

**ON SHOW**  
THE SELF DESIGN ACADEMY

**PERIOD**  
18 SEPTEMBER – 22 NOVEMBER  
2020

**OPENING**  
FRIDAY 18 SEPTEMBER  
FROM 20.00

**VISITING ADDRESS**  
TORENALLEE 40-06  
5617 BD EINDHOVEN

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**Editor's note**  
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**PRESS RELEASE**

# THE SELF DESIGN ACADEMY

**“The first thing you need to know about yourself,” says Yuval Noah Harari in *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, “is that you are not a story”. If he means to say we shouldn’t be on social media all the time pretending everything is hunky-dory while reality is nowhere near as gorgeous as our pictures suggest, he is right. But what then is this self we invite you to explore with us in *The Self Design Academy*, online and offline in MU Hybrid Art House from 18 September till 22 November? What are we, if not the stories we invent to make some sense of it all?**

In *The Self Design Academy*, a joint initiative of MU and Image Society, 18 artists and designers together with the visitors investigate how we can define, understand and design ourselves. Inspired by Mieke Gerritzen's upcoming book *Help Your Self* about the ever-increasing popularity of the self-help industry, we focus on the creative strategies and techniques we can develop ourselves, and how to share these with others. At the same time, the Academy is a place of critical reflection on the malleability of the self. Is it actually necessary to constantly improve or (re)design ourselves, and if so: on whose terms? To what extent are we being formed by forces around us, and how do we (re)gain control?

For once, let's not start with the awareness of our thoughts, this Cartesian bodiless ego that has taken central stage for long enough. Let's begin with a sense of self that evolves from the constant monitoring of our physical state. Muscle tension, blood pressure, breathing, heartbeat, temperature, balance and many other vital signs inform us about our current level of wellbeing,

#### **About MU**

MU Hybrid Art House is an investigative presentation platform that operates in a wide international network of creatives who define the liminal space between what art is and what art can be.

MU initiates, produces and presents preferably new works, and surrounds them with an extensive and interdisciplinary secondary programme targeted at a broad and predominantly young audience. MU prioritises the introduction to, understanding of, elaboration on, and hands-on experience of the creation of art.

MU is curious for talent, and challenges talents to be curious. MU provides a platform for artistic research & development by artists and designers, and contributes to their international visibility.

MU is located in a former Philips factory at Strijp-S in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

The logo for MU (Museum of Urbanity) consists of the letters 'MU' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are stylized with thick strokes and a slightly irregular, hand-drawn appearance.

says neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in *The Strange Order of Things*. We experience them consciously as feelings — pleasure or pain, anger, peace, sadness, joy and so on — that can only be our own.

Exactly these vital signs are part of the dialogue that Marlot Meyer instigates with *LIMB-O*. It consists of a network of tubes and valves linked to inflatable objects and electrodes attached to the artist's body, which responds with involuntary movement when the public interacts with the installation. The digital and physical feedback-systems that are created in the process blur the boundaries between body and data, personal and public, self and other.

No such blurring occurs in *Punctum* by Ana María Gómez López. Using disposable syringes, valves, and medical tubing, she transfers her own blood between veins and arteries from different parts of her body. This externalised blood stream first of all affirms the artist's physical autonomy and her right to self-experiment with her own flesh and bones. At the same time, it confronts us with the direct material reality of who we are.

Reflecting on consumer choices that underlie the daily maintenance of our physical selves, Jonas Ersland's *Shop with a Stranger – One Hundred Second-hand Shopping Lists* can be seen as a household take on Barbara Kruger's *I shop, therefore I am*. The items on the grocery lists that Ersland collected, the way the items are organised, the paper, the handwriting, they all suggest different priorities, identities and lifestyles. Question is: are we shaped by what we shop for?

Unlike shopping lists (that surely no one compiles thinking of the impression they might make), cloths are closely tied to the image of ourselves that we present to others. Although we don't need to turn ourselves into a work of art like the nineteenth-century *Dandy*, it can't hurt to understand the way we read each other's apparel. *Pan~ // Catwalk* by Zwermers carefully choreographs a continuous change of identity with a change of dress. You are invited to contribute your own (un)fashionable self in the Zwermers' photobooth or contemplate appearances during their performance.

