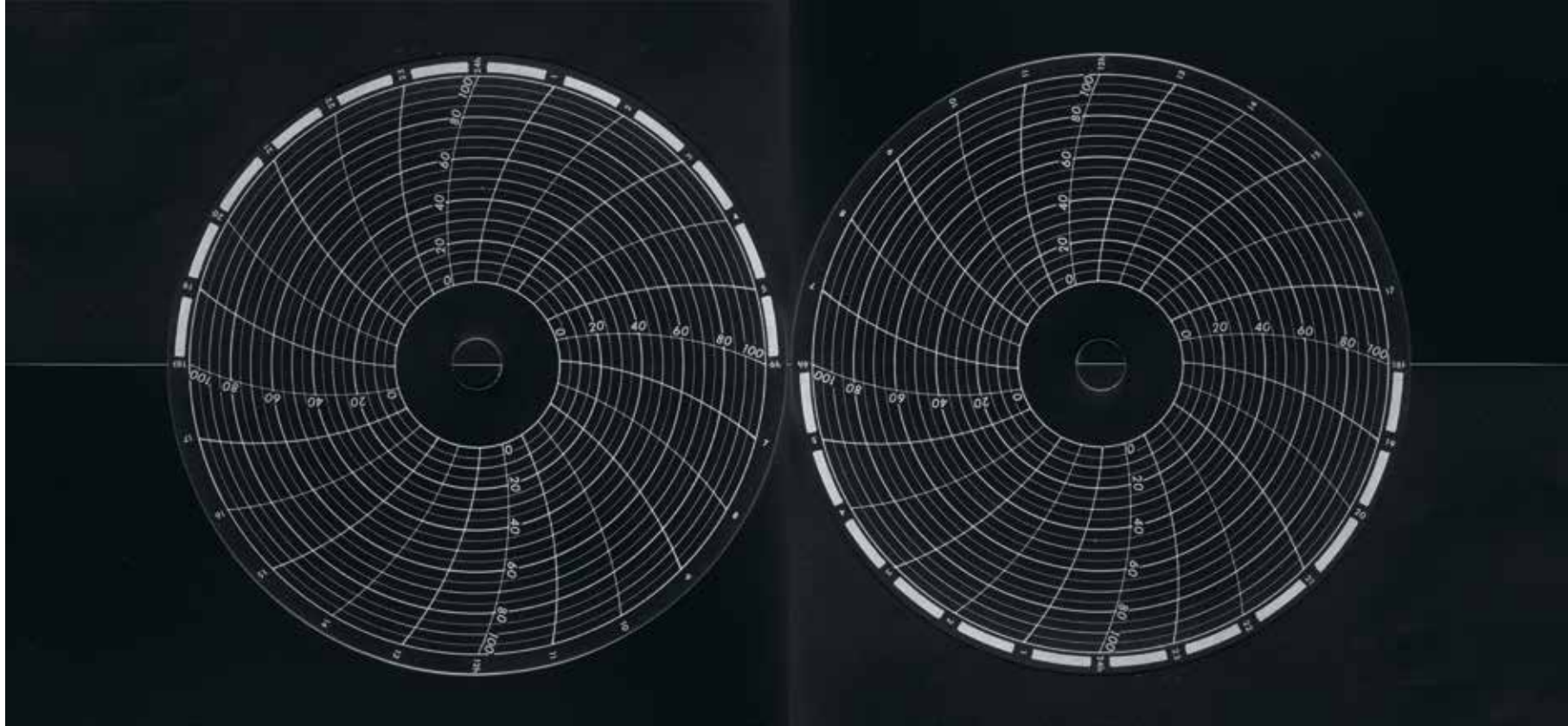


# New Humanism / the concept – the movement – the art



**The Split** (poster), photo: Gaston Meskens

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## Introduction

The adagio that we cannot solve our societal problems with the same methods that (facilitate to) create them is well known. The vision that inspiration and motivation for ‘new methods’ need to come from deeper thinking about who we are as individuals and groups and about how to deliberate these problems and live together is less popular. This vision is the point of departure of the New Humanism Project, and it thereby deliberately distinguishes the political from the social context.

