The buitenplaats

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In the beginning there was a sketch. A little unexpected, as such things can be. From a sketch a painting may be born. Or not. Or a different painting. That is the artist's choice. But the moment of the decision is essential: which choice, when and why. That is not always a rational process, but one that also involves intuition in order to know – to feel – what may be used and what may not.
The sketch, made in 2003, shows a sort of half-open hut/cabin in a forest-like/woodland setting, surrounded by what might possibly be water: a lake, a sea, an ocean? In any case a place far removed from the inhabited world.
The artist became conscious that this was not just *any* hut, it had to be *the* hut and the painting must eventually deal with everything, encompass everything: the whole world. He realised he could complete such a task only if he first undertook visual research into huts/cabins. Four years and 126 paintings later he was ready to make the envisioned painting, which he entitled *The Buitenplaats*
Olphaert den Otter has painted 127 buitenplaatsen and has thus cut through the entire history of Western art. He based each painting upon an existing work of art, most of which depict a building or structure of some kind, in which something may or may not occur. The oldest work is *The Nativity* by the early Netherlandish painter Petrus Christus dating from 1452 and the most recent is *Bread House* by Urs Fischer from 2006.
The oldest building of this kind that we encounter in art history is the stable, traditionally believed to have been Jesus' birthplace. This tradition lives on in the form of Christmas nativity scenes, but it is nowhere stated explicitly in the four gospels. Only Luke describes the birth of Jesus, but he tells us only that Mary, 'wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.' (Luke 2:7 [NOT 1]) Precisely where the manger stood is not mentioned. The apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James* mentions a cave as Christ's birthplace. [The Dutch text says 'is sprake van een grot in plaats van een stal' but Luke does not mention a stable, so how can it be 'in plaats van'?] Neither stable nor cave appears in art before the fourteenth century and only then as notable exceptions.
Another story has it that on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the thirteenth century, St Francis saw farmers living with their cattle in caves. Back in Spoleto he requested and was granted dispensation by Pope Innocent III to serve mass in a cave, with animals and all. This may have had consequences for visual art and this may be the origin of the ox and the donkey in nativity scenes. In Bellini's famous painting, which shows the moment at which St Francis receives the stigmata, we see him standing at the entrance to a cave. Olphaert has also used this painting; it fits well within the series – but so as not be understood: he did not do so for the sake of completeness.

The artist does not use the words 'hut' and 'cave', but talks instead of 'stable' and 'shelter'. It is, I think, important to distinguish between the meanings of these words within this context. Both are places 'outdoors': the stable is attached to a farm but is separate from the farmhouse and the shelter is attached to nothing. The stable is an involuntary dwelling; the shelter is a place of voluntary seclusion. But this two is questionable in a globalised world: how safe is the shelter, how hospitable is the

stable? Where exactly is the buitenplaats – that place beyond the established social order and structure?

For centuries Western visual art was dominated by Christian iconography and so initially the buitenplaats took the form of the stable or cave in scenes such as the Adoration of the Magi. Later the theme was secularised but never disappeared, or not entirely. It seems as though in some periods we are confronted with more 'buitenplaatsen' than in others, and that may once simply have been a matter of bitter necessity: in times of great unrest and danger people need shelter.
After approximately 1500 we see an increasing number of buitenplaatsen in art. The Spanish Inquisition functioned throughout Europe as a sort of secret police that more or less indiscriminately persecuted 'witches', heretics and intellectuals – dissidents who were perceived as a potential threat to power. The indiscriminate nature of the system, in which everyone was open to accusation and false confessions could lead to torture and a death, meant that many lived in fear. It is the nature of power to protect itself and, in this respect, silencing free spirits has always been an important and effective instrument. One could also argue that those in power are, by definition, also fearful because every shift in consciousness could lead to their fall. In this respect their specific isolation is in fact another kind of buitenplaats, which means that since the Renaissance the social structure has increasingly become an image of various buitenplaatsen surrounding an ideological vacuum. However that may be – and a post-modern hineininterpretieren? Of the above is not entirely strange –, in Olphaert's work it concerns the buitenplaats as sanctuary for the persecuted, those who might potentially be persecuted and maybe also those who persecute themselves, as protection through social isolation, albeit involuntarily.
One rarely encounters buitenplaatsen of this kind in the seventeenth century; the jolly/rustic [gezellig uitziende] structures in the paintings of artists such as Adriaen van Ostade, David Teniers the Younger or Adriaen Brouwer are inhabited mainly by jocular folk busily engaged in various forms of entertainment and the celebration of life. There was wealth, prosperity and self-confidence. As always, there are always rare exceptions that prove the rule, such as a painting by Van Ostade that shows an alchemist in his cave-like laboratory.
Neither does the eighteenth century – the age of the Enlightenment and the glorification of reason, in which the earth was perceived as more or less 'complete' and which witnessed the invention of the encyclopaedia, an attempt to alphabetically categorise the entire world – produce many stables and shelters, until towards the end of the nineteenth century the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution give renewed cause for social and spiritual unrest and existential *Angst*.
Then – and that has continued throughout the nineteenth century and has not disappeared to this day – practically all our certainties were undermined: Darwin and the further development of the natural sciences began to question Genesis and other biblical certainties. New social classes were born: the urban proletariat on the one hand and the rich industrialists on the other. The division of labour resulted in alienation. A partly escapist, partly anxious/fearful [angstige] and unnerving/frightening [angstwekkende] imagination explored dark desires and fantasies, which psychoanalysis would further legitimate and develop into a complete system for explaining human emotions and behaviour. This was accompanied by the first form of organised drug use in Western history, particularly among writers and artists: laudanum was used on a large scale, the Lake Poets experimented with opium and French poets including Gautier, Baudelaire and de Nerval and the painter

