



**Gaston Meskens**  
**WHAT'S WRONG WITH IDEOLOGY?**  
**Life and work at the Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction**

**M HKA**

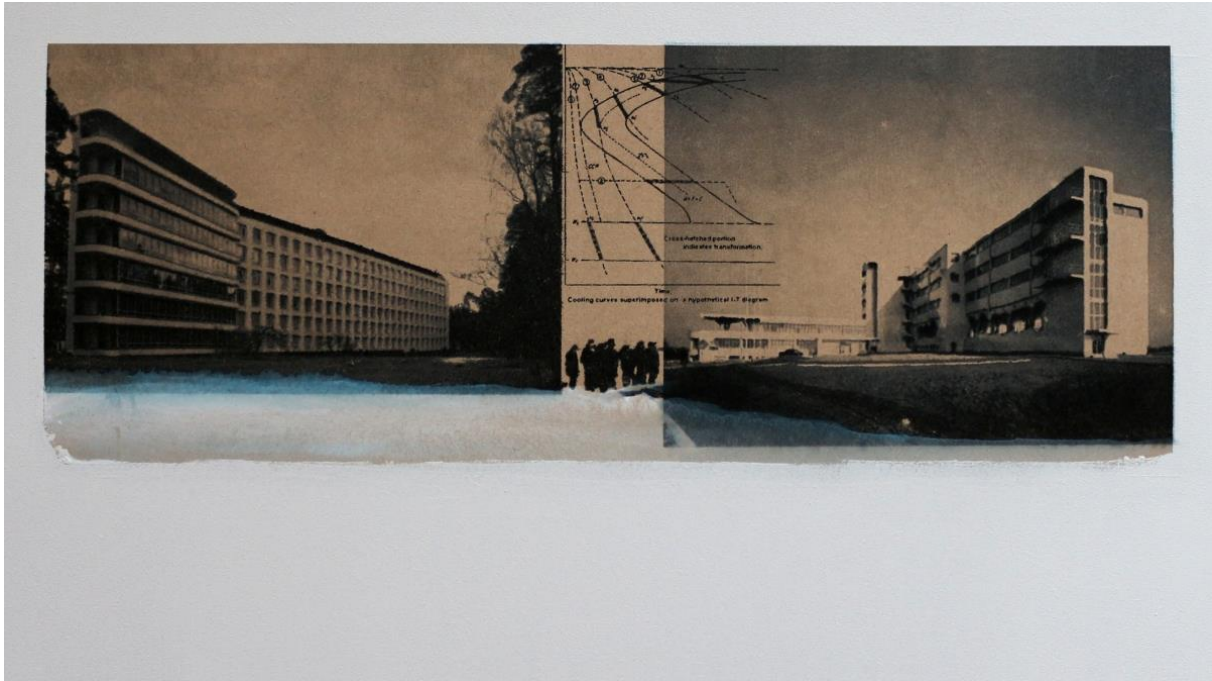
**Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, Belgium**

**9 September – 2 October 2022**  
**M HKA INBOX**



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front page: *Life at the Institute*, ink print & acryl on MDF  
top: *Your Absence Was Noticed*, digital photo on transparency mounted on wood



