



In his new crowd-funded book *Glass: Virtual, Real*, Koen Vanderstukken, artist and studio head of Glass at Sheridan College, writes about the artistic and philosophical values of glass in Western culture. What amazes me about this book is how it reveals and connects many different histories through the piecing together of events, exhibition catalogues, curatorial and scholarly writing, and the voices of artists and craftspeople.

Substantiated by these countless texts and images, Vanderstukken charts the breakthrough of glass in the arts during the modern era, and demonstrates the significance of glass to postmodern and contemporary art. It is not surprising that the author makes important contributions to art discourse as he emphasizes the complexities of glass and the increasing use of it in the digital era as a medium for artistic exploration. A longtime colleague, Koen and I met in his office in the glass blowing studio at Sheridan where we discussed his book.





# The Whole Story

## Writing Glass: Virtual, Real

BY KATHY KRANIAS

RIGHT Hans Op de Beeck,  
Frozen Vanitas, 2015, glass, 82 x 82 x 110 cm.  
PHOTO: STUDIO HANS OP DE BEECK.  
COURTESY OF STUDIO HANS OP DE BEECK AND  
BERENGO STUDIO.

**KATHY KRANIAS:** How do you think your work as an artist and educator has shaped the book?

**KOEN VANDERSTUKKEN:** Um...I think it's almost better to turn the question around: how has the book changed and shaped me as an artist and an educator? Because the book didn't come from either field directly. It was more of a curiosity for me. I always felt that there was a lack of academic content within the glass world. There were always fancy stories about how studio glass started with Harvey Littleton, and so on, and so on. But it never satisfied me as to why glass suddenly became so popular after the 1960s. Apparently glass, or 'artistic glass', appeared out of nothing in the 60s; but things don't appear out of nothing. And it wasn't just one person that all

of a sudden changed the world. So I was more intrigued by that as the starting point.

**KK:** You immigrated to Canada in 2006 from Belgium to work at Sheridan. In what ways has the community here impacted your thinking about contemporary art, craft, and design?

**KV:** Well, a direct impact was one of the conditions to be accepted here at Sheridan. I was required to hold a Master's degree. I didn't have any formal art education, but I had a lot of experience, some diplomas, and a degree in Chemistry...so, in order to be hired, I had to go back to school. I fast-tracked for both my Bachelor's, and then my Master's in Fine Art which included a specialization in glass.

So immediately my focus became more academic and there's no denying that my Master's studies in particular had a great impact on my thinking about these things, much more than the environment here, which is more practice oriented and less academic than in Europe. So in that sense it was challenging and exciting for me to see how I could deal with the academic knowledge and incorporate it into the existing situation here without neglecting the strength of the studio practice based program.

**KK:** And how has your transatlantic network supported the development of your ideas...about craft, art, and the book?

**KV:** Mhmm. Well, it was obviously an advantage that I got to see both worlds. I practiced as an artist in Europe for twenty years or so; it was my main market. I travelled all over Europe attending conferences and exhibits and all that. And I was less familiar with North America. So when I arrived here, I obviously knew the big names but I wasn't necessarily familiar with what was going on and the nature of the social relationships. So by living here I got more in tune with that, and it was a big advantage. I saw both perspectives and I was able to get a more informed opinion about things.

**KK:** In the book you delve deeply into the international Studio Glass Movement beginning in the 60s, moving of course into the 70s and 80s. Simultaneously you talk about the involvement of postmodern artists with glass and you single out the Glass '86 symposium in the Netherlands, which brought together artists and craftspeople. You also quote several artists who identify that experience as influencing their ideas and widening their range. Do you think this sort of intermingling and cross-pollination happened in other media within the broader context of the Studio Craft Movement?

**KV:** I think there must have been similar examples in pretty much every craft medium. Um, I cannot specifically pinpoint any, but I think in most other craft disciplines there is a much longer tradition of craftspeople working together with artists, where artists used craft media, if you can even say it like that - I think it's foolish to make that distinction that way, but there were plenty of artists that worked with clay, for instance. Whether they baked it or not, or whether it was just a starting point to cast bronze, I think is not relevant. They were working with the medium, as such. And I'm sure that several others worked with skilled craftspeople that would make the sculptures for them. The same goes for stone carving, which has been done for hundreds of years, where artists worked together with craftspeople. I think glass was one of the last media where this happened. And the reason, which I mentioned in the beginning of the book, was because glass was much more complex than most other media. Especially the

aspects of hot glass. Also, it was very inaccessible because it was done in production-type, industrial situations. Except for engraving and other decoration techniques, which could be done at home in studios.

