

**Goele De Bruyn**

*Les Mains Sales/Dirty Hands*

*The Last Remnants of Soap from the Soap Dish*

In 2011, Goele De Bruyn travelled to China (Beijing & Xiamen) on the invitation of Jiawen Hou, artist and artistic director of Casuallocations Art Space in Beijing. One reason for the trip was a new presentation of the work *Les Mains Sales*, which Goele De Bruyn exhibited in 2010 as part of *Le Fabuleux Destin du Quotidiens/The Fabulous Destiny of the Quotidian*, a group exhibition held at MAC's, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Grand Hornu, Belgium.

*Les Mains Sales* has a fairly long history. In 1998, Goele De Bruyn began collecting small remnants of bars of soap that she received from friends and family members. Today, this collection includes about 350 pieces. In response to Jiawen Hou's invitation to present *Les Mains Sales* at Casual Locations Art Space, it seemed incongruous to ship all these little pieces of soap to China, so she decided to remake the entire project. A work that originally took ten years (while the pieces were being collected) now had to be started and completed in just a few weeks. By shifting the emphasis from saving and collecting the pieces of soap to actively looking for them in a country where the artist knows neither the language nor the customs, a completely new work is created. Wandering around Beijing's old neighbourhoods, conversations with local residents, asking people you do not know and whose language you cannot speak for something as personal as an old piece of soap gives this new creation of the work an entirely new socio-anthropological dimension, which was not present in the original version.

In order to collect new scraps of soap, Goele De Bruyn and Jiawen Hou went out into the streets of Beijing. They tried to find ways to frame their requests for old soap. They had long conversations with the people they met and invited the contributors to the exhibition opening. People did not have specific stories to accompany their soap. These were almost abstract, once-functional products whose origins or histories were not relevant – never had been relevant. Soap is simply a functional product for everyone. At the same time, because they had been used every day, the pieces have a very personal and intimate quality. They are dirty and they are clean, and they contain the traces of their former

owners.

For the exhibition, Goele De Bruyn carefully cleaned some of the pieces, bit by bit, yet another very engaged and intimate labour. Layer by layer, the artist washed away dirt and traces of the former owners. Other pieces did not receive extra washing and still retain remnants of sand, hair or lint. Then the bits of soap were arranged by colour and shape and displayed on a table. Alongside the table hung a carefully composed list of all the people who had donated all these little pieces of soap. The result is an installation that is between sculpture and performance. Following the exhibition in Beijing, the same work was also shown in Xiamen.

Treasuring such worn-out, old, utterly mundane and functional material, which nonetheless bears the intimacy of everyday life, then using this material in the larger wholes and contexts of installations and stories is a working method frequently found in the work of Goele De Bruyn. It opens the way to imagining other people's personal secrets, rituals and experiences. The fact that these are moments of loss at the same time that they are moments of enrichment seems inherent in the cleansing character of the material itself. Loss and melancholy generated by absence and expressed in craftsman-like precision have always been central themes in the work of Goele De Bruyn. Now, in *Les Mains Sales*, the performative aspect has come to the fore, making the work a truly aged yet ageless social sculpture.

Els Roelandt