Intro: Writing with a chainsaw

Blog: Dirk Vis

My name is Dirk Vis, and I write. I usually write with a pencil or with my laptop. But it's interesting to note that you can write with all kinds of tools. I love tools like hammers, saws and cars. And I like lenses, cameras, typewriters and computer programs just as much. I am fascinated by artists who make their own tools; artists who put energy and time into the development and selection of the right equipment. It is the work of these artists that especially deserves your time, above other things screaming for your attention.

We can point to artists from thousands of years ago; ones who brought their depictions of wild animals to life by skillfully manipulating the 3D surface of a cave wall. They saw the cave as a tool for their drawings. I'm talking about the Lascaux cave paintings, of course. Then there is the tale of a film director who wanted to capture the appearance of light from 300 years ago in a film, and could only do by using the lens used in telescopes built for space observation. Who other than Stanley Kubrick? And what about the artist who could only make art by programming his own social network, and finding images through it that were unimaginable elsewhere? That artist is Harm van den Dorpel. Personally, I get excited by the idea of merging my stories with the possibilities offered by the smart AI, AlphaGo; the most advanced computer brain of our time. I want to use the neural networks of this artificial intelligence to give my work an extra dimension, and explore senses that we all believe to exist, but are unable to hold, see, or prove.

For me there is nothing more beautiful than someone writing a poem on their iPhone which proves that animals can talk. Or using a cloud-based collaboration tool to show my friends that the afterlife is at your fingertips. I write stories with pen and paper, but I also write travel stories with that flashing blue dot in Google Maps. I write fables with hatchets, or with the LED screens of Times Square. And I would like to write poems using my portable typewriter or the gyroscope that's in your phone.

#3 It's not a fantasy, it's a goal

Technology that we don't understand, or that is new, can appear magical to us. But it isn't, actually. In my previous blog I went in search of people who created their own tools to make their art.

I met the same kind of people face to face at A MAZE 2016 in Berlin. A MAZE is a gaming conference, a festival and an exhibition for indie game developers from around the world. What unites them is that they make computer games primarily for fun. I felt an atmosphere there that I would like to have around me at all times. People knew each other, challenged each other or marvelled at each other's' work, and understood what projects the other was busy with.

Thorsten S. Wiedemann, the director, is the uncrowned king of the festival and someone who is widely spoken about and admired there. When I asked him for his motives for the festival, he stated that he saw the event as a gathering of like-minded authors, something that I sometimes - but not hardly enough - experience at literary festivals. The comparison went further. Thorsten likened computer games and related small-scale multimedia productions with poetry. Adopting his point of view I looked around.

We walked past the work that won the A MAZE 2016 award, Diorama #3 from the Dutchman Daniël Ernst (for sale at [Steam](#)). For this work (in my opinion it can be considered as an artwork as well as a game) you need to wear a VR headset. You are immediately placed in a dark world where it rains. You notice a tollhouse. You can go through the house, walk a little bit up and down, twitch the curtains in the house, and that's retty much it. Nothing more.

But you feel in your bones that this piece works. If you don't watch out you can walk through a wall of the house and you realise that it is an intermediate world, one that you can only view. Other VR works use impermeable, impassable walls in an attempt to make the virtual world real as possible, but here the idea of virtuality is emphasised, and that has an immediate effect. Is this the place where I died without knowing it? Is this a place where I have experienced something tragic, and where I always return to in a dream?

The strength of Ernst's work is in its apparent simplicity; there are no complicated interactions, no goals to reach. Only a concentration for what there is; and that is something that you feel through your whole body. At one moment all the important moments in my life ran through my head; and whether they turn out triumphantly or tragically, or both, I can't yet say. Under the bridge on the outskirts of the village. In the dunes, basking in the sun. It's like I'm looking from a distance at my own history.

