

Billboards, Flags & Happy Accidents

A conversation with Valentijn Goethals



Ines Cox: Show. 21/06/2019-20/09/2019. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

Valentijn Goethals is Gent-based designer and musician. Educated as a graphic designer, Valentijn's activities range from collaborating with artists and designers on various graphic design projects to curation and playing the guitar in the band The Black Heart Rebellion. He is a member of the artist collective Smoke & Dust founded in 2008. In 2013 the collective took over an abandoned welding factory in Dok-Noord Gent and turned it into a trans-disciplinary art platform called 019. In 2018 they started another venue in a former monastery located in the center of Gent, now called Kunsthal Gent, where Valentijn is curator among other roles.



Tomas, Tim & Valentijn installing the 'Accept Change' flag by Olivier Goethals. Ghent, 2016. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

As part of the programs at 019 and Kunsthal Gent, the collective has organised a number of projects in public space, and invited artists and designers to create work for billboards and flags. We were eager to talk to Valentijn about the background of these projects and the process that goes into maintaining them.

We met Valentijn on a late spring afternoon at Kunsthal Gent. As it is a Monday and the space is closed, we expect the lights to be turned low, but instead the space is buzzing: some people are setting up for an upcoming book fair, others are busy with daily goings-on at the space, a group of students from Breda are visiting. Amidst this activity, we manage to catch Valentijn for a brief conversation in the yard of the Kunsthal over a round of lemonades.

Elisabeth Klement & Laura Pappa How did your activities at 019 get started?



019. Photo: Filip Dujardin

Valentijn Goethals The collective initially started as a record label. That's why it's called 019—because we released 18 records. The punk, noise and hardcore scene at the time in Gent was very closely related to the skate scene. There was an open call for the Dok-Noord space and we were thinking: who should we collaborate with? There were some skaters who needed an indoor skatepark, so we thought let's do culture and sports, sounds good! So we wrote an application together and got it and then the skaters entered the space for the first time and realised it's the kind of a floor that you can't skate on. So we talked to the city and asked if they could solve it. We were dreaming about a fuller use for the space and soon after started the construction. By building spaces within spaces, we were able to deal with the size more easily. Now, almost 10 years later, the space is actually way too small.

EK & LP For the past couple of months we've been busy looking into ways in which the practice of graphic design manifests itself within the city of Amsterdam. We've been following your activities here in Gent from a distance and have noticed that both 019 and Kunsthal Gent developed projects that bleed outside of the confined indoor space. Could you talk a little bit about how this came to be?

VG 019 has created quite a few exhibitions that don't really look like exhibitions because they happen in the public space and therefore relate to the audience in a different way. We're often thinking about how we can communicate with an audience or how one can discover an exhibition that has an unusual form. These billboard and flag projects mostly stem from the fact that Tomas and I are designers, or at least we studied graphic design. These are the kind of mediums that we know how to play with. There's one project or actually three or now even four connected to billboards. The main thing is that they're really cheap to produce. Our billboard is 60 square metres. That's really big! But it costs only 350 euros to produce.

EK & LP No way, what a good deal.

VG Yeah. Print Simple is the website. The first billboard project at 019 came about because originally there was a billboard on the facade of the building—a commercial one from Clear Channel, actually. This banner frame had been there since the early 90s. But we found out that it was put there illegally.

Mathew Kneebone, who was back then still living in Gent, played with the engine—it's this kind of turning billboard—and it stopped working. So Clear Channel in the end came to fix it. We started talking to them and asked if we could rent one. But they only gave us the commercial prices. Of course it's very cool to be a graphic designer and have a large billboard on the facade of the space you're running. But we couldn't afford their prices. So we kept talking to them and when we found out that this billboard was put there illegally, we thought we had some leverage. But they still kept referring us to the commercial fees. Obviously we were quite upset about it and thought of demolishing it but then realised just how well-built it is. I think it's my brother Olivier, who is an architect, that said: why don't you just make a bigger one next to it? So that's what we did. We also got a letter from the city saying we didn't have the right permits and needed to take it down. But we knew that the other billboard was there already for 20 or 30 years illegally. So we thought to just wait it out and see what happened if we ignored the letter. And that was five years ago.



Torbjörn Redland: Duo For Trio. 10/09/2021–21/12/2021. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

EK & LP That's really amazing. So what kind of projects have you done with the billboard?

