

# WESLEY MEURIS

## la fiction comme méthode

Christophe Kihm

L'organisation et la classification sont des constantes de l'œuvre de Wesley Meuris. Aborder son dépouillement, ses artefacts, c'est faire face à l'ambiguïté d'un projet qui interroge les conditions d'exposition, de scénographie, de classement, et la réalité de l'œuvre d'art. Soit les questions auxquelles sont confrontés aussi bien les commissaires d'exposition que les visiteurs dans leur perception des œuvres. Mais l'épure de l'œuvre cache autre chose : l'humour grinçant d'une mise en abîme qui pourrait révéler une critique des institutions muséales. Wesley Meuris expose jusqu'au 27 janvier 2013 à la galerie Annie Gentils, à Anvers.

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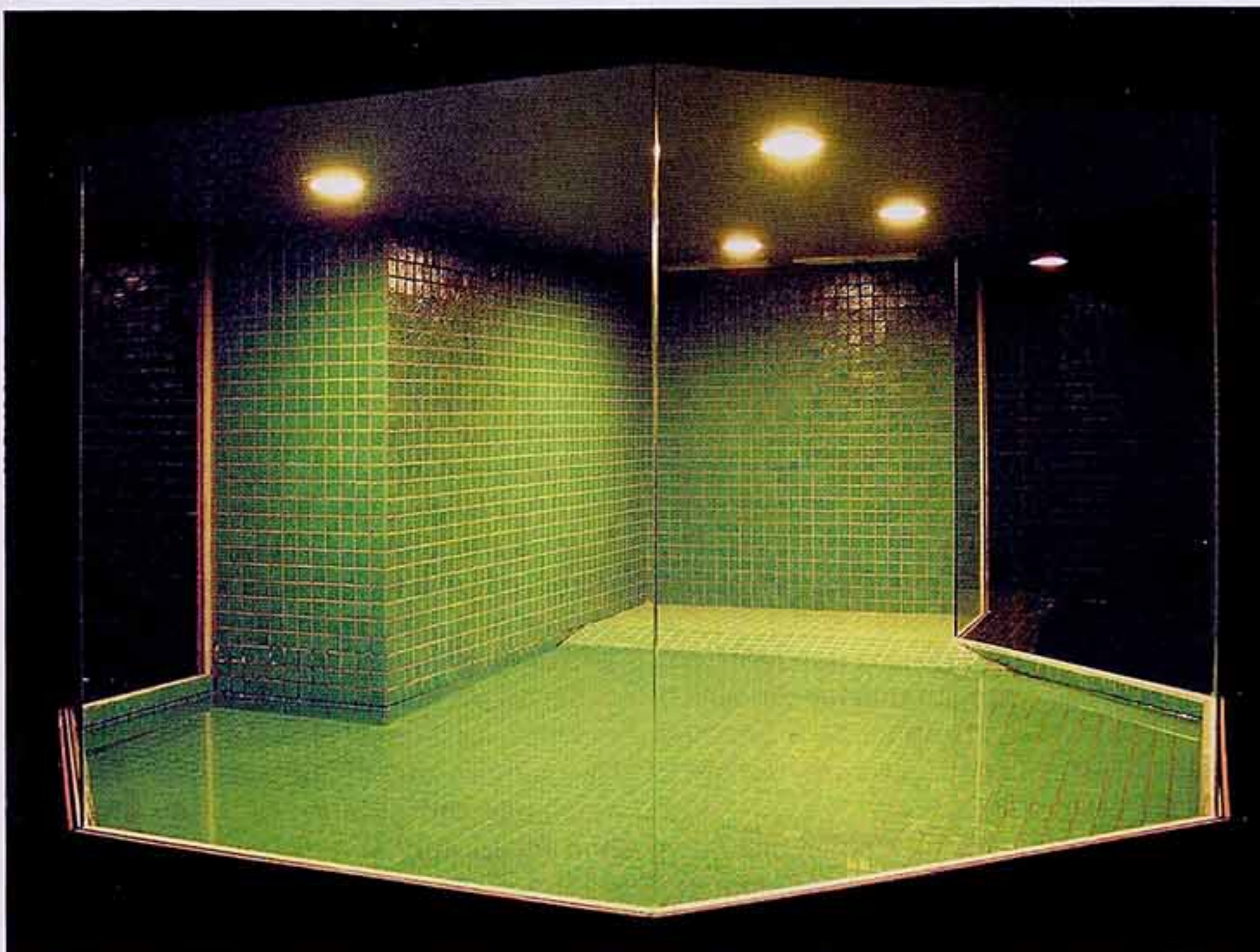
■ L'œuvre de Wesley Meuris se déploie à travers des projets monstres et des objets complexes dont la simple description appelle la rigueur et la précision. *The World's Most Important Artists*, sous-titrée *A Data Collection Which Explores The Artist's Life In Depth*, fut créée en 2009. Composée de onze modules en bois comportant quinze colonnes de quatre tiroirs chacun – soit de 660 tiroirs en totalité –, cette proposition d'archive, si l'on suit son titre, est assise sur un système de classification de l'information dont le critère est l'importance et l'objet la profondeur. Aucun nom propre n'est inscrit à la surface de ces centaines de tiroirs, puisque la classification de l'archive est ordonnée par trois entrées principales : les disciplines, les thématiques et les conditions psychologiques de la création. Chacune d'elles comporte une trentaine de catégories, dont les différents tiroirs ne font qu'épuiser les croisements dans un étonnant inventaire : on pourra y lire, sur l'un, « Garden Art – Personal Myth – Wellness » ; sur un autre « Media art – Death – Depression » ; « Fashion – The Everyday – Dyslexia » sur un autre encore... Nous avons donc affaire à un ensemble de classements qui, malgré les indéniables indices de scientificité que lui accordent ses ordres disciplinaires, thématiques et cliniques, et malgré l'apparente rationalité assurée par le choix de sa présentation, entoure sa promesse d'exhaustivité d'un halo de suspicion et d'absurdité. Précision d'importance, en ce sens : tous les tiroirs de ce mobilier sont faux, le meuble ne s'ouvre donc pas ; a priori, il est vide – entièrement vide, devrait-on préciser.