Delacroix experienced hallucinations as members of the Club des Hashischins. There was apparently a great need to escape from contemporary reality by any possible means: intoxication, fantasy, mysticism and the metaphysical, madness, the myth of unspoiled and animated/untamed [bezielde] nature (as opposed to nature as something to be cultivated, exploited and colonised) and the past. Everyone felt uprooted, even the ruling class that drove industry but nonetheless felt themselves inferior to the vestigial old aristocratic class and thus created the illusion of tradition through building fake ruins (shams, follies – actually also a form of buitenplaatsen) on their estates and the acquisition of art by the Pre-Raphaelites – fundamentalists in a certain sense who, like their slightly earlier and even more extreme retro-oriented contemporaries, the German Nazarenes, were of the opinion that visual art must take its inspiration from paintings predating the High Renaissance, before the 'purity' of art was supposedly lost. For similar reasons the Neo-Gothic style dominated architecture for a period.
At the beginning of the twentieth century it is possible to talk of a short-lived new cultural optimism and belief in progress that found its artistic expression in various future-oriented avant-gardes, which all too quickly found themselves apparently at odds with social developments: the First World War that claimed millions of victims and tore Europe apart, and the October Revolution in Russia, which appeared to be a deception for progressive optimists and developed into a totalitarian, repressive and criminal dictatorship. That the remainder of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century have supplied buitenplaatsen galore should thus surprise no one: never was the world simultaneously so small and so large as it is now, and never before had it found itself in such a comparable state of barbarism and decay. Fear was now employed by those in power as a tool of oppression, not only under the Nazi and communist regimes but also by Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East (with echoes among European immigrants) and Christian Neoconservatism in America. And that is not even to mention the dramatic mass murders and even genocide in large parts of Africa, that heart-breaking region from which we all eventually originate. Even the greatest optimist's heart can occasionally be frozen by the world's sorry spectacle.

This is the world in which Olphaert works on his stables and shelters employing the entirety of art history as his material. To this end, he uses a kind of paint that predates the earliest painting he quotes – egg tempera – but with an attitude that is quintessentially of our time: the use of art history to comment upon the here-and-now – even if the topicality in the statement is transcended – is typically contemporary. Olphaert uses his material precisely as that: he quotes the original work but does not copy it. On the contrary, he subjects it to an essential alteration. In by far the majority of his examples, the stables and shelters are inhabited by people who give the work its meaning. Olphaert's most important intervention is precisely to remove these iconographic elements: he omits the figures so that the anecdotal character of the original painting disappears and only the environment remains – an empty stable or shelter. Thus the new work usually offers a totally different spectacle; the greater the number of people populating the original painting, the emptier and stranger the environment appears.
Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* (1464, Uffizi, Florence) contains a profusion of figures, the absence of which in Olphaert's 'version' renders the original work as good as unrecognisable as its model. In Perugino's eponymous work (1504, Città della Pieve) dozens of figures flank the wooden structure positioned at the centre of

the composition. This building, little more than a wooden lean-to on four posts, naturally houses the Holy Family. In Olphaert's reworking all that remains is the canopy – the rest of the painting is almost unnervingly empty. This is a good example of a 'stable' construction, which is capable of concealing little or nothing. That was indeed not Perugino's intention: there had to be a sort of covered space for Mary, Jesus and Joseph (because tradition demands this) to provide the painter with an opportunity to attempt a large, almost symmetrical composition. It is only when Olphaert has shifted the priorities and removed the figures that the essence and form of the stable play a role, albeit as there is nothing else to see. And then it becomes apparent that the stable is centrally positioned in the picture plane, but it appears less like a form of shelter than a sort of children's play sculpture, through which you can run from all sides. The stable's meaning has been undermined: as a form of accommodation and as a stable it has little to recommend it, it is unfit for its purpose. Thus the buitenplaats may also assume a merely decorative form, comparable with the nineteenth-century folly: an aesthetic rather than an existential proposition. One the other hand you could also argue that we need consider it so literally and that the mere knowledge that this structure represents a safe haven/stable [stal] (since we may remove the figures from the scene but we cannot deny all our mental associations) is sufficient for it to actually portray it as such: we find ourselves – by definition – in the realm of the metaphor.

