

## SPONTANEOUS DOGMATISM

Dieter Roelstraete interviews Pieter Vermeersch

**My first question has to do with chronology, i.e. with the development of your work. The “installation” *Off The Hook* (summer 2000, Ghent) marked a break in your career as a painter. Roughly put, one could say that the work preceding *Off The Hook* belonged to “traditional” painting: two-dimensional, in a certain sense figurative, in line with the flatness of the pictorial surface. But then your work acquires the sculptural qualities of an installation, or even those of a performance: transparent and spatial, three-dimensional. It seems to distance itself from the traditional pictorial grammar and dimensions, though, of course, you still use paint. Is the contrast indeed as marked and simple as I present it here, or are things somewhat more complex?**

Maybe I should refer in this context to *8 Paintings*, a work of mine that is little known but that holds the key to your question. I created the work long before *Off The Hook*. It consists of a series of eight paintings, each of them depicting the same hazy image of a windscreen with a wiper. For these paintings I used one single photograph as a model, a photograph without any aesthetic qualities for that matter. Anyway, I had tried to reproduce this image as exact and accurate as possible. That precisely was my point of departure, from which the act of painting had to emanate. An extremely dogmatic point of departure, of course, and an extremely artificial approach of painting: the naked idea, the detached, mechanical reproduction as practical premise. My primary aim was to formulate a sort of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, a new objectivity, a pictorial idiolect that had to be as impersonal as possible. Sheer technique, pure artificiality. The beauty of it all is that in the end a sort of “nature” surfaces anyway. A novel “natural quality” emerges all the same. The more systematically you try to erase spontaneity from the image, the more tenaciously it manifests itself. Exact reproduction is not only *unlivable*, it is simply *impossible*. Even at that time this aspect was an important element of tension in my work.”

**Even in a rigorously mechanically cleansed process, “natural” programming errors occur.**

Exactly. For me *8 Paintings* represents a key work, because it was my first radical attempt to “break loose” from the canvas. Because every day, time and time again, I painted the same image, I was confronted with painting as a process in a direct, physical manner. My attitude towards my practice as an artist, my way of thinking, my aims, are embodied in an exemplary way in this work. In a manner of speaking, you could call it a manifesto. *Painting on the edge*: in a tense, rigid, purified sort of manner this work expresses everything I stand by as an artist.

**And then you were invited to take part in *Off The Hook*, an independent, small-scale exhibition, that turned out to be a turning-point.**

It was the first time that as a painter I was confronted with such a strongly defined—and defining—spatial context. At first I didn’t know very well what to do with these glass cases and the empty room. There were actually two options to choose from. I could either opt for a *historical* approach, i.e. I could create a work that revived the past of this empty showcase, or I could simply approach the given space in its absoluteness as a sort of three-dimensional canvas.

It so happened some time earlier I had painted a self-portrait on transparent plastic. The choice of a transparent non-entity as a support instead of the traditional white canvas bears of course witness to my “enquiry” into the fundamentals of paint. How can we show the essence of paint, while at the same time maintain the representation? Is it possible to show paint as mere paint and yet not renounce the image, the representational content? The same questions emerged, of course, from the architectural configuration of the *Off The Hook* venue, with the great glass surfaces that determined the space. Like *8 Paintings* and the self-portrait on transparent plastic, *Off The Hook* provided an ideal opportunity to explore the “edges”, the outer limits of the pictorial process. But in *Off The Hook* and in the works I later produced for the exhibitions at Koraalberg and in Strombeek-Bever there is also a reductionist element: all these projects were based on a schematic formula—one image a day, from which the image of the

work as a whole had to emanate.

**The emphasis in your work shifted from the product to the production, from the painting to the act of painting?**

Production is an important element, but the act itself I have never considered quite essential. Of course, there is a certain part to be played by the self-conscious act of painting, but for me the essence is not the action as such. In that sense I strongly oppose any attempt to characterize my work as a sort of “performance”. I found it quite instructive to see *Off The Hook* evolve to become as it were a living organism. Though the public could not actually access the room, every day some people came to see how the work evolved, how the room would transform into a *light box* with different shades again. In first instance my aim was to elucidate the fundamentals of painting, to bring to life the reality of light and colour with means as basic as possible.