The idea is that, for the politically, in order to tackle societal problems such as climate change, poverty and the various forms of social oppression, we first need to rethink and reform the formal methods we use to make sense of our coexistence, namely the methods of education, scientific research and democracy. Tackling complex social problems comes down to a fair dealing with their complexity. This requires ethical competence and the preparedness to engage in joint public reflexivity ‘in face of that complexity’, taking into account our interests, hopes, hypotheses, believes and concerns.

Second, but not least, there is an urgent need to reconsider the modern conformist patterns aimed to ‘order’ our social relationships, as they alienate the human being from what love can and should be: a compassionate love for the other, based on a reflexive self-care, while accepting the ethics and aesthetics of ambiguity of that connectedness.

Why would we need a ‘new humanism’ for this? What’s wrong with the old one? I aim to present here a vision on our individual and collective being and capacity transcending the one that emerged as a reaction against oppression by the pre-modern elites of emperors and priests. While liberating ourselves from this oppression was of course a good thing as such, throughout the following ages of social, scientific and technological progress, humanity has built up a self-confidence leading to the current ‘hyper-rationality’ driving education, science, economics, politics and even our social and love relationships today. In that sense, the

New Humanism Project explores a new way of looking at the problems the world is facing. It rejects cynical post-whatever defeatism as well as ‘back to the good old and simple times’ nostalgia. Alternatively, I want to present an ‘ethics of care’ view on who we are, what we can know and should know and how we can deliberate the issues, and I believe this view is essential for how we organise our coexistence.

## The need for a new humanism

How can we make this world a better place for all? Sketching what goes wrong in our world today, the picture does not look very bright ... structural poverty, expanding industrialisation and urbanisation and consequent environmental degradation, waste of precious resources, water, food, and products, adverse manifestations of technological risk, economic exploitation, anticipated overpopulation, derailed financial markets, ... All of this adding up to old and new forms of social, political, and religious oppression and conflict. Last but not least, regardless of whether or not they are directly affected by the global problems sketched above, more and more people feel lost in their personal life. In search for meaning, recognition and self-confirmation, they feel overburdened and exhausted by the rage of life and stuck in the labyrinth of often conflicting social norms, codes and expectations. As a result, psychological distress and depression are becoming the fundamental personal disorders of our modern times.

So how can we make this world a better place for all?

The stakes are high and the need to take more action is manifest.

However, the adagio goes that the recipes are known ...

To tackle the socio-political challenges, we have international politics run by nation states and democracy organised through party politics and elections. We have globalised markets steered by competition and profit and education programmes that prepare workers and specialists to function in any socio-technical role the big system of our society requires. And relying on those modern methods, it is said

that the only thing we need is leaders showing commitment and political will to do what reason and science tells us to do, and entrepreneurs and consumers showing a sense of responsibility and the will to cooperate in executing the plans.

In our personal spheres, we have the checks and codes that bring order in our life and that help us to realise our goals: a proper education, a partner, kids, a career, money, a yearly holiday, a house and a car. We have religions with gods that prescribe what to do and what not and we have religions without gods that prescribe what to do and what not, and in case we are insecure or mess up, professional life coaches and spiritual leaders are there to help us to get back on track. And our mental deviations and disorders are now categorised and analysed down to the finest detail, and the market has medication and tailor-made therapies to cure any form of them.

The rationality and necessity of these methods is key, it is said, because the world is complex, societal problems have no easy solutions, and the outlook on our personal paths of life is troubled by multiple uncertainties and ambiguities. And, at the same time, we are told by political and corporate elites and self-declared spiritual gurus that we should not be naïve but simply accept that our society lives by the grace of competition and self-protection, and that altruism and spontaneous solidarity of haves with have nots are nothing but nice philosophical ideas. People are selfish, it is said, and will always put the individual before the common good, regardless whether they are rich or poor. Politics and markets cannot be but competitive and conflictual power games, the theory goes, where the most popular opinion or product wins. And are the multiple acts of terror and aggression of the last years not the proof in themselves that security and defence are the only working remedies against the so-called unavoidable human evil?