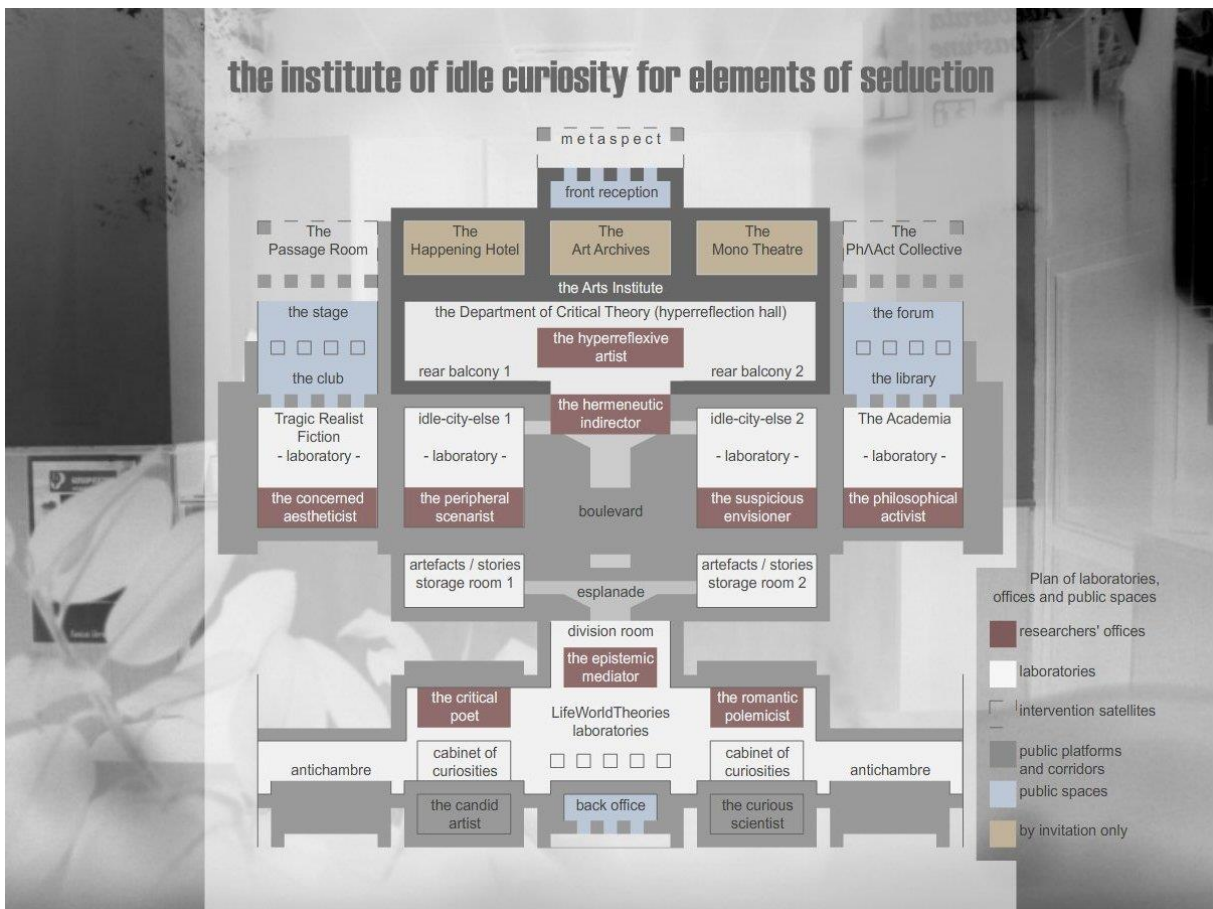
*“I started the art project “The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction” somewhere in 2006. Meanwhile, it developed as a life’s work and a conceptual framework for all my artistic and philosophical activities. The project can be understood as a critical reflection on the idea of ideology-driven ‘social engineering’ in the way it became a socio-political practice in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity, and it develops in all possible art forms (text, prints, drawings and paintings, music & soundscapes, found objects, installations, web presence, performances and happenings).*

*‘The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction’ is a research institute, and its research programme is concerned with the way humans deal with the uncertain, the ambiguous, the complex and the unknown in social and political interaction in a world ‘still struggling with the cramps of modernity’. The basis of the research programme is a critical theory that targets strategies of conformism, positivism, profitism and populism in social, cultural, scientific, economic or political contexts, but the programme essentially wants to go beyond critical analysis as such. The aim is to research and formulate a ‘new humanism’ that could inspire new social life forms and political interaction methods that would be resilient to these strategies and that would enable and inspire real dialogue on well-being, solidarity and social justice.*

*As a philosopher, I take that research serious, and it became an activist and professional academic practice in itself. In that way, ‘The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction’ is not only a critical analysis of the society we live in today, but at the same time also a philosophical and artistic experiment in ideological thinking. As a researcher of my own institute, I act in the ‘real’ worlds of art, of science and technology, of academic philosophy and of the international politics such as those of the United Nations. I present my socio-political critique and my vision on a new humanism in these worlds and I integrate reflections on these activisms back in my art practice. All these worlds have their own self-confirmative ratios, languages and codes, and depending on who I meet in these worlds, I tell variations of the story of who I am and of what I do.*

Last but not least, the concept of the Institute also provides a frame for self-critique: I am critical towards power and profit in my philosophical activism, and reflexive about my activism in my art. I think 'hyper-reflexivity', as the highest end state 'overlooking' everything, will always result in melancholy, although not in its current simplistic meaning of depression it got from modernity. In August 2016, The Institute organised the '2<sup>nd</sup> World Conference on the Value of Melancholy in Times of Cheap Commitment' in Antwerp, and on that occasion it reformulated the meaning of melancholy as an ethical experience in social interaction, and declared it the highest intellectual condition a human being can reach."

