



**New  
Game**

**Vanessa  
Jane  
Phaff**

**emstand**



## New Game

‘To exist is to sketch oneself (*s’esquisser*). One would like to write *s’exquisser*—to open oneself to a form which shows itself in the movement of its uprising (*surgissement*). No one would consent to live if they did not experience this desire—to open oneself to the desire of (letting oneself) being drawn to the outside.’

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure of Drawing*



### The Cut in Speech: Still Life

by Johan Siebers

New game, played differently, played again, another round, perhaps now to different rules. Only, the elision of the definite article in the title signals another reading as well: again, there is new wild prey. Or: a dirty game might have been played that could not be spoken about; *Mundtot*, silenced (“mouth death”), is a gloss that accompanies the work of Vanessa Jane Phaff like an omen. “New game” then acquires the defiantly angry and victorious tone that so many of the figures we meet in this work express.

The polysemy of words opens up an unspoken, unsaid within language, a realm where the voice cannot go but which yet is gestured in the act of speaking. What I say may come to mean something in the act of saying it, somewhere and to someone, but this does not always happen. My speaking is shot through by a cut. I cannot speak if speaking would be to recreate the massive presence of what once was or what I thought I wanted to say, but the impossibility of doing that – a kind of myth





about language – signals an openness in which a different way of saying comes into view. How do I exist in my speech? This is one of the questions that an encounter with the work of Vanessa Jane Phaff may make us think about. It is fundamentally a question of *Seelenwanderung*, *metempsychosis*, or in its verbal form in English, *to metempsychose*: to move from one body to another, as a soul. The precondition for this *Wanderung*, journeying, is, as we know, death. Even the shamanic soul journeying involves a symbolic death or vacating of the body. It seems that there is a hidden link between speech and mortality. Only those who are capable of dying can receive the gift of authentic speech.

The cut of meaning, to give it a name, exists as much within each language as between languages. Hamann remarked in his *Aesthetica in Nuce* (1762): “speaking is translation”. In his essay on drawing, Jean-Luc Nancy goes to the place of the cut of meaning in a reflection on the difference between *dessiner* and to *draw*. The first says *showing* or *indicating*, as in *design* or *designate*, the second says *to pull along* or *to pull out*. It is via the sketch that Nancy is able to create a new word, the neologism *s'exquisser*, with which he brings the two together and finds a way to say what he has to say, literally in his own words. The sketch of ourselves that draws us out into the open of a new life, responds to the desire of life itself, to that which animates the body, we might say. We have arrived at the soul and at the same time at a way of retelling the old, mythical tale of bodies and souls as things such that we can speak a truth with it without subscribing to the myth. We have found a new game.

The use Phaff makes of Christian myths in her iconography corresponds to this dynamic. She does not destruct or critique them other than as a side-effect of using them to develop her own language of the original trespass against the soul, the no and the name of the father; of suffering, resurrection and resurgence. The body becomes the cross on which the soul dies so it may find words and journey on.

Between painting and drawing, the medium of the linocut embodies the inherent translation-character of speech, which exists in its reproducibility and in its reflective character: the lines are literally cut out and drawn out of matter in reverse. Between paint and the drawing pencil, the printing ink allows them to surge up out of the background that remains a void on the canvas or cloth. No other medium could communicate so forcefully and consistently the inner logic of Phaff's work.

We said: all speaking is translating; the voice crosses over an area of speechlessness to arrive at the possibility of saying. A line surges up that shows and indicates a new game; the whole of this ensemble may be given the name *form*, in the way in which another old strand of by now mythical thinking spoke of the soul as the form of the body.





Form here becomes the way in which life may be made liveable, against the trauma of suffering just as the taboo was a form that had made life possible before it was transgressed and rendered us speechless, *mundtot*. Now we see: to translate is to metempsychose. We may begin to understand how we exist in speech, soul-journeying to struggle for a voice.

