



WIM WAUMAN x BLAUWHAUS

## *The Cocoonery of Pandora, 2021*

Semi-permanent installation/composition in the library  
of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp

### VISION/STATEMENT (Sept 2021)

#### (Introduction)

Why are we here? Today? Well, I am here, because I finally managed to make something ‘useful’, something which might instigate connections, something like a platform to be shared with students and with my peers.

And I am here today because I was invited to explain what this new long-term intervention represents. Why it is named ‘*The Cocoonery of Pandora*’; what’s relevant about the elements and objects it (already) contains; and what it might become...

*The Cocoonery of Pandora* consists of 3 similar (nearly empty) bookcases in birch plywood, a small writing desk (with room for a SONY Bluetooth turntable), a vintage corner bench with storage capacity and a handful of objects. The top surfaces of all main components were covered with luxurious decorative composite veneer by the Italian company Alpi and 3 precious (expensive) sheets of natural ‘Ziricote’ veneer. The ‘Ziricote’ or more scientifically *Cordia dodecandra* is - by the way - a small tree in the “borage” or “forget-me-not” family.

The installation features 10 recto-verso engraved panels which divide the shelves and indicate the designated compartments for the 4 research domains, a section for ‘Kunsten Inclusief’ and a section for ‘Track Report’ publications. Furthermore, they are decorated with a selection of Blauwhaussymbols, stamps and illustrations (made in close collaboration with Isabel Bouttens of Blauwhaus); a bunch load of Blauwhaus ‘concept keys’ (such as **#MakingisConnecting**, **#AirCrafts** or **#DeepResearch**); and some Toverspraak\* citations from the ongoing series of Blauwblad publications (which is also made available for consultation in the installation). Additionally, the installation holds a selection of objects (including a mechanical typewriter, a make-up mirror ‘uilenpiegel’, a scallop shell with peanuts and a balalaika instrument), and it will soon host a most peculiar, discarded library book retitled ‘Pandora’.

In its totality, I like to think of its compositional structure as a puzzle, an attractive enigma perhaps, giving expression to the nature of artistic research and research in general; as a “gift” and symbolical Blauwhaus ‘landmark’ or long-term intervention in the Academy library. However, the installation also serves a very concrete purpose. Today it resembles “a nearly empty box” holding but the potential of hope, carrying within its structure an open invitation addressed at the different research groups to add content. To add a curated selection of books which are made available to students, peers, and fellow researchers. It represents an initiative; a ‘gift’ to the academy; a shared platform for self-cultivation, for the preservation of knowledge; for metamorphosis.

So why is the installation/intervention/artwork named ‘The Cocoonery of Pandora’ and not just simply ‘research library’ or ‘research corner’? What message does its title hold? This is exactly where my own artistic research, artistic practice, and the complex, lyrical, mythical and imaginative world of Blauwhaus, with its focus on storytelling, intertextual references, on **#AirCrafts** and/or **#DeepResearch** comes into play. So next let’s try to elaborate on the lesson and added artistic value which the title of this piece should represent.

## Cocoonery – safe place for growth, cultivation and metamorphosis

A **cocoonery** is defined as “a building or apartment for silkworms, when feeding and forming cocoons.” It is a place, a structured and functional manufacture for harvesting silk: a luxury fabric in the fashion world and considered one of the finest fibres globally. Silk is made from natural cocoon protein fibres spun by silkworms before becoming moths. The ‘cocoon’ is like a protective casing or shell: a place of isolation. Of growth. Of metamorphosis.

This (and by extension the behaviour of ‘cocooning’) recalls the late 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian ‘**studiolo**’, usually a small, secluded room (in a palace) for quiet study, contemplation, meditation, and activities dedicated to cultural interests. It’s a place for self-cultivation. An ideal place for intellectuals, art patrons, mystics, and monks; and by extension for artists and scholars to conduct (artistic) research.

Furthermore, the *studiolo* is a predecessor of the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Wunderkammer*, housing encyclopaedic collections of precious and rare objects (including *naturalia*, art, manuscripts, and books). Hence the addition to our *Cocoonery* of a few objects:

(1) The make-up **mirror** ‘Uilenspiegel’ - representing reflection and introspection, distortion, and transformation of the visible realm - allows for you to read the poetic and nonsensical sentence which was engraved (in reverse) on the back of the Track Report subdividing panel: “*Als vingers konden spreken, schreven ze vast een gevlengeld gebaar*”.

(2) The scallop **shell** - associated with pilgrims and a symbol of direction - is filled with (3) **peanuts** (aardnoten or apennoten). At Blauwhaus we call them Voetnootjes\* (footnuts, as in ‘footnotes’ but also the ‘endnotes’ in Blauwblad – our ongoing series of publications - are called “footnuts”). Endnotes and footnotes form an essential aspect, a tool of academic writing but our Voetnootjes\* also hint at the idiom “If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys” and the *#ApesandCrafts* project (2018) from which Blauwhaus was born.

And then there is the mechanical **typewriter** (4) which miraculously appeared in the library together with an old **balalaika** (5). As if someone foresaw that the *Cocoonery* would benefit from the thoughtful addition of such noble instruments. We had already displayed several typewriters in our Blauwhaus workspaces before (actually, we named one of them Hermes, after the ancient Greek herald of the gods). We usually “feed” the machine with blue paper and a special vintage type of blue carbon copy sheets (6) (with an archer and ‘Magicrite’ printed on them). Recently we’ve taken an interest in old Occitan verses, troubadours, and songs. The citation *Don lo cavecs vos abura* – “my lord, the owl enchants you” – on one of the panels comes from Marcabru (*L’autrier jost’una sebissa*, ca 1275). You will be able to read more about it in our upcoming Blauwblad publication.

