

A MICROSCOPIC GESTURE

SARAH VANAGT ON HER LANTERN EXHIBITION SHOWFISH

An interview by Nele Wynants

In October 2016 the University of Antwerp, the Antwerp Museum of Contemporary Art (M HKA) and video artist Sarah Vanagt collaborated for a project on the magic lantern. The university organised a workshop (see Issue 9) while the Museum launched simultaneously the exhibition *Schijnvis/Showfish/Poisson Brillant: archeology of the projection microscope*. Sarah Vanagt put on display historical children's lanterns with her own 'scotch slides' and two short contemporary lantern films: *A Microscopic Gesture* (6 mins) and *The First Microscopist* (8 mins).

The exhibition is part of *A Million Pictures*, a European research project on the magic lantern as cultural heritage. The research group Visual Poetics of the University of Antwerp invited Sarah Vanagt to use the lantern as a starting point for new artistic work. In the exhibition Vanagt uses original children's lanterns that are part of the Vrielynck collection. This collection of antique cameras, projectors and optical toys is under the management of M HKA. Between 2011 and 2013 the Vrielynck collection was the source of research for a series of exhibitions curated by Edwin Carels featuring artists such as Julien Maire, Zoë Beloff and David Blair. Sarah Vanagt is the fourth artist who has been invited to work with the Vrielynck collection. For her contemporary lantern films, Vanagt combines her interest in the magic lantern with her research into the history of microscopy. In the interview below she explains her fascination for optics and earlier media.

What do you find so fascinating about 'early' or 'old' visual media and how has the Vrielynck collection inspired you?

Sarah Vanagt: Pre-cinema, proto-cinema, pocket cinema, paper cinema, thumb cinema – these are all names for, and forms of, 'early cinema' that interest me a great deal. What I find so beautiful about 'optical toys' is that you can see very clearly how the principle of the moving image works, the building blocks are literally laid bare – you can see the different drawings or photographs on the disc of a phenakistoscope, you can check page after page how the movement develops in a little flip book, and so on. You can look *into* the machine, as it were, without there really being a machine at all – because actually, our eye is the machine. No matter how often I have made a flip book rattle through my fingers, no matter how often I have seen a zoetrope in action, it always makes me happy. It's precisely that which for me is the power of these small-scale forms of cinema. Here, the wonder of looking itself is central.

What did you find attractive about the invitation to start from the magic lantern and where does your preference for children's lanterns come from?

SV: The word 'magic' in *laterna magica* shows that the 'magical' was central in the development of the lantern from the very beginning. You ask why I will include children's lanterns in the installation. Children often figure in my films. I like to consider them as experimental mini-historians 'practising' history during their games. You could say that through my films, I look at childhood and at the same time also at the childhood of looking. Both movements of looking come together quite nicely in the children's lantern: small boxes of cheap materials (cardboard, cans) that, using a torch or a little candle, can project a whole new world history on the walls of the nursery.

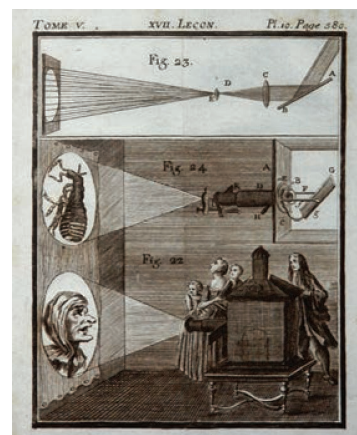
In the exhibition you also focus on a less well-known aspect of the lantern, as an educational and even scientific instrument. In doing so, you show a remarkable interest in organic materials, insects, fish.

SV: It is often said that the two birthplaces of cinema are the



Sarah Vanagt

scientific laboratory and the fair, a point that Gustave Deutsch highlighted in a beautiful way in *Film ist* (1998). At the moment, I am doing research on discoveries in the field of optics in the seventeenth century – focusing in particular on the figure of Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, who is considered to be the inventor of the microscope. Using a tiny glass lens, van Leeuwenhoek was the first to see moving 'diertgens' ('animalcules') in a drop of rainwater. The beauty of this early microscope is that, just like the flip book and other precursors of cinema, it is tiny in size. You could say that van Leeuwenhoek was doing 'pocket science'. What the microscope has in common with the magic lantern is that the core function of the two machines consists of enlarging something that is initially quite small. But where the microscope only gives images to one individual viewer, thanks to the lantern, microscopic images can be shared with a much larger audience – the multiform life in a drop from the Schelde River can fill the walls of a museum. That's what I try to do with the lanterns from the Vrielynck collection – to project ('throw forward') what van Leeuwenhoek might have seen, for the first time, through his tiny lens.