« Project Advertisement ». 2012. 100 x 80 cm.

Print on photo Rag on Dibond.

(Toutes les photos, court. galerie Annie Gentils, Anvers)





« Cage for Galago Crassicaudatus ». 2005.

(Coll. SMAK, Gand). 210 x 185 x 350 cm.

Bois, eau, verre, lumière. (Ph. C. Demeter).

Wood, water, glass, lights

Considérer l'espace dévolu, dans cette œuvre, à son propre commentaire, n'est donc pas une vaine histoire, comme nous invitent à le faire tous ces travaux d'artistes qui opèrent avec et à partir de la fiction – les stratagèmes arrêtés par Philippe Thomas pourraient ici servir d'exemple à l'efficacité de cette stratégie, quoique, pour Meuris, elle ne porte nullement sur le statut de l'auteur. Si la fiction, dans sa relation aux arts plastiques, produit de puissants effets de discours, c'est parce que dans ce lieu et dans la mesure où l'on y présente toujours des objets – fussent-ils de simples énoncés évanescents ou même des vides –, elle peut faire vaciller leur statut (pour peu que l'on oppose fiction à réel) et à la suite brouiller la lecture qu'on leur prête sur le plan critique comme symbolique (pour peu que l'on oppose le vrai au faux). La portée spéculative de ces pièges tendus par la fiction depuis les arts plastiques est assez limitée, mais elle offre toujours aux commentateurs, parfois à leur insu, parfois en bons complices, la possibilité de devenir les brillants ouvriers de son règne.

Page de gauche, de haut en bas/page left, from top:

« Research Building - Main Entrance ». 2010. 800 m<sup>2</sup>.

Scénographie critique pour collection d'objets africains.

Technique mixte. (Ph. C. Demeter). *Critical scenography for collection of African Artifacts. Mixed media.*

« Art in Belgium after 1977 - Foundation for Exhibiting Art and Knowledge (FEAK) ». 2012. Casino Luxembourg.

58 x 45 cm. Encre et aquarelle sur papier sur Dibond.

