

## ***Everybody's newspaper, her own sense of life.***

### **The re-use of the newspaper in Patricia Creyns' art.**

Tom Viaene

If one day we run out of trees, and are drowning in newsfeeds, we could make little boats out of newspapers to save us from the endless streams and turbulent postings online.

This imagery could be the start of a lovely fairytale or a wise anti-modernist parable, though in reality points to the dangers of future extinction of print journalism. The attraction of the newspaper; however, for all sorts of artists is hardly dead. In the past 10 years, more and more artists have incorporated newspapers in their work or have conversely, infiltrated the paper.



Not long ago, Anna Schuleit Haber was embedded as a visual artist in a daily newspaper for 26 days to create a collaborative alphabet with leading typographers from around the world. Over the decades, some have gone beyond the attraction of design, to make political statements with fragments from newspapers. In 2012 when Judith Brodie curated the *Shock of the News* (National Gallery of Art, Washington), which displayed the many ways artists in the past century used and abused newspapers, she in hindsight, set a trend.

From Picasso's use of the newspaper as found material (adding a 'journal' - cut out in the left corner of his *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass* (1912)) to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' conceptual pile of contradictory *New York Times* excerpts (*Untitled*, 1991) - it is remarkable, how the 'newspaper phenomenon' has carved out its own historical dimension in contemporary art.



Pablo Picasso, 1912

*Why* is the newspaper such a welcomed 'outsider' for art? As laypeople we see the attraction in its cheapness and palpability. For artists though, all kinds of strategies are involved. Some have felt the need to recreate sentiments of Picasso's 1912, as an intervention in their own time. Others approach the newspaper as a representative commodity of our modern era, loaded with only fragmentary viewpoints and facts, and outdated as soon as it is printed. Whatever the artistic motivation, the newspaper adds an uncompromising 'reality' and speed which allows artists to probe for a different mindset.

## You will find me in the kitchen at parties

When it comes to the work of Patricia Creyns, the question of *why* has long given way to the question of *how*. Her first foray into newspapers art appeared to be almost careless 'scribbles' of free-standing or sitting humans on top of random articles. This seemingly private act with a blue pen illustrated an unleashing of creative powers on material that is ordinary and readily available on the kitchen table. There was a strange contradiction involved in all of this: her humans were common people, uncomplicated but finding themselves in a shrine of urgency because of the specific article headings. It is not clear, whether her intent is to ridicule what we should see, but there is a palpable dreamlike quality in the result.



When she prepared for her first exhibitions of these 'kitchen-table' drawings, she had already started adding watercolor and acrylic to some of them. Here, she explored territories in ways reminiscent of the vivid newspaper-paintings of American artists like Mary Ann Aitken and Paul Thek. More than the act of erasing the written word with paint, these renderings have more to do with the exercise of movement and temporality.



Mary Ann Aitken, 1983

While Aitken painted two goldfish, swimming in a bluish-grey fish bowl on the inside page of the *Detroit Free Press* paper from October 16, 1983, Thek's *Diver* casts a sleek nude figure plunging through a blue wash of sky or water.

While these  
against the tide of  
a still life,  
of all generated  
the newspaper  
Aitken plays with



figures swim  
our perceptions of  
movement is most  
through the use of  
itself. While  
the yellowing of

the newsprint, They imagined that the paper would buckle underneath the paint and form waves. Likewise, time and action are the main actors in Creyns' work from 2011-2012 when she began decontextualizing sports figures from the papers by whitening the space around them. The words are erased and the figures are forced to hang on to a reddish or bluish wavy line that seems to represent a finish line blowing in the wind.

The viewer feels swayed between the image's sense of fluidity and the line's stranglehold. By simply contrasting her 'unbound' figures with the seriousness of the news and the newspaper format, Creyns draws attention to both the pivotal role of play in our culture and to the ways in which culture has a tendency to contaminate an attempt of playfulness. The newspaper becomes a playground for a battle between the often miscast hardcore opposites, i.e. between 'real art form' and 'entertaining art'.



## On becoming an eyewitness

The artist likes us to both stick to what we see and tempt us beyond the abilities of the figures. Take for instance her hand standing 'gymnasts' against a long wall. Yellow legs up, and white ghostlike bodies upside down, each on two hands and with no heads. The figures have a sense of urgency that can also be seen in Thek's singular *Diver* (and even so, his famous quote 'Believing is seeing'). The urgency stems from the confidence that bursts out of the movement. It makes us forget about the newspaper and at the same time relies on the materiality of it, for it merges into the backbone of an omnipresent



wall. The composition is flawless, though it operates on the verge of 'too perfect', as is the well-preserved newspaper heading underneath it all: OOGGETUIGE (Dutch for 'EYEWITNESS'). We are not only witnessing a definite second step in the ways in which Creyns chooses to incorporate the newspaper. One 'cyclopean' heading for a group of identical beheaded figures, which, if you look at them from another side, become giraffes trying to peer over the wall. This side of the wall makes us active eyewitnesses, the other side would make us passively complicit. We are all readers within the safe margins of the newspapers and walls may have turned into histories of violence. But as suggested,

what we are mostly witnesses of, is the abundance of faith piled up in those rifle-loaded yellow legs. We are left wondering what kind of faith is tempting us here. Is it the faith that all things will turn out right? Is it the faith in the powers of artistic in(ter)vention? Is it the faith in the goodness of mankind?

### **Out of the box**

At a certain point in 2013 Creyns attempted to take the incorporation of the newspaper almost literal by simply putting the paper in a box. The third phase in her work originated from something she picked up in the work of others. In the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, many started – through an urge of collecting stuff - to experiment with wooden boxes in which they showcased abstract geometrical minimalist paintings or found objects (cf. Joseph Cornell, Louise Nevelson, Patrick van Caeckenbergh, etc.).

