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Patrick Van Caeckenbergh

L'Apocalypse 1978-2022

10 avril - 21 mai 2022

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Texte: Natacha Pugnet, april 2022



Patrick Van Caeckenbergh
La gastronomie cosmogonique - Les mains des dieux, 2021

“I have noticed at present that I’ve forgotten the most important thing: the myths of peoples becoming extinct. I constantly reread them, they are the ones who make me relive, day after day, what metamorphosis is, I learn them, I practice them, I live following their example. The poet is the guardian of metamorphosis and he who does not keep them alive in himself dies before his time¹.”

Elias Canetti

Under the radical title of *Apocalypse*, the ensemble thought of by Patrick Van Caeckenbergh for his sixth exhibition at the In Situ – fabienne Leclerc gallery (the first took place in 1998) proves to be more mysterious. Based on a principle of the “fruitful ruin,”² the artist’s conceptual tinkering freely combine and merge very diverse areas of thought. The sciences are as though infiltrated by the universe of myths, with their cosmogonies, gods and shamans. The fruit of long ripening thoughts, each creation appears as the entirely provisional materialization of a complex mental edifice. That is why interpretative work is limited to a tightrope walker’s exercise close to that of the practical artist. During our many meetings over time, Patrick generously opened himself up, enlightening me on the meaning of each detail that, within the ensemble, best expresses his thinking. Trying to untie their threads is untangling what is reality from what is the tale; in a certain way it is translating the metaphorical expression that characterizes his fictions into a language that can be shared with the reader-viewer. This clarification effort is inevitably accompanied by a form of loss. Consequently, I must resign myself to my undertaking raising a piece of the veil without completely, very fortunately, solving the enigma.

In an implicit manner, this exhibition is placed under the sign of the autobiography or the spiritual self-portrait. That is why it is proposed both as an intimate revelation and a parabola on today's world. Although this approach can seem paradoxical, the metamorphoses that Patrick Van Caekenbergh creates and his imaginative "nomadism" must be accepted right from the start. The death of his mother Jeanne, at Christmas 2018, modified how he regards his past. Earlier, anthropological, his exploration is conducted today "from the interior," as much as possible. Consequently, the waterfall visible in the collage titled *Mon souffle (La marchande de ballonnets)* ["My Breath" (The Balloon Seller)] becomes the metaphor of his origins, applied to both the newborn and the cosmos. The microcosmic drop becomes a balloon, while their multicolored spray becomes a macrocosm. Like many other iconographic elements, this drop is taken from the *Winkler Prins* encyclopedia, which his mother gave him when he was seven years old and which he has often bought since. Present in many collages, it also refers to his wonder as a child before so many forms of existence. This illustration further refers to the infinitesimal duration that our history holds in the evolution of the universe, proof if ever there was one of the polysemy to which Patrick Van Caekenbergh is so attached.

Le Masque was shown in the Antwerp gallery Zeno X in 2020, for an exhibition that significantly had as a title *Le monde à l'envers* ["The World Inside-out"]. The attempt to climb back up on the maternal lap is also a sensitive and poetic mediation on the living, the search "for an unquestionable point zero" starting from which everything could have begun. This strange sculpture decomposes the "voyage" below this point, toward the fetal stage, the one that a shaman owes himself to make in order, once he has returned to reality, to "take care" of the other, daily. Incarnating this figure with beneficial social functions starting in the 1990s, Patrick can wear this anatomical mask: his face corresponds to the maternal stomach while the torso, arms and legs reveal their strata, from the skin and muscles to the viscera and skeleton.

The large installation *L'Apocalypse (évolution d'un autoportrait 1978-2022)* crosses there too autobiography and considerations on the world's imbalance. To complicate the story even further and to continue to disconcert us, Patrick Van Caekenbergh takes on an alter ego, the "monosandalos," associated with the shaman and transformed into the "funambulpus," an invented word. Once again, the artist identifies himself, metaphorically speaking, with the shaman, feeling socially on the margins of his contemporaries, or even an "outlaw." The self-portrait visible in the model is accompanied by a description of "beauty spots" to be achieved by the funambulpus, who is "a dwarf, humpbacked, a hermaphrodite, has a pointy head, wrinkled skin and red cheeks." We couldn't be less in the norm. It is undoubtedly at this price that his action can be somewhat efficacious. "Shamanism aims at maintaining the cosmic