Ink and watercolour on paper on Dibond

## HYPOTHÈSE ET ANTICIPATION

Pourtant, il y a mieux à faire avec la fiction, à condition qu'elle devienne une méthode. Car qui met la fiction au travail inscrit sa pratique sous le régime de l'hypothèse : une hypothèse, faut-il le rappeler, n'est ni vraie ni fautive, ni réelle ni fictive, c'est une dynamique de recherche que l'on évalue à ses effets de vérité. Chez Wesley Meuris, la fiction dispose de ses moyens propres – plans, dessins, installations, fragments de bâtiments, noms de lieux et de classes, calculs statistiques... –, qui participent de l'édification d'institutions dont l'architecture et le récit émergent au fil d'un travail qu'ils réorganisent en permanence (5). Elle renouvelle les moyens critiques dont dispose l'artiste pour ausculter le présent et connaît, avec les moyens de l'art, de nouvelles échelles d'espace et de temps, donc de nouvelles dynamiques.

FEAK, *The Foundation for Exhibiting Art and Knowledge* est un livre édité par Wesley Meuris en 2012, présenté comme l'extrait d'un travail de doctorat entrepris par l'artiste au Sint Lucas University College of Art and design d'Anvers, portant sur les savoirs de l'exposition. L'ouvrage s'ouvre par un entretien de Bizhan Mouradipour avec Pawel Jankowsky, qui définit la fondation comme « spécialiste mondial dans le développement de concepts d'exposition réussis et de connaissances connexes (6) ». Le titre de l'exposition de Wesley Meuris proposée au Mudam, sous l'égide de la fondation, portait le code d'indexation R-05.Q-IP.0001 correspondant à l'un de ses modèles d'exposition. Car la FEAK est encore une institution qui classe et ordonne, structure, modélise et contrôle, et dont les missions touchent autant l'exposition que ses

publics, qu'elle cherche à éduquer et à guider : il s'agit de « contrôler et d'institutionnaliser le monde de l'art », mais aussi « d'institutionnaliser le regard du visiteur, le discours critique, les travaux des étudiants. » Les plus désenchantés souligneront, non sans paresse, que le programme de la FEAK ne fait qu'accélérer un mouvement déjà en cours, omettant au passage de signaler qu'il est associé, chez Meuris, à une vaste entreprise de classification scientifique de l'art permettant l'institutionnalisation de l'institution à des fins de contrôle généralisé... À nouveau, ce projet de Wesley Meuris ne devient intéressant que dans la mesure où il fonctionne comme une machine à faire de l'art, produisant des objets, des collections, des expositions et des institutions, véhiculant certaines idées de l'art, discutant ses formats, ses catégories, ses normes et ses discours. On peut ainsi assimiler son œuvre à une grande maquette explorant les virtualités des institutions de l'art, depuis le futur, puisque l'anticipation plonge toute sa production artistique dans un régime de fonctionnement proche de la science-fiction. Depuis ce futur peuvent se préciser des effets critiques sur le présent, c'est le principe d'un jeu dont l'outil privilégié demeure la satire, à la fois joyeuse et grinçante. Elle renouvelle cependant ses moyens et ses formes chez Wesley Meuris, dans la neutralité froide de ses espaces et dans la scientificité implacable de ses discours, prise dans un dispositif architectural et statistique que l'on pourrait, à bon droit, qualifier de kafkaïen. ■

(1) À nouveau 300 données dans un tableau à double entrée consacré à l'« Activité de recherche » (« Search Activity »).

(2) Proposition qui s'entend aisément sur le plan mathématique.

(3) Entre autres à partir de l'impulsion zoologique donnée par la construction d'environnements pour animaux (des cages vides) initiée par l'artiste en 2005, et regroupée en partie dans la publication *Zoological Classification*.

(4) Il n'est d'ailleurs pas rare, pour en saisir la portée, de faire appel à la littérature.

(5) Tout ce qui appartient à un lieu peut le lendemain être introduit dans un autre : l'invention récente de la FEAK, *The Foundation for Exhibiting Art and Knowledge*, a ainsi redistribué la plupart des travaux de l'artiste selon une nouvelle nomenclature.

(6) L'acronyme de cette fondation, vers laquelle converge aujourd'hui la majorité des projets de Wesley Meuris, évoque le terme « Fake » aussi bien que le nom d'Ikea. Comme l'entreprise suédoise, elle est bien spécialisée dans la production de kits, mais il s'agit d'expositions, de musées, de displays...

