

# Jan Van Imschoot

## The End Is Never Near

E

This **ABC** by curator Dieter Roelstraete guides you through Jan Van Imschoot's work. In the visitors' guide on the white pages inside, you will find more explanations and the most important entries for each room.

### A for ALICE GUY

The titular protagonist of Jan Van Imschoot's monumental *Alice Guy au pays des merveilles* (2022) is the French film pioneer Alice Guy-Blanché (1873-1968), the first female movie director who helped pave the way for the development of the narrative film tradition alongside her much better-known male colleagues, peers, and rivals George Méliès and the Lumière brothers. Van Imschoot's large-scale homage to this unsung heroine of the seventh art is rooted, first and foremost, in the artist's deep and long-standing affinity with this particular art form – but it is obviously also a feminist critique of the systematic marginalization of female artists throughout *all* art histories, irrespective of genre or form. However, this very critique is complicated in turn by the presence in this picture of a female nude, which the artist has borrowed from Jacopo Tintoretto's *Amore, Venere e Marte* (1552): a stark reminder of the fact that western art history is essentially founded, as we know,



Jacopo Tintoretto, *Venere, Vulcano e Marte*, 1551-1552  
oil on canvas, 135 x 198 cm  
Collection Alte Pinakothek, Munich

on the objectifying male gaze. And that film, much like painting (including that of Van Imschoot), is historically and deeply implicated in the subjugation of the female form as a source of visual pleasure.

### B for BUÑUEL

Spanish-Mexican film auteur Luis Buñuel (1900-1983) ranks among Jan Van Imschoot's undisputed idols of the silver screen. Buñuel is best remembered today for his long-term working relationship with Catherine Deneuve, the talismanic French actress who features prominently in a series of surreal interiors painted by the artist between 2008 and 2011, some of which contain quotes from such Buñuel evergreens as *Tristana* and *Belle de Jour*. One of the Buñuel's last films is titled *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, a mordant and satirical look at the upper classes that closely aligns with Van Imschoot's own worldview. However, the core of Buñuel's appeal resides primarily in the purity of his Dadaist credentials: to Van Imschoot, films such as *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), which Buñuel co-directed with a youthful Salvador Dalí, embody the emancipatory promise of Dada before that movement's ideological paralysis under the tyrannical leadership of the surrealist ideologue André Breton. "Buñuel" is shorthand, in other words, for the indomitable eccentricity of art at its most heterodox and antidogmatic.

## C for CARAVAGGIO

*Amore Dormiente* is the title of the first painting in the exhibition – a mammoth tribute to the irreverent genius of Caravaggio (1571-1610), whose *Sleeping Cupid* (now in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence) Jan Van Imschoot alludes to in this work. The painting's dramatic placement at the entrance of the exhibition – which beyond this point proceeds in roughly chronological fashion – alerts the viewer to the importance of art-historical referencing in Van Imschoot's work. That said, the choice of paragon is much more than a merely academic affair. For Van Imschoot, Caravaggio functions as the incarnation, alongside Rubens, of what the artist himself has referred to as “anarcho-baroque”: an aesthetic tradition that is closely associated with the history of the Catholic church, but which simultaneously also contains the seeds of Catholicism's



Caravaggio, *Amorino dormiente*, 1608-1609  
oil on canvas, 72 x 105 cm  
Collection Palazzo Pitti, Firenze

most trenchant critique – one that is centered upon the spectacle of erotic embodiment. In Caravaggio's work, as in much of Van Imschoot's, we witness paint become flesh.