If you consider how vulnerable and utterly dependent we enter into this world, our strive for self-improvement makes a lot of sense. We need to learn how to crawl, stand, walk, run, cycle, drive... The desire to grow and become better is ancient, innate. In comparison, the idea that you can actually design yourself seems a lot more recent. In *the Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola lets God declare: "We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer."

Today, this promise comes not from God, but from innumerable courses, books, programmes and exercises that encourage us to realise our true, optimal inner self. Emma Verhoeven is turning all these propositions into clues and keys to leave the installation *Escape Here Now*. Online, the work can be played as an escape-room-style game. Would the countless products and services to become, improve, accept, and express ourselves actually bring us any closer to our true authentic self?

#### About Image Society

The Image Society foundation's goal is to provide a forum for an artistically visionary take on visual culture. It pursues this aim by means of research, projects, publications, events and exhibitions in the Netherlands and abroad. The Image Society, founded by Mieke Gerritzen, is a cross between a makers' studio and a production agency, a creative meeting place for today's image makers and visual thinkers. Here, modern image makers (born-digitals, wireless cosmopolitans, visual intellectuals) look around them and dive into the flood of competing meanings and new visual currents.

According to Plato, who founded the original Academy around 387 BC, the true self is our immortal soul that yearns for beauty, truth and wisdom. So, what could argue against the wish to identify with the beauty of fashion, to take part in the creativity by sharing images, memes, comments, et cetera, that relate to your favourite brand? Paradyme's *All that is solid melts into air* explores how this prosumer behaviour of self-expression contributes to politicisation of fashion, and vice versa. Using a transparent wardrobe and a face-filter, the installation transforms you into a personage that enters a speculative story of aesthetic value change.

Rather than taking on someone else's identity, Noam Youngrak Son decided to share their own self with others. In *Self Design Committee* they offer visitors a face-filter that allows them to become a digital Noam, and to weigh in democratically on decisions Noam would ordinarily take by themselves. It brings to mind Robert Jay Lifton's theory of *The Protean Self*, proposing a mature identity that is fluid and many-sided, defined by connections and reinvention — a self for our time.

Traditional psychoanalytical theories of the self revolve around the process of growing up to become an autonomous person – starting with the realisation of the infant that it is *not* one with its mother. When the conscious 'me' that emerges this way eventually develops into a stable self, it still faces the challenge of the unconscious drives, which continue to express themselves through life. In *Attachment Theatre*, Briony O Clarke engages with unconscious projections and attachments and the way they can be observed in our relations with the world around us. With the help of data technology, they are transformed into playful transitional objects that represent connections of personal meaning.

Many people resented the isolation of corona lockdown, but Hanneke Wetzer wasn't one of them. She gladly stayed at home bonding with her life-size dollfriend Nadiah, carefully documenting their life in the photo series *Living Alone (Together)*. Is Nadiah a transitional object, an alternate self or an artfully staged silicon prop in a profound comment on human relations? For the duration of *The Self Design Academy*, Nadiah will live at MU, where Hanneke will keep her company from time to time.

Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan professed that we mistakenly see our mirror image as the promise of a fully-composed, autonomous self. This concept of the independent ego is not a subject experiencing, discovering, defining the world and itself, but an object that is largely defined by convention. Tom Loois tends to agree. In response to people's compliance with society's (unwritten) rules, he advises visitors how to ignore them in his *Consultancy for Deviant Behaviour*. Take a good look at your self in the mirror, and follow the instructions... Meanwhile, PentHouss presents *Self Contained Archives* in one of the containers outside MU, where our reflection in the mirror confronts us with the presence of unexpected others.