## Wesley Meuris

Né en / born 1977, à / in Liege (Belgique)

Vit à / lives in Anvers

Expositions récentes / Recent shows:

2012 Casino, Luxembourg ; Mediaruinte, Bruxelles  
Galerie Annis Gentils, Anvers (jusqu'au 27 janvier 2013)

## Exhibit, Classify, Subvert - Wesley Meuris

Organization and classification are constants in the work of Wesley Meuris. To approach its spareness and artifacts means confronting the ambiguity of a project that questions conditions of exhibition, display and classification, as well as the reality of the artwork in itself. These of course are questions that face both curators and visitors in their perception of artworks. But Meuris's stripped installations also hide a grating humor behind which there may be a critique of museum institutions themselves. He is showing through January 27, 2013 at Annie Gentils gallery in Antwerp.

Wesley Meuris's work consists of monstrous architectural plans and complex objects that require rigor and precision just to describe them. His 2009 *The World's Most Important Artists*, subtitled *A Data Collection Which Explores the Artist's Life in Depth*, comprises eleven wooden modules made of fifteen columns of four drawers each, a total of 660 drawers in all. This proposed archive, as the title indicates, is based on an information classification system of which the criterion is importance and the point is depth. There is not a single name on the 660 drawer labels. Instead, this archive is organized according to three main headings: discipline, subject and the psychological conditions of production. In turn each of these is divided into 30 categories, and each drawer contains an astonishing inventory of cross-references. The label on one, for instance, reads "Garden Art—Personal Myth—Wellness"; another, "Media art—Death—Depression;" a third, "Fashion—The Everyday—Dyslexia." What we are dealing with, therefore, is a set of classifications that, despite the undeniable indications of scientificity produced by the ordering of things according to discipline, subject and clinical symptoms, and despite the apparent rationality assured by the choices involved in its presentation, surrounds its promise of exhaustiveness with an aura of suspicion and absurdity. There is an additional important detail in this regard: all the drawers are dummies, the file cabinets can't be opened, and theoretically the whole thing is empty—totally empty, we should add.

Obviously Meuris is playing with the forms and clichés of the archive in an installation whose cold, glossy theater functions in a very different way than in Christian Boltanski's work, for instance—these massive theaters of the archive call up no ghostly or spectral presence. The emptiness of the archives in *The World's Most Important Artists* is of an entirely different order because it is accompanied by a statistical apparatus that explains, in a publication associated with this installation, how this data set works. The book provides data pertaining to the consultation of the archive that makes it possible to quantify its frequen-

tion, which is in turn divided into and organized by space-time coordinates relating to the context, the times of day, the birthdays of the artists, etc.(1) Thus this monstrous structure archives its own consultation and even the risks inherent in the conservation of its documents in a dizzying, infinite loop in which an archival system produces an archival system. In fact, this entirely empty set turns out to be totally full.(2)

The archive is monstrous when it becomes self-sufficient, when nothing remains external to it, and its contents, restricted to statistical data, are purely virtual. This monstrosity confers, at first glance, an allegorical form on the digital archive, at least in terms of the totalization of knowledge we see in it, as well as the dematerialization we attribute to it. Yet the simple observation of its classifications suffices to convey an understanding of how an alternate form of knowledge is brought into being by creating different cross-sections, cross-references and methods of processing information that all point in the direction of fiction. The non-metaphorical effect of this construction produces virtual artists and artworks whose existence remains potential. Thus a machine for the processing of

« Display Kit for Portrait Statues - 40 Meaningful Curators of Contemporary Art ». 2012. Installation in situ. Bois, métal, verre. (Ph. E. Chenal/ Casino Luxembourg). Wood, metal, glass



information becomes a machine for making art. The fictional regime used in Meuris's work functions through this double trajectory in which the hypothesis of the archive becomes an archive of hypotheses.

In fact, the archive constituted by *The World's Most Important Artists* is simply one element of the *Center for Collecting and Conservation of Art Information*, which is itself part of a more substantial ensemble, the Research Building, which also houses the *Congo Collection* (2010) and many other departments and spaces for exhibitions, conservation work, meetings and administrative services. Meuris's work is based on boxes within boxes, a method in which a complex organization defines its forms in an architecture whose modes of existence can oscillate between drawings and blueprints, models and building fragments, materials for a presentation or research and an installation put on view.