## D for DARK

Although Jan Van Imschoot's work is clearly not without humor and a cheeky, joyful sense of self-relativization, the basic tenor of his oeuvre is an emphatically somber one. Many of his early works are rendered in a hazy, pale color palette that often serves to both highlight and obscure their dark and disturbing content. In more recent work, the artist has moved away from the conceptual murk and gloom of those founding concerns – but the paintings themselves have grown markedly darker. Might this be a function of the artist's fondness for Caravaggio and Rubens, masters of baroque *chiaroscuro* – or a simple consequence of the fact that Van Imschoot prefers to paint in the middle of the night? “I wear black on the outside / ‘Cause black is how I feel on the inside” is how Morrissey put it back in the heyday of The Smiths: dark times require correspondingly dark images – and Jan Van Imschoot is a consummate chronicler of these very moods.

## E for ERASMUS

*In Praise of Folly*, Desiderius Erasmus' best known treatise and one of the founding texts of the humanist revolution, was the first book that Jan Van Imschoot ever bought. It is a landmark in the historical development of satire, which famously flourished in the early decades of the Renaissance – and a discursive register that is very dear to Van Imschoot indeed. The female personification of “folly” in Erasmus' parable engages the reader with the following opening address: “However slightly I am esteemed in the common vogue of the world (for I well know how disingenuously Folly is decried, even by those who are themselves the greatest fools), yet it is from my influence alone that the whole universe receives her ferment of mirth and jollity”. Satire, in other words, is not cynicism: it is definitively marked by a minimal degree of sympathy with the object of its scorn. It is this precise ambivalence that draws Van Imschoot to the form – an ambiguity that certainly resonates in such works as *Portretten van Geel*, for instance: a series of portraits of residents from a famous psychiatric clinic in the town of Geel that also includes, tellingly, a self-portrait. E for eccentric: it is only when seen from the margins – from “folly's” point of view – that the true meaning of the center can fully be grasped.

## F for FILM

The French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) once described Jacopo Tintoretto (1518-1594) as the first ever film director; this characterization presages an entire body of art-historical writing that seeks to interpret painting, especially

of the Baroque period, as the proverbial Hollywood of its day. (A comparable metaphor traditionally describes religious art as “scripture for the illiterate”.) The history of film and that of painting are the most important frames of reference for much of Jan Van Imschoot’s art, and it is their shared character as essentially *narrative* forms that the artist feels drawn to first and foremost: narration is key to his oeuvre as a whole. Many of Van Imschoot’s more ambitiously scaled paintings tend toward a quasi-cinematic complexity that highlights the principle uniting the work of Bergman and Rubens, Eisenstein and Vermeer: that images allow us to tell vastly more complex stories than our logocentric culture is habituated to admit.

## G for GOLDA’S GAULOISES

There is an awful lot of smoking taking place in Jan Van Imschoot’s work – a truthful reflection, it must be added, of the artist’s daily life. Ephemeral and ethereal phenomena like smoke, mist, fire, and clouds are the subject of an intriguing iconographic micro-history within the larger context of the art-historical canon, where they often serve to signal the possibility of abstraction – think, for instance, of Bosch’ apocalyptic scenes of fiery immolation, of Constable and Turner’s ever-shifting cloud formations, or of the enigmatic icon of the stoic smoker in classic film noir. In many of Van Imschoot’s more recent works in particular, it is often women who are portrayed with a burning cigarette between their fingers – and here a riveting double-portrait of the legendary Israeli prime minister Golda Meir comes to mind: an allusion, perhaps, to the artist’s interest in images of female empowerment. In the final analysis,

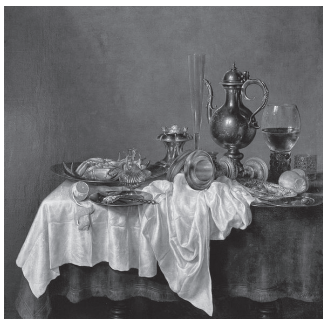


Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Sheerness as seen from the Nore*, 1808  
oil on canvas, 149,5 x 104,5 cm  
Collection The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

however, the cigarette – those painted by the artist as much as those smoked by the artist – signal the simple, irreversible march of time. A single cigarette will buy its smoker seven to eight minutes of evanescent bliss – but at what cost?