balance, but also the social one, when it has been disturbed by a disaster,” Danièle Vazeilles recalls.³ In *Le Sabbat des sorcières* [1989], which Patrick recommended that I read, Carlo Ginzburg defines the monosandalus as “beings (gods, men, spirits) in an unstable equilibrium between the world of the dead and that of the living.”⁴ That is why Patrick Van Caeckenbergh imagined the monosandalos-funambulpus-shaman combination as the ideal metaphor of a situation that he intimately experiences. His quest for balance is connected to homeostasis, namely the constants that an organic system must maintain (blood pressure, cardiac rhythm, etc.) in order to survive, regardless of the modifications of its external milieu. However, this idea can also be applied to an ecosystem: far from being self-centered, the evolution of his self-portrait has certain similarities, in an analogical fashion, to that of the Earth. Projecting one’s interiority onto cosmic and terrestrial elements is a behavior developed by a great many peoples who were becoming extinct, evoked by Canetti. In numerous non-Western cultures, man is not thought of as being separate from nature but responsive to it on a daily basis. Because “The animals, plants, spirits, certain objects are seen and treated by them as characters, intentional agents about which it is said that they have a ‘soul,’” Philippe Descola notably analyzes⁵.

With a candle-beam in his hand, the one-legged man with the grotesque appearances of *L’Apocalypse* moves on a wire stretched between two end points, the hadal zone – the deepest of the ocean – and the celestial universe. Endeavoring to understand the moment when humans stopped “taking care” of their vital milieu, the artist reminds us that a feeling of belonging, far from any anthropocentrism, must comprise our horizon. In order to restore a semblance of harmony within the “Earth-system,” certain solutions could be sought in animist cultures. The situation in the Anthropocene era, that geological revolution due to the human footprint alone, is unfortunately more alarming. “The Anthropocene is a point of non-return. I designates a geological bifurcation without any foreseeable return to the ‘normal’ of the Holocene,” the researchers Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fresso explain.⁶ Consequently, the presence of the stuffed vulture in the installation does not presage anything good.

Other elements present in the model of *L’Apocalypse* are organized around a magnificent full-scale drawing functioning as a “thought machine.” Bringing us to still other tracks, it informs us about how the artist designs his parabolas, with the obsession to bring everything together. The cactus is an interpretation of the oval medallions of the paradigmatic Tree of Knowledge – *Essai d’une distribution généalogique des sciences et des arts principaux* (1751) – created by Diderot and D’Alembert in the *Encyclopédie*. We know that the arborescent structure was (and still is) used as a tool to synthetically classify the extreme diversity of the real. The undertakings of assimilation, digestion and condensation of knowledge, in Patrick, are expressed in the following formula: “Leave everything, continuously stirring, gently until it...” This time, it is incarnated in another figure, *L’Oxoclave* – a name invented from the bouillon concentrates Oxo (the equivalent of Knorr). The small shell of *Œuvres*

complètes provides an example of this principle: its interior bellows conceal a bouillon cube that potentially contains the totality of the past and future Œuvre. But to attain such a concentrate, to achieve the “magic formula” that is inscribed above *L’Oxoclave*, the artist must begin his journey every day, in a “very autistic” fashion, he says. It is this deep nature of his personality that he reveals through an additional character, the ethnologist Vladimir Propp⁷, who devoted his life to establishing a classification of recurring schemas in fairy tales.

Within this conceptual labyrinth, two engravings illustrate the development of the artist’s self-portrait: the volcano, that is, his “inner island” mutated into an “atoll,” gradually disappearing. If Patrick Van Caekenbergh adopted them, in giving them an image-laden form, these formulas taken from Paul Valéry⁸, they are displaced from meditation on the “ego” to a vision of the world stretching to its end. The bouillon cube, shortly before so fruitful, because it made it possible to begin everything once again, indefinitely, was mixed with arid sand. Consequently, the precarious balance of the tightrope walker is thought of in an analogous fashion with the current peril lying in wait for the community of living beings.