In fact Diorama # 3 is a contemporary version of the story Le Passe-Muraille from 20th-century writer, Marcel Aymé. In it the main character can pass through walls, but it brings more stress than benefits. Aymé's stories have the same physical effect on me as the poems of Emily Dickinson, which sometimes make you feel more like a spirit than a human. Ernst's work also has something very cinematic about it; a camera that can move through a wall seems to me to be an image that would have an immediate effect in a film.

I spoke with Daniël Ernst. He calls those who look at his work a visitor, not a player, and he's right, that's how it feels. Diorama # 3 is a way to do something that could not be done before. Walking through walls, you feel like a ghost. Ernst told me he makes his work by putting on the VR headset, and drawing in the virtual space. I think that's crucial. Other game makers first draw out their entire virtual reality on the computer and go into the virtual world when they are ready. But whilst Ernst is engaged in creating his own virtual space, he is using his artwork as a tool. Perhaps that's the thing that enables him to get you to experience something extraordinary. The technique is not the magic element in Ernst's work. He uses his technique to create an even greater feeling of mystery.

While I had his headset on, I wondered what would happen if I met someone else in this in-between world. I wondered what new things have been made more tangible by games and apps, things I've never felt before. Are there people who have used their tools to create interactions for situations we've not yet experienced? Is it possible to visit someone in his or her

dream? I hope to find an answer to these questions next week.

#5 Seance App

Are there any apps that allow you to summon up spirits as well as the right train times? I have looked [at this question before](). What I'm specifically looking for is whether there are app builders who developed using the interactions of the users themselves.

With that question in mind, I went to the App Store. The first app I downloaded was the one [from Cinekid](). This app acts as a filter. The editors of Cinekid have fished out some gems from the gigantic reservoir of questionable content in the App Store, despite Apple's own strict requirements.

Using the Cinekid app, I also downloaded [Bounden](), which is a very cute initiative. This app turns your phone into a "tool for dancing" by way of customised navigation, choreography, music and - of course - your dancing partner. This dance initiative, using both a partner and an iPhone is in my opinion a true work of art. It shows how much we need technology to communicate, and it highlights the relationship we have with the thing. Because, as one of the dancing partners, you pay continual attention to this dancing tool; moreso than your actual partner.

There are thousands and thousands of apps available, but there are only a couple of makers that I have followed for years. Scott Snibbe is one of them. He made a series of visual apps, including the app LP by Björk. I downloaded his [Motion Phone](). This app allows you to create abstract animations. The real magic of this app happens when you contact, or place your device near someone else's iPhone. Then you see the drawings from one phone merge with those from the other. In my opinion, this is a beautiful depiction of the endless amount of invisible things that happen when two people meet. Chemistry, pheromones, energy, dark matter. Snibbe presented this particular work twenty years ago, as a work of art. Now it is an app that everyone can use.

Still, the question remains; what is all of this actually for? What can you do or develop now, that you couldn't do before? Dancing and drawing; regardless of how beautiful these apps are, are things that I like to do and often do; with or without an app. What images, memories, or dreams can we capture with these apps that we couldn't capture before? And what are the incentives for artists to make their tools? I'm going to ask a tool maker himself. The one who, as far as I am concerned, always managed to conjure up the most advanced tools for his artistic goals. I'm going to try to get in touch with Stanley Kubrick.

Bio

Dirk Vis (1981) is a writer and editor of the literary magazine De Gids and teacher at de Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten (the Royal Academy of Arts). He studied Image & Language at the Rietveld Academy, and Design at the Sandberg Institute. Vis has published essays, stories and poems in publications such as De Gids, De Groene Amsterdammer and De Correspondent.

Colophon

This publication is part of the project "Cinekid Unfold", realized for the dutch new media festival Cinekid, and created in collaboration with PublishingLab (Amsterdam) and Domein voor Kunstkritiek. The PublishingLab team is composed of Fabiola Fortuna (IT), Janne van Hooff (NL), Latika Meelu (IN) and Thomas Walskaar (NO).