

# Vincent Meessen. Blues Klair

Michèle Thériault



These texts accompany  
the exhibition

**Vincent Meessen.  
Blues Klair**

Curator  
Michèle Thériault

November 17, 2018 –  
February 23, 2019

**Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery**

## Works

1. *K-Variable, 2018*  
Vinyl lettering in Belgika font  
Courtesy of the artist

Amerikkkkk...kkkkanada is visible as an inscription outside the exhibition as a kind of preface to its experience. This port-manteau letter is a variable that can extend its size to adapt to its mural context; “politiKs” turns into “poetiKs” and vice-versa. A variable in the exhibition or the exhibition as variable. K as a mutable, shifting identity in the making. K for Kain, KTP, Amerika, Ku Klux Klan, Kanata, MoKum, Kandinsky, Kafka, Klossowski, Kiff, Kowass, Blues Klair, Monsieur K, Koderre.

2. *Ultramarine, 2018*  
Video and textile installation  
with sound  
42 min. 46 sec.  
Courtesy of the artist

Disrupting the Eurocentric logic of historiography as well as that of museum classifications, *Ultramarine* sets a constellation of objects into motion, exposing their intertwined histories. The immersive experience of colour—a living, textured, spectral and polymorphic substance—is here rendered inseparable from its political component and from cinema as a magical practice. The film is conceived as a kind of “narrated exhibition” featuring Kain the Poet (KTP), the African-American poet and performer, part of the Black Arts Movement at the end of the 60s and creator of the mythic album *Blue Guerilla*. He colours history through spoken word, alluding to his own exile blues in Amsterdam while the drummer Lander Gyselinck improvises alongside.

3. 21st Century, 2018  
Digital inkjet print printed on blueback paper  
Courtesy of the artist
4. Discordia, 2018  
Digital inkjet prints on archival and photographic paper, flyers  
Courtesy of the artist

The Black American militant playwright and poet LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka author of *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963) and one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement and the younger poet and performer Gylan Kain, each developed artistic responses to the struggles for civil recognition by Blacks in the mid to later 1960s by integrating in their work the life-affirming, politically engaging and uncompromising language of Black Power.

In 1968, six Caribbean students in Montreal, targets of discrimination at Sir George Williams University (Concordia University), ignited an uprising and occupation that ended in violence. Emancipatory movements and discourse in the Caribbean and across the U.S. framed their demands and actions.

Images remain and circulate. An abstract landscape is drawn to occupy our imaginary, constructing a shifting, silent, partial memory of the event. Hundreds of computer cards and paper streaming from the ninth-floor windows of the university's computer center, fluttering in the sky, wrapped around lampposts turned the street into a white landscape. A contrast to the wrecked interiors and jumbles of overturned chairs used as barricades. Police and people massing, standing, staring, waiting, passing, protesting. Remnants of a collective action and individual gestures engaged in a rewriting of the future.

5. New Canadians, 2018  
Map of "None Shall Escape. Radical perspectives in the Caribbean by Fundi, Caribbean Situationist," 1973, reprinted in 1984.  
Courtesy of the artist

In the aftermath of the computer center occupation at Sir George Williams University in 1969, and the arrest and long detainment of the Black participants, protests ensued in a number of Caribbean states from which many of the students came from. In 1973, Jamaican union activist Fundi (Joseph Edwards born Georges Myers) drew a map reporting on the various incidents of rebellion and their causes from the mid-60s to the early-70s. The Sir George Williams incident is mentioned as a moment of solidarity for West Indians. Canadian mining and banking interests were important in the English Caribbean, Guyana's bauxite reserves in particular.

Fundi was a Situationist and his map was accompanied by a poster reproducing excerpts of Raoul Vaneigem's section on "Radical Subjectivity" from his book *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967) as well as Guy Debord's Thesis 90 from his chapter "The Proletariat as Subject and Representation" in his *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Fundi forms a transnational constellation with Patrick Straram, exiled in Montreal since 1958 and a pre-Situationist who in 1960 published *Cahier pour un paysage inventé*, in an attempt to introduce situationist practices in Québec.

