



ZOLO TALKS No. 2 : Koenraad Dedobbeleer  
ZOLO Press, April 2020  
(author: Robert Morris Levine)  
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Koenraad Dedobbeleer (b. 1975, Halle, Belgium) is a sculptor, teacher (well, of sorts), reader (but never enough), husband, father, occasional editor, and publisher.

ON TITLING, THE ANTLIBRARY, AND A SERIOUS CASE OF QUOTOMANIA. April 10, 2020

**Robert Morris Levine (for Zolo Press):** I'd like to start with a word: contextomy. Contextomy, from the Ancient Greek *témnō* ("cut"), refers to the selective excerpting of words from their original linguistic context in a way that distorts their meaning. What is the role of quoting, of contextomy in your practice?

**Koenraad Dedobbeleer:** Quoting makes sense when it builds relationships to something that a broader audience can read. Often my quotes are rather idiosyncratic; most viewers are not familiar with the source. In that case, is there in fact a quote? In general, we use quotes to demonstrate our knowledge, and that knowledge is dissected by those who can grasp it.

**Z:** Does your viewer, then, need to recognize the quotes that you are making to apprehend the work?

**KD:** I don't think so. Sure, it is always nice when another geek—like you—recognizes my references, but it is not about recognition per se. In truth, I am more interested in misquoting than quoting.

“I AM MORE INTERESTED IN  
MISQUOTING THAN QUOTING.”

**Z:** *On My Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*, your 2019 exhibition at CLEARING, borrows its name from a 1367 treatise by the Renaissance humanist Petrarch. *Those Unabused by an Awareness*, a work in that show, quotes conceptualist Cady Noland. *Transgression Has its Entire Space in the Line it Crosses* adopts Michel Foucault. *Completeness Has Been Greatly Exaggerated* revises Mark Twain. What is the relationship between your sculptures and their titles? What effect does one have on the other?

**KD:** There is this gigantic problem with titles: they load the thing with meaning. They become explicatory, or are often considered as such. I try to avoid that as strongly as possible. I am not a conceptual artist in the sense that I would give numbers to my works, or that I would title them “untitled” or “title to be announced”—various tricks that one can devise to circumvent titling. I am just throwing titles on the works, not thinking about giving them a direct meaning in doing so. I use titles to generate a parallel line of thought—a resonance, you could say.

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Often I insert my own words into the quotes. "On My Own Ignorance" was originally "On His Own Ignorance," or at least that's how it was translated from Italian into English. But in classical Italian it is "On My Own." I wanted to re-translate it closer to the original, without any knowledge of classical Italian. I would never dare use only my own words, though. For the fear of coming off shallow or stupid or didactic.

Art is sometimes dishonest, or at least art is a sort of a lie. So it's rather not about truth, but it might be true. Anyhow, it's a construct and the use of titles can solve this problem. I am able to hide behind someone else's voice.

**Z:** In *The Critic as Artist*, Oscar Wilde writes that "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."

**KD:** "In order to tell the truth, we need to make caricatures." Or something along those lines was how Asger Jorn would have put it.

**Z:** Are you scavenging for titles as you read? Do titles ever precede objects?

**KD:** I'm always scavenging, or at least I have been for the past few years. Before, titles would come to me naturally from the things I listened to or read. Now it is more deliberate: I take notes while I read.

**Z:** *Exhibiting Keatonesque Persistence in the Face of Failure* nods to the film comedian Buster Keaton. What does humor do for you?

**KD:** You can never really talk about humor. When you have to explain a joke, there's no joke anymore; a joke deserves no explanation. Maybe a misapprehended joke is a bad joke. Maybe some of my works are bad jokes. Anyway, I am pleased when my work generates amusement on the face of the viewer.

**Z:** Keaton once remarked that "Nobody ever told you that making a joke is hard work." You seem to work hard to make jokes with your sculpture. In this, I am reminded of Bertold Brecht's insistence on laughter ("spass") as a step towards liberation. We laugh and then are forced to reckon with why we laughed.

**KD:** It's true. Laughter is a form of recognition. Certain types of humor will not be recognized because they belong to a certain club. Humor is cultural; it defines the groups of which one is a part or apart from. In that sense, wit is political.

**Z:** You first came to art through comics. Do you still read comics?

**KD:** Yes! Lately I've been buying them again. Comics are not as much a part of my mental world anymore, but they were a big influence on my awakening from the time I was fourteen to twenty-one. Listening to music and reading comics were daily activities in those days. I used to read everything but superhero comics. (They weren't available in Belgium. Sure, some slipped in through England and Spain.)

**Z:** You are just as meticulous with your press releases as you are your titles. The release for *This Is That*, your most recent solo, resembles Oulipean poetry. Do you consider the press release an artwork?

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**KD:** Press releases are either overly serious, or overtly dumb, or something in between. They are a problematic form. Whenever I am allowed to intervene, I do.

**“PRESS RELEASES ARE EITHER  
OVERLY SERIOUS, OR OVERLY  
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I would not go so far as to call them artworks, but they are certainly invitations to play. Ephemera allow us to access those artists and artworks that all but the richest collectors cannot afford. My attention to the para-exhibition is based in my own love for these alternative spaces of expression.

**Z:** You published an architecture “fanzine”, *UP*, for several years. How did you decide to begin a publication of your own?

**KD:** I started that with Kris Kimpe, a dear friend and architect. We wanted to share an element of architecture that we felt was underexposed. *UP* was our naive attempt to demand attention for that object.