## H for HEDA

Most of the artists that have served Jan Van Imschoot as inspirational guides throughout the years are well-known, indeed properly canonical: we have all heard of Caravaggio, Manet, and Rubens, and much of their visual language has entered the western world’s aesthetic unconscious. Van Imschoot’s interest in art history, in other words, is not driven by a will to obscurantism. His fondness for Willem Claesz. Heda (1593–ca. 1680), however, may be a slightly more niche enthusiasm: a lesser-known figure who worked during the period formerly known as the Dutch Golden Age – a term, it should be noted, that the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam discontinued as recently as 2019 – and specialized exclusively in still-life painting. In Van Imschoot’s view, Heda is the unsurpassed master of the said genre at its most surreal and semantically thick: an artist who never merely paints half-empty wine glasses



Willem Claesz Heda, *Ontbijtje*, 1625  
olie op doek, 48 x 67,5 cm  
Private Collection

or half-eaten baked goods, but whose richly set tables always have so much more to offer than what they initially seem to serve up. A magician of allegorizing, Heda shows us what “meaning” really means, and could therefore be considered an ancestor of the likes of René Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers – and hence also Jan Van Imschoot himself.

## I for INE

*Mummie/Ine* is the title of a diminutive diptych from 1993 – at thirty years old, one of the oldest works in the exhibition. One half of the painting depicts a mummified Lenin – but what might the other half be? Jan Van Imschoot met Ine Van der Poel in 1986 and married her in 1989. She has seen every single painting of his come into being – and is the single most important person in his life.

## J for JOHNNY

Johnny Cash, Johnny Moped, Johnny Rotten: three Johnnies, three musical heroes of Jan Van Imschoot's, three punk icons – progenitors and representatives of a musical subculture that proved to be a deeply formative influence on Van Imschoot's aesthetic and intellectual development when it first blew eastward across the Channel back in the late 1970s. Johnny Moped is definitely the least known, and perhaps the least outwardly “punk”, of the three – which may well single him out as the most punk of the lot, his very eccentricity (quite literally, as a solidly blue-collar presence in a subculture that quickly dispersed in upwardly mobile cultural aspirations) one of the reasons behind Van Imschoot's continued enthusiasm for this figure. Johnny Moped is best remembered today for his 1978 hit single “Darling, Let's Have Another Baby” – a lot more Monty Python than “Anarchy in the UK”, and for this reason alone a footnote in recent music history that is more than worth remembering.

## K for KNOWLEDGE

It is really only since the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the rise of artists such as Delacroix, Géricault, and Goya, that painting started to more systematically engage with “current affairs”. Slowly but surely, the age-old primacy of religious and mythological motifs or aristocratic portraiture started to make way for more worldly preoccupations – which, in the middle of the nineteenth century led to the realist revolution instigated by Gustave Courbet, and from there directly to Edouard Manet's *peinture de la vie moderne*. Under these artists' joint impetus, art increasingly turned towards the chronicling of everyday life, and acquired the sheen of a journalistic undertaking. This dynamic forever changed art's relationship to both history and knowledge – to the extent that art became both a form of historiography, and a new species of knowing: a specific way of *remembering*. Jan Van Imschoot is the heir of this paradigm shift, in that his works are deeply rooted in this tradition's mnemonic function – in the alternate art of knowing that all art has since become.

## L for LOUIS FERDINAND CÉLINE

We already know that film and painting rank among Jan Van Imschoot's most important sources of inspiration – but that is likewise true, if less ostensibly so, of literature. (The one major art form that barely figures in his world is music – though music, too, plays a role of real consequence in his creative life.) Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the artist's predilection for contrarian cultural impulses, Van Imschoot feels particularly drawn to writers of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's caliber and temperament – one of modern, twentieth-century literature's most gifted stylists, whose towering aesthetic achievement will be forever tarnished, of course, by the inexplicable obscenity of his war-time antisemitic screeds. It is this precise duality that fascinates Jan Van Imschoot to no end: how is it possible that the greatest geniuses so often reveal themselves to be the greatest idiots? How can good and evil cohabit with such seeming effortlessness inside one person? And why is the world of art often especially hospitable to such tortured individuals?