6. Postface, 2018  
Digital inkjet prints on archival paper  
Courtesy of the artist

7. Index, 2018

Twenty-six digital inkjet prints on archival paper  
Courtesy of the artist

*Postface* is a theatrical ellipse in which three abstract characters *Personne* (no-one) *et* (and) *les autres* (the others) play out narratives with a constellation of images presented nearby in *Index*. This short play, specifically written for *Blues Klair*, refers to a text from 1960 by the Belgian critic André Frankin entitled "Préface à l'unité scénique : 'Personne et les autres'" published in the fifth issue of the *International situationist*; the typewritten manuscript was found by the artist in the archives of Patrick Straram in Montreal. The "Préface" was also the inspiration for Meessen's project *Personnes et les autres* presented at the Venice Biennale in 2015. The catalogue of the exhibition was accompanied by a first "Postface to the Scenic Unit" in which the same three characters speculate on forgotten and hidden hiStories.

8. Straram's Trama, 2018

Drawing printed on vinyl  
Courtesy of the artist

An undated drawing found in the archives of Patrick Straram realized during his youth and printed in blue, is the motif that occupies two large expanses of walls echoing the dense weave of the textiles surrounding *Ultramarine*. Its play of filled and empty squares, of openings and closures points to obstructions, absences and flow of passages. *Trama* as a surface for projective speculation against which the characters in *Postface* weave stories and correspondences echoed in *Index*'s series of images. *Trama* as a web of citations that generates new lines of flight towards the future.

9. Sans issue, 2018

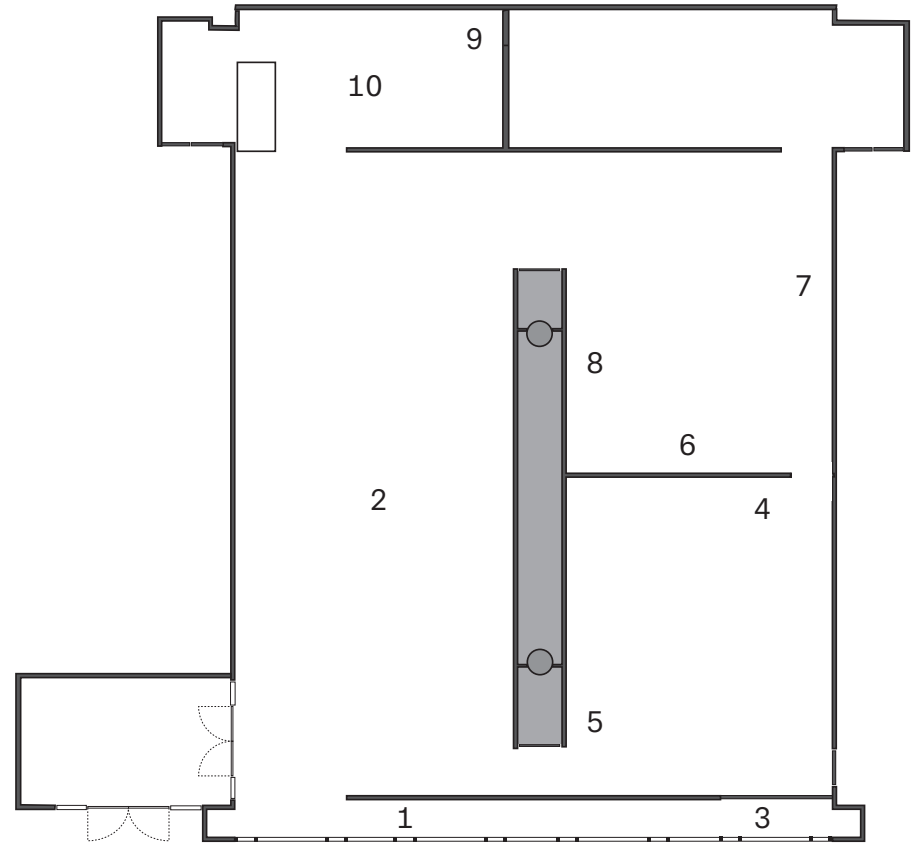
Photograph printed on vinyl  
Courtesy of the artist

Graffiti on a closed door noted by the artist on his daily walk to the Bibliothèque nationale to do research in the archives of Patrick Straram marks the haunting and continued presence of the triple K today in the West.