As they created a new window, so to speak, for whatever was inside, the whole resembled precious birds in private cages. Creyns seemed intrigued by how something vulnerable could become something very unyielding through the looking glass. She started to jumble up her newspaper-paintings and instead of throwing them in the nearest bin, put them, first in a shoe and later, behind glass, in wooden boxes.

Through these reenactments she transformed her newspapers into what she preferred to see as butterflies, full of potential and vulnerability.



Joseph Cornell, 1953-54

Many (more) are vulnerable when they do not fit the official categories (and norms). In a new, more direct collaborative spirit, she went on to use the wooden boxes for more socially driven work: together with her friend Ella, victimized for being transgendered,

she created *Out of the box, into* - a series of eleven boxes that constitutes one work.



A whole pamphlet is spread out using photo shop on (and inside) plexiglass boxes, while her familiar playful figures are tucked in a shoe box-inside-the-box. In her most dramatic work to date, she manages to build up tensions between what we regard as fixed

borders between those being victimized and the authorities, between different genders, between esthetics and ethics, between art and politics.

### **Ath nature**

Creyns' work, as if a sponge, continues to let itself being impregnated by different contexts and life experiences. Lately, she seems to have come across a fourth way to incorporate the newspaper into her art. In her latest work the newspaper becomes a living corpse. She noted that on her many daytrips to the South of Belgium (the French speaking part called Wallonia), she visited the small village of Ath. In one of the adjacent rural forests she stumbled upon a century-old Olympic-length swimming pool, overgrown with trees, branches and other plants. Struck by the beauty of nature's slow overtaking of *what must have been*, she started taking pictures from different angles. Back at home, having had a long look at them, she cut out the frail dancing, ethereal human bodies she had first drawn on the newspaper, and started to play with them. She took them out (like pieces on play board), moving, sitting and dancing on the many branches as if they are looking for alternative paths into the invisible swimming pool.



The combination of these ghostlike figures and the forceful piercing branches, makes for an atmosphere that mixes bucolic extravagance, peaceful idyll, hallucinatory gymnastics and after-life visions. The whole work reflects that kind of gratefulness we sometimes feel when everything falls into place. One almost senses what thankfulness means when witnessing so much *joie-de-vivre*. A kind of pleasure enrolls itself on a larger canvas. Not a short moment in time, but something that is happening on a longer term. As nature takes over the ruins of a long forgotten swimming pool, the artist adds a touch of unexpected frailty: are these figures swimmers from a distant past, or do they represent new possibilities that grew out of the shape-like branches?

Moving her newspaper-paintings into boxes was one thing, but transferring these spirited, little papery bodies to a (photographed) natural environment, is a different and more tricky affair. Tricky, because it triggers easy references to a romantic escapism that appear to be farther from

what drives Creyns' work. More than escape, nostalgia or eco-complaint, there is an explorative longing to outstep the margins of the newspaper, to mix different media, to simply preserve movement in her work, on the level of both her use of the newspaper and guaranteeing movement through a new choreography of her creatures.



### **Our own sense of life**

For the last five years, Creyns has developed her own artistic practice through the re-use of the newspaper. That newspaper is to this day, still, our most common tool to communicate ‘facts’ on human affairs and stay tuned about daily ‘happenings’ is both humble and remarkable. When examining Creyns’ work, one is suddenly surprised to understand what the common people and other figures have really been up to in her work. From the first drawings in the margins of the newspaper to the last ‘public’ work resulting from her visit to Ath, the action displayed is not only about free movement, but is about unfolding an inner-world of dialogue that exists outside the real-time of the newspaper.



*The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011)

When examining how these androgynous figures explore their afforded liberties, they appear to be speaking to one another by way of coded language. They could be forming sound waves, dreaming up new routes or simply ‘characterizing’ nature, like the protagonists in Terence Malick’s movies. Besides that, they seem to convey something more specific about how we tend to read newspapers and the kind of thoughts we produce when reading a newspaper. Or they open up a window to the type of thoughts that outlive our daily habit of reading between the lines of ‘facts’ and ‘opinions’. Inbetween facts and opinions the viewer now lingers in a more complex zone in which

categories lose their clear functions. No doubt, newspapers also harbor a variety of 'invisibilia' like doubts, fears, aspirations, assumptions, ideologies, histories, etc. There is a whole 'secret history of thoughts' that can be exhumed. Could Creyns be one of those artists who dives in deep waters to make (again) visible what was previously invisible? It is of course not - whatever that may be - the exceptional visionary powers of the artist that attracts our attention as by-standers. As we perceive the figures exploring the contours of the swimming pool in Ath, we-the-readers become lighted to do something that is attune to our own sense of life. Simple as it may sound, the harder it sometimes is: to do and think free. This is probably the hardest thing to realize in life. The power of this work is that it all appears so simple and pure. So, when she transplants the newspaper-figures in a totally different context, Creyns could be inspiring us to take up this ever-present challenge regarding our human condition.

In reference to exploring different contexts Creyns' work has been exhibited in different thematical groups shows in Ghent, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Milan and more. Her work has had a remarkable journey, especially when you take into account that she came to art late in life. At some point in the nineties it began to seriously itch: she started making little drawings of dangling knees and feet. Sometimes mastery is explored in the choice of its subject. Vulnerability acted like a prime mover from the start - a guidance in the activity of drawing and something that needed to speak for itself through those pencils turning into limbs and vice versa. If we would really drown in a sea of newsfeeds, Creyns' pencils would stick out and form a modest sailboat. An artistic practice devoted to your own sense of life would be adrift without a sense of care.