

Chantal Maes

« ...puisque
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astres »

The first retrospective devoted to the artist Chantal Maes (Brussels, 1965), the exhibition «...*puisque bafouillent aussi les astres*» ["...because even stars stumble"] takes its title from a poem by Christian Dotremont (1922–1979), one of the founders of the CoBrA group. The result of in-depth work initiated more than three years ago with the artist by the curatorial duo Jean-François Chevrier and Élia Pijollet, the exhibition brings together well-known series with previously unseen bodies of work and recent productions.

Black and white photographs, videos and sound recordings produced between 1989 and 2025 are, for the two curators, "so many elements arranged throughout the exhibition spaces according to a constructive logic". A visual construction, of course, since this is art; but also a biographical one, since artistic activity is, for the artist, inseparable from her biographical construction (in the sense of "building the self" rather than deliberate fiction).

The two curators have conceived the exhibition in an original way: as a kind of cinematic experience at the heart of Chantal Maes's work, in which visitors can themselves combine the different images, in whatever order they choose. They are invited to create their own "film" of the exhibition, and thus to produce their own "narrative". The curators and the artist have nevertheless defined the four chapters that structure the exhibition.

Curators: Jean-François Chevrier and Élia Pijollet

Prologue

Chantal Maes's work interweaves three major themes: impediments to speech (stammering), social interactions, and the territories of childhood. "People have said that I 'have the gift of stammering', the artist explains. This gift shapes my relationship to others, structures my thinking, and shapes my relationship to language and the body. I often stage speech, even though it has been a problem for me since childhood: speaking, being looked at, seeing and hearing the silent questioning of the person listening. All of this has become the subject of my research into language, self-construction and the dynamics of interaction."

Stammering is a phenomenon that emerges from a web of interactions. This is why the *Take a look from the inside* videos open the exhibition. In each of them, Chantal Maes reads a text aloud, following each sentence, while she eyes the camera. As she struggles to articulate the words, the camera echoes the tremors of her body. These four texts by different authors each shed light, "from the inside", on an aspect of the experience of stammering. The first video, described as a "poetic reading", is taken from Christian Dotremont's poem *Qu'il nous arrive de bafouiller* [That we sometimes stammer]; the second, an "ornithological reading", comes from the book by the ornithologist Jules Michel, *L'Oiseau* [The Bird] (1856); the third, a "sociological reading", is an excerpt from a book by the sociologist Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (1967). The fourth sequence, a "psychoanalytic reading", based on a text by the psychoanalyst Françoise Estienne, *Les Bégaiements* [Stuttering] (1996), is presented on a monitor at the back of the room.

Chapter I: thresholds

The curators, Jean-François Chevrier and Élia Pijollet, also note that "the theme of the threshold is everywhere in Chantal Maes's work". In several images, it even becomes a motif in its own right. An articulation between inside and outside, here and elsewhere, the threshold may be geographical, topographical, biographical, metaphysical... They go on to explain: "It is what is known as a *topos* of human experience, a 'commonplace', in the noblest sense of the term. The threshold is not necessarily a line; it can be thick, deep; it can be a time or an extended moment."

The exhibition opens with an image taken from a sequence broadcast by RTB (Belgian Radio and Television broadcasting) and filmed on 1st September 1971, during the start of the school year: a little girl, accompanied by her grandmother who is holding her hand, crosses the threshold of the school as she enters primary school. That little girl is Chantal Maes herself, on her birthday. She discovered the existence of the sequence when it was rebroadcast on 2 September 2018. Occurring at a critical moment in her life, this "apparition" provided the decisive impulse for a personal reconstruction, of which the exhibition, with its rereading of her work, is the echo. Seeing herself, 47 years later, crossing the school threshold with a determined step thus triggered the crossing of another "threshold" in her own life.

Jean-François Chevrier and Élia Pijollet also observe that some of the artist's earliest works are explorations of the surface as a site of union between photographic material and photographed material. The *Velours* series, produced at the end of her studies at La Cambre in 1989, reproduces at a 1:1 scale the folds of a piece of fabric. *1967/1993* combines highly enlarged details of rediscovered photographs from a family day at the beach with squares of sky (blue) or sand (in black and white). From this latter group comes the image *Madou rigole* [Madou laughs], a portrait of the artist's maternal grandmother.

Chapter II: faces and interactions

The notion of interaction is central to Chantal Maes's work. "I have always had this desire, she explains, to pierce the mask people wear, the social mask, to penetrate the mystery of the face. I came to Goffman through my interest in the notion of interaction. To lose face means to lose the protection of appearance, of the surface."

According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, whose book *Interaction Ritual* is therefore a key reference for the artist: "The photographic image is a screen, a point where the gaze comes up against resistance. It is a transposition. It would be futile to try to guess the thoughts of the people in the photograph. The image is both the mark of the separation between the photographed subject and the viewer, and the point onto which subjectivities are projected – those of the subject, the photographer and the viewer."

Chantal Maes's research into human interactions has given rise to two series – *Inward Whispers* (1997–1999) and *Tropismes* (since 2003) – as well as to an ongoing body of work in schools practising active pedagogy, and to isolated prints. The images sometimes double into diptychs, following a slight change in viewpoint, in the grimaces of a face or in bodily postures, or in order to distinguish two moments of the same action.

Tropismes presents situations of interlocution, that is, a specific mode of interaction generally involving two people. The titles of the series also specify who the invisible interlocutor is within the image.

Produced in airports, *Inward Whispers* focuses on moments when, between two travellers, flight attendants briefly withdraw from the flows of language at their counters.

Chapter III: schools

For the artist, the school is a privileged field, as it offers multiple situations of transmission and exchange. When Chantal Maes wanted to continue the series *Tropismes* in 2014, she turned to her children's school. Two years later, she was authorised to work at the Japanese School of Brussels, for a series she intends to pursue further.

At the Japanese School (2016–2018), she was drawn by the possibility of experiencing a space that is physically close yet governed by different cultural determinants. The images highlight the idea, important in Japanese culture, of the face as a social mask, extended to attitudes, gestures and behaviours. In addition to the few large black-and-white prints integrated into the *Tropismes* series, the ensemble currently comprises around twenty small-format colour images, presented here in part for the first time. Like *Inward Whispers*, the series arises from a single situation (the school setting of young Japanese people in Belgium), but follows a working logic closer to that of "reportage", focusing on interactions and threshold effects.

Chapter IV: objects, sound recordings

To the idea of the "eyewitness", Chantal Maes likes to juxtapose that of the "earwitness". Sound recording extends photographic capture, complementing its possibilities. The curators, Élia Pijollet and Jean-François Chevrier, conceived «...*puisque bafouillent aussi les astres*» as "a murmuring exhibition, inhabited and traversed by sounds as much as by silent images". As a counterpoint to the images, *La Limite* is a sound recording of an aeroplane landing, captured at close range from the terrace of Orly Airport in 1997. It is broadcast at regular intervals.

More peripheral within the artist's work, objects are present through their links to the home, the hand and memory. These photographs – dense black-and-white prints of relatively small format – carry a form of intimacy and a weight (all bodies fall). They metaphorise inner states, giving them a visible form before words.

A final, very moving small group consists of a few "objects of mourning", photographed after the death of the artist's maternal grandmother: "I had to keep a trace of them, Chantal Maes admits, before continuing. Without the photographic act, I cannot throw them away. They are objects from her everyday life. There is a remote control, because television was a central object in the homes of my childhood; a kitchen scale, a toaster, as well as a stapler."



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