### INDEX AND FICTION

This body of work, which is not yet so vast, has already been the object of numerous critical commentaries in which a high degree of erudition is applied to untangling the threads of the thematic divisions whose historic breadth and theoretical content seem unlimited. The issues include the connections between art and architecture in the modernist and postmodernist periods, museography and museology since the nineteenth century,(3) the contemporary status of the archive and the life of artistic institutions in the era of globalization, artwork, artifice and the simulacrum, etc. Inexhaustible themes with which the work of this artist both defines itself and gets lost in vast genealogies that overwhelm it and nourish it at the same time. Not all art launches discourses in this fashion, but Meuris's seem to invite



## THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT ARTISTS

WE AIN'T TO MAKE THIS DATA COLLECTION ACCESSIBLE FOR EVERY ONE, EVERY ITEM HAS BEEN CATALOGUED WITH FULL INDEX CARDS AND KEY-WORDED TO MAKE SEARCHING EASY, EVEN FOR THOSE WITH LITTLE ART KNOWLEDGE. OUR ARCHIVE ALLOWS YOU TO EXPLORE THE ARTIST'S LIFE IN DEPTH WITH QUICK AND ACCURATE SEARCH FACILITIES. WE ALSO PROVIDE A FULL RESEARCH SERVICE WHERE OUR EXPERT ASSISTANTS CAN SELECT ITEMS TO SUIT YOUR REQUIREMENTS.

TAXONOMY NUMBER: ...

DISCIPLINE	INSPIRED BY TOPIC	THE ARTIST'S CONDITION
001 ARCHITECTURE	001 MYTHOLOGY	Q1 MENTAL STATE
002 GARDEN ART	002 CHRISTIANITY - GENERAL	Q2 WELLBEING
003 BODILY	003 CHRISTIANITY - GENESIS	Q3 SENSE OF SPHERE
004 JEWELLERY	004 CHRISTIANITY - JESUS	Q4 SENSE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY
005 CERAMICS	005 CHRISTIANITY - ARMAGEDDON	Q5 EMOTIONAL AWARENESS
006 GRAPHIC ART	006 PHILOSOPHY - ALLEGORY	Q6 CREATIVE AWARENESS
007 PUBLISHING	007 VERGEE - IDEALITY	Q7 HYPERTEXTUAL
008 DRAWING	008 FREUD - PSYCHICS	Q8 HIGH STATE OF INTELLECT
009 PAINTING	009 FREUD - HUMANITY	Q9 ANTHROPOLOGICAL AWARENESS
010 SCULPTURE	010 LITERATURE	01 SCHIZOPHRENIA
011 ASSEMBLAGE	011 PERSONAL STATE	02 POST-TRANSMATOC FETTER DISORDER
012 INSTALLATION	012 ARTISTIC TRANSITION	03 OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER
013 NEW MEDIA	013 SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY	04 GENERAL ANXIETY DISORDER
014 VIDEO	014 SEXUALITY	05 SOCIAL PHOBIA
015 CINEMATOGRAPHY	015 TIME ONCEAS	06 SPECIFIC PHOBIA
016 PHOTOGRAPHY	016 SACRILEGIOUS & BARRON	07 DELUSIONAL DISORDER
017 MEDIA ART	017 DEATH	08 HALLUCINATIONS
018 PERFORMING ART - DANCE	018 TIME UNIVERSE	09 DEPRESSION
019 PERFORMING ART - MUSIC	019 SCIENCE	10 BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DIS.
020 PERFORMING ART - THEATRE	020 ART	11 SOCIAL DISORDER
021 LITERATURE - POETRY	021 VIOLENCE	12 EPILEPSY
022 LITERATURE - FICTION	022 BEAUTY - UGLINESS	13 NEUROTIC
023 VISUAL LANGUAGE	023 TIME EVERYDAY	14 ANXIETY
024 FASHION	024 ISSUES - CONTROL	15 STUTTERING
025 MIXED DISCIPLINE	025 CHRONOLOG	16 HYSTERIA
	026 PHYSIOLOGICAL PHONOLOGIA	17 AGITATION
	027 ATROCITY & CAMP	