VG We invite four artists each year to make a design for the billboard. The people we invite are typically not linked to graphic design. We invited Thomas Caron from artlead.net to curate the program as we wanted to expand our horizon.

For some time we thought we needed to move out of the 019 building. We got the opportunity to briefly relocate to a space at the Design Museum, and brought a version of the billboard project with us. After only four months we were able to return to 019, but left the new billboard to the Design Museum, a place with the most visitors of any institution in Belgium. We've continued to invite people to create designs for the billboard there with the support of the museum. This billboard is curated by 019 with a strong focus on graphic design. It's a win-win situation for both the Design museum and 019.



Nora Turato: It's Kinda Funny How I Keep Needing Money All The Time / Be Able To See Your Time And Complications. 21/09/2019–21/12/2019. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

Our archive of the billboards is getting really big—I think we've produced over 50 billboards and they are all still in mint condition. Sometimes there's a bird that shat on one of them, but that's about it. So now we've talked to the city of Kortrijk, half an hour outside of Gent, and they actually want to showcase the archive. So it's becoming a satellite project of sorts.

EK & LP How will they exhibit the billboard archive there in Kortrijk?

VG Rather than showing the whole collection at once, it'll basically be a rerun where they show four billboards a year. We didn't talk to them about producing new ones because then the archive just gets bigger again. They get 50 billboards and it basically becomes a free program for the next 10 years, using the archive but reconfigured in a new narrative.

EK & LP What about the flags? Didn't that project actually precede the billboards?



Flags by Larry Archiampong. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

VG When we started 019 and began cleaning it up, we discovered a flagpole in the building. We then figured out where it was originally installed and set it up again. We thought about the idea of printing flags for it. I remember printing an A1 poster and paying 40 euros for a digital print and then searching the same day for the price of printing an actual flag. It turned out to only cost 25 euros to print the flag so it was just way cooler and more affordable to make it this way. So we started communicating everything with flags and inviting people to the building through that medium.

Because making a flag is perhaps not the most conventional design form, most people were excited about the challenge. All they needed to do was to send a PDF and then the result would be printed and hoisted up a few days later. After a while we had an archive of flags so we added 15 more flagpoles to the building to show the archive during the winter. But in the end we never took the flagpoles down again and instead began making group shows with flags. From then on the collection grew really fast, and we now have over 450 flags. After a while we were asked to show the entire collection at an exhibition, again by the city of Kortrijk. But because a flag really

suffers a lot from being outside, we hoped to reprint some. With a small budget we would have been able to fix the whole archive. But instead of them asking how much money we needed, we asked what would be the maximum that we could spend on this. Their response was that it has to be lower than 15,000 euros.

EK & LP And you thought: we can make 300 more!

VG Our initial idea was to reprint all of them. But we started to feel like it was too early to show it as a collection as we'd only started the project a few years ago. So instead of reprinting the flags, we bought the biggest flagpole that we could get. That turned out to be a flagpole of 20 metres, which is obviously a lot for a flagpole. It's the only one we know in the Benelux of that size. There's bigger ones in Spain, America, Mexico and Korea. As it was going to be that large, we decided to design it ourselves. After the project took place they asked us if we wanted to keep it because it was too large for them to maintain. We ended up applying for some funding for it and were able to turn it into a mobile flagpole. Since then we have been commissioning artists to design Belgium's biggest flag. Now we can ask Rem Koolhaas or Tauba Auerbach for instance and they say yes because all they need to do is send a PDF and we give them the 200 euro fee.



Philippe Vandenberg: No title, ca. 2005–2008. 11/03/2021–17/06/2021. Photo: Michiel De Cleene



We Know, They Don't, But They'll Soon Find Out. Dok-Noord Gent. 10/08/2016–01/10/2016. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

Lastly there's a flagpole in front of SMAK which is super beautiful. It's actually a statue. There's a very funny story about the statue as well. It's a bronze statue called *The Mast Planters* and it depicts two guys putting a flagpole in the ground. It was actually designed in the late 1800s by Jules van Biesbroek. He was a futurist artist who was really into the idea of electricity. He wanted to make a statue for the city of Gent, but because he was quite progressive, instead of just making a bronze statue, he also wanted it to have a light ball on top. So he went ahead and produced it but because light was involved, apparently they couldn't pay him because the city could only give a fee to artists if they made an artwork and not a street lantern. He got really angry and the only solution to get his money was to cut off the lights. So all that remained was a stick.