10. Publications by Patrick Straram

*Ultramarine* is a commission of Le Printemps de Septembre (Toulouse) for its 2018 edition. Produced by Jubilee (Brussels) in collaboration with the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University and The Power Plant (Toronto) with support from VAF (Flanders Audiovisual Fund), Vlaamse Gemeenschap and the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco.

# Exhibition Floor Plan



## Blues Klair

Vincent Meessen is interested in History and in the construction of colonial modernity in the Western imaginary. Through a research process that is both systematic and speculative carried out in archives and on the ground, Meessen seeks to endow the document with a contextual agency. By linking it to people, objects and events whose intersection within a wide variety of media gives rise to new sensible experiences, the exhibition becomes a site for testing History in terms of the present. The resulting trajectories effectively skew received discourses, proposing rich transcultural and political rereadings and rewritings.

At the heart of the exhibition, is the projected film *Ultra-marine*. Within a structure of layered textiles, blue is the chromatic, historical and discursive filter through which a performance by African-American poet Kain unfolds. The famed precursor of hip-hop in the late 60s delivers his “spoken word” as the Belgian percussionist Lander Gyselinck improvises to the flow of his utterances. Throughout the performance various historical objects—astrolabe, mappa mundi, automaton, textile, fresco, film stock—are juxtaposed to Kain’s performance props. They invoke affective retrospections on exile and belonging, slave routes and colonial trade.

These considerations connect with the figure and unfinished literary project *Blues Clair* by the late French writer and passionate critic of jazz and film, Patrick Straram who lived in exile in Montreal from 1958, after having participated in the Lettrist project alongside Guy Debord in Paris. Associating text with the archival document, Meessen weaves a narrative line both textual and formal interlacing these exiled figures. He also brings into the fold, the Sir George Williams Affair, the 1969 racial protest movement led by West Indian students at the University whose repercussions were to be felt all the way back to the Caribbean. The artist draws attention to the

commonality of emancipatory movements from the past and by reigniting their signs and images, endows them with poetry.

Narratives and destinies obscured by History meet in the shared ground of the exhibition, where they mobilize and enter into a dialogue through the forms they take, their inhabitation of space, the sounds that circulate within it, and colour as a sensible lens for reading into the present.

## Vincent Meessen

Vincent Meessen was born in Baltimore, USA, in 1971, and lives and works in Brussels (Belgium). He represented Belgium at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015) with *Personne et les autres*, a collective exhibition with ten artists from four continents. Solo exhibitions include *Ultramarine*, Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse (2018); *Omar en Mai*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris (2018); *Patterns for (Re) cognition* in various iterations at BOZAR, Brussels (2017), Kunsthalle Basel (2015), and KIOSK, Ghent, 2013; *Sire, je suis de l'âtre pays*, WIELS, Brussels (2016), and *Mi ultima vida, An African Grammar After Roland Barthes*, MUAC, Mexico City (2013-14).

Meessen has also participated in the group shows *50 Years after 50 Years of the Bauhaus 1968*, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart (2018); and *Gestures and Archives of the Present, Genealogies of the Future*, Taipei Biennale (2016). His films have been shown in museums among which Kiasma (Helsinki), MUMOK (Vienna), Museo Reina Sofia (Madrid), Lincoln Center (New York) and in film festivals including IFFR (Rotterdam), IDFA (Amsterdam), Image Forum Festival (Tokyo), FESPACO (Ouagadougou). Vincent Meessen is founding member of Jubilee, platform for artistic research and production. *Blues Klair* is the artist's first solo exhibition in Canada and the United States.