# Jan Van Imschoot

## The End Is Never Near

This visitor's guide takes you room by room through Jan Van Imschoot's exhibition *The End Is Never Near*. Please read the ABC by curator Dieter Roelstraete for more information. Under the text about each room, you will find the details of the relevant entries.



Jan Van Imschoot, *La Piconera (La trahison conjugale)*, 2022  
oil on canvas, 190 x 170 cm  
Courtesy collection Paul & Marie-Rose Declercq-Benoit  
© Isabelle Arthuis



**Room 1** This room contains many works from the early years of Jan Van Imschoot's career. The colours are lighter than in his later paintings, and the subjects more sombre. *Amore Dormiente* is the first work that you see. Jan Van Imschoot found inspiration for his sleeping cupid in a work by the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio (1571-1610). Van Imschoot admires the sober colour palette and light-dark contrasts in the latter's work. You will soon see that Van Imschoot's oeuvre is filled with playful references to, and quotations from, Western painting and culture. From Van Eyck, Caravaggio and Manet to Sartre, Johnny Moped and Céline.

Jan Van Imschoot himself coined the term 'anarcho-baroque' to describe his painting style: contemporary baroque with a dash of anarchy. It is a reference to a style rooted in Catholicism but with dramatic and erotic overtones.

**Want to know more? See the entries C, D, J, R and Q.**

**Room 2** Jan Van Imschoot does not shy away from confrontation. In 1998, he painted a series of paintings entitled *La canonisation du Hymen* (1998). The sadomasochistic violence in these works is explicit. The scenes may shock or disturb, but no matter how directly Van Imschoot depicts the violence, it is never glorified. His aim, rather, is to denounce the surfeit of violence in our contemporary visual culture, which is based on complete exposure.

"I used to paint a lot of corpses and blood but found that I could no longer deal with war or executions, not at a time when the news was full of attacks and beheadings. History was initially a source of distance and abstraction. But once the violence gets closer, I'm blocked." Jan Van Imschoot in *De Standaard*, 2021

**Want to know more? See the entry O.**

**Room 3** Jan Van Imschoot's series *Repercussions* (2008) is inspired by 1940s photographs from the Rockefeller Institute in America. In the paintings, he reproduces various actions that appear in the photographs: muscular men throw children in the air or dangle them by one leg. The theory behind such research? That the men could exercise their reflexes by swinging and lifting children...

Van Imschoot painted the series against the backdrop of several paedophilia cases in Belgium. For him, the series is a way of denouncing and criticising such abuses.

**Room 4** Although Jan Van Imschoot's work is steeped in mystery, ambivalences and ambiguities of all types, he does not, on occasion, shy away from confrontational imagery. He criticises the variability of our Western visual culture, which largely co-determines what is labelled obscene or pornographic. Such a changing value framework contributes to the inevitable problematizing of Van Imschoot's *Ladyboys* suite of paintings, from 2007, in a world of changing perceptions of the stability of gender.

For Jan Van Imschoot, however, these individuals, whose visible sexual characteristics do not fit within a gender binary framework, symbolise the ultimate freedom: 'They are therefore the only characters I depicted smiling'.

**Room5** ‘Painter-intellectual’ or ‘artist’s artist’: these are two of the terms that are often applied to Van Imschoot. Such characterisations mainly stem from the multiple art historical references that seep into the painter’s work. Sometimes quite literally. Here, for instance, you might recognise Vermeer’s *The Milkmaid* or his famous *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Other references are more subtle. For example, Van Imschoot borrowed the female nude in the recent painting *Alice Guy au pays des merveilles* (2022) from the Italian Renaissance painter Tintoretto.