Some years ago we annexed it and began using it as a flagpole—and with just two tie wraps we've been adding flags to it. When we asked the city of Gent if we could do that, they said no, of course. But then you do it and nobody cares. So we have been doing for already five years.

EK & LP Is that how the city of Gent functions—you can get away with things easily?

VG If you do something and you do it well, they get excited. That's just how the city works. Because even the large flagpole—if we were to ask: can we put it there?—we would never get the permission because it's 20 metres high. Our flags are simply too big. If it falls down on a car, there's someone that has to be responsible. But ours are very well made. It's actually very funny because we put it up in a neighbourhood about one kilometre away from O19. It's an area with a lot of gentrification and there's a lot of new buildings being built. It was in a dirty old car park next to old buildings which they soon began tearing down. What they ended up doing was redesigning the whole area around our flagpole without touching it. They probably didn't know whom to contact and after a certain moment they installed concrete benches which are exact replicas of the pedestal of the flagpole. Once the new scenery was finished in that area we moved the flagpole one kilometre further again.

EK & LP They must be thinking—we made all this work for this flagpole! It sounds like you're doing a lot of projects at the same time and rather quickly, moving from one thing to the next. How do you deal with that pace when it comes to these very physical projects in the public domain?



Adrien Vescovi: *Soleil Blanc*. 13/05/2022–18/09/2022. Photo: Michiel De Cleene



Na Kim: SET v.21: 122+142. 01/12/2021-28/02/2022.. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

VG Running Kunsthal and 019 takes up a lot of our energy and the upkeep of ongoing projects like the billboards or flags is not happening as much as it should. Na Kim made a flag for the big flag pole a couple of months ago and it was normally going to be on view until the end of May but it ripped because of a storm and now there's nothing on view. So we could show one of the flags from the archive, but it's very low on the to-do list.

EK & LP Have you considered inviting somebody in to organise this project for you?

VG That would be great but you also need to pay that person. We want to have a fair pay practice. But it's a big question: how do we continue making new projects and evolving while maintaining older projects. We could make 50 other billboards but we don't want to be known for only the billboards or the flags. So it just slows down but we can also never say goodbye to anything unless it breaks down completely.

EK & LP How does your graphic design background influence the kinds of projects you work on and the type of artists and designers you invite?

VG I have been thinking about this a lot. As a designer you're always collaborating and I think this is also the way we make exhibitions. At 019, it's always in collaboration between an artist and the team of 019. But for instance, we made an exhibition called *Reservoir* two years ago, where we filled the whole space with water and we invited 20 artists. We also added 20 fish to the pond we installed, which was full of bacteria, So we added plants and it became a whole ecosystem. In the end we spent more time making this ecosystem than on the exhibition. When people enter, they think: wow this is cool. But underneath the plants there is of course an artwork. What are you then visiting or who made this show?



Building up Reservoir. Photo: Michiel Devijver



Group exhibition *Reservoir*. 04/09/2020-7/02/2021. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

We just published a book and it has around 250 contributors and it's made by 10 graphic designers. So we are almost completely disappearing into one collective of collaborations. We really believe in this way of working and seeing the artists as part of this collaboration, and in the end there's an audience. It is not the romantic idea of one artist and the audience, we don't really believe in that.



S&D#024 / APE#202: *Anything But Certain* (2022).
Essays by: Adrienne van der Werf, Edward Hollis, Joachim Dumoulin, Katinka de Jonge, Maira Dietrich, Mathew Kneebone, The Serving Library, Tom Van Imschoot & Waterland. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

EK & LP The mediums you work with are occasionally commercial. Also outside of Kunsthal Gent, we were walking around the building and found these poster boxes on the church facade. Maybe in these boxes you would expect to find some church information, but instead they have been completely co-opted in many layers to document the exhibitions and events and stay up past their occurrence date.

VG It's true but also it's not that there's a big master plan or anything. We inherited those together with the building.

EK I was also curious how you could put these on the wall of this heritage site.

VG They were here already and we just took them over. But we kept on doing it and finding cheaper versions of the boxes to add to the original ones. Things take some time for us to develop. This durational working is the DNA of our organisation. An artist or collaborator also probably knows even just by looking at Kunsthal or 019 or when we start the conversation: this is going to be a specific way of working.