## Kain

Gylan Kain, also known under his stage name, Kain the Poet, is a poet, playwright and actor born in Harlem (NYC) and living in Amsterdam. His spoken word practice, in dialogue with Beat culture as much as the rhetoric of Black Power, is among the precursors to hip-hop. He was one of the founding members of the Original Last Poets, created in New York in May 1968. He appeared with colleagues David Nelson and Felipe Luciano in Herbert Danska's film *Right On!* (1970), in which they perform their contestatory poetics on the roofs of Harlem. That same year, Kain released his solo album *Blue Guerilla* on which he delivers incendiary lyrics over a background of free jazz. Through the Seventies, Kain was associated with the East Wind Cultural Center in Harlem and wrote for theatre, notably the plays *Epitaph to a Coagulated Trinity* and *The Urination of Gylan Kain*. At the beginning of the 1980s, he left the United States for Europe. There he collaborated with percussionist Z'ev and the group Electric Barbarians, among others. While long remaining in the shadows, Kain's performances and phrasing, as well as the radicality of his words have influenced numerous artists, notably the group The Prodigy who sampled his voice in their hit *Voodoo People*.

## Lander Gyselincx

Born in 1987, the young Belgian jazz musician and composer, Gyselincx first came to hip-hop before making his mark in the experimental jazz scene. Not only is he a prodigious and inventive drummer, but also a composer with his various projects, including STUFF, a quintet mixing hip-hop, jazz and funk, the duo BeraadGeslagen, LABtrio and Ragini Trio, Sandy, the New York group Howard Peach, Sinister Sister, as well as his solo project, Known Alone. Gyselincx has received numerous prizes, notably three Music Industry Awards in 2015, 2016, and



2017, the Toots Thielemans Jazz Award (2010) and the Flemish Culture Prize for music (2015). He is a doctoral candidate at the Royal Conservatory and Academy of Fine Arts (KASK) in Ghent, where he also resides.

### **The Sir George Williams Affair / The Computer Center Riot**

In April 1968, six Caribbean students—Kennedy Frederick, Allan Brown, Wendell K. Goodin, Douglas Mossop, Terrence Ballantyne, and Rodney James—laid charges with the Dean of Students at Sir George Williams University (now part of Concordia University) of discriminatory practices by biology professor Perry Anderson. With their complaint left unattended by the administration, the students' frustration at this apparent dismissal turned into indignation. Protest ensued over the next year as they mobilized along with numerous white supporters, culminating in an occupation that ended in the destruction of the University's computer centre. The event would become one of the most important incidents of racial conflict on a university campus in Canada, its repercussions extending to politics in the Caribbean.

Rallies by the students reflected the language of liberation and affirmation that accompanied the struggles for emancipation brewing over the past decades and resonated with American Black Power and Pan Africanism. Understood to have fueled the students' determination was the *Congress of Black Writers: Towards the Second Emancipation, the Dynamics of Black Liberation* at McGill between October 11th and 14th 1968, and organized by Rosie Douglas (a prominent Dominican activist involved in the occupation at SGWU) and Elder Thebaud. Speakers included important Caribbean thinkers C.L.R James and Walter Rodney, as well as the charismatic Black Panther, Stokely Carmichael. This followed by the *Hemispheric Conference to End the Vietnam War* that took place

in Montreal from November 29th to December 1st that same year, hosting representatives from the Black Panthers, the Vietnamese FLN, Cuba, Latin America, and Québec's FLP, among others.