Also, our personal lives are said to be driven by competition and self-protection. The fact that the rich mate with the rich and the poor with the poor is simply a law of nature, we are told. And of course you are not necessarily doomed, as you can always work yourself a class up, that is: you are always free to try. And what about love and sex then? Well there is the love and sex from the movies and the videogames and there is the love and sex in ‘real life’. And in that real life, you better pragmatically conform to the norms and find your better half, as any alternative life form can only lead to chaos, pain and misery ...

And here is the thing.

Our modern methods and codes of social and political life may be seen as signs of social, political and even moral progress, given that they are the results of historical emancipatory struggles away from the often brutal oppressions by the pre-modern elites of emperors and priests, but in essence they are not designed to cope with the complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity of that life. Although each of them has its own history, one could almost say their common feature is that they were rather designed to escape confrontation with that complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity. Today, ...

## MODERN EDUCATION

*prepares you for a job,  
not for (the complexity of) life;*

## MODERN RELIGION

*is (still) designed to ‘relieve’ you (and your innocent children) from doubt with regard to your origin and destiny and, from choice, stress with regard to the Path of Life, but it (still) relies on (competing) dogmatic power structures strategically promoting collective beliefs in fictional ‘truths’ that cannot be proven;*

## THE MODERN LOVE RELATIONSHIP

*is as much a construction meant to help you to resist lust and curiosity and to streamline doubt about your feelings as it is the materialisation of a ‘bond’ of love, but breakups, cheating, disappointment and pain seem to be basic consequences of that construction as much as feelings of belonging, security and joy;*

## MODERN SCIENCE

*is organised as a quest for measurable and usable truth at the service of politics and the market, but it is not designed to advise on issues open to value-based interpretations*

*and troubled by uncertainties that cannot be resolved (yet);*

## MODERN MARKETS

*are organised as systems of competition that reward strategic insight and profit, but they are unable to demarcate their own ethical boundaries;*

## MODERN POLITICS

*is (still) organised as a conflict of opinion relying on political self-promotion and simple ideologies (including that of the nation state) but it is unable to deal with thoughtful nuance as well as with populist misuse;*

Consequently we will not save our planet and humanity in a society that remains blind for the fact that our current ‘modern’ methods to make sense of and organise our co-existence are too primitive to grasp the complexity of that co-existence and are actually denying instead of recognising who we really are as human individuals. In other words: our traditional methods of making sense of our co-existence (politics, science and education) are no longer able to grasp the complexity of these social problems. In addition, it is important to realise that these methods and codes are not ‘errors’ of the motor of modernity but rather strategic tools. They prepack, streamline and exploit our human quest for belonging and recognition (as lover, as spiritual mind, as consumer, as citizen, ...) at the service of the contemporary elites of emperors, entrepreneurs and priests who need these methods and codes to legitimise and safeguard their own power and privileges.

## Better living (in a complex world)

And here we are. The adagio that we cannot solve our societal problems with the same methods that (facilitate to) create them is well known. The vision that inspiration and motivation for ‘new methods’ need to come from deeper thinking about who we are as individuals and groups and about how to deliberate these problems with each other is less popular. This vision is the point of departure of the New Humanism Project. The New Humanism Project aims to facilitate dialogue about that vision and, consequently, about what these ‘new methods’ should be and can be. The idea is that, in order to tackle societal problems such as climate change, poverty and the various forms of social depression and oppression, we first need to rethink and reform the formal methods we use to make sense of our coexistence, namely the methods of education, scientific research and democracy.

Why would we need a ‘new humanism’ for this? I aim to present here a vision on our individual and collective being and capacity transcending the humanist one that emerged as a reaction against oppression by the pre-modern elites of emperors and priests. While liberating ourselves from this oppression was of course a good thing as such, throughout the following ages of social, scientific and technological progress, humanity has built up a self-confidence leading to the current ‘hyper-rationality’ driving education, science, economics and politics today. In that sense, the New Humanism Project explores a new way of looking at the problems the world is facing. It rejects cynical post-whatever defeatism as well as ‘back to the good old and simple times’ nostalgia. Alternatively, I want to present a ‘pragmatic ethics’ view on who we are, what we can know and should know and how we can deliberate the issues, and we believe this view is essential for how we organise our coexistence in general, and education, science and politics in particular.