them through the complexity of its general organization and its focus on the sites of knowledge of art, both their physical structures and forms of discourse, in a framework that gives pride of place to fiction.(4) Thus it is not a vain endeavor to ponder the space dedicated to self-commentary in this work, as we are prompted to do by the work of all artists who work with and on the basis of fiction. The stratagems used by Philippe Thomas could exemplify the efficacy of this approach, although for Meuris the subject is not the status of the author. While fiction, when brought into relationship with the visual arts, produces powerful discourses, that is because in this space and to the degree that objects are always presented there, whether they are simple evanescent statements or even empty, it can throw into question their status (if fiction is in any way contrasted to the real) and then confuse our reading of them on a critical as well as symbolic level (if the true is in any way contrasted to the false). The speculative ambit of these traps laid by fiction in the visual arts is quite limited, but it always offers commentators, sometimes unaware of it, and sometimes all too aware of it, a chance to become brilliant workers under their reign.

### HYPOTHESES AND THE FUTURE

Nevertheless, fiction is good for something even better if it becomes a method. He who puts fiction to work inscribes his practice under the regime of the hypothesis. A hypothesis, we should recall, is neither true nor false, neither real nor fictitious; it is a research dynamic to be evaluated on the basis of the truth effects produced. In Meuris's work, fiction has its own tools—plans, drawings, installations, fragments of buildings, names of places and classifications, statistical calculations—that help construct institutions from which architec-

« The World's Most Important Artists ». 2009-2012.  
Casino Luxembourg Forum d'art contemporain.  
Bois, métal, lumière. 660 poignets/handles,  
660 étiquettes/unique labels. 195 x 260 x 40 cm.  
(Ph: E. Chena). Wood, metal, lighting

ture and narrative emerge in the course of a productive process that they constantly reorganize.(5) It renews the critical tools this artist uses to scrutinize the present, and enjoys, by means of art, new scales of space and time and consequently new dynamics. *FEAK, The Foundation for Exhibiting Art and Knowledge*, is a book Meuris published in 2012, presented as an excerpt from doctoral work regarding the forms of expertise involved in the exhibition he pursued at Sint Lucas University College of Art and Design in Antwerp. The book begins with a dialogue between Bizhan Mouradipour and Pawel Jankowsky, who defines the foundation as "a world specialist in the development of successful exhibition concepts and the associated expertise."(6) The title of Meuris's exhibition at the MUDAM, sponsored by the foundation, was the reference number *R-05.Q-IP.0001* corresponding to the one of its exhibition models. The *FEAK* is another institution that classifies and organizes, structures, models and supervises. Its missions have to do with visitors as well as exhibitions, in seeking to educate and guide them. The aim is not only to "manage and institutionalize the art world," but also to "institutionalize the way visitors see, critical discourses and the work of students." The most disillusioned will emphasize, rather facetiously, that the *FEAK*'s program only accelerates a trend already well underway, but fail to remark that in Meuris's work it is part of a vast enterprise of scientific classification of art so that the institution can be institutionalized and managed like everything else. Once again what

makes Meuris's project interesting is simply that it is an art-making machine that produces objects, collections, exhibitions and institutions, conveying certain ideas about art and discussing its formats, categories, norms and discourses. His work can be compared to a large-scale model exploring the virtualities of art institutions from the vantage point of the future, a viewpoint that immerses all of his artistic output in a regime whose functioning is similar to that of science fiction. Since the impact of criticism on the present can only be discerned by looking backward from the future, this is the principle behind a game whose privileged tool remains a simultaneous joyous and caustic satire. Yet in his work satire acquires new resources and forms in the cold neutrality of his spaces and the implacable scientificity of his discourses, with an architectural and statistical apparatus that could be rather accurately described as Kafkaesque. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff

(1) Once again, 300 data sets in a double-entry spreadsheet devoted to "Search Activity."

(2) This idea is to be found in set theory as well.

(3) Among other things in 2005 he took up zoology in designing environments for animals (empty cages). Some of this work was included in his book *Zoological Classification*.

(4) Literature is often a useful way to grasp what he is getting at.

(5) Anything that appertains to a particular site can be moved to another site immediately after. Thus the recent invention of the *FEAK, The Foundation for Exhibiting Art and Knowledge*, has redistributed most of Meuris's work according to a new nomenclature.

(6) The acronym of this foundation towards which most of Meuris's work is currently converging brings to mind both the word "fake" and the name Ikea. Like the Swedish company, the foundation specializes in the production of kits, in this case for exhibitions, museums, displays, etc.