



WIR ÜBERLEBEN DAS LICHT



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Flemish artist Johan Tahon discovered sculpture when he was 15 years old and, as he likes to emphasize, hasn't stopped since. Sculpture became his solace from the unsafe environment of a violent situation at home, and offered him creative ways of coping. He soon discovered the craft of traditional sculpture, including casting and molding, which he still uses to this day.

As he came into adulthood, Tahon had to face another ordeal — this time on a professional level. During his formative years, the climate in the art world was geared towards everything but classical conceptions of art. Those were the heydays of postmodern art, with its fetish for readymades, irony and pop references. Craft, personal expression and spirituality in the arts were seen, at best, as futile — and at worst: hopelessly conservative. Tahon, who enrolled in the art academy in Ghent, which was then a bastion for conceptual art, soon understood he would be on his own.

But art movements are as fleeting as fashion — they come and go with the influential people who shape them. In 1996, Belgian museum director Jan Hoet, famous for prestigious projects like the curation of Documenta IX in Kassel, was standing on the doorstep of Tahon's studio uninvited. The curator, once nicknamed “the Art Pope” for his militant way of promoting artists, was exalted at the sight of Tahon's monumental sculptures. How could he have missed this treasure, just laying there for him to discover a few miles away from his museum. Tahon's works, which quite literally look like archaeological findings, were hiding in plain sight the entire time.

The tide in the art world shifted. Under Hoet's sponsorship, Tahon was now able to rub shoulders with revered artists of international stature, such as Vito Acconci and Sam Taylor-Wood, and started exhibiting worldwide. He was part of a group of artists that was to herald the comeback of figuration and craft in the arts.

In the years that followed, a number of writers took special interest in his work, perhaps partly due to Tahon's own penchant for psychobiography and ancient tales of discovery. Among recent admirers is Till Lindemann, frontman of the German rock band Rammstein, who wrote a number of poems inspired by Tahon's sculptures. Craftsmanship, personal expression and spirituality have indeed taken center stage again.

by Catherine Somz  / photography Sandor Lubbe (portraits Till Lindemann) / photography Gert-Jan van Rooij



“It’s like we are scientists who have become experts at recognizing each other.”



Catherine Somzé: The Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht is exhibiting your work alongside Till Lindemann’s poetry. Whose idea was this?

Johan Tahon: First, I have to say that I’ve been working with poets on a regular basis for the last 20 years. The first time I did this was with Flemish writer Peter Verhelst. It’s strange, perhaps, but there’s a relationship between my work and poetry. There are many poets in Flanders — and elsewhere — who have written about my work. The idea to work with Till Lindemann came about after talking with the creative team at ZOO Magazine. They had worked with Till before, and after talking about my work, they thought our styles — his poems and my sculptures — exhibited a resemblance to one another, and had a very strong connection. After meeting with Till, we connected and became inspired. This is the first time I worked with someone who writes texts but is also famous in the rock scene, so it was very exciting!

CS: Isn’t it unusual for poets to be able to expose themselves on a stage?

JT: There’s a huge difference between the poetry scene and the rock scene. Poetry is more introspective and it’s also made in solitude, whereas music — especially of the kind Till makes — is made as a group. It’s also very interesting for me to see that someone like Till, who is so strong on stage and who is also so amazingly famous, can at the same time write poetry. It’s very moving to see the other side.

CS: In which sense is this paradox meaningful for you?

JT: I love this so much in a person. There’s something intimate about it. It’s beautiful to be able to show a part of yourself that is more fragile. Still, Till’s poetry is very expressive and strong, but it still feels soft compared to his music. It’s much more personal, I guess.

CS: Poets are inspired by your work. Does this also work the other way around?

JT: Absolutely. You have to understand that there is no language for the sculptures that I do — they are largely coming from the unconscious. The making process has to do with archaic things that emerge from deep psychology, so there are no words for this. I am lucky to have the capacity to make these objects, and poets are gifted with the ability to project words onto them, which is very mysterious to me. So, for me, a collaboration with poets is not only good — it is necessary.

CS: How did that play out with Till?

JT: The title of one his poems, *Wir Überleben das Licht*, struck me as very powerful. What does it mean to survive the light? This statement was so inspiring that I felt it should become the title of the whole show at the Bonnefanten Museum. It’s very interesting when contact between people happens through poetry and art. That contact does not have to be personal at all. It’s not like we are best friends and that we spend lots of time together. Our encounters happen through works, symbols and forms. It’s like we are scientists who have become experts at recognizing each other. We’re all doing the same type of human and social research.