#### The Cut in the Body: Movies

*Reap and sow*, 2018 (see Figure 1). Against the black and white background of a repetitively moving chess board, the headless, pink, wavering shape of a human body, mere flesh, signalled more than represented, symmetrically cut in half along the division that runs through the middle of the chess board. Pinned down, or up, with arms and legs spread out, the body is relentlessly being dragged to and fro, upper and lower part in opposed directions, as in a *danse macabre* or a puppet show. Ballet in Kafka's Penal Colony might look like this. There is no illusion here: if soul is the unity or harmony of life, we are in the realm of discord and death. Phaff's *Reap and sow*, a moving projection in a darkened space that we now see on a video screen, as witnesses peeking in unseen, counteracts the gaze of the viewer of Duchamp's *Étants Donnés*, the artist's last work and last surprise, made in secret while the artist cloaked himself in the guise of the professional chess player. The female body in Duchamp's work hovers between life and death, a pale headless body cast down in the grass, legs spread open, but holding up a gas light with her left arm, an artificial Pentecostal fiery tongue (is it even a symbol of spirit?) but a sure sign of life, if the rest of the scene did not look so ghostly. Phaff's commentary is on the one hand a clear rejoinder to the male gaze of Duchamp's work. But, as the linocuts, it is more. We can see the dancer of death as a triumphant figure. What cut her in half also cut the game that was being played in half. Along the furrow of speechlessness, the pleasure of the line acquires a new potency, now owned by the dancer who becomes a tight-rope walker over the abyss of silence, journeying towards a new game and a new speech. The resurgence or resurrection that figures as a constant motif in Phaff's work resides here in the very movement of the installation itself. That movement, which is the movement of life, traverses the silence of death and draws us, in Nancy's words, to the outside of the artwork, into a new game. As a drawing-out, this installation points towards the pleasure of drawing. The viewers themselves are set onto a course of metempsychosis and come to realise that death is the precondition of authentic speech, and of authentic life. When I become a viewer of this work, my body is cut in half, I am