Whereas the original work derived its meaning from the presence of figures, Olphaert's paintings in this series are concerned precisely with absence. This is made emphatically clear through the works' titles. The work based upon the aforementioned painting *St Francis in the Desert* by Bellini, in the Frick Collection in New York, is entitled *Not St Francis by Giovanni Bellini*. And indeed there is no one to be seen in the painting. The extensive landscape has also disappeared leaving only the cave as if a camera has zoomed in on it. Here – and in many other cases – it is thus possible to talk of a variety of interventions: in addition to the omitting the figure of St Francis, Olphaert has used only a detail of the painting, namely that part that is relevant to his aim: the cave, that remote accommodation in the mountains, isolated from the bustle of the inhabited world. Bellini's actual theme was the ecstasy of St Francis; Olphaert's theme is the shelter which for Bellini was merely incidental.
But there is more going on here: it is naturally not the case that in this way the artist has idly plundered centuries of the art of painting to locate a detail to suit his fancy in the absence of any personal inventiveness and neither does he appropriate the work in order to copy that detail. It is precisely a radical transformation in relation to the earlier work – the absence of the protagonists – that is at issue here: the emptiness of the stage from which the actors have disappeared. That follows very closely, even in the titles, which denote precisely what is going on and how we must interpret this absence. If the title had been different, for example 'St Francis in the Desert without the Principle Figure', it would suggest a different meaning: that a specific work by Bellini was the subject of Olphaert's painting and that his intervention was a comment upon that painting. But the intervention does not produce a work whose subject is Bellini's painting – or a detail thereof. It is the intervention itself that is the subject, as is made unequivocally clear by the title: Olphaert's painting is *Not St Francis by Giovanni Bellini*. It is thus in a certain sense a denial of the original work. And that denial is typical of our age, in which Christian mythology and iconography are no longer central to our culture, but have been demoted to a somewhat wretched existence at the periphery.

The contemporary lack of ideology is possibly reflected in the emptiness of the stable and shelter – and thus by extrapolation – of the entire world: Rushdie's 'God-shaped hole'. On the face of it there is nothing wrong with this, it offers us a choice: we can enjoy the emptiness, the liberation from dogmas and hollow dictates. Maybe we stand empty-handed but that does not necessarily need to be the end of the story; in the arts it may indeed be a positive starting point: everything must be rediscovered and the in buitenplaats seems the ideal place for this. You could argue that art by its very definition originates in a buitenplaats, the buitenplaats in the artist's head (a buitenplaats in a binnenplaats), even for example when that buitenplaats is literally at the centre of the world: *Die Gedanken sind frei* (thoughts are free). Whoever seeks, in Peter Sloterdijk's terminology, refuge/salvage/shelter [berging], does not therefore shut himself off from the world for eternity; he takes a distance from it. With that distance you can see different things and you see the same things in a different way than when you are in their midst or engulfed by them. In this sense the buitenplaats is perhaps a necessary survival mechanism for everyone.
And so art can be much more powerful than is often assumed. And I do not mean only the 'socially committed' art that bears witness to what is happening in the world, but also precisely art as escapism. We need art that tells us what is happening, in a way that differs from journalism, because art – which even in the face of atrocities is always a form of imag(e)-ination – can reach places and touch emotions that are inaccessible to the reporter. But this is of no use to those who are caught up in the catastrophe, whose chief concern is survival. My father was interned for three years in Nazi concentration camps and eventually returned from Dachau without any trauma. He never hated the Germans, never lost his powers of reasoning or his sensitivity. I found that hard to understand and asked him how he managed to survive the camps unscathed. My father loved poetry and had committed a few hundred poems to memory. His answer was: "Ik heb me verwonderd and attempted as much as possible to shut myself off from the events around me and I constantly recited poems in my head." I have never forgotten this sentence. And I think that Olphaert will share that sentiment, for his buitenplaats – and his entire series of stables and shelters – remains in the last instance a solace amidst a world of horrors.

One the one hand the image is certainly dehumanised but that does not mean that it must be inhuman: that which is empty may be filled. Where shelter can be offered, reflection can occur and one can, for example, paint: all the artists who appear in Olphaert's series are also, to my mind, the inhabitants of the buitenplaats they depict. Olphaert has created a void, which he then proceeds to fill: a titanic task that he has set himself. You could also say: the new shows itself in the old work or that the new work seeks the shelter of tradition. So we conceive of the history and constantly shifting manifestations/semblances/phases [schijngestalten] of art as a conceptual constant that begins in the series with Petrus Christus and ends (for the time being) with Olphaert den Otter, who is its messenger. In that capacity the artist is always in a buitenplaats.

In one case a buitenplaats is literally located within a buitenplaats and that is an interesting proposition, which clarifies the relationship between tradition and our own time: depicted on the ground in the empty stable of *Not the Nativity by Petrus Christus* (after Petrus Christus, *The Nativity*, c.1465, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.) is a three-dimensional scale model of the hut from Olphaert's very first sketch for the large painting *The Buitenplaats*. Here the new work, then no more