Gaston Meskens, Antwerp, 9 September 2022



The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction – plan of laboratories, offices and public spaces, digital scheme

## **Texts**

From the film 'Twilight Hotel' (Tragic Realist Fiction, 2014, 24'05")

The research programme of the Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction

. Revisiting Melancholy . Declaration from the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Conference on the Value of Melancholy in Times of Cheap Commitment

. Fragments of Absence . (the archive of our common future) – Unrecorded stories about found artefacts told to an audience on 27 April 2022 down in the salt mine in Hallstatt

. Fragments of Absence . (the archive of our common future) – Lecture performance for an audience on 27 April 2022 down in the salt mine in Hallstatt

[...]

*'The Boulevard of Broken Dreams was only a story. It is fiction', she said. 'The palm trees were plastic and the street was going nowhere. It was fake, but that doesn't matter. Every populated physical environment is décor. Also here, outside. The rubbish in the alleys and on the bare zones of the city is fake. It is put there. The animals are dead and stuffed. The shops are full, but nothing is for sale. Taxis drive in circles and trains shuttle back and forth. People are dressed up, but for no particular reason. It is all sculptured, assembled and pretended'. She pauses. ... 'But we can easily take it away if we want, and return everything back to normal'.*

The air in the corridor is damped and the ventilator thrums. You put down your suitcase. *'Why would you do that?', you ask. 'The only thing normal here might just be the desert. The desert that connects the cities. The desert that is enclosed by the continents. We travel through it to escape it, and linger in the fata morganas we construct for each other. We set up decors to hide that there is nothing behind them and to enable ourselves to concentrate on pure encounter. So why would you take it away if you need it for us to recognise you in the first place?'*

[...]

*From the film 'Twilight Hotel' (Tragic Realist Fiction, 2014, 24'05")*



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*'Twilight Hotel' (Tragic Realist Fiction, 2014, 24'05"), film still based on modified photo*

## the research programme of **The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction**

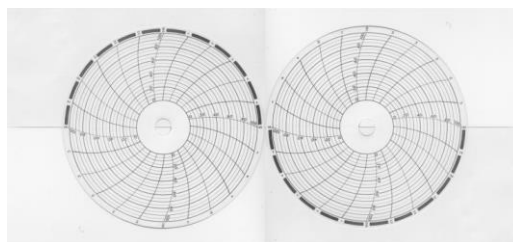
The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction is a research institute established in 2006. It is built on the (fragmented) legacy of the historical Institut Weich-Fehler für kritische Philosophie der Psychologie that existed from 1924 until 1952.



The research programme of the Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction is concerned with the way humans deal with the uncertain, the ambiguous, the complex and the unknown in social and political interaction in a world 'still struggling with the cramps of modernity'. The basis of the research programme is a critical theory that targets strategies of conformism, positivism, profitism and populism in social, cultural, scientific, economic or political contexts, but the programme essentially wants to go beyond critical analysis as such.

The aim is to research and formulate a 'new humanism' lived through alternative 'ideological' human interaction modes that go beyond those traditionally leaning on the proclaimed values of social, cultural and ethnic collective identity, scientific truth, free competition in the market and competition over ideologies in politics. These traditional interaction modes shape our society today, and while the dominant perception is that they are essential in the way they provide certainty and safety and the means for social recognition and self-expression as proclaimed conditions for societal and individual well-being, the argument is that they are actually stimulating pseudo-tolerance, conformism, positivism, profitism and populism themselves. As a consequence, these traditional interaction modes remain to serve the various social, cultural, scientific, economic and political non-overlapping comfort zones of power and profit that steer society today, which makes them to hinder rather than facilitate dealing with our unavoidable human individual angst on the one hand and with the various social, ecological and economic malaises on the other hand.

More about the theory and practice of the research is on [www.newhumanism.org](http://www.newhumanism.org).



## . Revisiting Melancholy .

Declaration from

the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Conference on the Value of Melancholy in Times of Cheap Commitment

**Gaston Meskens**

Antwerp, August 2016

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Robert Burton published the first edition of his magnum opus 'The Anatomy of Melancholy' in 1621. His aim was to write a definite and comprehensive study of the meaning of melancholy. His book promised to explain '*.. What it is: With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Several Cures of it. In Three Maine Partitions with their several Sections, Members, and Subsections. Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically, Opened and Cut Up...*'. What looks at first sight as an exhaustive analysis of melancholy as a disease to be cured is in fact much more. Burton uses melancholy as a perspective to inquire into all human emotions and thought. In that sense, the Anatomy can also be seen as a total encyclopaedia of the human condition of that time.