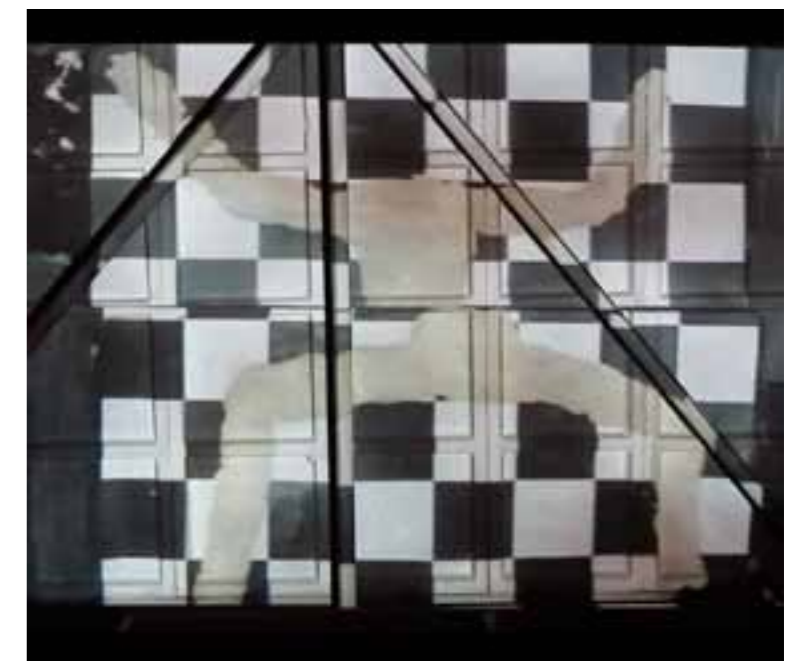


Fig. 1

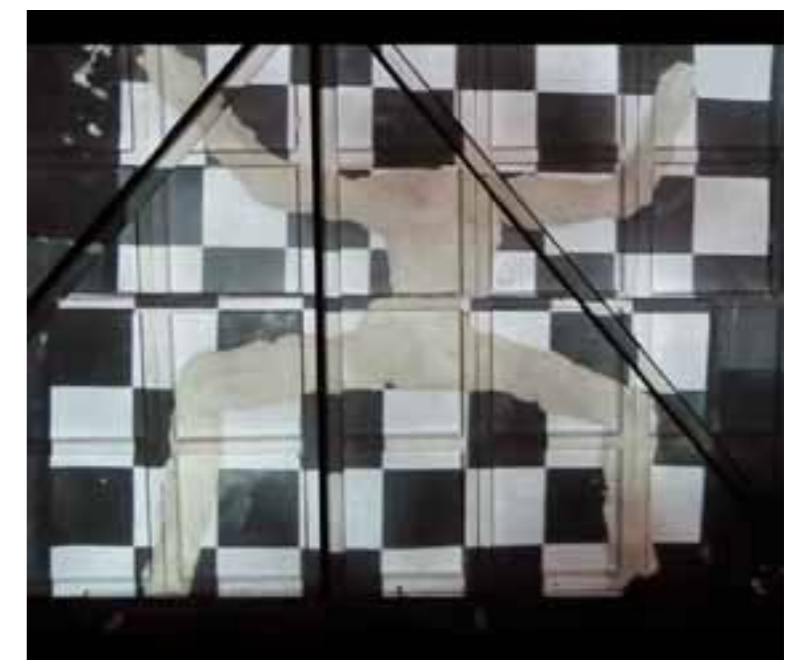




Fig. 2

made to dance, I turn back on myself and find a way out, along the lines of my desire. The work makes life possible because I now have found and seized the power to consent to it.

### The Woodcut

With the role of wood in this work, we strike upon an unashamedly symbolist vein in Phaff's universe. The wood is the wood of the cross, of the family table in *Vehicle*, 2019 (see Figure 2), at which the game is played, the wood of the phallus, the wood of the board game and its amorphous pieces, the wood of the paradisiacal apple tree, the tree of life, and the wood that transforms into paper and books. Wood grows but as cut, it is dead, it becomes a growth and is made into the raw material for shape. The body as fragmented is depicted as wooden, but because of its wooden character it can also be reassembled and made new, as in *New Game*, 2019 (see Figure 3), in which the girl staring at us from out of the speechless void of her eyes, victoriously carries Tell's apple of freedom on her head while her shorts mimic the chess board in front of her casually spread legs, altogether different from Duchamp, which hail a new age as her reassembled, disproportionately grown arm tokens potency without being bothered to hold up a light. The growth rings of the slice of tree trunk on the table remind us of a dart board and signal new game as a new hunt, or perhaps they remind us of the holy ire in Blake's line that "wounded by arrowy smarts" the business of our life is "to pick out the heads of the darts". The commentary on life becomes a commentary on modernist art via the intertextual references to Duchamp, which we will only notice if we have had a look at the whole body of work, but is here also reinforced by the tiles on the table which remind of Picasso's doves of peace. The soul of the image moves from insatiable desire on the left to resolve and resurrection on the right, but no peace is found, just a new way to live and speak.

*Untitled*, 2019 (see Figure 4) brings all the elements we have looked at together in an image in which the Christian mytho-logic of sin, suffering, death and resurrection leads to the birth of the work of art. The viewer commits the original sin of witnessing, and witnessing is here causing, the death of the girl by her own hand, with a knife that echoes the cross on the other side of the frame, as a foreboding of what is to come. The dead body, like the ones we saw in the other works, remains without a head and face, but the other figures share one face, and we can assume that they all are the same person, the same soul on its wanderings. The scene is set on a chess board; its figures as so many pieces being pushed around on it; the girl as angel pulls aside a veil that kept out of view what was happening but is now exposed. In parallel with the veil, she pushes back