than a sketch, literally seeks shelter in the old: one stable needs the other. In this case it is perhaps possible to speak of the replacement of one nativity scene by another: the birth of Jesus initiated a world-encompassing structure, not a buitenplaats but a cathedral with staggering ideas of enormous influence, no matter what you think of them (who dreams up something as insane as, for example, the Holy Trinity?) But an equally legitimate question is: who dreams up something as idiotic as the Oedipus complex?) The birth of Western art (symbolised by Olphaert's hut) witnessed the origin of another great construction, which for a long time in a certain sense ran a parallel course to that of Christianity – in as much as it was, or appeared to be, an illustration thereof, in the iconographic, anecdotal layer – and thereafter sought its own path and generated its own theory rather than following one. That the Church disappeared as a client was of course a significant fact in this respect. In Olphaert's example, contemporary art shows itself to be vulnerable for a variety of reasons. In a period characterised by a barely interrupted continuum of breaking with traditions, contemporary art shows itself here precisely as the child, the progeny thereof – nothing falls from the sky and each step is possible only through the steps that have preceded it. But the child, no matter how divine and predestined to great deeds, must be cared for by the mother: the ever-nurturing tradition. Within such a large and ambitious project as this, in which the artist attempts to formulate the all-encompassing buitenplaats and thus interrogates history, it is perhaps no wonder that at this stage (number three in the entire series) this buitenplaats still occupies a modest place and is, as it were, only just underway. I can imagine that a few years later in the series, and with a greater degree of self-assuredness, that it would demand more space. Finally it forms the eventual key piece and *pièce de résistance* of the series, painted in a much larger format: a conclusion, a final chord.

Indeed some later works exhibit more substantial interventions from the contemporary studio. Sometimes such an intervention in simultaneously spectacular and hermetic as in *Not the Pearl of Brabant by Bouts* (after Dieric Bouts, *The Pearl of Brabant*, c.1465 [or 70 or 75 depending on who you believe – apparently the most recent dendrochronological evidence now places it around the time of his death in 1475], Alte Pinakothek, Munich), in which the buitenplaats is suddenly and unexpectedly populated by a dead horse and in the sky upper right the artist has added a few paint spatters of the unfalsified Abstract-Expressionist kind: even when quoting from other works on the basis of an overarching theme, the artistic imagination nonetheless bubbles to the surface, often with surprising results. As such the entire research project into stables and shelters escapes from the rigidity that might otherwise creep into the representation of the theme and would thus lead to a soulless dogma: *Jede Konsequenz führt zum Teufel* (consistency leads to the devil). [For a discussion on the correct interpretation of this quote see here: http://local.google.com/answers/threadview?id=399668] Here, where the addition is fairly exuberant and occupies quite some room, one might speak of the penetration of the now into the then, albeit an extra-literal version of the now since every one of Olphaert's paintings, now matter how faithful or deviant in relation to its example, is of course in essence a work that belongs in the here and now. In my first year at university, as part of a series of lectures about 'the portrait' our lecturer, Hans van de Waal, showed us a Roman head and explained that we had to understand that we should not to view it through 'twentieth-century eyes'. I understood that only too well: people thought differently then than we do now and similarity of form does not equal similarity of content. Research into the source material was essential in order to

arrive at a substantiated opinion. That remains true in principle, but nonetheless a few years later I began to have my doubts: for I, in fact, possessed only twentieth-century eyes (which have in the meantime taken on the insights of a new century) and it is hard to imagine that the way in which I perceive history – including its sources – can be entirely divorced from that vision. You could even ask yourself if that is actually desirable. That depends upon your aim. Johan Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* is now long outdated, but no one has ever written so beautifully and with such insight on the subject. In this respect the artist possibly has more freedom than the art historian. In any case Olphaert augments his knowledge of his chosen examples with contemporary visual material. Or perhaps it is better to say that he empties out his example and fills it anew. Even if he literally places something in the past, he always works in the present and indeed that could not be otherwise, or if it could it would serve little purpose: why would you superficially rework the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when you have access to the achievements and conflicts of the twentieth century? That would quite rightly be called 'retro' and that belongs only in a nostalgic niche market of artists who paint artful still lifes, landscapes and church interiors without adding a thing to what we already knew.

The gravity of the task Olphaert has set himself does not mean that his work is top-heavy with cultural pessimism. There are several examples in which he adds a comic note in the form of an ironic allusion or a spectacular transformation. *Not Hutten's Grave by Friedrich* of 2007 (after Caspar David Friedrich, *Huttens Grab*, c.1823-1824, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Weimar) shows one of Friedrich's famous Gothic ruins dominated by three tall arched windows (holes in the wall that must once have contained stained-glass windows). This is a typically Romantic scene: a ruin that refers to the distant past, partially overgrown with vegetation; a relatively dark image, in which the glowing orange light of the sunset through the 'windows' provides for a degree of visibility and is simultaneously symbolic of the decay of civilisation or in any case the uncanny sense of having to take shelter from the harshness of reality and to seek refuge in a reference to an unshared past. But whoever looks carefully at the windows will see that the arches, which in the original are somewhat frayed as a result of dilapidation, are crowned with forms that do not belong there at all: the heads of Popeye, Olive and Mickey Mouse. Of course this unexpected introduction of the cartoon into the Gothic ruin tickles our funny bone. But you can interpret this addition in two distinct ways: in the first place as putting into perspective Friedrich's heavy metaphysical *Sehnsucht* (longing) and mysticism of nature in which the appearance of Popeye *et al* is a sort of sacrilege (akin to swearing in the ruins of a church), or conversely their presence here might mean that they also seek refuge in the selfsame ruin and thus participate in the same continuum. They are not misplaced here and in fact nothing can misplaced in the buitenplaats because the buitenplaats is in fact a reflection of our culture from 1450 until 2007 and there – in that buitenplaats – Friedrich and Popeye can meet/confront one another without that resulting in any form of conflict: the buitenplaats is for everyone. Furthermore you could argue that Popeye stands as a model for – somewhat broadly perceived – our time, a period of new media and fast-moving images. And these new media also require shelter and protection because they are, in the final analysis, just as defenceless as everything else of value, and function, certainly in regards to art, in a peripheral niche that is by definition unsafe: a danger that art, by virtue of its fairly subversive nature since the beginning of the twentieth century, frequently invites. And art must be nurtured. Popeye is a subversive element in a painting by Friedrich, but this sort of buitenplaats

disarms even subversion, that speaks for itself – perhaps it was even designed specifically to do so.