Throughout art history, women have often been depicted as objects of desire. In *L’échange de bêtises* – Van Imschoot’s variation on Edouard Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* – the artist depicts himself between not one, but two naked women: the biblical Susanna joins the company. Moreover, Jan Van Imschoot paints himself slightly taller than his hero Manet: a playful way of surpassing his inspiration? Van Imschoot admires the way in which Manet incorporates everyday life into his paintings.

**See entries A, R, M and T.**

**The bar** According to Van Imschoot, an artist’s career never ends. The painting *The End Is Never Near* – on display in this room and also the title of this exhibition – alludes to this idea.

Relax in the bar before heading to the cinema. A born storyteller, Van Imschoot is not only inspired by historical masters such as Rubens or Vermeer, but also by film directors like Buñuel, Pasolini and Tati.

**Cinema** For this exhibition, Jan Van Imschoot has delved into the history of cinema and selected trailers for the films that have influenced him the most. Please note that certain trailers may contain violent images.

**L’age d’or** Luis Buñuel  
**Le Fantôme de la liberté** Luis Buñuel  
**Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom** P.P. Pasolini  
**Uccello e uccellini** P.P. Pasolini  
**Novecento** Bernardo Bertolucci  
**Les Valseuses** Bertrand Blier  
**The Unbelievable Truth** Hal Hartley  
**Mon Oncle** Jacques Tati  
**Malpertuis** Harry Kümel  
**Even Dwarfs Started Small** Werner Herzog  
**Lucky** John Carrol Lynch  
**La Grande Bouffe** Marco Ferreri

**Want to know more? See entry F.**

**Room 6** Nothing is what it seems in a Dutch 17th-century still life painting. Fruit, a pastry, a flower or vegetable can all contain references to the transience of life or a sexual allusion. The genre fascinates Van Imschoot precisely because of the hidden symbolism and double meanings. He is a great admirer of Willem Claesz. Heda's oeuvre (1594-ca. 1680). Van Imschoot's own still lifes also conceal meanings that need to be decoded.

"In terms of genre works, still lifes and ultra-bourgeois paintings are all too often pushed into a corner. But once you realise that these works also tell you something about their time, and that the painter is conspiring with the viewer, then it becomes exciting."

**Want to know more? See entries H and S.**

**Room 7** Nothing is what it seems. This not only applies to the still lifes in the previous room, but also to the surreal interiors that Van Imschoot painted around 2010-2012. He combined interiors with stills from his favourite films, including those by Luis Buñuel, one of Van Imschoot's primary sources of inspiration. The artist is intrigued by the similarities between painting and cinema.

"For me, film is painting in motion. Photography is actually a derivative of painting. Everyone is always going on about 'new media'! But the new media owes everything to painting."

From *Interview with Jan Van Imschoot*, Ghent, 24 June 2010.

Interviewer: Hilde Van Canneyt.

**Want to know more? See entries B and F.**





## M for MANET

Édouard Manet (1832-1883) towers above all other titans of western art history in Jan Van Imschoot's world. That much can certainly be derived from the sheer amount of explicit homages to the French master: *Reconstruction d'une exécution: Le fusil refusant*, for instance, is directly modeled after *L'exécution de Maximilien* (1869); *L'échange des bêtises* emphatically restages *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863); and Manet's iconic *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* (1882) is the real subject of Van Imschoot's enigmatic *La présentation des absents*, which only retains the marble counter-top of said "original". (Van Imschoot likewise shares Manet's rather bizarre predilection for asparagus as a recurring still-life motif.) The reasons for this particular adulation – "imitation", after all, is the highest form of flattery – are manifold, but it is of course worth noting that art history has enthroned Manet as the quintessential painter of modern life. He is the archetypal missing link between the Old Masters that also matter so greatly to Van Imschoot, and



Édouard Manet, *Un bar aux Folies Bergère*, 1882  
oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm  
Collection Institut Courtauld, Londres

all the artists who came after him and for that reason alone have been named *modern*. Somewhat paradoxically, Manet functions as the ultimate authority who continuously compels his brightest and most ambitious students to always paint the here and now.