Vitrine boxes in front of Kunsthal Gent. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

I was talking to the Belgian artist Sophie Nys and she said that you really feel that it's an exhibition space with a lot of graphic designers, just because of how all the artworks are placed in the space. And of course, there are not only graphic designers involved. There's also for instance Olivier, who is as an architect and tries to understand the plan of the artists and then proposes something spatially—that's when a conversation begins. And that's important and it takes a lot of time. We made a user's manual for the space—that's the first thing we give to the artist. Then we have a very long conversation about the idea of an endless exhibition and how we work.

EK & LP Something that's new in Amsterdam is that there is a tax on visual communication in the city. This opens of course so many interesting questions on what's communication. There's people walking around billing everything that's up for longer than six weeks.

VG But not for posters or anything?

EK & LP For posters, for everything. So, let's say you are an individual who has something on your home windows. It's a strange expectation of how the city wants or doesn't want you to communicate in it. Whereas your position is really encouraged by the city. Even though you're making things that are sometimes unwanted, it doesn't mean that someone's coming to take that flagpole away.

VG But that's Belgium. It's not corrupt, of course, but the rules are different than in the Netherlands. Just look at how houses are built in Belgium versus the Netherlands. I can understand that's probably partly UNESCO or the preservation of cities like Amsterdam. I hope that won't be the case one day in Belgium because then we would of course be fucked with the billboard. Before the collaboration with Kortrijk we first spoke to the Brakke Grond in Amsterdam. It seemed like a good idea because their main aim is to show Belgian artists in Amsterdam. But we don't even know how to start applying to do it legally in Amsterdam, and what it would mean there. So it was just too much of a hassle for them to just do it of course. We're very spoiled in this regard at the same time. We even got the Kunsthal building through an open call. We wrote a proper application, spent many months talking to everybody from the city and stuff. But still I don't know any other city in Belgium who would give a monument of this size to a group of young people and say 'have fun for the next four years and we'll see what happens after that'. So, yes, we are very lucky, that I can tell you for sure.

EK & LP There's something quite gutsy about how you act. Of course, the fact that you are a collective also helps in just trying these things out and having the trust of the city.

VG There's definitely a layer of trust which is building, but we always need to keep fighting with the city. After a while you go from being a group of students who are interested in making a skatepark and a screenprinting studio over eight years to being a structurally-funded organisation running two buildings. So while there's certain things that the city wouldn't allow us to do, a couple of years pass and they change their minds because they look at our portfolio and say 'if somebody makes it work, it's probably you guys'.

That's our trick. That's also why we make books. We have Michiel who is a really good photographer, and helps us reach more people. If you look at the documentation of all our projects, it all looks rather professional. 019 is a very rough space and there's a big contrast between being professional and just a group of people having fun at the same time. But it's not like if you go and work with SMAK or

with the Culture Department of the city, everything would be very well organised—actually everybody's struggling and just doing stuff the way they know how to. A good thing as well is that we're a large group of people. When we started as a team, we were actually really searching for people, but we would never search for somebody who has a practice in painting or in making sculptures, because they would only make the floor dirty. Instead we would search for a carpenter or somebody who could weld, or a graphic designer or a photographer or an architect. They contribute to the organisation with knowledge and tools.

EK & LP How do you manage to keep up with the workload?

VG We created this job for ourselves which is a very luxurious position to be in. It's not only from working hard but also being very lucky and having the right mayor at the right time and things like this. But of course, we work too much. Often we hear someone say: what's happening here is more relevant than what's happening in other institutions. The rule that we have for ourselves is that we should have fun doing this job, otherwise we just burn out—it doesn't work. So the most important thing is that an artist that we invite can't be an asshole because if you do this the way we do it, we don't have capacity for drama.

EK & LP How do you ensure that you stumble upon the right people?

VG Somebody says: do you know this artist, they are really great. Of course you never really know them. In our current show, there's 17 artists participating and of course we didn't know all of them in person beforehand. But basically in the end we get along with everybody. It still feels a little bit like a hobby next to our design work, although our design work stopped. And it's shifting but there was never a moment when somebody, even a board member, said that now we should stop playing. We try to make sure that the playing remains. It's actually the title of Olivier's book that just came out: *Play Sincerely*. He has this whole thing about it but I think it makes a lot of sense: we play a lot but we do it sincerely. As in: we mean it and we want to do it. We care about the artists, we care about the audience, but there should be a layer of fun.



T.S.A.I.I. (The Situation as It Is)—a story that unfolds in episodes of three frames, rhythmically revolving on a new billboard mounted onto 019's facade. *Episode 11—The Upheaval*. 01/06/2021–01/07/2021. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

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