Things get even sillier in *Teplitz (#2) by Friedrich* also of 2007 (after Caspar David Friedrich, *The Castle in Teplitz*, c.1828, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow), in which the ruin painted from a distance, by Friedrich's standards a relatively light-hearted watercolour, retains only its schematic form but is further rendered unrecognisable by its transformation into a much more threatening construction, viewed in close-up and from beneath, which actually more closely resembles a sort of archetypal 'modern abstract' sculpture, which rests partially on a menhir-like stone. In the distance loom associations with Rückriem and Kirkeby, but also with a piece of abandoned industrial architecture. Here, thus, the buitenplaats has actually disappeared to be replaced by a completely impenetrable sculpture that gives not the slightest indication of being accessible to anyone or anything. The buitenplaats takes on the form of the hard, cold world against which it should actually provide protection. In 1828 it was still a nostalgic ruin, but transplanted to 2007 it has become an industrial-archaeological site. Sometimes the present forces its way into the buitenplaats, takes power, as it were, and annexes the site, to which the buitenplaats is not always resistant. In other words: the buitenplaats is itself threatened and must in turn be maintained and nurtured if it is to remain a buitenplaats.
Another notable difference with the majority of the works in the series is the title, which contains no denial. This is because here Olphaert has selected a buitenplaats that was originally unpopulated and thus does not need to be depopulated. As a result the work simply bears the title of Friedrich's original painting because that is what it depicts (or rather: that is what it represents), even if it has been transformed into more or less the opposite of what it once was.

There are more works that depict stables and shelters devoid of people. That is in a certain sense less laborious/long-winded/circuitous [omslachtig], because then you do not have to get rid of them. With a bit of good will, you could view this category of buitenplaatsen as squats: if the space is vacant it will quickly be occupied, since an empty house is a crime, certainly in a country with a serious housing problem. You might expect that the painter would – in what is in fact a reversal of the process – populate these vacant stables and shelters, but remarkably enough he does not.
TV Studio by Hirschhorn (2005) is a borderline case: it shows the rickety structure that Thomas Hirschhorn built for the *Documenta 11* (2002) in a suburb of Kassel and in which he sited his *Bataille Monument*. Olphaert's painting is a relatively dry, unspectacular representation of the exterior. We might assume, in keeping with the tried and tested formula, that the interior is empty but we cannot say that with certainty because visually the work provides no unequivocal answer in this respect. The same is true of *Mobile Home by Van Lieshout* (2005), which we know for certain was never occupied by anyone or anything that was not part of its construction. So too *Merziglo* (2006), after an igloo by Mario Merz, provides only a faithful representation of the exterior, while *Pinakothek der Moderne by Bock* (2006) is a depiction of an installation by John Bock in the museum in Munich (2002). And the same is true of *Shelter by Schütte* (2005), after the sculpture *Schutzraum* (Shelter) by Thomas Schütte (1986), which is sited in the woods surrounding the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo.
What the abovementioned works have in common is that they are not paintings, but sculptures or installations, which actually occupy and enclose three-dimensional

space. Here the image functions in a slightly different manner: one discipline is replaced by another, the three-dimensional object is flattened and taken up within a different category, that of stables and shelters in a painter's research project, before which they would collectively have been categorised as 'sculpture from the beginning of the twenty-first century [the Schütte piece is from the twentieth century!]'. Because they are by nature already shelters (shed, igloo, caravan/mobile home [woonwagen] and of course Schütte's 'Schuilplek' whose title embodies its function), they do not *per se* require further intervention: we fully understand the function of such spaces.

This is even more the case with *Shelter by Olphaert* (2006), a painting based upon another painting, namely 'after Olphaert den Otter, *Shelter* (1999)', of which the title also speaks for itself. This is one of the final works from the series and is in a sense tautologous in that here Olphaert quotes himself, although the title nonetheless contains a neat semi-mystification: the painter of the original work is given as 'Olphaert den Otter', who is quoted by someone called 'Olphaert', thus suggesting a distinction. That is to a certain extent naturally a moment of playfulness, but you could also interpret it more seriously: 'Olphaert den Otter' has made a painting that fits neatly within the research into stables and shelters undertaken by 'Olphaert' and in precisely the same manner as all the other artists who between 1452 and 2006 made works that would become part of the series. In other words: 'Olphaert' places 'Olphaert den Otter' in the procession of stable and shelter painters that he is researching, but for this reason they are not identical. I would say: they exist in parallel universes, the one an artist who has made a particular work, the other a painter who interrogates the history of a particular category of art. Of course they abut and overlap, but they do not correspond precisely – and furthermore 'Olphaert den Otter' in 1999 was not precisely the same person as 'Olphaert' in 2006.
Of course this can be dismissed as a matter of semantics and this is indeed a question of language, but that does not mean that we can ignore it: the artist's titles are part of the work. We speak and think in language and we give titles to works using language. We have already seen how, in a series such as this, every word – and every brushstroke and every visual addition or omission – must be weighed on gold scales in order to clarify the meaning. That will not permit sloppiness or nonchalance – everything must actually add up – if only to point to what does not add up, and here I am talking about difference at a cognitive level because the visual differences cannot possibly escape anyone's notice.