Among the other adjectives thanks to which the artist defines himself, that of “manager of the threshold” is central. The threshold should be understood as the border between an inside and an outside, concerning autobiography, between introspection and the anthropological approach, between the singularity of he who has synesthesia and the normality of the common “domestic animal”; concerning art, Patrick, through his creations, can travel between the imaginary and reality, following the cycle of the “eternal return.” The conception of visual stories in the artist can be compared to the creation of myths and tales, all symbolic activities notably governed by the use of stories. In following Carlo Ginzburg, we can ensure that the figures and objects act within the work as “semiophores,” that is, that their vocation is to signify. Thus, in *L’Apocalypse*, the magic formula, the cactus, the amazonite, the chimes, the candle, the compass rose, the children, and so on, beyond the immediate sensitive experience, are to be understood as words inside a parabola in which they have a specific meaning.

In Patrick Van Caekenbergh, the metaphor often becomes gastronomic of which *La Gastronomie cosmogonique* offers a perfect illustration. Incorporated into the collage titled *Au sommet de l’Olympe*, the text accompanying the photo of an appetizing plump chicken are taken from a work by the sociologist Richard Sennett.⁹ The recipe for “chicken Albufera-style” by Mrs. Benshaw, a virtuoso cook of Iranian origin, is written in a very poetic but not very explicit oral language. That is why it demands clarifications, which are recopied here by hand. The artist contrasts a “consumption of the world of animals and plants” devoid of conscience with a spiritualized vision. The image-laden expression transfigures the death of the chicken, giving its boning and its metamorphosis into a dish to be eaten an almost sacred dimension. Once again, we can detect in it the paradigm of Patrick’s sensibility regarding the living, his “intimate and daily ecology.”

The second component of *La Gastronomie cosmogonique* is comprised of a large collage in a square format tipped on the point, *Les mains des dieux* ["The Hands of the Gods"], placed above a sewing box in an accordion configuration, called a *travailleuse*. This type of opening structure, frequent in his production, makes it possible to reveal or conceal its content, in this case, hundreds of hands busy at culinary tasks, that the artist cut out during several decades. Arranged in concentric circles by decreasing size, they seem dragged down into a cosmic hole. A third collage brings together in a colorful galaxy a quantity of dishes magnified by gastronomic inventiveness. Evoking our gargantuan appetite on the planet-wide scale, these representations cause a degree of metaphysical vertigo. Two identical medallions show a peasant woman holding a chicken on her lap like a cat, another incarnation of what Patrick designates by the expression "taking care."

A tribute to his mother, the most directly autobiographical creation is unquestionably *Le Teatrino*, closely linked to the house where he was born. Located in the small working-class village of Alost, in East Flanders, it is a symbolic space for him with a matrix value. Concretely, it is the "cozy dwelling" of happy moments, the place of his first experiences and games, of reading the encyclopedia that would nourish his work until the present day. In attesting here to the cohort of animals, accompanied by minerals, flowers and the shamanic fly amanita, with their aesthetics full of freshness and beauty. Having hyperthymesia, a syndrome meaning a highly developed autobiographical memory, Patrick has always been the archeologist of his past. As in *Le Masque*, the return takes place here to the beginnings. The model shows a set of photos mixing self-portraits and scenes from family life as well as two views of the façade of his childhood home. It is also reproduced in ceramics on the tombstone of his mother Jeanne. We can guess that an entire universe irremediably disappeared with her death.

Adopting this house's shape and proportions, the dimensions of the Teatrino are those of a seven or eight-year-old child. The precarious position of the architecture echoes that of the funambulus like in the world's ecological state. Within the theater itself, it places other animal figures, this time in the form of puppets. Being able to evoke the reification of the living, these puppets are also animated by the charm of a child's imagination. It is clearly this imaginative power that the artist cultivates and that impregnates his works with a sense of the marvelous. The second installment (*Archive de Teatrino*) is offered as a system, that makes it possible to spatially deploy a second group of articulated animals. Brought together on the shelf, we find images that condense Patrick's past: the encyclopedia, the photograph of Jeanne on the threshold of the house, as well as a black-and-white view taken during the famous Alost carnival. During the St. Martin festivities – that moment when the world is upside-down – "people are metamorphosed into sorts of demons," creating confusion in the child at the time and shaping his vision of the world. In the center, the reproductions of two sculptures connected to the family

home and the death of his father Frans, *Mobile Home* (1986) and *Le Cheval* (The Horse, 1985-86). For the exhibition, the artist moreover designed a much smaller version, using the proportions of the kitchen table. With seeming candor, the body of *Le petit cheval* (2021) is made from glass jars, its head from a series of plates and its tail from hanging flatware. As always, the question here is also making something with the means at hand, according to the attitude that characterizes the activity of the tinkerer to which the artist lays claim.