How did I actually proceed? I had set out to work along a rather rigorously worked-out scheme, but I also allowed myself the artistic freedom to incorporate sudden ideas or influences, such as the incidence of the light or chance combinations of colours. Despite the analytical point of departure, these surprise elements make the work interesting. A work scheme should be flexible to allow room for chance, for contingencies. In that sense there is a parallel with “everyday life”. We close the door behind us, another day at the office is about to start—in my case a day working with the *Off The Hook* glass cases—a day that will bring us the same sort of work as any other day. Yet every day is different: there are minute variations that bring a third dimension to the flatness of everyday life.

**But we, as the public, can only experience this by registering the entire transformation process that keeps the work “alive”. How important is this element of registration? Are the photographic and video registrations of the creative process in Ghent, Antwerp and Strombeek-Bever an integral part of the work as such?**

That depends to a great extent on the specific spatial context. In Strombeek-Bever, e.g., the video projection was a sort of “encore” that allowed the public literally and figuratively to look inside the *tactile* nature of the act of painting, i.e. inside the pure physics of the action—which, indeed, does play a part. But I repeat: the video images that show myself while painting (“caught in the act”) are not meant to submit to the demands of the idiolect of the performance. The images are not the images of a scene or of a choreography; they are images of painting as such. *Neue Sachlichkeit—New Objectivity*—no more, no less. Furthermore, the registration of the creative process is never restricted to the recording of one image. On the contrary: there is an abundance of “illustrative” images and these all serve the same *instructive* purpose: showing paint as paint, no matter what supports the paint.

**What we see is mere paint...**

Indeed. Feel free to refer to it as a *demystification of the metaphysics of the work*, a demystification of the metaphysics of the image, too, of the romantic illusion of artistic calling. Painting is kind of job like any other. Simply everyday work, to which all people are subject. In that sense the illustrative visual material that registers the act is indeed an integral part of the work. It allows a view inside the work or through the work, like the glass membrane of the showcases that demystifies and enlightens us about painting. At the same time it is a sort of gate that enables “the Other” to enter the work. For [*solemn voice*] “the work of art always remains in part in the artist’s mind, yet the artists incessantly hopes to meet the Other.” Not my words, but those of some philosopher. I forgot whose—maybe Wittgenstein’s.

I had the feeling, anyway, that while painting the *Off The Hook* showcases or the Koraalberg windows or the glass cases in Strombeek-Bever I was not merely present in a studio, but also in a study, in a *room to think*. It was as if I was walking about in my own thinking head, as if the process of thinking was expressed through my act of painting!”

**“Meeting the Other”, that sounds rather idealistic. The works in Ghent, Antwerp and Strombeek-Bever seem very off-limit to me. They look detached, as if they insist on the physical isolation of the *light box*. Except in Koraalberg (where the spatial situation of the gallery disrupted the**

**continuity between the *works in progress* of Ghent en Strombeek-Bever), none of the exhibition spaces could actually be entered. In Strombeek-Bever it was made very clear that such was your intention, i.e. that the public was to be excluded from the three-dimensional experience.**

There is indeed a border the public “should not” or cannot cross. But that does not imply there is something I want to deny to the public or that I want to deprive them of something. In Ghent the concrete spatial context of the exhibition room simply allowed no more than this sole view. In Strombeek-Bever I deliberately tried to re-create this situation, precisely because I wanted to undermine the mystification of the pictorial space. Actually, I do not deprive the public of something, I offer a lot, as I allow people to look behind the scenes, inside the “brain” of the art of painting. True, I create a certain distance, but in exchange the public is allowed to become a privileged witness to the analysis, to the *dismantling* of the image.

**And the dismantling of the image results in a new image: a meta-image.**

Indeed. It all sounds rather theoretical and mathematical, but what is important, is that these meta-images, these reflections on the creation of images, generate a lot of visual impact. In the end the result should be an overwhelming visual experience. As far as I am concerned, the “sublime” remains a relevant contemporary aesthetical category.