So there are several moments within the entire series at which various aspects of the general theme are interwoven or enter into a dialogue with one another. The aforementioned *Pinakothek der Moderne by Bock* (2006) is a relatively complex scale model of a verblijfruimte in a gallery of the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich. Because the original work is depicted as it stands in the gallery, there are actually two shelters: Bock's structure and, surrounding it, the museum itself. You could cal that 'double shelter' and that immediately raises questions about art's architectural and social context: is the museum also a buitenplaats? You can ask yourself: one the one hand is it a sanctuary/refuge [vrijplaats] for art, a place where things of value are stored and conserved? But it is also constant under fire, from two sides: the funders (whether the government, companies or individuals) that place restrictive demands of all kinds on the programme, and a growing group of artists who view the museum as a sort of corrupt site that reinforces the corporate reality, a house of the elite from which the people are excluded, where art is unjustly declared sacrosanct and is

simultaneously expressed in terms of dollars, where every artistic activity results merely in dirty hands. You can say such things or write them if that is your opinion but you can also state the problem visually, by means of the museum itself, as Olphaert does here without siding with either party: he is in search of stables and shelters, not political statements. But this series is so rich in its content that practically every topical theme in contemporary art is contained within it in one form or another.

Somewhat comparable is *Destroyed Room by Wall* (2006) after *The Destroyed Room* by Jeff Wall from 1978 (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa). *The Destroyed Room* is a photographic work that, at the moment at which Olphaert depicted it, was exhibited in the Nova Gallery in Vancouver. Wall's meticulously staged photograph is in the first instance transposed to a painting with the matt sheen of egg tempera –almost entirely at odds with the razor-sharp 'realist' manner in which Wall articulates his image – and in the second instance alters its spatial context, even if it is in fact faithfully represented. Because the work is depicted as viewed from the street it results in a space within a space, which was not Wall's intention, but which ideally serves Olphaert's purpose: he now has not one but two buitenplaatsen simultaneously, two birds with one stone. And thus the meaning of Wall's work, itself already richly layered, is altered entirely. In this context the destroyed room becomes more or less the opposite of a stable or shelter, but it could well have been one or the other; now, however, it affords no shelter because a destroyed room offers poor accommodation. For the second skin/shell [schil] – the gallery – the previous statements about the museum are also valid, indeed even more so: is the gallery a buitenplaats, a site of commodification or perhaps both? Or is it a space in which rooms are destroyed? Or is the room depicted by Wall actually (also) a metaphor for the space in which it finds itself? Through the nature of the question – what is a stable, a shelter, a buitenplaats – and no less so manner in which the question is posed (the image therefore that Olphaert derives from or adds to the original image) existing images are invested with entirely new contexts about which only one thing can be said with positive certainty: nothing is certain, not art, not art history, neither the context nor the buitenplaats, that place where safety should be, but apparently cannot always be, provided.

I would like to address this point once more in relation to *Not the Adoration by Mantegna* (2004). I have already mentioned that a motley procession of figures has been removed from the scene. But something has taken their place that entirely alters the meaning of the work, namely a representation of the Malevich's *Black Square* (1913), that astonishingly pioneering painting, perhaps the most radical painting ever made (certainly if you bear in mind the context of the period), which on the one hand is completely abstract and indeed monochrome, but on the other hand must be viewed against the background of its Russian precursor: the Byzantine icon. Only here Malevich has removed the figure and replaced the gold with black so that nothing detracts from the boundless, cosmic spirituality envisioned by the artist, which indeed recognises no boundaries, not even those of the picture plane: an icon is nothing more than a *representation*, a finger pointing to the moon. The similarity is particularly striking: in a certain sense we can view Malevich's *Black Square* as prefiguring Olphaert's series. The adoration of Christ, as depicted by Mantegna, has disappeared but the religion of art appears to have taken its place and also: the adoration of free speech, of artistic invention, of unprecedented/unmatched/unrivalled [weergaloze] discovery. But the *Black Square* is not situated very prominently in the picture plane, but is casually positioned left of centre on the wall of the cave, even, it would appear,

it hangs a little *in* the cave. The painting has been emphatically placed to attract the viewer's attention, it speaks to us and, in broad terms, it says two things: what it has always said, what Malevich wished it to say, *and* also that it is in need of protection because it is under threat, actually has been since as early as 1917, but certainly is now again as a symbol of values that will disappear on a global level if they are not nurtured, because we live in barbaric, anti-intellectual and anti-artistic times. That is the meaning of Olphaert's positioning of Malevich in an emptied-out Mantegna. Or perhaps I should say: that is the meaning I deduce from the image of this trinity of paintings.