If I’d knew how to produce something which sounds like music on a balalaika, I’d probably had written a song to sing and play for you right now. I’ve put some strings on it, sensitive ones, and added a “**tea tag**” with a message (7): “The unknown has to be trusted”. “A valuable lesson for them fellow-researchers”, I presumed.

And finally, the installation features a unique work of my ‘Genii Out of the Bottle’ series (8), hinting at the ‘plagues’ or “blessings and good spirits” which were released from ‘Pandora’s box’ in which Hope prevails.

This being said, before getting into the figure of Pandora, I finally want to add that the ‘*Cocoonery*’ was first named the “Coconnerie van Pandora” - spelled with one ‘o’ and two n’s and didn’t end with a *-nye* (upsilon) but with *-ie* and stemmed from merging the cocoon with the French “Cochonnerie” or pig stable. This would have been another (hidden) playful reference at the Orwellian character of Snowball reappearing in our Blauwhausstories as the attribute of Sint Anthony; and at the expression ‘pearls before swine’ which often *eylaes*\* eloquently describes what it is that we are making. But I have a stubborn tendency to stretch things just a bit too far, so we kept it a tiny bit simpler. But all of this entirely on the side and just to illustrate how everything I try to make, tell, sell, and share with - and through - Blauwhaus is interconnected and full of self-referential marks and clues which only become evident (or gain relevance) after closer inspection. It requires research. And for this matter, I would highly recommend reading Blauwblad to try to unravel and grasp what Blauwhaus represents, which opportunities it holds and what on earth we try to achieve.

## Pandora – a room for interpretations



Let's take a closer look at the Greek figure and multi-layered myth of **Pandora** who's name could be interpreted as either "all-given" or as "all-giving", and allow ourselves for a world of shifting interpretations, and (deliberate?) demonisation processes to unfold.

The first interpretation "all-given" is supported by the account of her story by Hesiod who wrote the earliest version of the Pandora myth (resp. in *Theogony* and *Works and Days*) and who described and portrayed Pandora as a deceptive female creature, "**a beautiful evil**", a "first woman" who was sent *down* from Mount Olympus by an angry Zeus as a punishment and a torment to humankind. This is the theodic creationism narrative "with the box (filled with plagues)" - the "box" which actually was a "jar" (wrongly translated by Erasmus as "box"). It is the story which is commonly told and taught.

However, the British classical scholar and linguist Jane Ellen Harrison (born in 1850 - credited with being the first woman to obtain a post in England as a 'career academic') claimed to have found evidence of a deliberate shift from matriarchy to patriarchy in Greek culture (and particularly in the patriarchal mythology of Hesiod). She argues that the figure of Pandora initially was depicted (on vases) as an "all-giving" goddess, rising *up* from the Earth – "**she is the Earth**": the giver of all things. Harrison claimed that the life-bringing goddess Pandora was eclipsed by the death bringing human Pandora, a handiwork of (male) Olympian Zeus and an anti-feminist fable 'invented' by Hesiod.

"Evidence" even suggests that Pandora herself was the "jar" – the creative/procreative womb, the holy vessel or grail. In Ancient Greece jars commonly bore images of women's uterus. The ancient myth of Pandora never settled into one accepted version. It was never agreed to have a single interpretation. The jar became a goddess and the goddess fell from grace and became a 'first woman', an evil creature or witch with a 'jar' (filled with evil) which later became a 'box'. Considering these facts, I would like to propose replacing Pandora's attribute – being a container, a vessel, 'box' or 'jar'- by a *cornucopia* (a 'horn of plenty', filled with gifts, verze vruchten\*, the 'fruit of nature'). To think of Pandora as a vessel, a concept, or even as a library holding knowledge and the fruits of research, of labour. To help reinvigorate her original, most honourable position as an Earth goddess, giver of all thing, of good things. Blessings.

Taking into account that the ambivalent figure of Pandora recalls 'Mother Earth' holding gifts - or the horn of plenty - we have found in her a more than suitable patroness for this installation. Hence, as a final inauguration ritual, I would like to offer her a "first book". A very special book, a used and previously discarded book with an uncertain destiny. With an open end.



## Pandora – a book ‘returned to sender’

On a sunny day in August 2021, Dr. Wim Wauman, creator of the “*Cocoonery of Pandora*” and founder of the Blauwhaus ‘Recreational Art Center’ rescued this book by David Douglas Duncan, entitled ‘*Toverwerelden van Fantasie*’ (EN: ‘*Magic Worlds of Fantasy*’). A book which was being discarded from the academy library in the summer of 2021, liberated by the librarian Ine Boogmans by labelling it a ‘free book’ (and by making it available for take-away by anyone who would take an interest in it).

Dr. Wim Wauman, took the book home, marked the book with a Blauwhaus stamp containing the message ‘Return to Sender’ (designed in collaboration with Isabel Bouttens). He retitled this book ‘Pandora’ and reinserted it in the library as a fixed component of the ‘Cocoonery of Pandora’ ensemble, with the intention to invite all researchers (and former researchers) associated with the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, and by extension all artists, makers or writers associated with Blauwhaus (or any other research related collective), to add a clever mark, a trace, a drawing, a transformation, or to leave a comment on in the book before placing it back into the *Cocoonery* for future preservation.

By doing so, this particular book can no longer be ignored or deemed ‘no longer useful’. To the contrary, it will illustrate a collective effort to add value to a discarded object, and by extension, to help repair the image of a demonized Earth goddess named Pandora, and it will gradually allow for our individual ideas to connect over time. For them to grow. For an artefact to be shared and eventually, to become OURS. Because

*#MakingisConnecting* and “*One can’t judge a book, or a set of book cases, (merely) by its cover*”.



## Thanks

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