Our modern times may now inspire us to re-read that meaning for the contemporary human condition, although not through a systematic re-interpretation of the encyclopaedic classes and categories, but on the basis of one simple idea....

Melancholy is not depression neither pessimism. Drawing on interpretations from the pre-modern Romantic and Decadent Era, it can be described as the aesthetical consolation that comes with the awareness of the impossibility of pure beauty, unity and harmony, and of the inevitability of imperfection, decadence and uncertainty. The idea however is that melancholy is not a detached but an ethical experience, and that this became apparent with modernity: melancholy is the human condition resulting from a deliberate awareness of the limits to rational instrumental reason in a context of social appeal. That social appeal may either be love, friendship or lust, or social or political engagement. The implications of modernity rendered melancholy with a social meaning: the impossibility of pure beauty, unity and harmony, and of the inevitability of imperfection, decadence and uncertainty, is not experienced by way of detached observation, but in a reflexive way in social interaction.

In this vision, the 'end state' of melancholy is still aesthetical consolation. But that state is not passive, as it arises from an ethical demand. In its recognition of the intrinsic ambiguity of human interaction and of the inherent complexity of social organisation and coexistence, it is an intellectual withdrawal from the delusion of grandeur of a society obsessed with rationality, security, efficiency, predictability and competition. In its disdain for complacency, it is a consolatory practice of leaving the comfort zones constructed around strategies of conformism, positivism, populism and profitism. But as an active state of resignation, melancholy is not evasive. Its decadence is in the eyes of the conformists. Layered on reflexivity as an ethical experience, it feels the anger towards the detached. And as a meta-state of concern, it is aware of the fragile potential of intellectual solidarity among the capable, and of the melancholy of the capable as vulnerable.

Melancholy is practicing the aesthetics of imperfection, decadence and uncertainty, although with a constant awareness of – and care for – the possible of human possibilities.





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*2nd World Conference on the Value of Melancholy in Times of Cheap Commitment, conference poster*

**. Fragments of Absence .**  
(the archive of our common future)

**Gaston Meskens**  
Hallstatt, 27 April 2022

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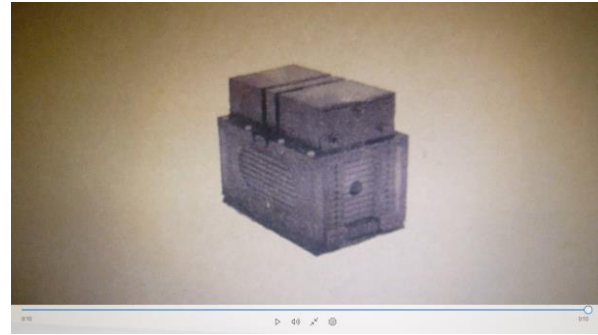
**Stories about found artefacts**  
(unrecorded stories told to an audience on 27 April 2022 down in the salt mine in Hallstatt)

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1. print of a colour photo of a found colour photo (of an object) displayed in a museum
2. print of a screenshot from a colour film of a print on mdf of a found colour photo (of an object) displayed in a museum



1



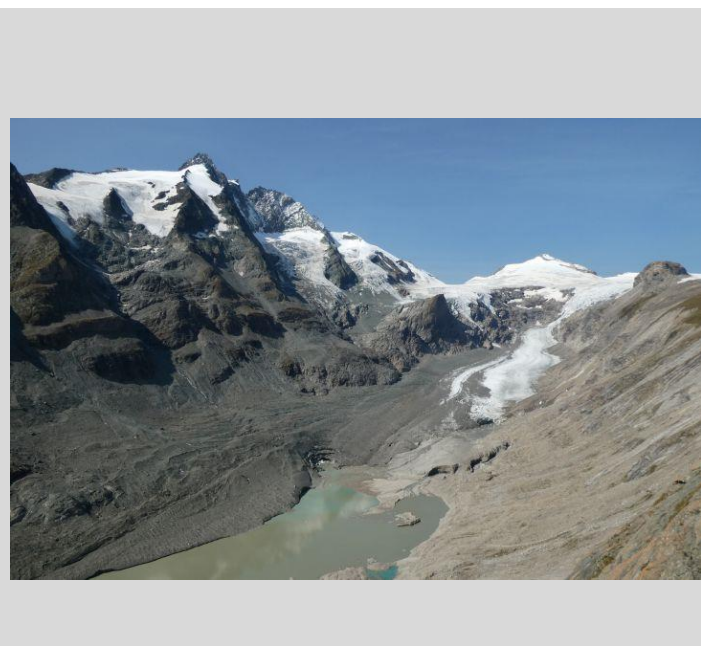
2

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3. print of a (cropped) photo of a page of a photo album found in a second hand shop in Gmunden
4. print of a photo downloaded from the internet