The New Humanism philosophy is a living and fluid philosophy, in constant development through dialogue with others. But here are the key ideas:

Problems such as climate change, environmental pollution, unsustainable food production and consumption and loss of biodiversity are complex social problems troubled by multiple uncertainties and often incommensurable value judgments. In addition, typical for these complex social problems is that they are all interconnected, which means they all need to be tackled together in a holistic perspective. Dealing fairly with these complex problems comes down to dealing fairly with their complexity, and that requires the joint preparedness of all of us to become ‘reflexive in face of that complexity’, trying to understand ‘the bigger picture and



yourself in it', each of us with our specific interests, hopes, hypotheses, beliefs and concerns. That kind of reflexivity can thus be seen as an ethical attitude in face of that complexity, and as a motivation to seek rapprochement with each other and to engage in 'public reflexivity' to deliberate the problems. In the New Humanism Project, I argue that this kind of deliberation, as a form of public reflexivity' is marked by two fundamental principles:

When it comes to give meaning to and decide on what is a personal meaningful life and on how to live together, we are all equal and we have no reference other than each other.

In our care for personal and general well-being, we can only make use of one absolute reference value: the possibility of a continuous engagement in deliberation as equal human beings. All other possible value references (specific ideas, facts, values, statements, roles, responsibilities, objects, systems, ...) are relative and need to be incorporated as subject of that deliberation.

However, 'being reflexive in face of complexity' is not an intellectual exercise we can choose to do or not, detached from reality. In whatever position, situation or role in our daily life, we are all impacted by complexity and we have impact on complexity itself. In addition, with globalization and the interconnectedness of our current socio-economic practices, it is clear that complex social problems now have global dimensions. Today, we have to understand that, as individuals enjoying an acceptable standard of living, all of our choices with respect to the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the consumer products we buy, the energy we consume, the means of transport we use, and so on, have some effect somewhere else on earth. As a consequence, ethical reasoning with respect to those choices requires us to look beyond our familiar local 'comfort zones' and to think as 'citizens of the world' or cosmopolitans who try to evaluate the consequences of their choices, and who are motivated to understand their specific place, role, responsibilities and rights in the bigger picture of it all.

In the New Humanism Project, I translate this vision by saying that the 'fact of complexity' brings along three new characteristics of our modern coexistence:

*(moral) connectedness*

We are connected with each other 'in complexity'. We can no any longer escape or avoid it.

Fair dealing with each other implies a fair dealing with the complexity that binds us.

*(social) vulnerability*

In complexity, we became dependent on each other (we can only know, feel, understand and act 'together'). At the same time, we should care for the vulnerability of ignorance and confusion, but also of that of 'mandated authority' and the next generations.

*(sense for) engagement*

Our experiences now extend from the local to the global. As intelligent reflective beings, to become involved in deliberating issues of general societal concern has become a new source of meaning and moral motivation.

### The idea of ethical competence

Our responsibility to adopt reflexivity as an ethical attitude and to reason and act as a cosmopolitan, essentially leans on our capacity to do so. Understanding the bigger picture, the complexity of social problems and the consequences of our acts, roles, rights and responsibilities in relation to them therefore requires developing reflexivity as a skill, or thus the ability to see that bigger picture and yourself in it, with your interests, hopes, hypotheses, beliefs and concerns.

In the New Humanism Project, I see reflexivity as both skill and ethical attitude as the two essential elements – interdependent and mutually influential – of an ethical competence needed to fairly deal with each other 'bound in complexity'. I argue that ethical competence and reflexivity can be stimulated and fostered in dialogues that 'work'

emancipatory and (compassionately) confrontational at the same time. From this perspective, it becomes clear that there is a need to reform the old modes of politics, research and education into interaction methods that are inclusive, pluralistic, transdisciplinary and deliberative. I believe these interactive methods will not only enable more effective governance of complex social problems, they may also be perceived as fair by anyone concerned.

