

# “Wer nicht denken will, fliegt raus”

(sich selbst)

Joseph Beuys

*On Marie-Sophie Beinke's "Können Sie das bitte buchstabieren?"*

## Introduction

A year ago, Marie-Sophie Beinke (b. 1990, Munich) gave me her book *Dingen, die je niet in woorden kan vatten (Things One Cannot Put into Words)*, opening the door to the topic of whether, and if so, to what extent language can represent reality. Trained in Germanic languages, I recall burrowing into numerous philosophical and literary works during my studies. However complex this topic – let alone its expression in language and its representation in a text – the search for a method to “linguistically” capture aspects of the dialogue between art and the spectator is not yet finished. In this sense, the exhibition I am organising at LLS Paleis with Marie-Sophie Beinke is both a turning point and a touchstone of consistently maintaining a position and not shying away from the personal. The artist has found in LLS Paleis an ally to invite the visitor not to undergo the exhibition as a passive event.

Interested in museology, Beinke explores how works of art are named and described. The most common titles of paintings in art history lead her to paint – in German, her mother tongue – well-known captions that hang next to the exhibited paintings in a museum; albeit with the date, materials and dimensions of her own painting. As the caption is part of this work, scientific precision manifests itself at two levels: both on the canvas and next to it. These serialised works are reminiscent of minimal art. Beinke is not concerned with incorporating aspects of her emotional life into her art. However, because each work is handmade, the paintings are never cold or impersonal. With words such as “Stilleben” (“Still Life”) or, even more explicitly, “Ohne Titel” (“Untitled”), the works open up many different interpretations or images for the spectator. Although more concrete, “Mutter und Kind” (“Mother and Child”) or “Jagdszene” (“Hunting Scene”) do not make the spectator’s interaction with Beinke’s work any less active. With her works, she leaves the spectators as much freedom as possible to conjure up their own image. The chance of two visitors imagining the same thing is virtually non-existent.

This individual and unique relationship between the spectator and the artwork is also at the heart of “Können Sie das bitte buchstabieren?” (“Could You Please Spell That?”). As the title is both a demand for clarification and deciphering, it is also a demand for demystification. As if the work itself is asking to be unriddled. It is of course also an “appeal”, and in that sense it is a consistent continuation of what is at stake in Beinke’s work: (inter)action, imagination, dialogue.

## Können Sie das bitte buchstabieren?

The four works on display at LLS Paleis could be considered expressions of this question. The German verb *buchstabieren* means not only “to spell”, but also “to (laboriously) decipher”.

The title could at first be understood as a polite request with which Beinke addresses the visitor. It could also be interpreted as a request to repeat a previously pronounced word letter by letter, perhaps in order to write it down correctly. The conversion from sound to writing implies shifting the emphasis from the spoken to the written word, from an immaterial to a concrete state. This shift could be considered a synopsis of her work. This is particularly evident in her sculptures, in which she attempts to give a material form to abstract concepts through attention to inconspicuous details. Unlike the paintings of captions and their captions, where both elements have a specific and fixed relationship but are on different levels, the textless, or languageless, works could be called “spelling attempts”. This stratification is the connecting thread of Beinke’s oeuvre.

The title of the exhibition asks for a translation. It calls for understanding and interpreting one reality with the help of another.

This leads to the multiplicity of interpretations that is so important to Beinke, because the relationship between the artwork and the spectator is not univocal or fixed but is created over and over again.

### **The Invitation Card**

The schematic depiction of the brain on the invitation card again illustrates both Beinke’s interest in a scientific approach and her call to action. The perception of what is happening around us takes place not so much in the eye as it does in the brain. The “visual centre” in our brain links information supplied by the other senses with our memories and expectations, thus enabling us to give meaning to the world around us.

From this point of view, we live in a world created by our brains.

This is what Beinke elaborates on. Different aspects of the brain such as memory, habits, fears and expectations take shape in several works. She achieves this awareness through her way of working: what she does not understand, she tries to fathom by making it. Working with her hands is central to her oeuvre. It is her way of *buchstabieren*, as a *modus operandi*: learning and understanding while making in order to arrive at conscious and active action. The request from the title is a request from the artist both to herself about the things she does not understand and to the visitor to enter into a relationship with her response.

The attention to the problematic nature of language in visual art, which took a very explicit form in 2021 with *Dinge, die nicht in Worte zu fassen sind (Things One Cannot Put into Words)*, is present in this exhibition in three ways: first, in the title that Beinke chose for her exhibition (which is not only linguistic, but also concerns language), second, in the titles of the artworks on display and, finally, in a work that consists of a painted text. All these words and their associations influence our way of looking at art.

The first work one sees when visiting the exhibition is a painting of an exhibition-text critique, a critique of language that sets in motion the interpretation of and thinking about art even before looking at and encountering the work has been able to take place. “Isn’t language the enemy of visual art?” texted a curator friend the day after the opening. “Doesn’t the problem arise as soon as the choice of a title for the exhibiton and for the works?” It is fascinating to see someone like Beinke deal with language so precisely within visual art. By embracing them both, by fusing them or, on the contrary, by separating them.

### **Cells**

An American company, Powell Safety Solutions, launches a “Portable Holding Cell”, “to hold prisoners safely with minimum supervision”. For a long time, pictures of these one-person cages are hanging on the walls of Beinke’s studio in order to be painted. Painting, however, does not appear to be the right medium for this. Her attempt to give physical form to confinement and the anxiety involved leads to the decision to translate the image to a three-dimensional form and to weld the cells herself. The result is two heavy iron sculptures, largely based on the existing industrially manufactured object.