**KK:** You say that the breakthrough of glass in the arts originated in practice in the modernist tradition with Marcel Duchamp. I think that's a really important insight. Could you talk about that?

**KV:** I think it is indeed with Duchamp that you have that breakthrough...I consider Duchamp the first artist to use glass in a totally new way. A non-decorative way. And he used it for its intrinsic qualities.

Yes, so that's part of modernism, but it depends a little on which art critic you follow....According to Clement Greenberg, that was not part of modernism, but according to many others, it was. I refer to Paul Greenhalgh's book which makes the distinction between 'idealist modernism' and 'reportage and critical modernism.' It's no coincidence that Duchamp is part of the critical movement and not within the idealist movement of modernism. Within the modernism of Greenberg there is little or no glass, only functional glass. But it's also no coincidence that many people, and I don't necessarily agree with them, see critical modernism as a kind of pre-postmodernism. Right?

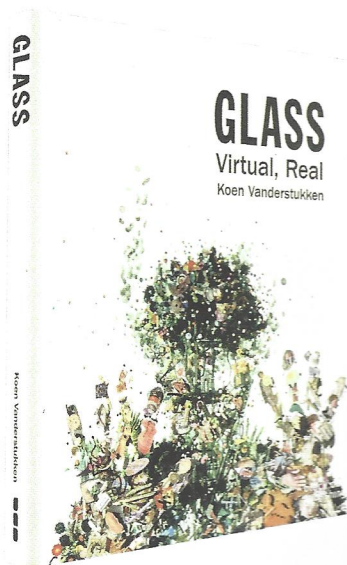
**KK:** Yes, in the 1920s.

**KV:** Yeah. So they see Dadaism as the beginning of postmodernism, or conceptual art, or that kind of thing.

**KK:** The radical critique...

**KV:** Yes, so whether you agree with that or not I don't think is even relevant, but it is relevant that glass enters within that critical discourse. Which again, was all about questioning things, questioning reality, questioning social categorization-that kind of stuff. Which is exactly what I use as an argument for the breakthrough of glass in the 50's and 60's with the rise of postmodernism. The social was a catalyst, because, indeed, people started to question things. They didn't believe in understanding anymore. They didn't believe that we had all the knowledge. Everything became a lot more undefined and if you want to talk about a medium that represents that, and is so dualistic, then it is glass.

**KK:** Artists today are working in post-disciplinary ways, creating hybrid art forms that often interact with the environment. In the book you foreground two glass artists who do this...the Canadian Sarah Hall, and American James Carpenter. You explain that Carpenter's work is neither sculpture nor architecture in the traditional sense, and it has a new quality which is cinematic...Carpenter approaches the medium in a novel way....Why did you choose to conclude your book with a discussion of his work?