For God dobbelt niet (God doesn't gamble) (2015 - 2020), Patrick Van Caeckenbergh had two medieval figures of different genders reproduced that are transformed into giant dice. A time machine, the deliberately theatrical scene is related to the games of his childhood. Putting himself in the position of a magician, the adult artist reactivates its memory. Associated for the occasion with the luminous sign illustrating an atom, as well as with *L'histoire pittoresque du vide* (1997-2017), the dices makes reference to the enigma that the world's origin still constitutes today, or the void starting from which matter might have been created. Very common until recently with the villagers of Flanders, glass globes fitting into each other contained representations of saints. This attempt at visualizing the void crosses the religious symbol and the scientific approach. Without any solution, the visual poetry of causality and chance subsists from the microcosm to the macrocosm.

Applied to Patrick Van Caeckenbergh, the expression "personal mythology" is particularly relevant.¹⁰ His reflections on the fragile balance of the living are passed through the autobiographical filter, as art and life cannot be dissociated. In his "evolution of a self-portrait," apart from the figures and alter ego evoked, he humorously takes on the role of the "galactic paleontologist, the cosmogonic geologist and the molecular anthropologist." His appropriation of the modes of expression typical of "magical" or "wild" thinking is assimilated with tinkering. Lévi-Strauss establishes such connections: "Tinkering," he writes, that "science of the concrete," has similarities with the myth, both founded on the "speculative exploitation of the sensitive world in sensitive terms."¹¹ Deeply learned, subtly critical, Patrick's work is always marked by visual poetry, a quality whose singularity in the field of today's art must be recognized. Reality, however cruel, is metamorphosized into images of an astonishing beauty.

1 The artist recopied this passage in what he calls his "lines of thought," asserting that its content stands on its own. Elias Canetti, "Le métier du poète, discours munichois, janvier 1976," in *La conscience des mots*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1984, p. 324.

2 Unless otherwise stated, all the citations come from our exchanges during the month of January 2022, earlier meetings or are taken from his texts published in *Abracadabra* (Palais des beaux-arts de Bruxelles; CCC Tours, 1992).

3 Danièle Vazeilles, *Les chamanes*, Paris, éditions du Cerf, 1991, p. 39.

4 Carlo Ginzburg, *Le sabbat des sorcières* [1989], Paris, Gallimard, 1992 for the French translation, p. 219.

5 Philippe Descola, *La fabrique des images. Visions du monde et formes de la représentation*, Musée du Quai Branly/Somogy éditions d'art, 2010, p. 13.

6 Christophe Bonneuil, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'événement anthropocène. La Terre, l'histoire et nous* [2013], Paris, Seuil, 2016, p. 35. I have borrowed the expression "Earth-system" from them.

7 Vladimir JA. Propp, *Morphologie du conte* [1928], Paris, Gallimard, 1970 for the French translation. Ginzburg recognized his debt to the Propp method.

8 Didn't Valéry write "between Ego and me, things and others have raised a coral ring. I am Atoll." *Correspondance* [with Gide] 1890-1942, p. 508. The author constantly makes reference to the author of *Monsieur Teste*.

9 Richard Sennett, *Ce que sait la main. La culture de l'artisanat* [2008], Paris, Albin Michel for the French translation, 2010, p. 258 to 260. Original publication: *The Craftsman*.

