

The correspondence between Franklin Engeln and Philippe Vandenberg

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During the winter of 1986, artist Franklin Engeln (°1956) sends his first letter to painter Philippe Vandenberg (1952–2009). What follows is an exchange as flourishing as it is short-lived. The two artists get to know each other in the gallery of Richard Foncke, who had been active in Ghent since 1967 and enjoyed great prestige in local art circles. Vandenberg was also living and working in Ghent at the time of the correspondence, Engeln in Antwerp. The correspondence between the two artists during this period is the basis of the publication ***Brieven (1986–87) – Philippe Vandenberg & Franklin Engeln***, published by Posture Editions. The exhibition at Convent stems from the publication, selecting a number of paintings and works on paper that have a clear link to the correspondence. The intimate correspondence reveals new insights into Vandenberg's ambiguous artistic mind and offers an insight into Engeln's little-known work. They write about a variety of topics: their sources of inspiration, working process, exhibitions they visit and quarrels with galleries.

Philippe Vandenberg started his career after completing his painting studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent in 1976. His work soon became nationally and internationally acknowledged. From 1983, he is associated with Richard Foncke Gallery after the gallery owner discovers his work during a group exhibition. During this period, Vandenberg mainly creates large, colorful paintings with rudimentarily drawn figures. In the late 1980s, his work goes through an artistic transition. He develops a fascination with graffiti and cartoons, resulting in an iconography shift. Furthermore, political and social themes become notably more important. Throughout his life, he regularly changes his style, ranging from figurative, expressionist-inspired work to more abstract work.

Franklin Engeln began painting in his teenage years, a practice he continued while studying at the Higher Institute for Art History and Archaeology in Ghent. During this time, he met Richard Foncke; his student dormitory was located next to Fonckes gallery. In 1982, Engeln got his first solo exhibition there at the age of 26. He works in different media -

drawing, painting, installation and language. His work is characterized as constructivist figurative, playful, colorful, organic, but at the same time displaying a kind of archaic, classical quality. The artist creates a tension between different visual elements, which he also calls 'signs'.

To support his friend's artistic development, Philippe Vandenberg bought Franklin Engeln's collage ***Fire to Love*** at his exhibition *Prospect 3* at De Gele Zaal in Ghent in 1986. Originally, the work was part of a triptych, but the two other collages are currently missing. A triptych that does remain intact consists of the three paintings ***Mizon***, ***Sfinka*** and ***Toumbey***. The works are a good example of his "Engeln-language": an enigmatic visual language of which the interpretation is left open by the artist. Language and poetry are keywords in his artistic practice, as is purification. He searches for what is essential to him, and then transforms it into a visual scene. Poetry is also important to Vandenberg. Both artists reflect on their artistic practice through the letters, as a continuation of their conversations in their studios. They discuss, among other things, their sources of inspiration, and occasionally mention intimate, personal topics such as eroticism and sexuality. In one of these passages, Vandenberg refers to the books of the French writer and poet Jean Genet. The painting ***De vreesaanjagende leegte van de domheid***, is named after a quote by Genet from his book *Querelle de Brest* (1953).