## N for NIGHT

Jan Van Imschoot is an old-fashioned night owl who whose working life is an almost exclusively nocturnal affair. Right about when most of us take to our beds for a good night's sleep, the artist heads to his studio for a long night blessedly free of distractions, changing daylight or random intrusions. (All of Van Imschoot's paintings are made in the same conditions of artificial lighting.) Van Imschoot has been a creature of the night for as long as he can remember, as he would regularly fall asleep in class during the day. We have already remarked upon the artist's penchant for a somber, subdued palette, which may be a function of his predilection for the dark of night – but the fact remains that "after hours" is when the artist feels best prepared to take up the laborious challenge of making art, which requires the utmost concentration in a contemporary society built on the principle of distraction.

## O for OBSCENE

Although Jan Van Imschoot's work is steeped in mystery, ambivalences and ambiguities of all types, he does not, on occasion, shy away from confrontational imagery. The pornographic content of some of his nudes as well as the paintings with an explicitly violent charge are a product, in a sense, of a visual culture that always insists on seeing more, on probing further. (The American film scholar Linda Williams famously defined pornography as "the frenzy of the visible".) Needless to say, what is deemed obscene or pornographic frequently changes according to the whims of our cultural climate, and such fickleness certainly contributes to the inevitable problematizing of Van Imschoot's *Ladyboys* suite of paintings in a world of changing perceptions of the stability of gender. The precise etymology of the term "obscene" remains undetermined, but the old hypothesis hasn't lost any of its explanatory charm: perhaps "obscene" literally means what lies "in front of" the scene – that which escapes all attempts at contextualization, and therefore always exists at a radical remove from the grasp of understanding.

## P for POLKE

The influence of artists like Caravaggio, Manet, Rubens, and Francis Picabia on Jan Van Imschoot's work is easily assessed and understood – that of Sigmar Polke (1944-2009) much less so,

even though Van Imschoot frequently invokes the German painter's protean oeuvre as a continuing source of inspiration. Indeed, Van Imschoot has compared Polke to a post-war "northern" Picasso of sorts: a radically fearless adventurer who enthusiastically engaged in all kinds of experiments with quasi-scientific curiosity (no wonder the language of alchemy features so prominently in his work), even if the results sometimes turned out to be rather questionable. Polke's entire "career" in art can be understood as an uncompromising battle against the temptation of a single signature style, and the resultant promiscuity of his artistic multiverse contains art's single greatest lesson – the very reason why we're all "in" it: to be *free*.

## Q for QUIZ

Even though Jan Van Imschoot has limited tolerance for highfalutin theorizing (see also: *U for Uccellacci e Uccellini*), it is worth noting that he came of age as an artist at the height of postmodernism – the leading aesthetic "philosophy" of the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of the primary critical goals of postmodernism was to deconstruct the entwined modernist myths of authenticity, authorship and originality, and the historical reference or quote – parody, pastiche, persiflage – came to function as a philosophical sacrament of sorts. Thus became enshrined the caricature of postmodernism as a simple, vapid game of recognizing and identifying art-historical references, fragments, and quotations – the reduction, in a sense, of the art-historical record to mere pub quiz material. Although Jan Van Imschoot's practice is evidently informed by the postmodern ethos of an anti-authoritarian questioning of the dynamics of canonization, it would be misguided to approach an exhibition such as this one as a mere quizzing opportunity – ours is too traumatic a present for such fun and games.

