

Interview with Roland Patteeuw

Kunsthalle Lophem, 2004

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As a result of globalisation of culture, it is increasingly impossible to speak to day about a continuous western tradition in the visual arts. How does this affect your work ?

Nevertheless, it is exactly this western tradition that is the inspiration and starting point of my work. So, on personal level I disagree with your statement. I will loosely quote Virginia Woolf: the meaning of every - book, she says obviously, but I think every artwork in general – is that it is a continuation of the tradition, and it turns into the tradition of the generations to come. This is at least how I feel about it.

As what comes to globalisation, I think its main effect is that we can no longer talk about national artistic practices, national "schools" in the same sense as 100 or more years ago. Group exhibitions like "Contemporary Art from Finland" or "Contemporary Finnish Photography" make no sense to me. The differences between individual artists within the country can be just as big and random as are the differences between a Dutch, a British, a Japanese, a German, a French, an Italian, an Icelandic and a whatsoever colleague and me.

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History shows that new art brings in its train often a new language for analysis and description. Existing notions are often inadequate and critics and art historians search for a new vocabulary. How is your work linked to a new vocabulary and consequently needs a new language for description ?

I'm probably not the right person to answer this. My point of view is that of a picture-maker's. I realise that now that I live away from my country since five years, I'm becoming less and less attached to verbalising. My thinking, while working, is visual, not literal. This is sufficient, I'm not interested in trying to find verbal equivalents.

I often claim that I'm an old-fashioned artist. Sure, I use contemporary mediums, but I have a strong attachment to my predecessors. My work is about the fundamental questions of visual art: light, colour, form, composition, spatial relations of figures. It falls into the classical genres of landscape and portrait. (This holds true also for the most of my video works.). These are ancient things. I don't feel the need of inventing something new.

In addition to this I might say historical and formalistic approach, I want to emphasize the psychological-emotional meaning of art. Good art creates an emotion in the viewer, which I find of an utter importance, even if this often is treated in the official (art historical) discourse as something banal and non-interesting. This attitude which I have encountered among scholars makes me angry as in my opinion it bypasses the artist and his intentions, it bypasses the audience and its experience; in other words, it misses the point.

I'm not into analysis for the sake of analysis. I love to talk about art, but from the point of view of a maker. The remarks of critics and art historians, with their desire to create new vocabulary that is accessible only for the "initiated ones", can even be unfair to the art itself. We should describe less and watch more.

Why are so few people interested in what pictures look like? Even with paintings (I just saw the Vuillard exhibition in the Grand Palais in Paris) the discussion often turns around secondary issues like who are the models and what kind of social relations did they have with each others and with the artist. For me, that's not the point at all. I want to observe and marvel the choices made by the artist: how the colors are tuned, how he has applied the paint; the gesture. There might be some areas that are especially wonderful that I want to see from very close.

With photography this problem is even more marquant. Photography is doomed to be considered documentary by the large public. The questions people ask are: who? where? when? "What a beautiful place – is it in Iceland? Oh, I thought so." "Is this your boyfriend?" "You must have been so unhappy."

Why don't people look how things are shown? Photography looks so innocently simple. But making a picture implies dozens of selections and choices made by the artist, not only at the moment of exposing the film but further in the darkroom when making the print. I often photograph my landscapes at strange hours of the day. There is no information in the negative of "correct" color. The choices are as arbitrary as choosing among different tubes of paint. I can make the sky neutral gray, or I can make it opal blue, or mauve. I can leave it light and luminous or I can darken it as if a storm was rising. It is difficult to remember the impressions one has had on-location. What did the sky look like? I should do like Bonnard, who had his notebook always on him, and made beautiful observations on colors: "Violet dans les gris. Vermillon dans les ombres orangées, par un jour froid de beau temps."

I'm also fond of the special characteristics of my medium: I love the genuine grain of film and photographic paper (not the pixels in digital photography), the unsharp areas and the crispy detail. I work in large format (4x5 inch negative), so when enlarged into exhibition size, it's a real pleasure to look at the print.

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Quotation from your answer question 2:

"In addition to this I might say historical and formalistic approach, I want to emphasize the psychological-emotional meaning of art. Good art creates an emotion in the viewer, which I find of an utter importance, even if this often is treated in the official (art historical) discourse as something banal and non-interesting..."

3(a) If you want to communicate with the viewer through the creation of emotion, what is the effect in your work (in relation to " ..the psychological-emotional meaning of art.....") of alienation.

