

An ode to the process

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The Coba de Groot scholarship should be accompanied by a publication. This is usually a booklet with a piece about the artist's work combined with a number of illustrations of his or her work. Joyce ter Weele has chosen something different. Something logical for her.

At her graduation exhibition Joyce ter Weele shows a work five meters high and three meters wide 'behind the visible 1'. An enormous collection of image elements in black and white. At first glance the whole thing looked like a huge jigsaw puzzle that, after accidentally falling apart, had been unsuccessfully reassembled. Although the image elements did look like each other, they did not fit together. They suggested the representation of something, but the identity of that something had been submerged by the whole. Looking at the work proved to be a workout in concentration. I had no idea where to start, let alone where my quest might end. Should I take a step back, should I exam the details? Each time I looked at the work from a different angle, it was as if I was seeing a different work. Sometimes it looked like a coarsely pixelated black and white photo of one of those typical Italian villages with little white houses pasted onto a hillside, and another time it was no more, nor any less, than an intriguing collection of quirky abstracted shapes. It sometimes looked like a large drawing, another time it was a collage in which drawings and photographic elements are battling each other to a standoff. Because the black was present in every sort of shade and form, the work seemed to have more colour than I had at first glance suspected. The experience of looking at a work has rarely been such an adventure for me. An adventure in which I was constantly surprised or set on the wrong track. One of the main reasons was the intimidating dimensions of 'Behind the Visible 1'. I was literally unable to get a grip or hold on the work, while the work seemed to hold me completely in its grasp.

It was only with later works that I realized that these apparently randomly chosen components of the whole are much less random than I had conveniently assumed. By using a different format and by printing the various image elements using a different technique and placing them in a different way, works are created that provide a different viewer experience, while the basic principle – collage composed of black and white image material – has not essentially changed. 'Kallitypie 1' is a good example of this. The diamond shape and the black streaks immediately evoke associations with a painting, yet more plainly, and also due to the high degree of abstraction, paintings by Mondrian come to mind. As if his 'Victory Boogie Woogie' and his (black and white) 'Composition No.10' have been a source of inspiration, have entered into a devil's pact. This work seems to make it easier to contemplate the whole – the intimidation has gone – but it is precisely the details that call into question the seemingly abstract whole and thus again create confusion.

The series 'C' is the result of another experiment. The size of these works is human, meaning that as viewer you can relate to them on an equal footing. The works differ, too, since in some cases holes have literally fallen into the collages and in other cases various parts have worked themselves into the space creating the idea of a wall sculpture. Because the different parts have been used as structural elements rather than 'filling-in', the whole looks fragile and vulnerable. But also slightly untidy, like the surface of a waste-paper dump. This remarkable contrast provided a different viewer experience. Joyce ter Weele has once more intervened in the process to find out whether this would enable her to influence the final result.

In the exhibition she had a few months ago in The Hague, the space not only became a significant theme, but it also revealed, more clearly than before, that her way of working is a form of association on existing works and on the qualities of the space in which the new artwork will be seen.

The gallery's exhibition floor was a dominant factor. Elaborate patterns in a greenish colour. An homage to history, but a disaster for a white cube. Ter Weele solved this by making a collage on the gallery windows using black image elements that were printed onto a transparent, green background. These were negatives of another work in the space that she had printed out and then cut into pieces. She thus vanquished the floor and made the space her own, both literally and figuratively.

Photos have been manipulated and used to make collages since the beginnings of photography. It brought fame to Dadaists such as George Grosz, John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch. Man Ray's manipulated photographic works are exemplary in a similar way. In the sixties and seventies the collages of artists such as

Romare Bearden attracted attention. Now, it is the African Wangechi Mutu who is showing her eroticizing collages worldwide. Mostly these photomontages or photo collages – the terminology tends to change – are actually a composite of existing, cut-up representations of reality. The figuration may have been modified, but it remains visible. This logical with politically veined photomontages, in the nineteen-twenties for example, since their aim is to communicate a clear message. For artist who want to tell a story, African or African-American artists for instance, the reference to reality is also necessary, but the figurative element is dominant with less engaged or less narrative-oriented artist as well. The figuration or the objectivity is only consciously broken with the Russian constructivists.

Claiming your own place within the long tradition of a genre is no easy task. Ter Weele has done it. What is remarkable about her work is that in it she consciously seeks out the grey area between abstraction and figuration and that she uses, extensively experiments with, photographic and printing techniques in order to achieve this goal. Existing image material is of less interest to her. Furthermore she blends the two genres, the collage and the drawing, into one, sometimes tangled whole. While the focus of many of her predecessors is directed primarily to the image itself, Ter Weele expressly includes the context.

It is impossible to say what Joyce ter Weele's work will look like, say, in five years' time. She sees each project as a reason for a following research or experiment. This means that while each work does have a logical relationship with what has preceded it, its appearance can and is allowed to differ. In her most recent works drawing seem to be taking the lead, but she sometimes uses a special etching technique to imprint photographic images. Almost as if they are becoming drawings. Only a detailed examination reveals the difference. The fact that she is now underlining the importance of the detail by (photographically) enlarging details and turning them into individual works, indicates the start of another new phase in her work process.

Joyce ter Weele has an inspiring way of persuading you to continue to follow her work.

Rob Perrée
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