

Left: Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Poisson rouge*, first collage, 1963, colored pencil on paper, 11 ¾ x 8 ¾".

Right: Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *La Fille qui descend l'escalier* (The Girl Who Walks Down the Stairs), 2006, HD video, color, silent, 28 minutes 38 seconds.



CLOSE-UP

Measure for Measure

CATHLEEN CHAFFEE ON JOËLLE TUERLINCKX'S
THREE-PART RETROSPECTIVE, 2012–14

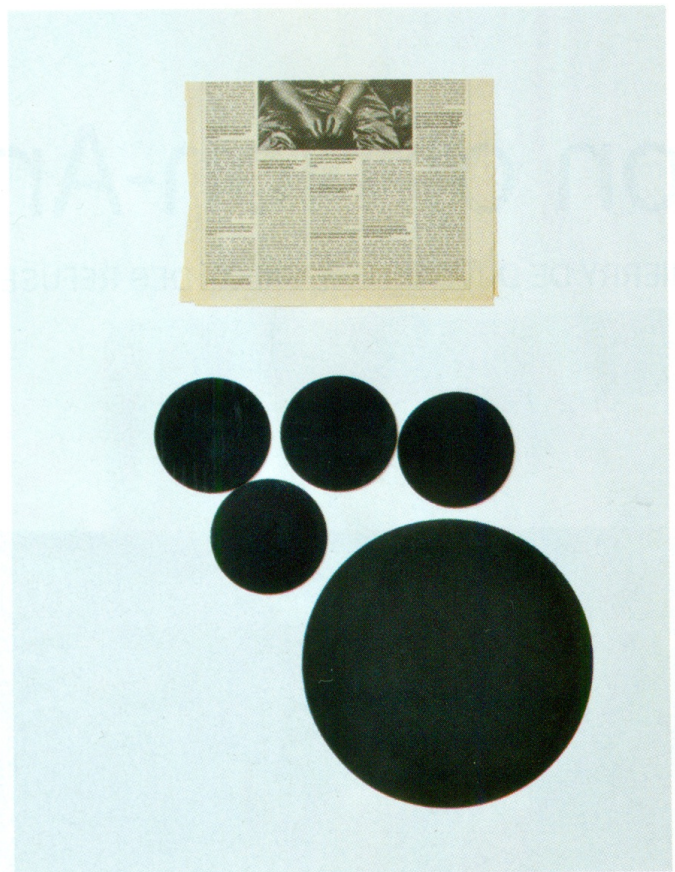
View of "Joëlle Tuerlinckx:
WOR(L)D(K) IN PROGRESS?,"
2013–14, Arnolfini, Bristol, UK.





Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Grande Chute Rose*, 2012, mixed media. Installation view, Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2013.

Right: Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Collage d'Archive-Atelier serie "Grande Blanche,"* 2012, collage on paper, 35 1/2 x 24 7/8".



VISITORS COULD BE FORGIVEN if they walked by one particular piece of yellowing paper in the first gallery of Joëlle Tuerlinckx's retrospective at the Haus der Kunst, Munich: a tiny drawing of a red fish. Like almost all the works on view, this drawing was essentially unlabeled, with only its date, 1963, penciled by the artist on a nearby wall. Tuerlinckx, who was born in Brussels in 1958, considers this spiky red fish to be her earliest gesture as an artist, owing to a simple line she drew around it on the page. Without it, the fish floats, Platonic, in an ideated paper sea. The line locates the fish in a bowl, and therefore gives it a context in the world of representation, scale, and illusion.

The work's significance for Tuerlinckx hinges on the inseparability of context from artmaking, and the pressure the present puts on the past. Both of these were subtexts of the retrospective, which the artist reinvented for each of the three cities to which it traveled. The show derived its title from Tuerlinckx's misreading of a business magazine headline, "World in Progress," as "Work in Progress." She pulled a different thread from this initial mistake for each successive location, specifically challenging the notion of proliferation or advancement with respect to labor ("WOR[LD]K IN PROGRESS?") at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels; globalism ("WORLD[K] IN PROGRESS?") in Munich; and language ("WOR[L]D[K] IN PROGRESS?") at the Arnolfini in Bristol, UK. Each iteration of Tuerlinckx's retrospective bore only a family resemblance to the others, and it was this very reinvention in response to site that made the three shows a work in itself, a demonstration of the extent to which exhibition practice *is* this artist's practice.

Tuerlinckx has spent thirty years developing a unique geometric visual language that uncovers the building blocks of abstraction—cubes, circles, volumes, lines, and folds—in the fragmentary salvage she

finds in daily life, whether it be boxes, balls of tape, round paper doilies, newspapers, or dowel rods. Alongside such work, Tuerlinckx has been creating shows and spatial interventions that engage with the history of exhibitions as well as the cycles of social, economic, and even geological time. If many of the Conceptual artists of the 1960s and '70s to whom Tuerlinckx is indebted interceded in the quotidian world, making disembodied art that someone else might receive in the mail or perform via a set of instructions, Tuerlinckx invents exhibitions that could not possibly exist without her. Her projects slowly come into being on-site, in a long process of sifting, aggregating, and staging that responds to the physical and historical givens of her particular location.