Psychoanalysis can take up many years, and new treatments are much more focused on behavioural therapy or medication that yield quicker results. For *Eunoia* — 'good will' or 'a healthy state of mind' — Ivi van Keulen invites people to overcome painful experiences by repeatedly writing their personal

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goal on a long roll of paper, in an act of self-design by Neuro-Linguistic Programming. In a live performance, *Atlas Skin*, she will take on other people's traumas by having them transferred to her naked body in writing.

Perhaps repeating a specific intention installs a feeling of self-determination. The Self-Determination Theory of Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan states that people are better able to manage their own lives and are much happier if they have a sense of control and influence over the outcome of their choices. Jonathan Levain's *One More Nation* plays into the desire for self-determination by inviting you to create your own micronation, like a true Robinson Crusoe. But how would you express this self-government symbolically?

Self-determination as the right of a people to determine its own future is closely intertwined with decolonisation. The times when a few European nations ruled over most of the world are gone (and good riddance), but people of colour still struggle against ingrained denial of their identity. Take Ruby Williams for instance, who earlier this year won an out-of-court settlement of £8,500 after she had been repeatedly sent home from school just for having Afro hair, which teachers said was 'too big'. With *Afro Hair Futurity*, a series of Afro hair crowns, and podcasts of interviews reflecting on Afro Hair, Alix Bizet aims to provide a starting point to rethink Afro hair in a post-colonial context and as a performance of black futurity.

Similar issues of self-determination underlie *It has all the colors and all the shapes and all the moves*, a work by Thom van Rijckevorsel. Referring to mediaeval altar pieces that showed people how they were supposed to live, the video triptych addresses the present-day freedom to be who you want to be, promised by the many apps and services we use to design ourselves. Unfortunately, instead of being intrinsically motivated, we become caught up in external rewards — likes, reposts, comments — while the apps determine how we express our selves.

In *MindMeditation.net*, Brigitte Jansen takes a look at zen and mindfulness as ways to escape from the overwhelming online demand on attention. Are they a coping mechanism to prevent burnout and keep us productive? Are they anti-digital propaganda? Or just another form of control? Three deceptively simple apps in the exhibition combine into an altar piece to help you set your mind at ease, or promise to do so.

Sociologist and psychologist Sherry Turkle has been studying our relationship with digital technology for over thirty years. In her book *Reclaiming Conversation* she warns that our self is suffering from a constant connectivity that shies away from actual encounters. The remedy is simple: talk more, in real life. Go to Margriet Craens' beautiful *Bar No.5*, where the bartender will give you a private Social Hygiene session on how to respect other people's physical and mental health, and where custom-made glass bottles help to represent your personal social struggles.

Or you can watch how Anna Maria Fink experimented with an alternative concept of home. For *Landscape as House*, she spent a year at the large mountainous plot of land that once belonged to her grandfather and has since

been divided between his children. Every day, she slept in one place, had tea in a shed higher up the mountain, worked in a barn down the slope, cooked her meal at yet another dwelling, gathered firewood in the forest — always walking from one part of the 'house' to the next, connecting with her relatives, becoming one with the landscape and the changing seasons.

You can contribute in person to this wide-ranging investigation of self and self-design in *The Self Design Academy Space* at MU Hybrid Art House, but you can also join the online presentations and activities at *The Self Design Academy Site*. In addition, you are more than welcome to participate in *The Self Design Academy Share* programme of courses, workshops and talks. Come and redesign the self with us. All you need to bring...

**The Self Design Academy**  
From 18 September until 22 November

**Opening:**  
Friday 18 September from 20.00

**Curators:**  
Mieke Gerritzen and Angelique Spaninks

**Participating artists:**

- Alix Bizet
- Briony O Clarke
- Margriet Craens
- Jonas Erslund
- Anna Maria Fink
- Brigitte Jansen
- Ivi van Keulen
- Jonathan Levain
- Tom Loois
- Ana María Gómez López
- Marlot Meyer
- Paradyme
- Penthous
- Thom van Rijckevorsel
- Noam Youngrak Son
- Emma Verhoeven
- Hanneke Wetzter
- Zwermers

**In collaboration with:**

