience that was inaccessible to them in more familiar surroundings. But making work about a place presents the same situation that occurs when trying to write about something. We can make work in a place, we can carefully consider our individual relationship to that place and its specific history, but to try to make a work about a place is always an epic failure, because the place exists solely in our imaginations. The place, as such, doesn't even exist. The famed Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński refers to this in the preface to *The Shadow of the Sun*, "Only with the greatest of simplifications, for the sake of convenience, can we say Africa. In reality, except as a geographical term, Africa doesn't exist." Whether we are considering a city, a country, or a continent, the most intriguing thing is the not the place but the way that it is imagined. The task of any artist then, who is either inspired by a place, or attempting to make work about a place, is to open the gate to that place that is otherwise confined within the imagination.

For Chaim Van Luit, this place has two names: “Brussels” and “the underground.”

Brussels can be easily geopolitically situated as the capital of Belgium, while the underground is a more ambiguous term, recalling not only subterranean layers of the earth, but also the subversive, hidden and sometimes shady layers of human society. Van Luit’s starting point for the exhibition “ALGEMENE STUDIES/ETUDES GENERALES” at P/////AKT draws from both sources. The title was inspired by a nameplate he noticed on a locked door during one of his solo forays around off-limits areas of the Brussels subway stations.

He recently moved to Brussels from Maastricht, and has expressed an interest in the history of the city and surrounding areas. The main works in the exhibition deal with the local subway stations, but his way of distinguishing these stations from stations in other places is, at times, inconsistent. How does he introduce the imagined or real place he is thinking about to the visitors of the gallery? Is there any crossing or mixing of “distinct” or unique places? In the untitled work (Waiting room), he collected 14 decommissioned subway seats, which are the constructions of one place, and resettled them in the gallery environment. This presents an irrelevant convergence of spaces, not unlike decorating one’s Los Angeles home with Ming dynasty furniture. The effect looks good, in LA and at P/////AKT, but as a concept it is missing some substance. Why make the effort of transporting these specific objects from Brussels to Amsterdam?

Van Luit went to considerable trouble to collect 14 original subway seats, construct metal frames to support them, and haul them to Amsterdam to install in the gallery. The effect, as I said, is attractive, and people are drawn to use the seats, not thinking of them as untouchable artworks. This is an interesting aspect of the exhibition because it recalls artist



Chaim van Luit, *algemene studies/ études générales*, 2014.



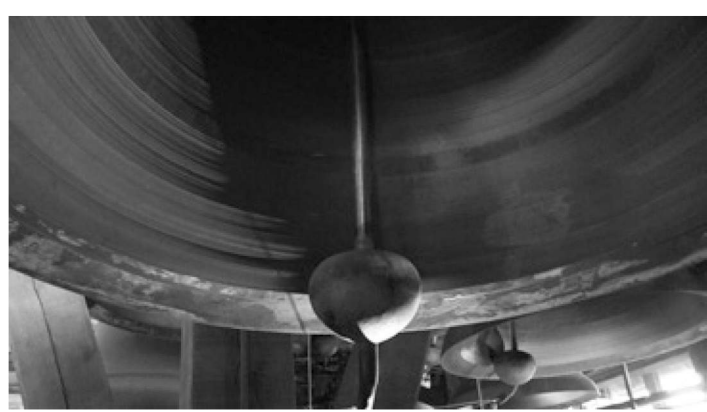
Chaim van Luit, *algemene studies/ études générales*, 2014.

Franz West's comfortable "art-object" sofas and chairs, and it plays with the questionable construction of the art-object as enduring and valuable. It's also worth noting that the placement of the chairs is such that they do not directly face any other works in van Luit's installation. To sit and watch the projected videos we must angle our heads a bit to the side, which is an artful way of making the featured works feel less like principle works and more like peripheral ones. Furthermore, in the exhibition at P/////AKT, visitors felt comfortable draping their coats on these displaced subway chairs, standing around them, and sitting next to each other to have private conversations with their companions. In this way, the seats and their arrangement warmly invite social behavior. And finally, when sitting on them, one recalls the many hours spent waiting on similar chairs. Van Luit is interested in the idea that countless people have sat on these chairs before. So by giving them new lives as art objects, he also gives them a new context. It's a modest suggestion, but I find it a bit threadbare because all objects have history and context. The ground we walk on is scattered with prehistoric stones, and the bricks of our buildings are hundreds of years old, but what about these objects begs us to reinvent them in another context? What about these objects can speak, from within a new context or specific arrangement in a way that gives meaning? Do these objects really have to do with Brussels or the underground?