The University's attempts to resolve the situation through internal memos, closed door meetings, and an endlessly recomposed committee—all judged biased by the students—only demonstrated how unprepared, confused, and, ultimately, unwilling the administration was to tackle systemic racism. Thirteen hundred students attended the first hearing on January 27th, 1969, but by that time relations between the complainants and the administration were deadlocked. At a second hearing held in the amphitheater of the Henry H.F. Hall Building on January 29th two hundred outraged students decided to occupy the computer center on the building's ninth floor and eventually the faculty lounge on the seventh floor. They held their occupation peacefully for almost two weeks while negotiating with the administration through their lawyer. On the night of February 10th negotiations dramatically broke down. Riot police were called in, a fire broke out in the center, and the computers were destroyed. More than ninety students were arrested, among them forty Black students who were mostly Caribbean and in some cases non-residents of Canada. Some received prison sentences from a few months to a year and half; others were sent back to the Caribbean without finishing their degrees. After the occupation, the University proceeded with an enquiry concluding in Anderson's favour. He continued to teach at the University through the 1970s. However, in the wake of the riot, the University did establish an ombudsman office and set up new procedures to address issues of inequality and discrimination.

Support for the Caribbean students during their battle with the administration came from students at SGWU as well as McGill, particularly from the universities' respective Black students' associations and student newspapers *The Georgian* and the *McGill Daily*. Following the arrests, a defense committee

was formed to help with bail and the long judicial processes. The Union générale des étudiants du Québec among other Québec labour groups also offered their support. Montreal was in the throes of its own struggle for francophone emancipation and no stranger to such activity. Through 1968 a number of parallel mass protests erupted, notably: a strike initiated by CEGEP students demanding access to higher education, the occupation of the École des beaux-arts where students held police at bay for weeks, and a sit-in by francophone McGill students denouncing discriminatory practices. However, the population at large in Montreal disapproved of the students' actions at SGWU and the Black community was divided on the issue, critical of the violence, fearing backlash in their daily lives, and sensing a threat to the acceptance and integration painstakingly acquired.

The Computer Center Riot or the Sir George Williams Affair, as it has been called, remains surprisingly absent or downplayed in official Canadian accounts of emancipation. In the Anglophone Caribbean, notably Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Guyana, news of the riot and the fate of the arrested students led to public demonstrations. The intensity of the occupation, the students' profound commitment, and the violence they were met with was an uncomfortable reminder of the existence of racial inequality and the long history of Black oppression in a country that considered itself free of it. In Québec, the situation was complicated by francophone nationalism, which, in its more radical ethnic partiality, did not embrace, as it should, the growing plurality of its society.

### **Patrick Straram**

Patrick Straram was a French writer, poet, critic, jazz and film aficionado, and radio programmer. Leaving his family at fourteen for a makeshift existence in Paris' bohemia, he developed a profound affinity for American jazz and the literary avant-garde

and befriended many figures of the cultural milieu, among them Ivan Chtcheglov and Guy Debord, the latter who would be, in 1957, one of the founders of the Situationist International (SI) in 1957. Never a member of the SI, Straram was nonetheless committed to its ethos, in particular a focus on daily life as a revolutionary means to liberate oneself from social and political alienation. Errantry characterized his entire life. In the mid-1950s he exiled himself from France, moving first to British Columbia in 1954, to Montreal in 1958, to California in 1968, and back to Montreal in 1970 where he continued his uncompromising life until his early death in 1988, ravaged and indigent.

Upon his arrival, Montreal was on the cusp of a cultural explosion linked to the modernization of Québec society and an opening up to liberatory leftist social and political movements that nourished and defined what is known as The Quiet Revolution. By the mid-60s, literature, film, and art in Montreal were undergoing an energetic redefinition in face of a rising middle-class consumerism that exacerbated a sense of alienation and threatened new forms of reification. Straram embraced the possibilities that such a society offered him. At the periphery of the center, as Montreal certainly was then, where new forms and processes had yet to coalesce, presented unprecedented potential for a figure that was both fascinated by the avant-garde and fiercely committed to living life at the threshold.

Within a year, Straram had joined the cultural scene and befriended a long list of poets, filmmakers and artists, closest to him was filmmaker Gilles Groulx, poet Gaston Miron, and Marxist political theorist Jean-Marc Pottle. He began writing for leftist and countercultural periodicals, among them *Parti pris*, *Hobo-Québec*, *Stratégie*, and *Chroniques* (which he co-founded), as well as the more popular *TV Hebdo* and *MacLean's*. In 1960, he co-founded the Centre d'art de l'Élysée, the first film theater dedicated to new cinema, and later in 1974, the Centre d'essai Le Conventum a unique multidisciplinary center for the arts. At Radio-Canada he hosted programs presenting films, published writings, thinkers, filmmakers,

actors and jazz music (*Blues Clair* aired from 1978 to 1979). He corresponded with French intellectuals, notably Debord, Jean-Luc Godard, Gilles Deleuze, Marguerite Duras, and the editors of *Les Cahiers du cinéma*.