CS: In the past, have there been other literary fragments, be they a sentence or a whole book, that have inspired you?

JT: When it comes to titles, there are some words that stay with me and that survive in my unconscious. I do read a lot.

CS: At the beginning of the documentary *Prayer in Clay*, we see you drawing figures in your sketchbook, to which you give names from Greek mythology like Medea and Perseus.

JT: I have to read every day. I really need it. The older I get, the less I watch television. I never watched a lot, but I don’t even watch the news anymore. I’m so bored — it’s so depressing. I don’t want to see it anymore. I don’t want to know.

CS: Later in the documentary, we see you struggling in your studio to make a sculpture, lifting metal bars and heavy materials. This brought to mind another character from Greek mythology: Sisyphus.

JT: Is this the one who rolls a stone up the mountain to see it roll down again? Actually, that is a very good comparison because, let’s face it, when I look at it in a very rational way, it’s not useful to do art. What a stupid thing to do, to keep on making art, to take this weight onto my shoulders — for what? For whom?

CS: But also in a literal sense, tossing and pushing rocks around.

JT: I think about this a lot. There is something... I’m hurting myself.



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“Other human beings do not exist, modernity does not exist, complexity does not exist. Working with materials in this way has something to do with praying — there’s something religious about it.”



Till Lindemann and Johan Tahon, Berlin, November 2017
Photo by Sandor Lubbe

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CS: This is indeed how it looked, although in the original story, Sisyphus was punished by the gods. You seem to choose to inflict this misery upon yourself.

JT: It took me several years to recognize that I was hurting myself all the time. I can say something about this though, without having to talk about my psychological past, which is not a very happy story. I really want to work alone — to be in the studio alone, to be on the margins of society — and I want to try to go as far as I can to do everything by myself. I do ceramics myself. I do bronze myself. Things that seem impossible to do on your own, I still want to do them myself. I get some sort of pleasure in being able to do this. It’s like an archaic feeling — not needing the luxury of all the assistance.

CS: So you don’t have assistants who help you?

JT: Well, I do have assistance now, but they can’t be in my studio all the time. I don’t like that. Or I want them to work in another room. There’s something archaic about being alone with the material — the heavy weights — to find a solution on my own, almost breaking my back. I have the feeling that there is something primitive about it that I love. This feels like being a human being at its maximum.

CS: What is it that you’re after?

JT: It’s not being in love with pain. I am not masochistic. I’m absolutely not masochistic at all! But when I am in the studio, time disappears. Other human beings do not exist, modernity does not exist, complexity does not exist. Working with materials in this way has something to do with praying — there’s something religious about it. It’s about the refusal of contemporary speed and the ease of consumption. It’s about meaningful gestures that require time and attention.

CS: You’ve also mentioned that you feel as if objects absorb that time and effort.

JT: Every day of work that has been done on a sculpture becomes apparent. You can see how it was made — what happened, that it was broken apart and put back together again. Time makes it more human. It almost becomes a living object with all the defaults, the asymmetries and the things that can happen. I want them to be organic.

CS: When you are invited to articulate a discourse around your work, such as now, you always put an emphasis on intuition, whereas what you just said leads me to think you are very well-versed into the conventions of art.

JT: I don’t know. You are the first to point out this tension. But then, of course, after 20 years I would be very stupid if I didn’t know how to make my sculptures.

CS: Who do you consider to be the masters in your field?

JT: Well, Rodin, Lehmbruck, Giacometti...

CS: Do you feel you have become equal to them?

JT: This is exactly my problem. That’s why I always feel the urge to start all over again. I am waiting for that moment — the moment I will feel like a master — which never happens. But there’s also something in me that says that maybe it is just fine if it stays like this. I will keep on working anyway.







wir überleben das licht

ewig gesucht gefunden für ewig
wir überleben das licht
zwei leben ein sterben
ein geist zwei fleisch
zu wasser zu den sternern
zu himmel nicht
nacht unter uns nichts
im wasser glüht getier
für deinen finger
mein herz
sei mir 3 4 und 4

poem by till lindemann



ich

außen bitterbunt
pechschwarz mein geblüt
gelber kuss
farblos meine seele blüht
das rot bekommt der morgentau
und die schenkel der engel
giftgrün für die see
für tiere fettes tiefes blau
schwarz verschenk ich nie
ich verteile farben
die ich den menschen stehle
saug die coloren aus den augen
und schmiere sie auf meine seele

poem by till lindemann



Credits artwork