**The word “overwhelming” reminds me of the monumental “murals” you recently realized in the S.M.A.K. in Ghent and in the Programa Art Center in Mexico City: huge frescos that indeed overwhelm us, that submerge us. A sharper contrast with the detached trigonometry of Strombeek-Bever is hard to imagine.**

But the contrast is merely spatial. Certain spatial conditions lead me to work on showcases or to work in space, resulting in the meanwhile familiar fading gradations. The huge murals with the extremely subtle gradations of colours may seem more spontaneous or intuitive—they seem perfect for the aesthetic experience of the sublime—but in the end they are merely the result of meticulous three-dimensional calculations. The philosophy of the gradations is no less mathematical than the reductionist philosophy of the “one-colour-a-day” works. All these works result from the same basic intention, from the same prime attitude, i.e. my work does not focus on a single theme, but on a specific *mentality*, which is actually a mathematically inspired interest in the image, or an interest in the art of painting as such.

**The calculus of colour, shall we say. Your work in Mexico City, too, led us to discuss the contrast between the extreme objective attitude from which you depart and the overwhelming physical experience of the finished product—the Apollonian and the Dionysiac poles: the analytic reason of the “creative” formula versus the synthetic, almost holistic aesthesis of the environment that is the “product” of this formula.**

For me that summarizes the area of tension on which my recent work focusses. Automatism versus experience. In my view this contrast provides the only means to create tension in a painting. Yes, this tension is what makes painting “liveable”. If an extremely rigid conceptual attitude results in an extremely rigid—i.e. completely conceptualized—image, the result is simply *dead* art. A stringent, pure, technical concept needs to be “corrected” by a visually interesting execution.

**If only to avoid tautologies, which, as we all know, are *devoid of meaning*. But what exactly do you mean with the phrase “a visually interesting execution” of the work? Does that phrase refer to the classical idea of beauty? From a historical point of view that idea seems out of date. It has furthermore been deconstructed to such an extent that it seems more topical and fashionable than ever.**

Beauty is of course an element of interest. It may a bonus, but the creation of beauty cannot be the sole purpose. You refer to my works in the S.M.A.K. in Ghent or in the Programa Art Center in Mexico City as a “plea for beauty”. I consider this beauty simply inherent to my method of working. Maybe true

beauty resides in the contrasting effect of the tension between the formulaic nature of painting as a “conveyor belt job” and the aesthetic experience of something *sublime* that is manufactured at this conveyor belt.

**It is hard to see the sublime in pictorial terms separate from the work of Barnett Newman or Marc Rothko. Do these associations annoy you, or do you find them stimulating?**

I don't feel particularly related to this tradition. My way of working is simply too objective to relate to this tradition, while theirs is precisely extremely subjective. The primary impulse that inspires my work as an artist is anything but romantic. In fact it is *prosaic*—which cannot be said in the case of an artist like Rothko.

**In your case the prosaic impulse can at the very most lead to a romantic result. There we are confronted once more with the tension between methodology—*de jure*, *a priori*—and experience—*de facto*, *post factum*.**

That might be a way to put it. I think it is necessary to emphasize once more how important experience is for me, for I paint to obtain a result that will bring me lasting joy. I, too, want to share this experience. Ideally a powerful image is an image that can be consumed daily. Apart from my longing for a conceptually solid foundation, I also want to satisfy my own visual hunger. And that results in something that is useful to the public as well.

**But reverting to this so-called key work that inspired this sort of thinking, those eight identical “copies” of an utterly inferior photographic image: no matter how watertight that was with regard to the concept, was it not an exceedingly *dull* work of art? What is the aesthetic surplus value of this work, what about the “visually interesting” dimension? Or was it simply an interesting work of art in itself? And you must be aware that the term “interesting”—which is itself a product of Romanticism—usually is a euphemism for “irrelevant” or “ugly”...**

That is correct, but this “key work” was not simply a work of art. It was more of a statement, a manifesto. I have never exhibited it, for that matter. The rigidity of the pictorial gesture—painting the same subject over and over again, “like a machine” Warhol would say—was the entire point, nothing more. And of course I soon discovered that I could not go on with this sort of thing, that it literally was not “interesting”. You could call it a theoretical and conceptual exercise, but the act itself was quite instructive and, as it turned out, defining. It turned out a *grid*.

