

ORLAN & M HKA

The art world in Flanders is relatively small, even if you include its expansions into the rest of Belgium and the Benelux. In Flanders, art is publicly represented by an image of art that takes a limited number of artists as a reference. Other major artists from the region may therefore disappear from view and international artists even more so. Whereas on the international scene there is a movement that anchors art historically, in Flanders this is virtually non-existent. The scene appears fragmented, with private initiatives and museums that find it more important to work on their own profile than to look at the broader picture. This is largely due to the fact that the institutional framework in Flanders is still in the embryonic stage.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, even ORLAN only existed here in the margins of that picture. Exhibited by Guy Pieters and Axel Vervoordt, she was only once shown in the setting of a museum, as part of 'Al het Vaststaande Verdamp't' (All that is solid evaporates) hosted by M HKA in Mechelen, which showed five different perspectives of spirituality anchored in the material. Liliane De Wachter thereby used the manipulability of man as a theme and took ORLAN as one of the anchor points in the form of several of her recent photos. This is the ORLAN as she exists on the periphery of that Flemish art scene, with work from recent decades and as one of the first artists to carry out actions on their own body as part of their art.

ORLAN is a broader artistic story than that, however, and until the M HKA project in 2012 she was only appreciated in this broader capacity in the French-speaking part of Belgium, obviously within the French cultural sphere of influence but also logically, in historical terms, because she performed one of her most remarkable *mesuRAGEs* in Liège. It could have been different in Flanders too, because one of her other *mesuRAGEs* was carried out here in the first public institution for contemporary art, the International Cultural Centre (ICC). Her exhibition there in 1980 should have been the end of that first fundamental period in her story, but should also have resulted in her first retrospective publication.

The drama surrounding the resignation of ICC director Flor Bex immediately afterwards signalled the end of the ICC as an international hub and would lead directly to the establishment of the M HKA, but it also ensured that the potential that had been built up in the ICC was neglected and forgotten. The ICC stories only resurfaced when the M HKA reshaped itself in the last decade into a fully-fledged museum, activating the collection and paying attention to the archives and the historical dimension. It took 25 years of M HKA for it to actively seize this potential of the ICC archive as an international avant-garde source. One of the most notable clusters in the archive appeared to be that of ORLAN. Much has been lost, and the recording of the performance was nowhere to be found in what was left of the video archive. But a lot has been preserved: the most extensive photo archive of these performances, some of the basic material from the production of the exhibition, and the mock-up of the book that should have been published back then.

For the M HKA, with its interest in the international post-war avant-garde, this was a potential anchor; it shows a radical female artist who adopts a feminist perspective in an idiosyncratic way, and who in her performances proves to be an important link with all kinds of international storylines in the art of that time.

Together with ORLAN, the M HKA has decided to publish this book now and to reconstruct parts of the ICC exhibition. One thing led to another; as a result of this conversation ORLAN started thinking

actively again about the *mesuRAGEs*; she carried out another one in the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and another in which, following the ICC, she now measured its successor the MUHKA – with the body she has today – so connecting the past with the present and the future. The upshot of all this is for the M HKA collection is a second public ensemble of *mesuRAGEs* in addition to that at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.