Whereas *buchstabieren* separates and isolates the letters that make up a word, welding actually does the opposite: it connects materials through pressure and heat. The brutality and threatening presence of this work expresses that, for Beinke, art does not arise outside of a political and social framework. At the same time, this group of sculptures is also an image of being trapped in one’s head: in frames of mind, fixed values, habits, etc. The arrangement of the works, with both a door ajar and a door wide open, suggests different perspectives. The work conveying abstract notions such as isolation and shielding, one could wonder from what place and point of view this can be perceived. Is looking at it uncomfortable because we find it uncomfortable to be inside of it?

Beinke graduated from the Academy in Antwerp in 2021, and even then she exhibited a sculpture evoking discomfort and oppression, *Umkleidekabine (Changing Cubicle)*. Although in a very different material and different from the *Cells*, it emanated a sense of menace as well. Both sculptures evoke an image of the (naked) body in its vulnerable state, a confrontation with the cold and repetitive pattern of a brain-dead and unimaginative reality. Beinke manages to formulate her view on such a highly layered object in a commentary-free manner. Can Beinke impart the consciousness she acquired by making it to the audience? As we “look” with our brains, we search for similarities to what we already know. In this sense, her art functions as a vehicle, mirror, instigator or amplifier.

## Focus

Earlier this year, Beinke created a circle in her studio with a pencil attached to a nail, and each studio visit had her aim once at the centre with a paint-covered ball. It is a different kind of timekeeping, a diary or calendar, a way of visualising the regular presence in a place. This dedication, discipline, endurance and concentration become an exhibition moment through a single attempt by Beinke. The print is the residue of an action performed by Beinke a few days before the opening. A second attempt was out of the question. The ball hit the wall just inside the circle – on the edge but more inside than outside –, and I am moved by this involuntary self-portrait of the artist.

## Der Sprung

A diving board stands at the centre of a space tiled blue from top to bottom. *Focus* still involved an actually risky activity: leaving a trace on the wall, which is now shown for all to see. In *Der Sprung*, the performance becomes a mental representation, similar to Beinke’s title paintings. When looking at the diving board, we imagine the jump. Since the visitor sees not only the diving board but also the four walls that surround it, this work has a high in situ value. The presence of the tiles evokes both positive and negative images: the

jump into the water does not happen in the wild or in the open air; the interior of a swimming pool can also be oppressive.

Those who don't like diving feel the nerves that precede the risk. Others look forward to the transient feeling of flying. Beinke combines both: the feelings of elegance and pleasure as well as those of discomfort and disgust.

Fear resides in the brain. What comes to mind is everything that could go wrong. Don't think but do! Dare. Peer pressure. Imagine the queue that has started forming behind you, smiling and impatient sports enthusiasts bursting with impatience for their umpteenth jump...

## Exhibition Text

The reproductions people think they recognise in Beinke's work are rarely if ever exact reproductions of something existing.

*Zaaltekst (Exhibition Text)* is an exhibition-text critique, or rather, primarily a critique of the place the exhibition text occupies today in many an institution, museum or gallery. The text, written by me and typed on A4 in Arial size 12, was painted with black paint and without a hint of handwrittenness by Beinke on a prepared and white-painted canvas of 172.5 by 122 cm.

At first glance it looks as if Beinke is only reproducing what already exists. Nevertheless, the various Latin names have been erased from the simplified drawing of the brain from an anatomy book. The print, on the other hand, is blurry, with speckles in and around the lines, and has deliberately not been touched up.

As with the invitation card, doubts arise whether *Zaaltekst* is a technical reproduction or a handmade version.

Beinke enriches the repetitive with the craftsmanship of an anonymous but very diligent copyist, arriving at an original and unique result. Anyone looking intently at the cells will notice that the doors of the two cages open in opposite directions...

The request in the exhibition title for interaction and dialogue is echoed in this painting. It is an appeal to the spectator to make an effort to facilitate an encounter with the artwork. That is the second thing the exhibition-text critique is about: do not just undergo the exhibition.

## Conclusion

Four images, an invitation card and a publication.

Three actions: to translate, to concentrate, to *buchstabieren*.

Vorübergehend, zeitweilig (temporarily).

That is how one could summarise Marie-Sophie Beinke's exhibition. Various threads are woven into a consistent and solid body of work: the drawing on the card is a reproduction, executed manually. The *Cells* are sculptures and handmade imitations of industrial objects. The publication, the *DAGBLAD*, is the only reproduction in the true sense of the word, but here we do encounter her own handwriting. It is the representation of the word "Focus" from a school notebook. The pages from this notebook were reproduced by photocopy, albeit in black and white (and not in colour like the original), as the *DAGBLAD* accompanying the exhibition. In contrast, the text in the painting was meticulously copied with oil on canvas, imitating the existing font. *Der Sprung* shows an industrially manufactured (ready-

made) diving board and a home-made tripod in a tiled space finished at Beinke's request (in situ).

Perhaps *Focus* is the only free work, independent of industry or text. Daring to show failure. The throwing at the circle, the action, the only place where she adds colour (showing her colours) and paint to the exhibition herself: red, the colour that draws the most attention from our brain. Alarm! An exhibition that conveys feelings of oppression and menace as well as the euphoria of freedom. Is that discomfort lurking?

Much of Beinke's work concerns the re-enactment or performance of actions, the re-producing and making aware of representations, experiences, impressions, etc. Mimicry and imitation as a working method for Marie-Sophie Beinke to understand what she would otherwise not understand, cannot grasp in words, attempting to understand it by means of laborious deciphering, *buchstabieren*.

The result of this is her art.

Stella Lohaus, October 2022