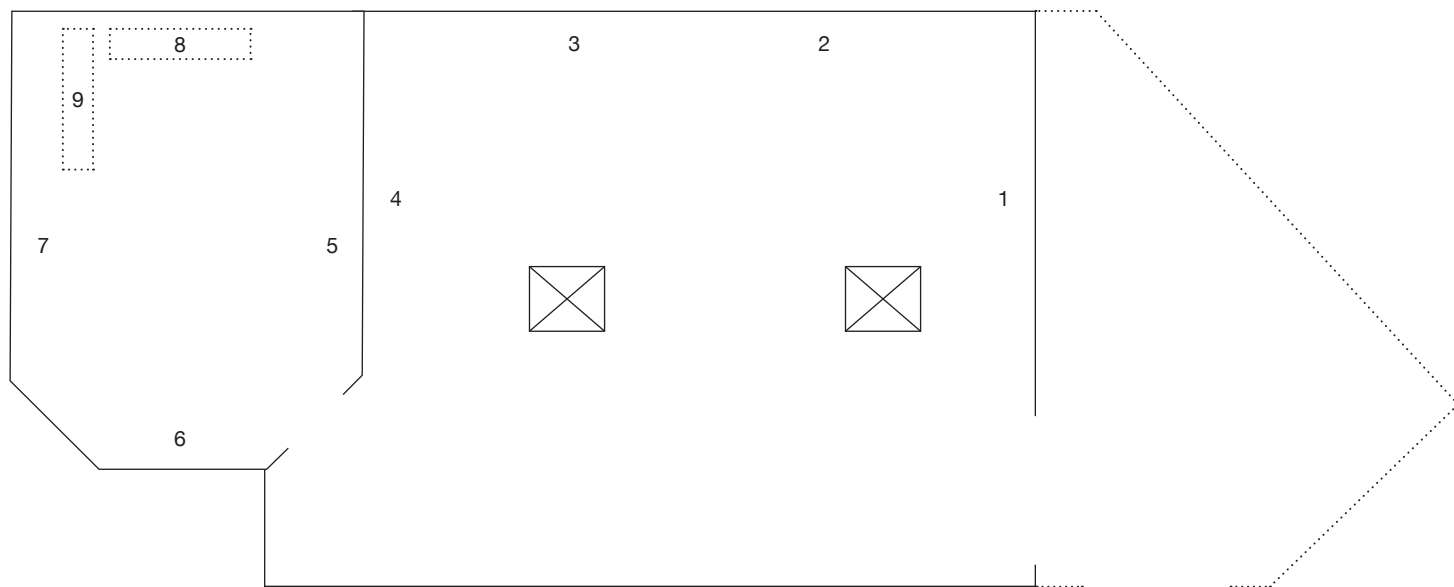
The two befriended artists also frequently express their dissatisfaction with the evolution of the art world. Vandenberg's criticism is mainly about the so-called "selectieheren", i.e. gallery owners and organizers of large institutional exhibitions. Motivated by a desire for power, they regard art as commercial, popular, and generic. As an example, he refers to the curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent, Jan Hoet. In 1987 Vandenberg's ***Schilderij*** was on display at the exhibition *Kunst-Zicht: Aangezicht tot aangezicht* curated by Hoet, taking place at the student restaurant of Ghent University in Overpoort. In his letter to Engeln, Vandenberg complains about students deliberately damaging the work, for example by throwing mayonnaise at it.

Interestingly, Vandenberg adds drawings in pencil or pen at the end of some letters. The contact with Engeln was clearly inspiring for him. The style of such drawings corresponds to sketches in his personal drawing blocks, which depict abstract figures from roughly drawn lines.

The correspondence reveals new information about the Ghent art scene in 1986–87, represented through

the eyes of the two artists. The letters demonstrate the relationship between artist, art world and art market in an unfiltered way. The struggle with the artist's career, acceptance in the art world and interest in each other's work are regular topics. Ultimately, the letters make one reflect on slowness, intimacy, and exchange in the context of the artist's intellectual, romantic, and artistic thought process.

Sofie Frederix



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| <p>1) Brochure for the exhibition Prospect 3 (1986) at the Gele Zaal, Ghent featuring a triptych by Franklin Engeln <i>Face of Love, Fight for Love and Fire to Love</i> Archive Franklin Engeln</p> | <p>3) Philippe Vandenberg, <i>De vreesaanjagende leegte van de domheid</i>, 1987. Oil on canvas, 206 × 206 cm. Collection Rik and Yvette Van Quickenborne-Oushoorn</p> | <p>5) Franklin Engeln, <i>Mizon</i>, 1988. Oil on canvas, 150 × 150 cm. Collection Fernand Vanoutryve</p> | <p>8) Philippe Vandenberg, <i>Untitled sketchbook</i>, 1986. Pencil on paper, 42 × 56 cm. Philippe Vandenberg Foundation</p> |
| <p>2) Franklin Engeln, <i>Fire to Love</i>, 1986. Collage on corrugated fiberboard, pencil and charcoal on paper, 220 × 190 cm. Philippe Vandenberg Foundation <i>Part of a triptych, the other two collages are (at the moment) unfindable.</i></p> | <p>4) Philippe Vandenberg, <i>Schilderij</i>, 1984. Oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm. Private collection, long-term loan S.M.A.K.</p> | <p>6) Franklin Engeln, <i>Sfinka</i>, 1988. Oil on canvas, 150 × 150 cm. Collection Fernand Vanoutryve</p> | <p>9) Philippe Vandenberg, <i>Untitled sketchbook</i>, 1987. Pencil on paper, 56 × 42 cm. Philippe Vandenberg Foundation</p> |
| | | <p>7) Franklin Engeln, <i>Toumbey</i>, 1988. Oil on canvas, 150 × 150 cm. Collection Fernand Vanoutryve</p> | |

The correspondence between Franklin Engeln and Philippe Vandenberg, curated by Sofie Frederix, is part of the multi-annual research project Ghent, playing field of the visual arts (1957–1987) (KASK & Conservatorium (HOGENT–Howest)) by Godart Bakkers, Koen Brams, Wouter De Vleeschouwer, Sofie Frederix and Naninga Lens.

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