## R for REAR VIEW

"An artist's artist" is a typical honorific for the type of artists about whom "insiders" agree he or she should be better known – an artist who appears to make his or her art primarily for an audience of other artists. This can of course quickly turn into a sclerotic academicism that ends up producing art designed primarily for an audience of art *historians* – a rear-view mirror perspective on art in which only the past may seem of interest; an optic that only knows retrospection. Jan Van Imschoot's interest in art history – in reviewing, returning, remaking, reflecting, reconsidering, and so many other verbs that start with "re-" – is resolutely anti-academic, and one certainly does not need a degree in art history to "understand" his work. Like every other artist, Van Imschoot belongs to history – to the art that has preceded him, but also, just as importantly, to the art that will follow in his footsteps. The figure in the painting after which this exhibition is named (*The End Is Never Near*) looks *ahead*.

## S for STILL-LIFE

The last room in the exhibition is given over entirely to still lifes, a genre that Jan Van Imschoot has started exploring only recently. Might his appreciation for this most undervalued and overlooked of pictorial genres have something to do with his own advancing age, seeing as still life has often been viewed from the interpretive vantage point of the *memento mori* adage – an intimation of our inevitable mortality? In most still lifes, flowers are forever blossoming, fruit forever ripening, the table more often than not groaning under the weight of nature's bounty – but for how long? The very sense of suspicion raised by this question mark already singles out still life painting as a quintessentially symbolist form: these are paintings that shouldn't just be *seen* – they should be *read*, decoded. Jan Van Imschoot's commitment to still life functions as a call for an enhanced visual literacy, for what you see is never exactly what you *get* – which is surely one way in which art helps to make life more interesting.

## T for TINTORETTO

Jacopo Tintoretto (1518-1594) stands alongside Edouard Manet as the supreme guiding light in Jan Van Imschoot's creative universe, and the latter's work contains multiple direct quotes from and references to the Venetian master's oeuvre. Van Imschoot's admiration for Tintoretto's work is partly grounded in the pivotal role played by the latter in western art history: although much of Tintoretto's paintings depict Biblical themes and religious motifs, his work heralds the moment when the image of God is gradually replaced by the image of Man, and it is this humanist impulse which is likewise central to Van Imschoot's own undertaking as an artist. Tintoretto's contemporaries took to naming him "il furioso" because of his seemingly inexhaustible energy and flair for the dramatic, as well as the speed with which he fulfilled his various artistic duties. Painting like a man possessed, Tintoretto was among the first to truly grasp the essence of art, and why it allows no vacillating or procrastinating: in his work, we start to discern the contours of the fundamental sense of *freedom* that has since become integral to the very idea of art.

## U for UCCELLACCI E UCCELLINI

*Uccellacci e Uccellini* (literally "birds of prey" and "little birds") is the allegorical title of a film from 1966 directed by the great Pier Paolo Pasolini. In contrast with Jan Van Imschoot's other favored filmmaker Luis Bunuel, Pasolini was known for a political militancy that frequently led to clashes with Italy's leftist establishment, to which he nonetheless belonged. (Pasolini's typically iconoclastic streak was most evident during the late sixties' student riots, when he would often side with the working-class policemen in the streets against the Marx-quoting upper-class students behind the barricades.) *Uccellacci e Uccellini* is set among the underclass of postwar suburban Rome and narrates the trials and tribulations of a pair of rudderless outcasts who are being followed around by a garrulous, pedantic crow who clearly stands in for the pontificating intellectual elite – but ingloriously ends up in the cooking pot at the end of the film. Pasolini was a lifelong devotee of the communist cause, but this dedication did not blind him to the fact that the socialist gospel shall prevail only when nourished by its acolytes' most stringent critiques.