3



4

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**. Fragments of Absence .**  
(the archive of our common future)

**Gaston Meskens**  
Hallstatt, 27 April 2022

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**text**

[...]

*What is the status of an artefact – a text, scheme, image, drawing or object – stored in an archive?*

*Is its meaning stored at the same place as the physical thing? Can it change meaning while left untouched in the dark for years? If the world moves on with time, can we say the artefact is 'left behind'? Or is it 'moving on' too, taking context with it in its slipstream?*

[...]

Today I invite you to reflect on the archive as a physical place that is still but not dead. While everything remains in place in the corridors, on the shelves or in the drawers and boxes, the meaning of what is stored, indexed and catalogued is continuously changing with time.

The question is whether we can possibly understand the past through the memories of it preserved. How can we look at historical artefacts today, knowing that we hold and observe them, naked, decontextualised from everything that surrounded them at their time of material realisation and through their years of use and later storage? Is contextual meaning lost or just absent? How could we reconstruct contextual meaning if it's only present in its aura of absence? Where is the archive of absences needed to understand the past? And, last but not least, what if we think we do understand the past, and then we find an artefact – a text, scheme, image, drawing or object – that, without context, subverts or shakes up the whole picture of the world as we know it?

In trying to understand the past through the memories of it preserved, the questions raised above emerge from a position of 'critical wonderment'. What is it that we see? Who has chosen to archive it, and why? The position can also be described as a reflexive awareness of the volatile character of contextual meaning of materialised 'information' of which the material 'presence' as such is elusive, even in a state of degradation.

The place where we are today reminds us that, while questions concerning the understanding of the past by way of physical artefacts require thorough reflection, the challenges coming with preserving memories from our present times for future understanding are even more difficult to tackle. Today we document our life with a constant stream of photos that go straight into the cloud. At the same time, zillions of chats and emails, whether trivial messages, functional communications, fictional stories or deeply emotional or spiritual thoughts, disappear in digital recycle bins or archive folders. In comparison with the era of the handwritten letter and the printed document and photo, we face today not only the challenge of distincting the essential from the overload, but also a paradox with regard to the possibility of human historical memory itself. On the one hand, storing images and text became easier than ever before. On the other hand, the possibility for the next generations to consult and study our records was never more uncertain. Already now, many of our records are lost,

stored as they are on obsolete hard- and floppy disks and in no longer readable digital archive folders. Meanwhile, our document and image clouds and internet pages are in the hands of big private corporations who think profit and give no guarantee our memories will be preserved into the far future. As a consequence, in archiving our recent historical memory, we face not only the need to deal with the absence of contextual meaning but primarily with the absence – in the sense of the waning presence – of the artefacts themselves.

What can we learn from all this in the interest of dealing with our concern, namely to be understood by those from the future in dealing with our impacts on them? Martin Künze's Memory of Mankind project learns us that building the archive of our common future should be done through a continuous process of reflection and deliberation, always aware of two ultimate challenges

Firstly, it makes no sense to try to completely control the understanding of our messages in the far future. We can never provide 'full context', because our attempt to explain context is always done in its own context, and will anyway be open to interpretation from out of any possible context in the future. The first position of someone who would find our artefacts in the far future, whether it would be our objects or texts, will always be wonderment; a priori wonderment before possible recognition and understanding.

The second challenge, even facing this impossibility of providing full evidence and the guarantee of understanding of the traces of what we did today, is simply doing our best today in taking care of the long term effects of our actions. Only then we can try to explain the far future that we tried to do our best, and why we thought this was the best we could do. In writing, we could make this explicit, and given the self-reflective nature of the thoughts, there would be no need for additional contextual explanation (which wouldn't mean that there would be a guarantee that those from the far future who would manage to understand our message would agree with it.



*View on Hallstatt, 27 april 2022*