But the works in Ghent, Antwerp, Mexico, Amsterdam or Strombeek-Bever in a way also form a grid or blueprint that generates other paintings, that prompts me to return to the canvas. There is an interesting interaction that cancels the—in my view—artificial distinction between a two-dimensional and three-dimensional way of painting. The three-dimensional, “sculptural” work would not exist without the impulses I received from my enquiry into painting on the traditional canvas. And likewise, my current exploration of the possibilities of “traditional painting” is unthinkable without the incentives I got from working in three dimensions and from literally feeling the edges of the pictorial surface. I have just returned from Mexico, and already I know that the coming three or four months I will solely paint on canvas. And the experiences that result from this work will be recycled in the “installations” that follow. I want to move freely between the “extremes” of the two-dimensional canvas and the three-dimensional space. They are the proverbial low and rising tides of my practice as an artist. Those two polar tendencies reflect the opposition between Spartan technique and visual exuberance—which, for that matter, is also manifest in other dualities that are important for a better understanding of my work. You only need to think of the tension between the hard-edge reflection of painting on glass on the one hand, and the organic, diffuse luminosity of the image that results from this manner of painting. Inside there is the visual experience of “immersion”, but seen from outside there is the little attractive order of the grid. Precisely these tensions, this dialectics of thesis (system), antithesis (experience) and synthesis (art), make painting lively and attractive.

**Is that the way to escape the so-called historic deadlock we usually refer to as “the end of painting”? Or have you never experienced the feeling that our pictorial means have been**

**exhausted?**

Of course I am familiar with this story of the end of painting. In a certain way the story of painting has indeed come to an end, i.e. it has been “completed”. But I think you should not understand the end of painting quite literally. The weight of the history of painting, or of whatever history for that matter, is no impediment, but a challenge.

**To that conclusion also Malevich had come. Having painted his legendary *Black Square* (1913), he simply continued to paint. And twenty years later, he presented this magnificent self-portrait with himself in a red cardinal outfit. Picabia, too, is another example. The bolts and nuts from his Dadaist period seemed to herald the “end of painting”, while precisely his late work provided the leitmotif for a prestigious retrospective about “figurative” painting.**

That had of course to do with the spirit of the age. After the radical, i.e. “scientific” excesses of Cubism (Cubism as method, as a mere formula), also Picasso sought new inspiration in the almost archaic, “incorrect” figuration of a sort of neoclassical revival. “The end of painting”, that is actually the same as *reinventing* the art of painting, starting all over again. And every new beginning always involves a sort of turning back. And that, of course, confirms the idea that the story of the art of painting has come to a close, that the rules of the game can no longer be altered. Image and representation versus fundamental self-analysis and abstraction: these are the asymptotes that eternally define the practice of painting. I do not think there is an alternative. There is nothing new to discover. In my own work, too, I experience these two limits: abstract versus figurative, autonomous versus heteronomous, introspective versus narrative. One cannot escape this choice, let alone that we could even imagine to be *outside* this dilemma.

**Your “photorealistic” landscapes are sometimes traversed by an enormous fluorescent stripe of colour. Has that anything to do with what you just said? You “sabotage” the landscapes, you curb the explicit figurative element by adding a “stripe of abstraction”?**

That is true. It is as if I cannot simply paint a landscape without asking questions about its nature. In a sense I have to sabotage the image to make it interesting. The image must comment itself, it must be broken down. And because of that, we are always aware that we are looking at an image. But this, too, results from the polemic antagonism between the illusion of total figuration—the image coincides with reality—and the illusion of total abstraction—the image is its own reality. There is no escaping this opposition. This discussion has been going on for decades. But it quite important to notice that to a large extent this discussion took place largely among art critics, and only among a minority of painters themselves. “The end of painting” is a story told by critics, and as we all know, these are not always aware of what is happening in the real world out there. Any artist who wonders too much if he or she is working in an era that follows the so-called “end of painting” puts a burden on his or her creative practice. The artist will become trapped in the rhetorical game of “the end of history”, a game that soon ceases to be interesting. Of course, it is not obvious to paint in this day and age, i.e. to paint *in* and *with* the language that was handed down by the history of art. But it is ironic that the *ontology* of the art of painting and the ontology of the pictorial image endorse so many other visual media: the pictorial image is ubiquitous. Painting has freed itself from its form.

**Dieter Roelstraete** is editor-in-chief of the quarterly magazine AS and organizes exhibitions in the M HKA. He was co-curator of the exhibition *Storage & Display* (Programa Art Center, Mexico City, 2003), which featured also work by Pieter Vermeersch. With Diederik Peeters they form the free noise jazz power trio *Spasm*.