The entire series is truly a magnum opus, in which practically everything that can be ransacked in and by means of art is ransacked, much more than I can discuss in the space allotted me here. With this series Olphaert demonstrates *en passant* that it is possible with the medium of egg tempera and by enlisting the entire art-historical tradition to make entirely contemporary statements, which themselves incorporate (in principle all) other media. Without any hierarchical judgement, Olphaert's series of stables and shelters is *also* very much an *hommage*, a declaration of love to the art of painting, which can do with some protection amidst its periodical death pronouncements in the framework of a sort of belief in progress in which technology threatens to become the new ideology and of which the new media is its prophet. It is good that there are new media that are also employed to make art and which possess their own powers of expression, their own dynamic, their own methods, their own often insistent and pregnant manner of producing and distributing inescapable/inevitable/unavoidable [onontkoombare] images. But this certainly does not mean that the painted image should suddenly be declared taboo. The black and white polarity of 'progressive' and 'outdated' is destructive because it involves thinking in terms of exclusion rather than inclusion and, in broad terms, that is what is wrong with the world.
Olphaert is a painter with an extensive knowledge of art and a broad general erudition. You can expect of a painter that he is devoted to his *métier* and in addition to everything that this series represents and offers up, it is also: a celebration of the static image, the image that demands careful reflection and does not cease once the performance has ended, because it never ends (except for the visitors when the museum closes). In this sense the art of painting is modest, it urges nothing, does not thrust itself upon us, it simply is. And whoever wishes to can appreciate it, for as long as is necessary, as has always been the case.

At a certain moment in 2007 the series came to an end: the stables and shelters had been sufficiently mapped. You have to know the right moment at which to stop lest you are reduced to soulless and pointless repetition. But the series, based upon the analysis of existing works in a manner that has resulted in 126 entirely new works, had at its basis a sketch that must be developed into a relatively large painting (eventually measuring 153 x 306 cm) that must unite everything within it: to that end the painter had journeyed for four years through the history and context of art.
Now the painting is complete, *The Buitenplaats*, and it is striking how much it resembles the original sketch. We see a sort of raft – or perhaps it is a fixed promontory, that is not entirely clear – surrounded by water within which, in the background, there is a series of islands. In the foreground is a sort of half-open palisade [staketsel], which appears empty, but which you could enter. The structure appears to consist of four bare tree trunks – only the tree front-left is clearly visible

and looks to me like a birch – to which a temporary canopy/awning [overkapping] in the form of an orange cloth is knotted (what in its set-up somewhat resembles Perugino's aforementioned structure, but then in a more 'clothed' incarnation). On the ground – it is ground nonetheless, but is so positioned in the water that it more closely resembles a raft of earth – is a low wooden pallet covered with an orange-red cloth, surmounted by a television set, whose working order is impossible to determine in this context. At the rear the accommodation is closed off by a beautifully draped piece of agricultural plastic with glowing orange-red echoes of the 'roof' and 'floor' on its dark ground. To the left two thirds of the space are visible; to the right the rest is covered by a greyish net-like construction and an opaque length of cloth.
On first impression the painting appears to shimmer and glow. But the longer you look you are slowly but surely gripped with a feeling of disquiet, of the uncanny. This is no jolly painting.
This is the buitenplaats, the ultimate stable *and* shelter, the place for anyone seeking refuge.
In comparison with most of the other structures that make up the series, it is obvious that this buitenplaats offers a sort of combination of security/safety [geborgenheid] and decay/dilapidation [verval] that we have encountered in the other stables and shelters. But although the theme is a timeless one, this buitenplaats is explicitly of our time: the immediate association is that of the shanty towns, those sometimes extensive neighbourhoods beyond the suburbs where the remnants/detritus/leftovers/cast-offs [resten] of the prosperous serve as the necessities for those who live there: one man's trash is another man's building materials for his 'home'. I mention the shantytowns but we could also think of the refugee camps in Darfur or any other region ravaged by war or disaster, where large numbers of people are uprooted and must scrape together a makeshift roof above their heads.
The buitenplaats is therefore a place for people who are 'without', those who fall outside of the group, out of the boat, outside the family, outside the tribe, outside of the social class, outside of the (laws, rules, conventions, norms and values of the) society within which they accidentally find themselves. And we live in a period that is pre-eminent in its exclusion of people who look different, who behave differently, who come from afar: refugees, immigrants, 'foreigners' or, conversely: unwelcoming xenophobes and 'border-shutters'. All too often they imagine the other to be their enemy: the one is quickly daubed a terrorist, the other a racist and sometimes that is also the case, and the exceptions that prove the rule are bombarded, also by the media, to a stereotypical standard – in some parts of the world even literally so. We live in barbaric times that crave images of enemies: who is not for us is against us, and Fortress Europe protects itself against scary outsiders.
But the word 'buitenplaats' has another, now somewhat old-fashioned meaning, namely that of the chic country estate of the rich. And in all its shabby poverty this accommodation nonetheless exudes something of this: it is a hut/shack/cabin with allure. It should be obvious that we are not concerned here with pomp and circumstance but with the manner in which people treat one another in extreme circumstances and then the external allure must be internalised and be read as a metaphor. In other words: human values need not disappear under any circumstances, indeed perhaps they even have more chance in circumstances of poverty than in an environment in which they are never put to the test. Certainly man is 'inclined to evil/sin' [do you know the Calvin quote in English? I couldn't find it], but not everyone and not always, and there must surely exist something like an 'inner beauty' that may flourish even, and possibly even precisely, under pitiable conditions.