In this current retrospective, rather than installing her work chronologically—the quintessential characteristic of the retrospective-as-exhibition—Tuerlinckx clustered objects according to theme and form, tracking the synchronicities between pieces from various decades. As in her multidecade series of found *ronds* or circles, her works almost always incorporate earlier gestures or collections. She staged these acts of reproduction in scenarios where the contemplative beauty of pure abstraction meets the giddy pleasure of recognition. For example, in *Études sur Étagère, Composition 6.12.2007–Volumes d'ombre* (Study Shelf, Composition 6.12.2007–Volume Shadows), 2007, a cluster of industrial metal cylinders evokes a lunar terrain—what she calls "volume shadows"—owing only to light cast on the supporting shelf.



Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Stukjes, stukjes en dingen, dingé, dingen en stukjes* (Pieces, Pieces and Things, Thing, Things and Pieces), 1994, paper. Installation view, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2013.

Tuerlinckx's three shows constituted a work in itself, a demonstration of the extent to which exhibition practice is this artist's practice.

In that first gallery in Munich, monitors played *La Fille qui descend l'escalier* (The Girl Who Walks Down the Stairs) and *Les 7 Hommes qui marchent + réservé* (The 7 Men Who Walk + Reserve), a durational video that records a Sisyphean loop of different men striding back and forth across the deSingel International Arts Campus in Antwerp, Belgium. Both were created for her 2006 exhibition there, and in both, the acts of walking and waiting become ways of representing measurement and time themselves. After the opening in Munich, Tuerlinckx then spliced new footage into the latter work, adding to the series of men—including Chris Dercon and Okwui Enwezor—pacing from one end of the room to another. These loops were related to the many metal-and-wood bars and lines of string in the same gallery, including one length in particular: *Segment de Marche*, (Segment of a Step), a white piece of tape on the floor representing the “museal step” of visitors walking through an exhibition. First measured and exhibited in Tuerlinckx's breakthrough exhibition at Documenta 11 in 2002, the length remained the same when it was subsequently transferred to a completely different context in Marie-Puck Broodthaers's gallery in Brussels and in two venues of Tuerlinckx's retrospective. Nearby was a series of collage panels ranging from 1977 to 2012, in which Tuerlinckx repeatedly juxtaposes fragmentary press clippings that make reference to the world economy with simple line drawings on paper. In these works, the often-hysterical propaganda for capitalism

continued on page 236

found in newspaper reportage becomes a kind of self-parody, both because Tuerlinckx isolates the stock figures and photographs of gold bars from their normal justificatory context in the business pages, and because she seems to weigh them against abstract drawings that, in their incredible simplicity, look like reasoned antidotes.

Some works, such as a rectangle on the floor composed of a thin trail of confetti, have become legendary. This nearly invisible line of paper fragments, *Stukjes, stukjes en dingen, dinge, dingen en stukjes* (Pieces, Pieces and Things, Thing, Things and Pieces), was created for the group exhibition "WATT" at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam in 1994. In a gallery filled with compositions involving line and demonstrations of scale, this work's own "line" is always a broken series of points; the merest footfall causes it to drift, and thus it breathes, as so much of Tuerlinckx's work does—as if in respiration with the subjects around it, literally sensitive to the social and political space of the institution and of hierarchies of display.

Many of these works were remade for installation in the retrospective, such as the confetti; other works were wall drawings and installations, which were specifically introduced to expand and respond to the conditions of each venue. In this way, the earliest works quite reasonably appear to exist in contiguity with the latest. Her intermittent or understated labeling of objects is therefore hardly a caprice—it may be one of the artist's most rigorous decisions. In a visit to a more typical retrospective, it is easy to view "early" work with nostalgia and "late" work more critically, but the present is always the time in which a work of art is being judged. Tuerlinckx's retrospective illustrates just how fully this temporal collapse, which continually makes past works contemporary, is also tied to the artist's lifetime. When she is no longer present to reactivate them, her works will assume a weight of responsibility that is hard to imagine: These traces, objects, drawings, books, sculptures, photographs, and films will have to stand in for the part of the artist's work that can no longer exist—her own agency. Until then, Tuerlinckx's arrangements frustrate attempts to parse a career or "retrospective" view; her objects create encounters and moments of discovery in real, rather than chronological, time, much as they did in the quotidian context from which she took them. □

"Joëlle Tuerlinckx: WOR(L)D(K) IN PROGRESS?" is on view at the Arnolfini in Bristol, UK, through March 16, 2014.

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