An artist working with similar themes and who has begun to pose these questions in earnest is the artist Cécile Ibarra, also working in Brussels. Not only do these artists share the capital city, but Ibarra too has expressed ideas about the way her work is connected to the places she has lived, traveled to, or been an artist-in-residence, including Brussels, Mechelen, Vienna, and Crimea. In early 2014, an interest in the Crimean Astrophysical Observatory of Nauchny brought Ibarra to Crimea and other locations in the peninsula. The sounds and images she recorded in there and in Belgium are her means to develop the notion of crossing spaces and at the same time bridge distinct regions and histories.

Her recent exhibition "Etre à l'ouest" at B Gallery in Brussels featured video, sound, and architectural installations that reflect on the idea of caves, basements, and ruins. In the video "Bakla," uninterrupted silence is sourced from breaks in the audio loop of a piece titled "Backspace." In that audio piece, Ibarra and sound artist Vincent Matyn explored the potentiality of recorded sound material from the Astrophysical Observatory and the Royal School of Bells in Mechelen, and

looked for an audible point of encounter between east and west. Connected spaces in the exhibition act as a powerful metaphor for the way that these geographical poles are crossed or traversed. Looped and repetitive sounds of “Backspace” offer moments of silence and space for the listener to enter, pausing before traveling across the map, circumnavigating the globe, and repeating their paths. In “Bakla,” the absence of sound serves as a deliberate background for artefacts from the east and west to silently coexist; much like the images in her photography series, “Levadki — serie 1,” they are sites and objects that are situated in the physical world, but most importantly they serve as doors to the imagined spaces that Ibarra understands as “Mechelen,” “Crimea,” “the East,” and “the West.”



Cécile Ibarra, stills from *The bells*, HD film, 60min, 2014-2015.

The enduring hollows of caves and bells, the fragmented histories left in fossils and ruins, the proud banners of undetermined places, and the futuristic aura of observatories — all present in “Etre à l’ouest” insist on a considered reading of the future-past perspective. They suggest a way of seeing the future from a past position; a kind of temporal bridge that materializes through the artwork.

Consider, on the other hand, van Luit’s video “Time Is On Your Side,” where he has documented a steady shot of people in the station. Van Luit hid himself out of sight, within the folds of the subway architecture. The commuters in the video are going about their daily activities and are unaware of being recorded. But more than a simple surveillance video, another part of this work has been scripted. Van Luit hired an accordion player to sit in the station and play at twice the normal speed. Later, during video editing, the artist slowed down the video so that the musician appears to be playing at the regular tempo while the passersby are walking in slow motion. It is a clever effect that heightens our sense of the relativity of time, which is exaggerated in spaces of transition and passage such as stations and waiting rooms. This is a way of making a temporal bridge, similar to what Ibarra has done with “Bakla.” “Time Is On Your Side,” more than the others

in van Luit's exhibition gives us a sense of the artist's particular version of Brussels, the imagined place. This is where "Brussels" and "the underground" merge into one unique place, and this is also where he has succeeded artistically.

Though both artists have manifested creative ways to show how sound influences the perception of time, they also both tend to be too easily satisfied with their initial findings and the documentation of their chosen places without getting more deeply into the imagined spaces. I reserve this criticism for the Untitled (Waiting Room) installation and the other videos by van Luit. It is difficult to share a particular imagined space and it can rarely be accomplished by documentation alone, as the artist has tried to do in "Controlroom." Though he is fascinated by the idea that a single muzak-like program is broadcast throughout all of the subway stations in Brussels, the video documentation he made of the broadcast station is a less imaginative offering and doesn't do justice to the quality of that fascination. The notion of place is more effectively expressed by the poetry of both artists' exhibitions titles, "ALGEMENE STUDIES/ETUDES GENERALES" and "Etre à l'ouest," as these suggest a door and a direction to spaces of the mind.



Chaim van Luit, *algemene studies/études générales*, 2014.