What this buitenplaats also has in common with most of the stables and shelters in the series is the fact that you are never really within and never really without. That goes for the ambivalent image itself, but also for the viewer, which becomes even more apparent when you remove the people from the paintings: the stable is often actually more of a sort of open lean-to, a set for a play while the actors have already fled leaving the structure functionless behind – or perhaps we should move in, the entire series invites us to think about shelter, safety and isolation; and so we are almost physically engaged in the image, in a certain sense we find ourselves not only *in front of* but also *within* the work, with as the apotheosis this large painting – *The Buitenplaats* – which contains the entire world and offers us a contemporary, 'globalised' accommodation. In other words: the viewer finds himself in two places at once: as an observer who looks at the painting (or series of paintings) in the museum *and* as a participant who also lives in the hut/cabin/shack, that hut/cabin/shack of Everyman, that we share with everyone else and where we must make the best of it.
That this buitenplaats is of universal and also topical importance is apparent from a closer inspection of the remainder of the painting. It then becomes clear that the water that surrounds the buitenplaats is the ocean, or rather the oceans, for on the left-hand side we see North America and South America, to the right we see something that must be the northern point of Scandinavia; and Africa, Australia and the majority of Asia are obscured from our view by the buitenplaats, but they are of course there. Here too we find that combination of conflicting emotions that the sophisticated painterly style evokes. The trees on the continents have something of the Douanier Rousseau or the proto-Renaissance about them in that they are not depicted 'true to nature' but are far too large and with an 'incorrect' perspective (as can be seen decorating old maps) and that initially results in a sort of agreeable or even safe effect as if the world is perfectly under control. Until you realise that the buitenplaats must therefore be located somewhere around the North Pole and that there an icecap is quickly melting, which the image proves because there is no ice to be seen. The rest of the world appears to be populated only by trees; it seems as though the people have fled or have been removed from the image by an Olphaertesque painter, which here amounts to the same thing. Thus, in short, we all are in the same boat, a boat that must perhaps endure a new deluge.
This is not the first time that a comparable connection between moral decay and climatological disaster has been made in (art) history. Towards the end of his life John Ruskin, perhaps the most influential art critic who ever lived, wrote a wonderful book, a collection of two lectures he had given in Oxford, which he entitled *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* and in which explained the negative climatological developments he believed – probably incorrectly – he observed, partially as a reflection of man's increasing wickedness [slechtheid].
What intrigues me further is the presence of the television set in the buitenplaats. Is this simply a remnant of prosperity with none other than a symbolic function or could we somehow actually received television programmes made elsewhere (where?). Or is it precisely a metaphor for the overestimated value of technology, which in turn might stand for every form of materialism? We do not know.
What we do know is that the left 'wall' of the buitenplaats consists of a quotation from Duchamp: this is *The Large Glass*, that hermetic, Surrealist work about sexuality upon which one can reflect endlessly without ever coming to a definitive conclusion. It was never completed and Duchamp himself called it 'definitively unfinished'. Apart from the importance of the sexual urge, both for the survival of the

species and the quality of life, this strikes me as the principle reason that this work is ‘on board’: our ‘journey’ as people in this buitenplaats is also by definition incomplete.
What is our current situation, our position in the buitenplaats? It is, despite everything, also consolatory/comforting [troostrijk], worrying perhaps, but not without prospect. In the hut/cabin/shack we are invisible or, despite the open left-hand section, we can hide in the right-hand part that is shielded from view. We are withdrawn from the cruel world in the painting but also from the world of the observer/viewer [kijker], the gallery, our ‘real’ world. We actually find ourselves in-between two worlds – which are naturally each other’s mirror image is so far as the painting is a reflection of the contemporary world/culture – all together in a no-man’s land between hope and fear. That is not an optimistic vision and there seems little reason for one unless we can find salvation or at least consolation, which is to say: in *real* fiction, there – where reality all to often appears to take on the semblance of fiction – we can truly believe the images on our screens and if we can believe them can we then live with them? Or can we live with them precisely because we become accustomed to and numbed to what happens in the world, never further way than a 24-hour flight, thus actually in our own backyard (our shelter, our buitenplaats) immune to the grisly fiction of reality or must we simply live with it? Is it possibly that to which television set refers in the hut/cabin/shack of the buitenplaats, that we are not even safe there – in the sense of ignorance – and there too perhaps we must take our responsibility without being able to say that we didn’t know?
Where does this lead us? Whither is the buitenplaats bound? Where are we all heading? I would say: we are not so much on our way to an apocalyptic endtime, but we stand, actually as everyone ever has, and just like Olphaert in relation to all his predecessors, at the provisional endpoint of tradition, which is simultaneously a starting point for a new development. The phoenix rises from its own ashes.