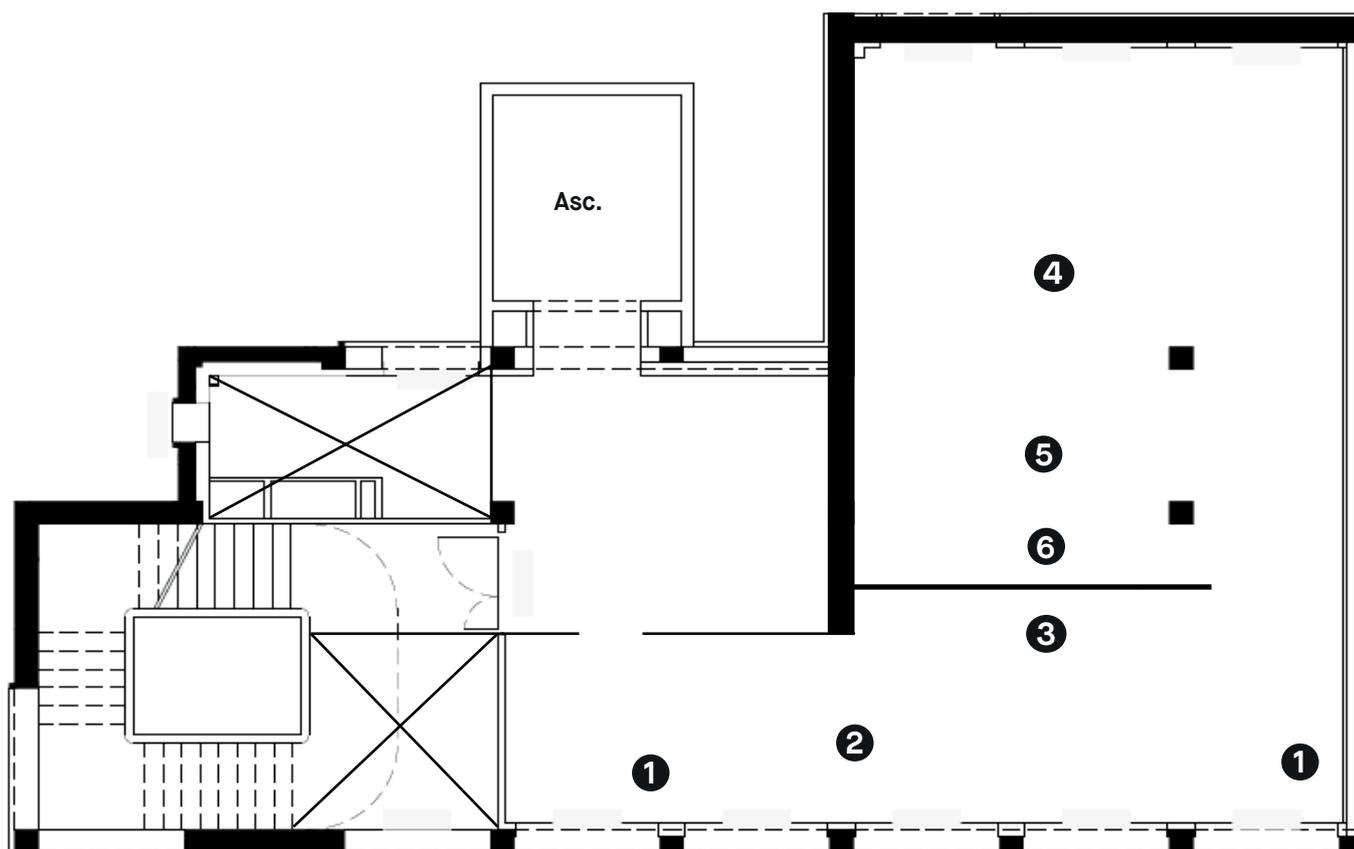
10 Concerning the formation of the idea of the individual myth - in 1949 in Lévi-Strauss, then in 1953 in Lacan - and its uses in art in 1963 by Harald Szeemann, see notably Fabien Faure, "'Every version belongs to the myth.' Étienne-Martin seen by Harald Szeemann," *Mythologies et mythes individuels à partir de l'art brut*, under the dir. of Anne Boissière, Christophe Boulanger and Savine Faupin, Villeneuve d'Asq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2014, p. 15-36.

11 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Paris, Plon, 1962, p. 25.