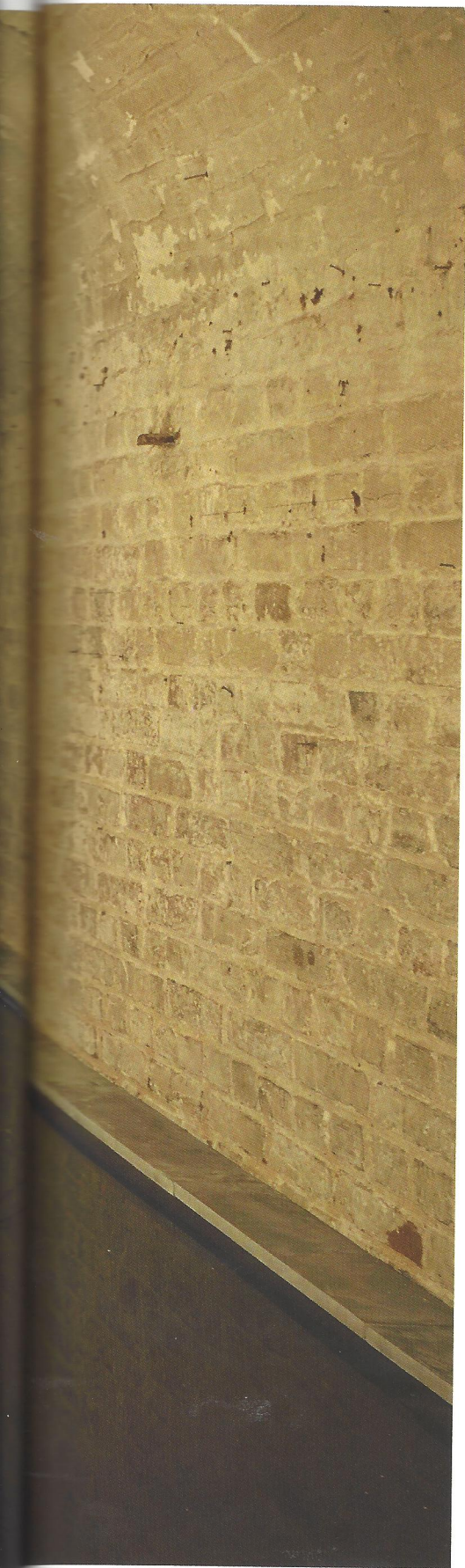












LEFT **Koen Vanmechelen**, installation view from *Darwin's Dream* at the Crypt Gallery, St Pancras Church, London, 2014.  
PHOTO: STEPHEN WHITE. KOEN VANMECHELEN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

FOREGROUND: *Coming World—C.C.P.*, 2014, glass eggs, branches and stainless steel, 150 × 150 × 50 cm.

BACKGROUND: *Turbulence—C.C.P.*, 2014, aluminium frame, textile and LED light box, 90 × 120 × 3.8 cm.

**KV:** Because I think it was a very good example of, like you said, getting away from the material yet using the material...It's the whole build-up of the book. What I am trying to bring forward is based on the fact that glass as a medium is really at the edge of reality and virtuality. It's really walking that fine line; it's basically the main interface between reality and virtuality. And so, we are very familiar with the material aspects of the medium, we're very familiar with virtual images in our computers, you name it, but we're not necessarily familiar with that interface between the two, right? How one acts as an interface to the other, and what that relationship means on the level of the medium itself. And I thought that James Carpenter's work was probably a good example to explain it in a more visual way. I was hoping to make it a little more accessible to a broader audience... it's kind of a nice completion of the theory I was trying to build up. It encapsulates the whole thing in a very comprehensible way, I think.

**KK:** And highly accessible too. I mean it really makes sense because it's out in the environment. It's not sequestered in a gallery...

**KV:** Yeah, not in a gallery or in a specific room. A very stand alone, prominent, body of work.

**KK:** You write about glass from an interdisciplinary perspective; through social history, science, philosophy, art, and art history. Why did you use this method and what literature, if any, led you to take this particular approach?

**KV:** It was a natural conclusion I came to. I strongly believe that when you look at art, whether it's contemporary or historical, you cannot disassociate it from its social environment and its historical background. Things just don't pop up. They grow out of something else. And so, if you really want to understand what is happening here and now, you have to understand where it's coming from. You have to understand history. But you also have to understand the context. You have to understand the social connections and what that means.

Glass is a complex medium on a scientific level so it was almost impossible not to incorporate that as well. Part of the reason why I make the statements that I do is because the underlying factor is quite often the lack of understanding at a scientific level. We all think that we understand glass. And it's such a common, everyday material. We all know how to use it. But in its intrinsic value, very few people really understand what glass is. And, I think, if you want to talk about what inspires glass or what inspires artists to use glass, or understand why, within a society, there is more acceptance for the glass medium within its arts, then you really have to see the whole picture. You have to be able to analyze 'Okay, which things did change? And would that have something to do with it?--And can I make those links or not?' Which would be impossible if you don't have the whole picture...and that's what happens in most other literature. That's what got me all the time, that it was never the whole story. ■