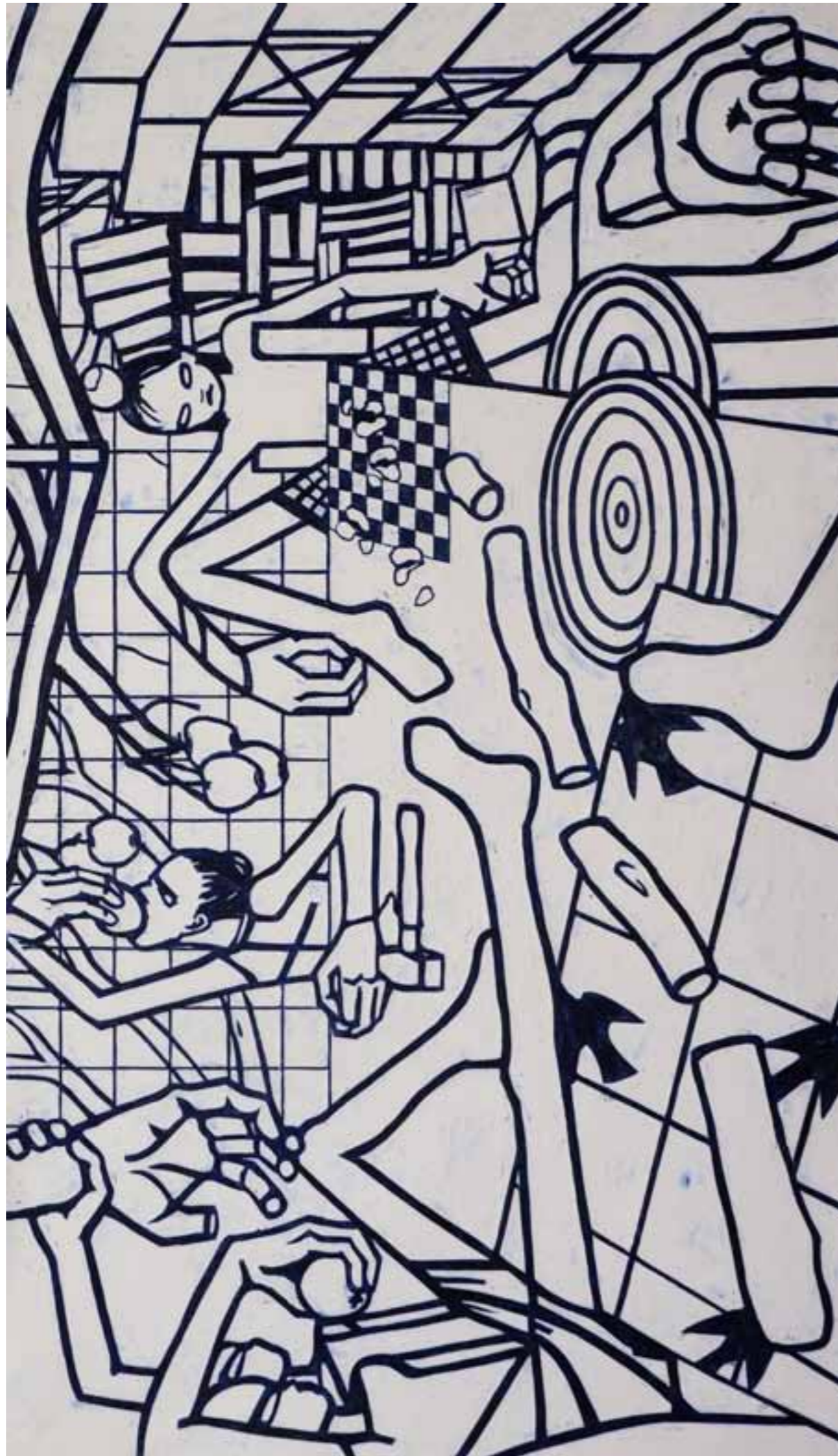


Fig. 3

the skin of the central figure in the place where Christ's fifth and final holy wound was. The angel's arm, with which she exposes the scene, is as powerfully enlarged as the arm of the central figure, with which she holds up a *work*, an art work, between her legs as if she is giving birth to it, showing by blocking the gaze that Duchamp's viewer indulged in. The work is the illuminating lamp here, and it is the actual resurrection and resurgence of the human who died and is reborn, put herself together again in a new way, as artist in a doubled life, drawn outside, here in the doubling of the image that shows the artwork as transcendent. Hamann said "speaking is translation". He continued: "from an angel's tongue into a human tongue". The little angel of childhood has become her own subject. In Phaff's work a completely individual way of tying a life together meets us and we can follow her lead in our own way, as we allow ourselves to be drawn to the outside of human existence. The journey of the soul, the metempsychosis, is literally psychotic. In the artistic psychosis lies the possibility of speech. The faces in this work are silent, communicating to us from the unspeakable void, one eye open but empty, the other eye covered. They are speechless and blind, Tiresian, oedipal figures that show, designate, in drawing out the work of art, what makes having a voice possible. They mutely and unwaveringly cut out the shit that allows the paradoxes and contradictions of desire to inform and unfold into the pleasure of the moving line.