In Situ - Patrick Van Caekenbergh

L'Apocalypse 1978 - 2022

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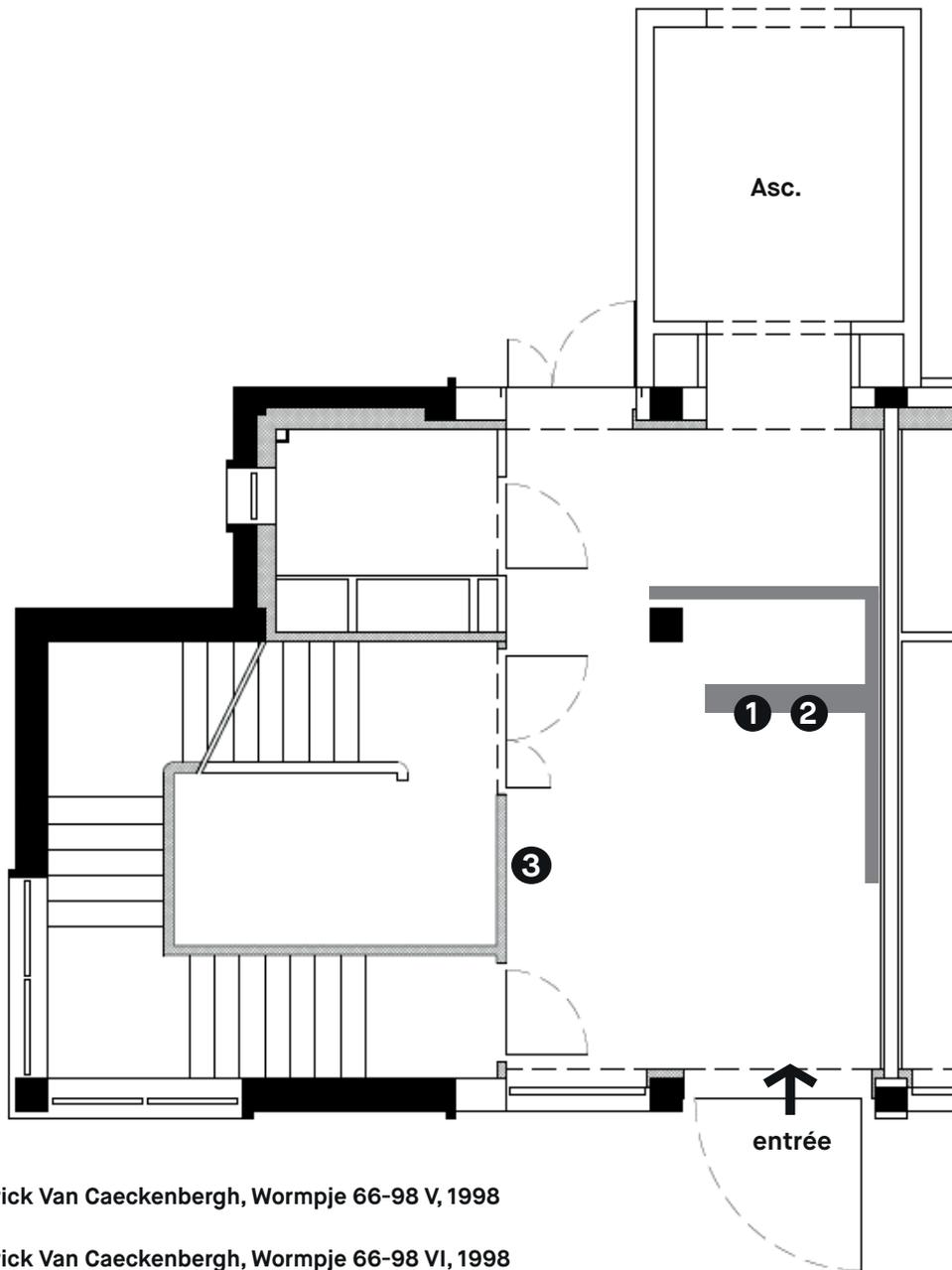


- ① Patrick Van Caekenbergh, *Le sommet de l'Olympe*, Été 2021
- ② Patrick Van Caekenbergh, *Le petit cheval*, Été 2021
- ③ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, *La gastronomie cosmogonique - Les mains des dieux*, Été 2021
- ④ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, *L'histoire pittoresque du vide*, 1997-2017
- ⑤ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, *God dobbelt niet (God doesn't gamble)*, 2015-2020
- ⑥ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, *La bouche de la vérité*, 2021

In Situ - Patrick Van Caekenbergh

L'Apocalypse 1978 - 2022

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❶ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Wormpje 66-98 V, 1998