But what are the ways to get there? In search of new methods that rely on and could stimulate ethical competence and reflexivity, I have started different tracks including writing, workshops, happenings and networking. Our first attention focusses on education. Why?

I believe that there are reasons to conclude that, still today, most approaches to education now mainly prepare our children to function as one-dimensional uncritical subjects in the systems of our society.

I believe everyone has the right to an education that would aim to make them more resilient to all kinds of capitalist, conformist and fundamentalist manipulations of our co-existence and to help them to live better with each other in our complex society.

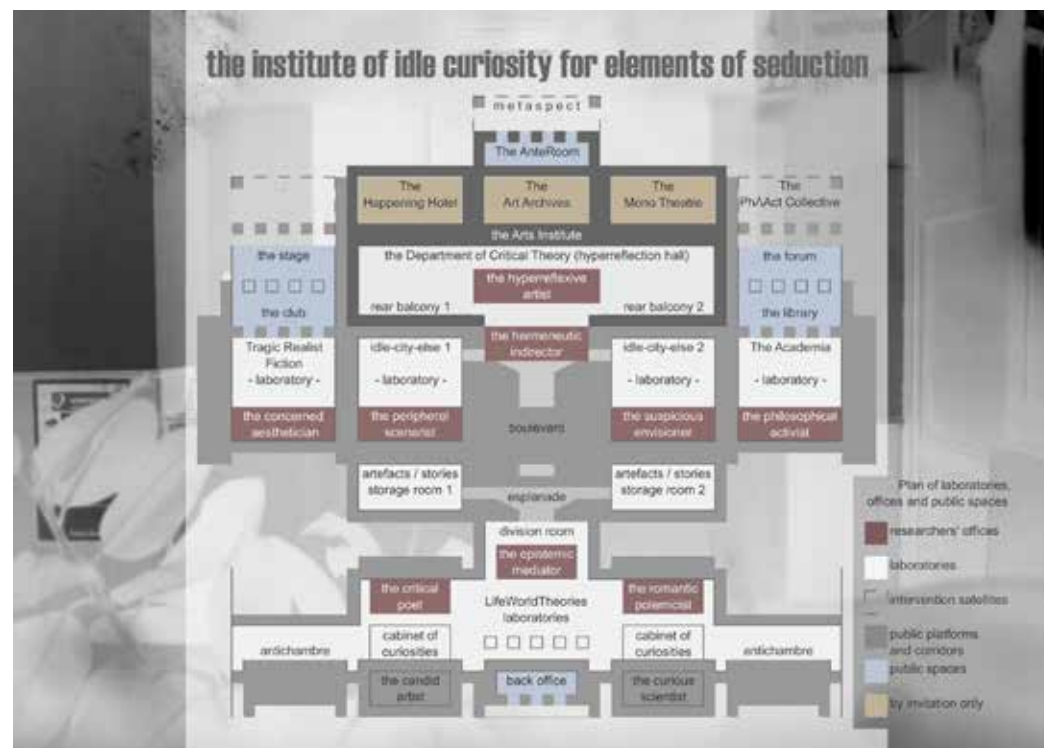
I believe that for children, youngsters and adults, becoming self-critical world citizens is not their duty, it is their human right.

I believe that reforming our formal education systems with a focus on fostering ethical competence and reflexivity can inspire and motivate (future) changemakers to make us shift away from our current forms of social and political life driving on competition, conformism, polarisation and conflict. We need to find new structures, new forms, evolving not towards new fixed systems but towards a constantly reinventing fluid society.

### New Humanism and Art – The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction

I started the art project "The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction" sometime in 2006. Meanwhile, it developed as a life's work and a conceptual framework for all my artistic and philosophical activities. The project can be understood as a critical reflection on the idea of ideology-driven 'social engineering' in the way it became a socio-political practice in 19th and 20th century modernity, and it develops in all possible art forms (text, prints, drawings and paintings, music & soundscapes, found objects, installations, web presence, performances and happenings).