Art has the power of creating emotions that are not easily verbalised nor compared. The emotion is first and foremost something personal experienced by the viewer and has little if nothing to do with the artist. I have my personal reasons to do the work. But once sent "out there", the work is out of my reach and does no longer rely on my explanations or intentions. The viewers filtrate what they see through their own past, and there might be some recognition or a feeling of "understanding", however imaginary that may be. But then again, the human life in its essence – birth and death, and between them love and pain – is something we all understand.

3(b)

Is it conceivable that the use of a (yellow) post-it is a mental and formal estrangement which creates a distance in the emotional approach of the viewer ?

I don't know. I used Post-its in "Suites françaises 2" (1999) because they represented (1) a way to learn French, (2) a banal everyday-life object that made the work less serious, more familiar, even humoristic, (3) a unifying theme ("the red thread") for the whole series, (4) an access to the (alien) French landscape, which made it possible for me to use myself as a model in some landscape pictures as well.

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How important is the narrative (in general) in your work (examples ?) and more specific in your videos , video installations ?

Since some years, it is not important at all. Some videos make exception: "Attends-moi je t'aime" (2001) and "Brotherus, tyttö" (2003) are constructed within some kind of a loose

narrative. But "Spring" (2001) and "Baigneurs" (2001/2003) are non-narrative, purely visual. They are closer to still images than to films. "Spring" is a horizon that flows by. "Baigneurs" refers to the classical theme of nude bathers by the waterside.

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About the use of language in your work.

Quotation from : 2002 Artforum International Magazine

"If the fixation on language shown by "Suites francaises 2" is any indication, Brotherus believes that photography must also be conceptual"

Do you agree ? Is this use linked to art history ?

Not the use of language. There are art historical links in "Suites françaises 2", but they are visual links. I can't make general statements like "Photography must be conceptual". "Suites françaises 2" is perhaps my most conceptual work, and the only one where I have directly used language. In my early work titles were very important and added an extra level to the image. Nowadays I use very laconic titles that simply state what there is in the image.

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I assume you needed a lot of guts to use language in 'Suites francaises 2'. Did art history help you and is it conceivable the Belgian artist René Magritte played a part in for example 'Les chaussures' 1999 and 'La nature morte jaune' 1999 ?

I don't think it required especially lot of courage... I was quite fun. I wasn't thinking of Magritte (although you are not the first one to propose this): "Les Chaussures" was made because a friend who found my post-its funny wanted to contribute and wrote those notes; "La Nature morte jaune" is a small tribute to Cézanne.

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At least in your early work the self-portrait has been important. Am I right to think they show a fear of solitude and in certain cases a search for yourself ? Fear of solitude to be seen as a phenomenon of the world and not only as a psychological item.

Not a fear for solitude, perhaps a constatation of it. The early self-portraits were pictures of psychological or emotional "decisive moments". Solitude is something we have to accept. We have to embrace it. Solitude is often good for working, some amount of it is even indispensable. Solitude sensitizes.

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Do your landscapes, such as 'Horizon' and 'Low Horizon' series, incorporate the same loneliness but in a less personal linked way and as such more universal ?

Could we speak about a kind of insurmountable solitude ?

Well, that's your reading and it's of course ok to think that way. For me, though, the landscapes are first and foremost formal exercises. Then there is also the need to contemplate an open landscape that is even stronger now that I spend a lot of time in big cities. In an open empty view there is not so much sadness, I think, but strength, air, breathing space.

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Besides the fact you describe your videowork 'Miroir' 2001 as " ...an allegory of photography, which in its origins...." could we see this too as a discovery of a metamorphosis of your self ?

No. The idea I had in mind was simply to check what it looks like when the vapour disappears. I see no identity stuff in there. But then again, if you do, what am I to say that you are wrong? The "allegory of photography" thing came later into my mind and is perhaps a bit artificial. I was thinking of daguerrotypes, which were sensitised silver plates where the image gradually appeared during the development with quicksilver vapour.

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Why did you decide to make videowork, what are in your view the differences between photography and video, and do both influence each other in your work ?

My first video work was "Lesson" (1998), an experiment on female cruelty and on not being able to reach the norm. I did it for a workshop when still a student. I guess I was concerned about those questions at the moment, and I found the realm of dance a good pretext to take up the issue.

Sometimes one still image feels too limited. The element of time opens up the work in a whole new way. Most of the time my videos and photographic works are just different points of view to the same questions. Take "Spring", 2001, for example. It's about horizons, but they are in a continuous flowing movement. "Baigneurs", 2001/2003, is about nudes in a landscape, by the waterfront or bathing, and this subject matter too I have often been photographing. What is different: Photographs of bathers are more linked to the tradition of painting, whereas the movement brings a certain realism but at the same time a strange alienation to the work.