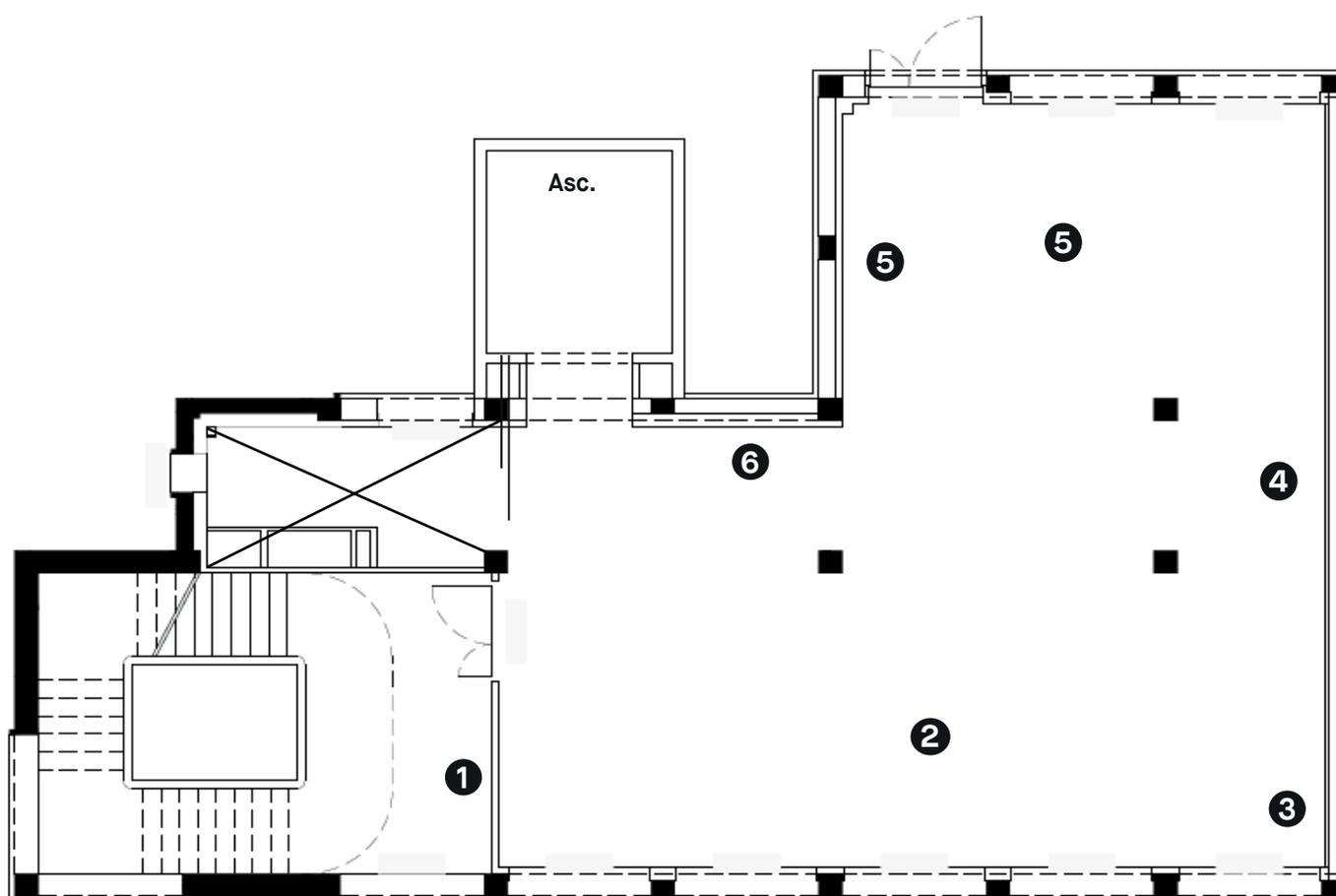
❷ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Wormpje 66-98 VI, 1998

❸ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Het Multiversum (vending machine), 2020