Haunting the bars and taverns of the *Quartier Latin*, Straram was a very visible public figure in Montreal's cultural life. His uncompromising Marxist and anarchist politics made him a contentious figure. Radically eschewing any dogmatism led him to turn his back on many of the periodicals and organizations from which he made a living. By 1968, faced with employment, he left Montreal for California. There he witnessed the Red Power Movement's occupation of Alcatraz and the rise of Black Panthers militancy in the embattled figures of George Jackson and Angela Davis. In 1970, Straram returned with the pseudonym, *le Bison ravi*, adopted in solidarity with Indigenous struggles for land as witnessed in the United States. Assuming his role as a representative of the counterculture, Straram resumed his relentless critique of life by way of a critique that is life itself.

Straram published over a dozen books in a uniquely hybrid genre of collaged citations, enumerations, and first person repetitions that lead to a mix of poetic outpourings and political criticism. On radio, he delivered with the same density, commenting on the fly and weaving together private events and references to friends and thinkers fundamental to him. From 1980 on all of his writing appeared under the header *Blues Clair*. Inseparable from his way of life, Straram's writing practice was utopic and, in many ways, revolutionary in its claim for an authenticity and freedom grounded in the individual's daily existence. In this sense, he remained to the end bound to earlier and more artistic Situationist concepts of the construction of situations, *dérive urbaine*, and *détournement*, all actions which sought to create the conditions for the fulfilment of true and authentic desires by fusing the public and the private and returning to the individual control over his, her, or their own life.

## Credits

Despite the efforts of the artist, copyright owners of some images used in the exhibition have not been found.

### 21st Century and Discordia

Images from the student newspaper *The Paper*, special edition, February 11th, 1969.

Photos credit: 21st Century

Images available on Archive Montréal Website.

Flyers: contact sheets of the computer centre riot at Sir George Williams University. – February 1969.

Records Management and Archives, Concordia University. Photo credit: unknown

*Discordia* performed at Concordia University on November 14th, 2018. Photography: Paul Litherland

### Index

Images from archives and collections of Bibliothèques et Archives nationales du Québec, Fonds Patrick-Straram, various private fonds and collections.

### Straram's Trama

Drawing by Patrick Straram, n. d.

Image from the archives and collections of Bibliothèques et Archives nationales du Québec, Fonds Patrick-Straram.

Design: Karine Cossette

© Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, 2018  
ISBN: 978-2-924316-16-0

Support: Canada Council for the Arts, Conseil des arts et des  
lettres du Québec.

Legal Deposit: Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec  
Library and Archives Canada, 2018

Collaborators (Brussels)

Exhibition coordinator: Émilie Lecouturier

Textile design *Ultramarine*: Diane Steverlynck

Graphic design: Pierre Huyghebaert & Sophie Boiron

English translation of *Postface*: Emiliano Battista

English translation: Simon Brown

French translation: Catherine Barnabé and André Lamarre

Acknowledgements

Katrie Chagnon, Gaël Comeau, Jean-François Côté,  
Hugues Dugas, Éric Fillion, Jean-Marc Piotte, Sylvano Santini,  
Robin Simpson, Anne-Marie Trépanier, Yasmine Tremblay  
and Nadia Trudel.

# LEONARD & BINA ELLEN ART GALLERY

Concordia University

1400 De Maisonneuve Blvd. West, LB-165

Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1M8

[ellen.artgallery@concordia.ca](mailto:ellen.artgallery@concordia.ca)

[ellengallery.concordia.ca](http://ellengallery.concordia.ca)