Early projections in Jean Antoine Nollet, *Leçons de Physique Expérimentale*, 1764, vol. 5

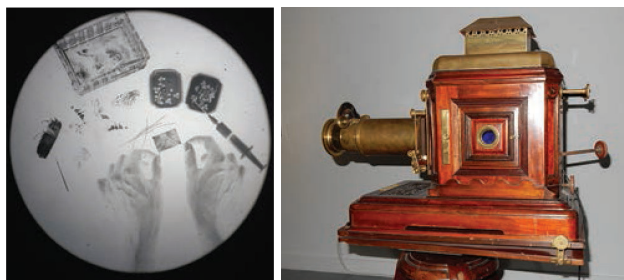


You did a lot of (historical) research on the use of the magic lantern, in particular on a specific lantern for the projection of microscopic images. Do you consider your work as a form of documentary art?

SV: I think in all artworks fact and fiction intermingle. The artwork takes shape right at that intersection. You can also reverse the question: is there something like fictional art? What interests me about van Leeuwenhoek – and why, at first sight, I have a very science-historical (documentary) approach – is that on the basis of



something as tiny as a glass drop, he entered a new dimension. It really must have been a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* experience (which again is a link to the choice of children's lanterns). In other words, for me, van Leeuwenhoek's lens is nothing more (or less) than a prism to look inside reality.



This interview was first published in Dutch together with a text by Nele Wynants on *Schijnvis / Showfish / Poisson*, in the November issue of *FORUM+ for Research and Arts*. More information on this exhibition and earlier work by Sarah Vanagt can be found on her website: www.balthasar.be.

The exhibition *Schijnvis / Showfish / Poisson Brillant* ran from 27 October to 13 November 2016 at M HKA and was developed within the framework of *A Million Pictures: magic lantern slide heritage as artefacts in the common European history of learning*. This international research project on the magic lantern as European cultural heritage is a consortium of European researchers, museums, collectors and artists who want to promote the sustainable use and management of lantern plates in European collections. For more information: <http://a-million-pictures.wp.hum.uu.nl/> (see also page 2 and previous issues of *The Magic Lantern*).

Schijnvis / Showfish / Poisson Brillant :

Archaeology of the projection microscope



Sarah Vanagt & Nele Wynants

Sarah VANAGT studied history in Antwerp, Sussex and Groningen and film at the National Film and Television School (UK). She makes documentaries, video installations and photographs in which she combines her passion for history and film (history). Previous films and installations include *Little Figures* (2003), *Begin Began Begun* (2005), *Les Mouchoirs de Kabila* (2005), *Ash Tree* (2007), *The Wave* (2012), *In Waking Hours* (2015) and *Still holding still* (2015). Her work has been shown at several film festivals, including FIDMarseille, Viennale, Doclisboa, IDFA Amsterdam, Rencontres Internationales Paris/Madrid/Berlin, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Hors Pistes/Centre Pompidou and in various museums: Frankfurter Kunstverein, Fact Liverpool, NGBK Berlin, Shedhalle Zürich.

Nele WYNANTS is a researcher at the Université libre de Bruxelles and University of Antwerp.

NEWS FROM ITALY – THE MUSEUM OF PRECINEMA IN PADUA – THE MINICI ZOTTI COLLECTION

has let us know about two important developments.

The first concerns their original travelling Shadow Theatre of *Le Chat Noir* with its shadow zinc cut-outs (Fig. 1). This has been on show in Paris at the Montmartre Museum for the last year and will now be on loan to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam from March 2017. It will form part of their exhibition *Prints in Paris 1900: From Elite to the Street*. In 2018 and 2019 it will move on to feature in two major exhibitions in Madrid and Barcelona – Toulouse-Lautrec and his time. The Museum is very proud of how successful this has been.



1. Shadow Theatre and cut-outs



2. Laura Zotti with the magic lantern

The second piece of news is that Laura Zotti (Fig. 2) has decided the time is now right for her to step down as Director of the Museum of Precinema and hand over this role to her son Carlo Alberto, Professor of the History of Photography at the University of Padua. He will continue to develop the Museum and steer it in the same cultural direction. The City of Padua has already expanded its interests through establishing a 'Room of Photography' dedicated to photography exhibitions under the direction of Carlo Alberto.

Elena Dekic, a graduate in the history of cinema, will be the curator of the Collection. However, Laura will often be found at the Museum in the future, continuing her research interests in the magic lantern and beyond. We know some members are aware of the many treasures to see in the Museum, founded in 1998, such as the rare set of 108 slides of the history of Rome and Greek mythology made in Italy in the seventeenth century (Fig. 3). We would urge others to visit the Museum or at least to visit the website at www.miniczotti.it if you are not able to travel to Padua in the near future.

3. Long slide from the history and mythology set