'The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction' is a research institute,

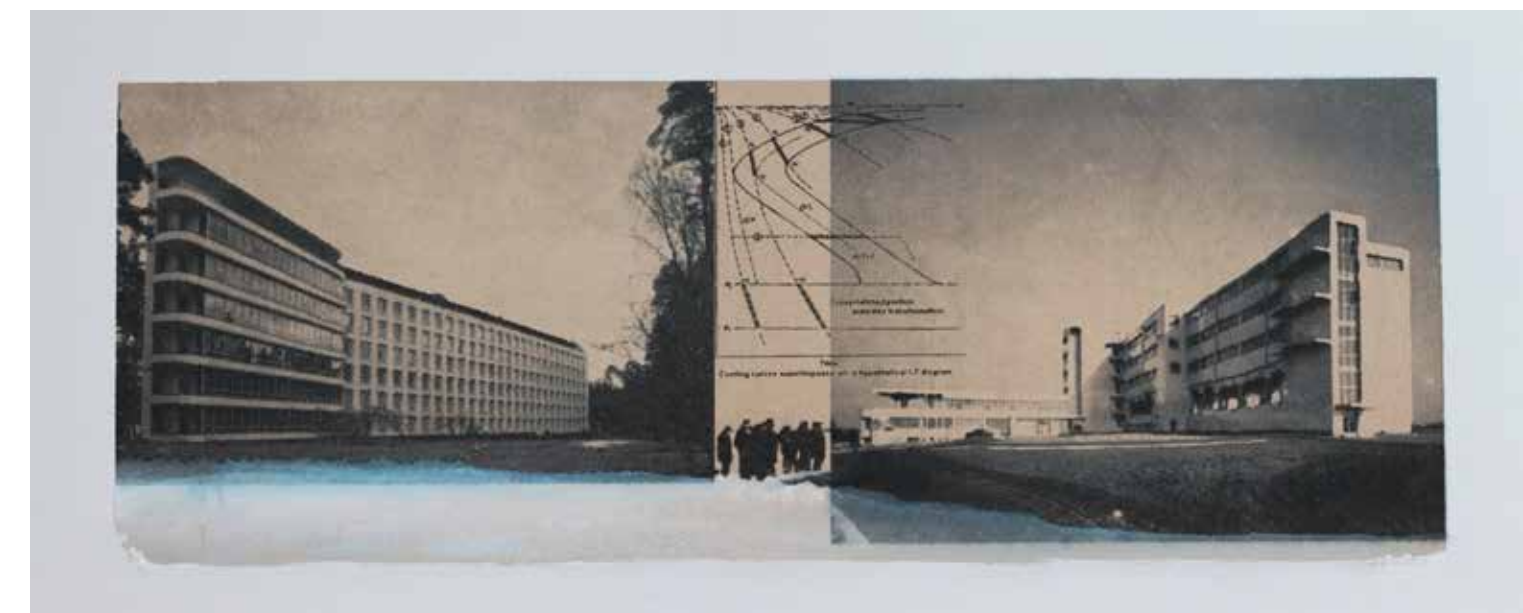


The Institute Floor Plan, (digital scheme), photo: Gaston Meskens

and its research programme is concerned with the way humans deal with the uncertain, the ambiguous, the complex and the unknown in social and political interaction in a world 'still struggling with the cramps of modernity'. The basis of the research programme is a critical theory that targets strategies of conformism, positivism, profitism and populism in social, cultural, scientific, economic or political contexts, but the programme essentially wants to go beyond critical analysis as such. The aim is to research and formulate a 'new humanism' that could inspire new social life forms and political interaction methods that would be resilient to these strategies and that would enable and inspire real dialogue on well-being, solidarity and social justice.