**Z:** The eighth issue concentrates on the doors in the master bedrooms of Mies van der Rohe’s Haus Lange.

**KD:** The *Licht-Luft-Raum* (Light-Air-Room) ideas of early-twentieth century architecture could be seen as a means to concentrate less on the psychological dimension of space. The architecture or body being healthy meant that the mind was healthy by consequence. But at Haus Lange in Krefeld, things seem more complicated. That building is not a clear statement: it is a filled-in steel structure hidden by a brick facade. The separate master bedrooms are connected with a shared bathroom, and here Mies plays with ideas of privacy and sexuality. This is a marked difference from van der Rohe’s later buildings, which demonstrate an affinity for the functionalist and machine-like. Haus Lange is, from that point of view, old-fashioned bourgeois.

**Z:** In 2009, you received the Mies van Der Rohe Award. Then, in 2016, you staged your work around Jean Prouvé’s Demountable House. What is your relationship to Modernism with a capital M?

**KD:** It is somehow unavoidable. We have to go through a phase when we are impressed by the so-called heroes of Modernism. But, like in life, things pass.

**“WE HAVE TO GO THROUGH A  
PHASE WHEN WE ARE IMPRESSED  
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**Z:** For every piece of architecture built, there are many more sketched on paper or collected in books. Some architects, like Étienne-Louis Boullée and John Hejduk, worked mostly in plans. You have used books as proposals before, too. *Compensating Transient Pleasurable Excitations*, the title of which I'm obliged to mention is from John Dewey, was a catalog for an imagined exhibition.

**KD:** *Compensating Transient Pleasurable Excitations* is a possible exhibition. It will likely never be realized, and that was exactly its purpose. This is a selection of works by other artists: from furniture of Lihna Bo Bardi to the sculptures of Charles Ray, an architectural model of Gerrit Rietveld next to Aztec crafts. A bit like an imaginary museum. Since all the artworks do exist, I just cherry-picked them like I assume any curator would do. The book functions as a catalog for that show, with scans out of existing publications in order to be able to illustrate the selected works. It is a wide variety of things that don't exactly belong together, but, perhaps, could make sense alongside one another.

**Z:** Do you think of the book as a sculptural medium?

**KD:** It is definitely a space. I like that you open a book and enter into a room you create while flipping through it. The downside of literature is that it is chronological. Art books allow you to navigate the book more freely—to wander through them.

**Z:** And what of typefaces? Trump Medieval, Avant-Garde Gothic, Avenir, Futura, Utopia have figured in your work.

**KD:** Pomponius Gauricus—what a name—wrote in *De Sculptura* about sculpting letters out of wood. I always enjoyed considering type as sculptural, or at least possible sculptures.

**Z:** I have heard that you have a secret library. Is this true?

**KD:** It is true that I have a library. It is not hidden, though. My library is a growing thing. I have not read everything in here; that would be impossible.

**Z:** Nassim Nicholas Taleb, speaking of Umberto Eco, calls this the "antlibrary": "[Eco] is the owner of a large personal library (containing thirty thousand books), and separates visitors into two categories: those who react with 'Wow! Signore professore dottore Eco, what a library you have! How many of these books have you read?' and the others—a very small minority—who get the point that a private library is not an ego-boosting appendage but a research tool. Read books are far less valuable than unread ones."

**KD:** For me, the library is about speculation. You presume that you might need certain information one day and store it just in case. My studio library contains volumes on architecture, art, music, design, and fashion. All the literature is stored at my home library. The studio library bears traces of what I'll have to read rather than the memory of what I have read. It is a working instrument.

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**Z:** Do you see objects as texts capable of being read? Norman Potter, the design theorist, suggested that "every human artefact—whether a painting, poem, chair, or rubbish bin—evokes and invokes the inescapable totality of a culture."

**KD:** Objects are a language themselves. Objects that are part of an exhibition can be seen as a form of syntax. Together they form possible constructions of ideas. This brings me back to ephemera: objects are material proof of history.

**Z:** Speaking of language, many of your titles allude to linguistics. *Enclisis*: a word pronounced with little emphasis. *Ablaut*: a change of vowel in related words or forms. Do you think of language in material terms?

**KD:** Certain words have presence and volume. In that respect, yes. And just as objects manifest their histories, a word's etymology traces its evolution. It is like DNA.

**Z:** In 2019 you published your first monograph, "trac[ing] the development of [your] practice since 2006." How did you think of this book as history-making given your sensitivity to history?

**KD:** I had this fear of the monograph: that it would compromise complexity, make a definite statement. I endeavored to turn that upside down and share the spaces around the works of art. An exhibition is anything but the objects themselves; it is the gaps in between, the way you walk around, the relationship between an object and its surroundings. I feel that one cannot grasp that through photography, but I attempted to get as close as I could.

**Z:** In a recent interview with curator Chris Sharp, he remarked that many artists resemble their work. Would you say you look like yours?

**KD:** All of a sudden, I have to think that most dog owners resemble their dogs. I'm wondering what kind of dog I should have!

I hope that I do not look like my work, to be honest. Sure, these are things that I have made, but they are not about me. One can't deny their personality; it leaves traces. There is no such thing as an objective object. Still, I would like the things I make to be about something more or something else than the artist. Or maybe about nothing at all.

Koenraad invites you to read:  
**Gaston Lagaffe**, André Franquin  
**Middlemarch**, George Elliot  
**Rock My Religion: Writings and Projects (1965-1990)**, Dan Graham