In Situ - Patrick Van Caekenbergh

L'Apocalypse 1978 - 2022

1er étage

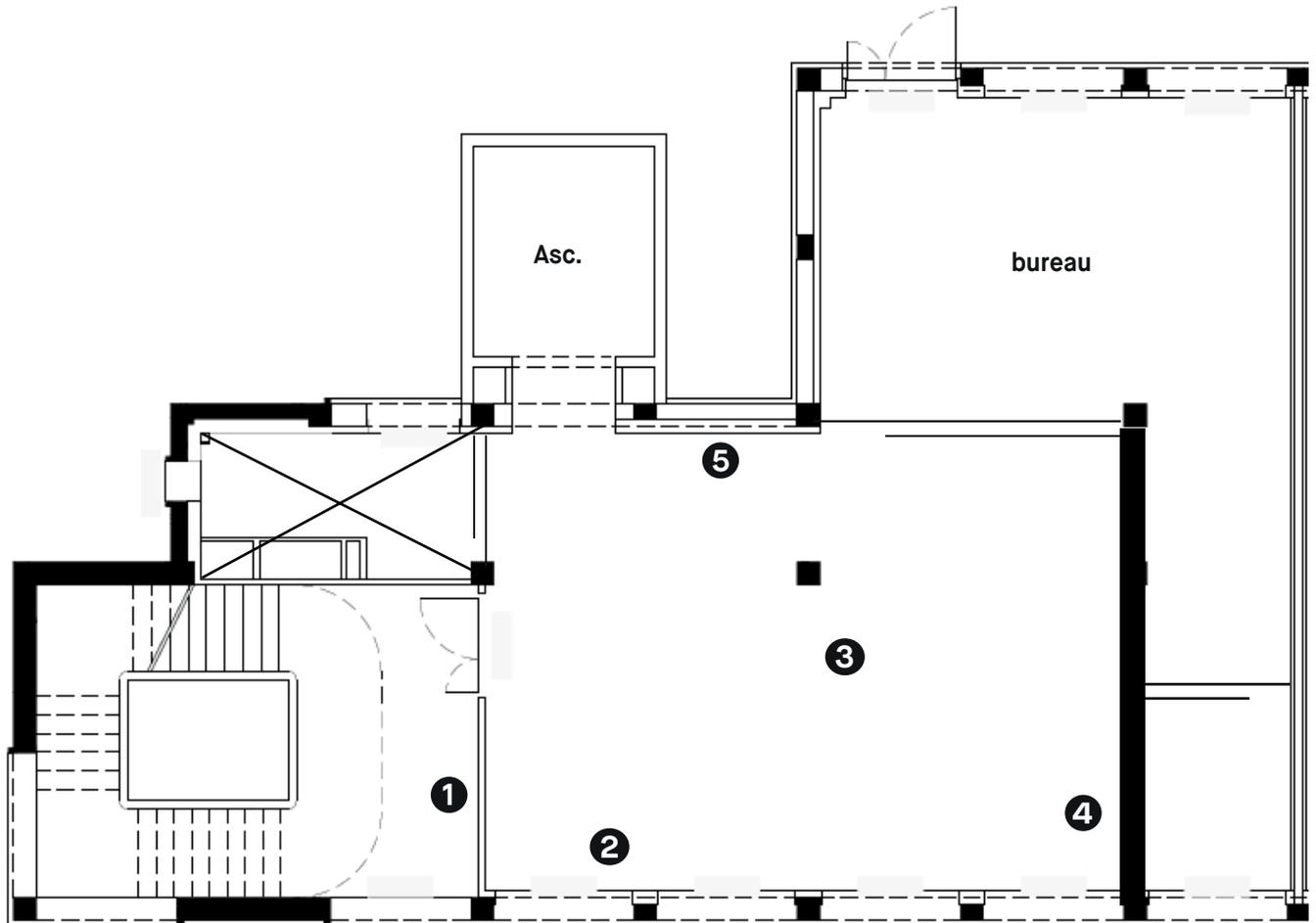


- ❶ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Drawing of old trees on wintry days during 2007-2014, 2007-2014
- ❷ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, L'Apocalypse (évolution d'un autoportrait 1977-2022), 1977-2022
- ❸ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, L'Apocalypse (le mode d'emploi), 1999-2022
- ❹ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Le masque (maquette), 2020
- ❺ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Le masque (Le monde à l'envers), 2015-2020
- ❻ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Maquette van koralen (voorjaar 2013), 2013

In Situ - Patrick Van Caekenbergh

L'Apocalypse 1978 - 2022

2ème étage



- ❶ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Drawing of old trees on wintry days during 2007-2014, 2007-2014
- ❷ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Teatrino (Mode d'emploi), Été 2021
- ❸ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Teatrino, Été 2021
- ❹ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, maquette Archive du Teatrino, Été 2021
- ❺ Patrick Van Caekenbergh, Mon Souffle, Été - Hiver 2021