As a philosopher, I take that research serious, and it became an activist and professional academic practice in itself. In that way, 'The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction' is not only a critical analysis of the society we live in today, but at the same time also a philosophical and artistic experiment in ideological thinking. As a researcher of my own institute, I act in the 'real' worlds of art, of science and technology, of academic philosophy and of the international politics such as those of the United Nations. I present my socio-political critique and my vision on a new humanism in these worlds and I integrate reflections on these activisms back in my art practice. All these worlds have their own self-confirmative ratios, languages and codes, and depending on who I meet in these worlds, I tell variations of the story of who I am and of what I do.

Last but not least, the concept of the Institute also provides a frame for self-critique: I am critical towards power and profit in my philosophical activism, and reflexive about my activism in my art. I think 'hyper-reflexivity', as the highest end state 'overlooking' everything, will always result in melancholy, although not in its current simplistic meaning of depression it got from modernity. In August 2016, the Institute organised the '2nd World Conference on the Value of Melancholy in Times of Cheap Commitment' in Antwerp, and on that occasion it reformulated the meaning of melancholy as an ethical experience in social interaction, and declared it the highest intellectual condition a human being can reach. The text 'Revisiting Melancholy', included as last part of this text, elaborates on that idea.



Entrance / The Institute (ink print and acryl on MDF), photo: Gaston Meskens

### Epilogue - Revisiting Melancholy

Robert Burton published the first edition of his magnum opus 'The Anatomy of Melancholy' in 1621. His aim was to write a definite and comprehensive study of the meaning of melancholy. His book promised to explain '... What it is: With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptoms, Prognosticks, and Several Cures of it. In Three Maine Partitions with their several Sections, Members, and Subsections. Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically, Opened and Cut Up ...'. What looks at first sight as an exhaustive analysis of melancholy as a disease to be cured is in fact much more. Burton uses melancholy as a perspective to inquire into all

human emotions and thought. In that sense, the Anatomy can also be seen as a total encyclopaedia of the human condition of that time. Our modern times may now inspire us to re-read that meaning for the contemporary human condition, although not through a systematic re-interpretation of the encyclopaedic classes and categories, but on the basis of one simple idea.



Panorama (installation at the Antwerp Museum of Contemporary Art), photo: Gaston Meskens

Melancholy is not depression neither pessimism. Drawing on interpretations from the pre-modern Romantic and Decadent Eras, it can be described as the aesthetical consolation that comes with the awareness of the impossibility of pure beauty, unity and harmony, and of the inevitability of imperfection, decadence and uncertainty. The idea however is that melancholy is not a detached but an ethical experience, and that this became apparent with modernity: melancholy is the human condition resulting from a deliberate awareness of the limits to rational instrumental reason in a context of social appeal. That social appeal may either be love, friendship or lust, or social or political engagement. The implications of modernity rendered melancholy with a social meaning: the impossibility of pure beauty, unity and harmony, and of the inevitability of imperfection, decadence and uncertainty, is not experienced by way of detached observation, but in a reflexive way in social interaction.

In this vision, the 'end state' of melancholy is still aesthetical consolation. But that state is not passive, as it arises from an ethical demand. In its recognition of the intrinsic ambiguity of human interaction and of the inherent complexity of social organisation and cohabitation, it is an intellectual withdrawal from the delusion of grandeur of a society obsessed with rationality, security, efficiency, predictability and competition. In its disdain for complacency, it is a consolatory practice of leaving the comfort zones constructed around strategies of conformism, positivism,

populism and profitism. But as an active state of resignation, melancholy is not evasive. Its decadence is in the eyes of the conformists. Layered on reflexivity as an ethical experience, it feels the anger towards the detached. And as a meta-state of concern, it is aware of the fragile potential of intellectual solidarity among the capable, and of the melancholy of the capable as vulnerable.

Melancholy is practicing the aesthetics of imperfection, decadence and uncertainty, although with a constant

awareness of – and care for – the possible of human possibilities.

### Gaston Meskens

is a philosophical activist and artist with master degrees in theoretical physics and nuclear physics. He is the founder of the New Humanism Project. His art and philosophical work dwell around the question of how to better deal with uncertainty and complexity in a world still struggling with the cramps of modernity.

Participant UTOPIENALE III