## V for VAN EYCK

The brothers Hubertus and Jan Van Eyck embody the alpha and omega of the western painting tradition: they are traditionally credited with the "invention" of oil painting (an admittedly somewhat simplistic claim) yet simultaneously also mark that form's very endpoint – for who will ever transcend the astounding mastery of their *Ghent Altarpiece*? This, indeed, is one of the great privileges of growing up in Ghent and/or its environs: chances are that when you finally get to see your first real work of art, it will be the Van Eyck's peerless polyptych, the technical prowess of which has rightfully caused despair in many burgeoning artists. Jan Van Imschoot was just ten years old when he first saw the *Altarpiece*, then still housed in its fuss-free original location in Ghent's Saint Bavo cathedral. This viewing must have been an epiphany of sorts, which helped steel the artist's secular resolve: one need not believe in God to believe in the "Agnus Dei" – one must simply believe in Van Eyck.

## W for WALT DISNEY

The earliest truly memorable aesthetic experience of Jan Van Imschoot's life occurred in 1967, when his father took him to see *The Jungle Book* in one of Ghent's movie theatres. Not only was this his first exposure to the magic and drama of cinema as a feature of urban sophistication, but the Disney classic also made a deep impression on the young child because of Uncle Walt's unparalleled mastery of *color* – a dispiriting contrast with the oppressive greyness of a typical mid-sixties Belgian childhood. *The Jungle Book* decisively whetted Van Imschoot's emerging appetite for color, but it also introduced a sense of ambivalence and

complexity into the schematic world of sixties children's literature: how do you square the horrors and terrors of Kipling's original with the seductive, luscious beauty of Disney's graphic art at its zenith? Needless to remind ourselves that the architect of this landmark of graphic arts was an even more troubling knot of contradictions: a master narrator and selfless children's friend, Walt Disney was also a great admirer of Adolf Hitler.

## **X** for X-RAY SPEX

X-Ray Spex is an English punk band who were part of the original first punk wave that washed over England and its immediate environs towards the end of the 1970s – and Jan Van Imschoot was strategically positioned in the moment's front row, ready to soak it all up. X-Ray Spex were fronted by the legendary Poly Styrene (1957-2011), the daughter of a Scottish mother and Somali father – one of the few women to break the glass ceiling of that subculture's homosocial, occasionally misogynistic ethos, and a harbinger of the multicultural society that would come of age as the leading countercultural force in Thatcher's Britain. Bands like X-Ray Spex (and related 2Tone acts such as The Selecter) sought to put into practice what up till then the punk movement had primarily merely preached; they signal the moment when punk grew up and started taking politics seriously, inaugurating the brave new world of a properly politicized youth culture that would go on to decisively and definitively shape both Van Imschoot's world view and conception of art.

## **Y** for YVAN & YVETTE

*Yvan & Yvette* is the title of a diptych from 1996, the subtitle of which reads *The Cinematographic Ciphers*. The first part ("Yvan") is based on a scene from Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944-1958), a visually overwhelming, delirious epic riddled with references to a wide range of masterpieces from western art history – just the way Jan Van Imschoot likes it. The second part ("Yvette") is a paraphrase rather than a direct quote: the personage covering her (?) face with her (?) hand is borrowed from the well-known figure of the damned soul in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, painted for the wall behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel. *Yvan & Yvette* is a programmatic early work presaging the deep and continuous interaction between art and film history that would become such a distinctive conceptual hallmark of Van Imschoot's work.

## **Z** for ZEVENEKEN

Part of today's municipality of Lochristi (total population: 22,621), the little village of Zeveneken (total population: 2334) was an independent *commune* until 1977. It is here that Jan Van Imschoot, who grew up in neighboring Beervelde, went to elementary school – a surprisingly progressive school staffed by younger teachers who first introduced Van Imschoot to the wonders of art. One teacher in particular, Eddy Levis, will forever be etched in the artist's memory, for it is in his class that Van Imschoot for the very first time heard the word "museum", and got to see reproductions of masterpieces by Jan Van Eyck and Rubens. Improbably though it may sound, the journey that led to the present celebration of Jan Van Imschoot's lifework in Belgium's leading museum for contemporary art, really started, more than half a century ago, in the unlikely locale of Zeveneken.