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Fig. 4







Ode to God (1917)  
by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven







CV Vanessa Jane Pfaff  
Solo exhibitions (selection): Lentos Kunstmuseum/  
Linz (AT), Museum of Modern Art/Arnhem (NL), CASM/  
Barcelona (ES), Laurent Delaye Gallery/London (GB),  
I-20 Gallery/New York (US), Reuten Gallery/Amsterdam  
(NL), Künstlerhaus Bethanien/Berlin (DE) (as part of artist  
residency program Mondriaan Fund (NL))

Group exhibitions (selection.): Institut Néerlandais/Paris  
(FR), New Art Gallery/Walsall (GB), Galerie K&S/Berlin  
(DE), Ciudad Grupo Santander/Madrid (ES), Museum of  
Modern Art/Arnhem (NL), Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefab-  
rik/Odense (DK), Talbot Rice University Gallery/Edinburgh  
(GB), Solvberget/Stavanger (NO), Palazzo Re Rebaud-  
engo/Guarene (IT), MOCA DC/Washington (US), Haines  
Gallery/San Francisco (US), Armand Hammer Museum of  
Art and Cultural Center/Los Angeles (US), Witte de With/  
Rotterdam (NL), W139/Amsterdam (NL), Inmo Gallery/  
Los Angeles (US), Collectie de Groen/Arnhem (NL),  
Whitechapel Art Gallery/London (GB), Museum of Con-  
temporary Art/Chicago (US), Center for Contemporary  
Art/Kiev (UA), Centrale Electrico do Freixo/Porto (PT)

Art fairs (selection): The Armory Show/New York (US),  
Artforum/Berlin (DE), Artissima/Turin (IT), Art Fiera/Bolo-  
gna (IT), ARCO/Madrid (ES), Chelsea Art/New York (US),  
Gramercy Art Fair/New York (US), Art Brussels (BE)

Collections (selection): Centraal Museum/Utrecht (NL),  
Merkx+Girod/Amsterdam (NL), Dimitri Gigourtakis/Athene  
(GR), Bouwfonds/Hoevelaken (NL), Gemeentemuseum/  
The Hague (NL), Museum of Modern Art/Arnhem (NL),  
Lentos Kunstmuseum/Linz (AT), Andy Spade/New York  
(US), Museum Boijmans van Beuningen/Rotterdam (NL),  
De Heus-Zomer/Barneveld (NL), ABN AMRO/Amsterdam  
(NL), SCHUNCK/Heerlen (NL), Teylers Museum/Haarlem  
(NL), AMC/Amsterdam (NL), LUMC/Leiden (NL), Fondazi-  
one Sandretto Re Rebaudengo/Turin (IT), Galleria d'Arte  
Moderna e Contemporanea Palazzo Forti/Verona (IT)

Member of artist collective Friendly Stalking

This magazine appears with 'NEW GAME', a solo  
exhibition by Vanessa Jane Phaff. NEW GAME  
will take place from 10 October to 24 November  
2019 at Omstand and is part of the Gelderland  
Biennial 2019, a production of Museum Arnhem  
and Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen. Plaatsmaken  
was selected to make a proposal and substantive  
choices for the Gelderland Biennial 2019, as well  
as doing the project management and production.  
They invited Omstand to make an independent,  
autonomous contribution as part of the Gelderland  
Biennial 2019. This contribution takes the form  
of NEW GAME. Omstand curators are Lieven  
Hendriks and Rob Groot Zevert. Magazine picture  
editing Vanessa Jane Pfaff and Rolf Engelen.

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