NIGHTBOOK, NIGHTWORLD

Re-projected on the dark screen of the night

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Before me lies Jan van der Pol's new book of drawings, *NIGHTBOOK, NIGHTWORLD.* It has the bulk and weight of an old historical tome. The title has a dreamlike quality, and the images seem to glide past as you leaf through the book. A man with a diving mask who is edging onto the beach like a walrus. A naked woman with long dark hair. A chopped-off head, rolling along the street. A nightmare perhaps? Ornamental statues lining the edge of a classicist roof: Moses with his tablets; Saint Andrew with his cross. They resemble Thomas Schütte's comical *Grosse Geister*. These are private themes. In *A. Revisited*, a large-scale Aalsmeer painting made by Van der Pol in 2004, the head rolling along the typical Dutch country road is that of the artist's grandfather. The drawings combine images from the news with the artist's personal fascinations, like a dynamic and optimally efficient car designed by Buckminster Fuller (the Dymaxion car).

Turning its pages is an intimate experience. Reading a book… for a moment, you're alone with the drawing: a fragment of something greater. Veiled in dark graphite, your impressions of the past day resurface in compressed images on your retina. Rhythmically pulsating, whining, whinging, banging – occasionally lighting up from the inside like a picture on a computer screen.

Even before I can make a start on developing my own interpretation of this book, one thing has already become clear from the description: Van der Pol has a certain weakness for the 'enchantment of lists' – he is seduced by the charms of the catalogue. [[1]] *NIGHTBOOK, NIGHTWORLD* contains a total of 262 drawings, and the book's relatively brief period of gestation – 29 September 2001 to 22 February 2012 – shows just how intensive the work process has been. Every day, the artist went in search of new images; every day, he made new drawings and patiently stringed the results together in a long line of images. One, and one, and one, and one – a series that sometimes reflects a basic order or rhythm, but equally

[1] Umberto Eco, de betovering van lijsten, de kunst van het verzamelen (2011) Bert Bakker

often suggests a meaningless succession: randomness and folly. Van der Pol enumerates while he paints; he enumerates while he collects and draws. But although his work often deals with meaning and randomness, the enumeration itself is far from arbitrary. On the contrary: Jan van der Pol has for many years been working on a consistent – and to a certain extent 'classicist' – body of work that shows tremendous coherence when viewed as a whole.

In this essay, I would like to offer further insight into this coherence. I refer both to the interrelation of Van der Pol's paintings and his books of drawings, and the ties between the paintings as a separate group. Although you can approach Van der Pol's work in a variety of ways – everyone writing about his work focuses on different aspects (Katalin Herzog speaks in terms of registers, Lien Heyting and Erik Bos give centre stage to the artist's personal themes, while Roos van Put seems to concentrate on the media images) – at the heart of his oeuvre you can find a certain forceful consistency. This is probably what Van der Pol is referring to when he calls painting an 'agile medium': you can ask a wide range of questions by putting paint to canvas; show a multitude of images; and still combine them to form a single whole.

Watch, observe and collect

But let's first examine the relationship between the artist's paintings and his books. In 1986, Van der Pol made his first book of drawings. He experimented with a number of themes and used brushes and pens to produce 107 drawings in black ink. The man with the extended arms. The man staring at the sky, exposing his vulnerable Adam's apple. Grid patterns. 'Every day, try and draw whatever comes to mind,' was the advice Van der Pol gave to his students during his time as a teacher at the Royal Academy of Art (KABK) in The Hague. 'It will help you to develop themes that you can also use in other aspects of your work.' At the same time, these drawings form an exercise in achieving coherence. The artist has described one of his books of drawings as one big pen-and-ink drawing: a single large-scale composition. This indicates that the book format serves a second purpose for Van der Pol. The books of drawings are more than simple diaries or records: they are a forum that systematically brings together apparently disparate phenomena: private themes, current affairs, trivia and stories with and without a moral message. Almost as if the works were a novel. But there is not only a strong disparity in terms of content; the images themselves are also fundamentally

different in kind: they are both abstract and figurative; the result of the artist's personal observations; filtered through the media, photography, television, films and the Internet; analogue and digital. Between 1986 and 2009, Van der Pol made 23 books, using pencil, ink and water colours. The book before last features 44 photo collages.

Van der Pol watches, observes and collects. In most of the writing about his work, the authors refer to his collection of African art and the vast butterfly and beetle collection the artist has had built up around a core collection inherited from his father. Multiplicity can be found all around us, is what Van der Pol seems to be saying, and in his unique approach to this teeming diversity, he reminds you of Atte Jongstra's *Crystal Man*: 'Although the compounds in a crystal are organic, they are also virtually inimitable. The crystals consist of associations,' is how Jongstra put it in his book about the Dutch writer Multatuli. [[2]] Van der Pol actually collaborated with Jongstra on the work *Magazijn 'Memoria'*, a portfolio of 52 prints, accompanied by 52 poems.

Indeed, maybe Van der Pol shares certain traits with Jongstra's *Crystal Man*; perhaps he is an encyclopaedist at heart – albeit not for romantic or nostalgic reasons. He is not attempting to escape reality. The core of his fascination – which simultaneously reveals the fundamental convergence of Van der Pol's collections and his art – is perception, watching, observation, empiricism. Amassing specimens and mounting them are a hobby, nothing more – Van der Pol is a more rational man than his passion for collecting would suggest. He has a critical interest in technology, nature and science; an interest that is informed by a strong affinity with the times we live in. This becomes clear when Van der Pol speaks about the formal aspects of painting, for example. He pays a great deal of attention to the technical aspects of the viewer's conception of the images: when does a discrepancy in colours result in a unified work? How does the eye move across the canvass? When should colour fields be strictly delineated? What happens when the image blurs? Such questions suggest that the artist prefers Color Field Painting like that of Ellsworth Kelly to trompe-l'oeil effects – with the exception of the spots and circles that you see when you press hard on your eyeballs. But of course, there is also a strongly poetic side to this ordering: the enumeration as a vehicle for the aesthetic experience.

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[2] Atte Jongstra, *Kristalman, Multatuli-oefeningen* (2012), Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam.
Quoted in Maria Vlaar, *De Standaard*: http://www.standaard.be/artikel/detail.aspx?artikelid=GT3P5E64

The Hieroglyphs of Horapollo

The book *IUOEYA BFG X ZNQD VCSP KWTRL HMJ*, a collection of linocuts published in 1999, shows both the rational and poetic sides of Van der Pol's work. Van der Pol added 195 prints to the text of *Hieroglyphica*, a treatise written in Coptic by Horapollo that – like Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* – offers an overview of knowledge as it existed in the author's time. The result is a curious mixture of trivial facts and purported mythological and religious explanations and translations of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Van der Pol has decided to place his own themes, portraits of artists, landscapes, abstract imagery and migraine auras in a specific order above the text of the treatise. The linocuts are not intended as illustrations or coded images, like the ones found in Jacob Kerver's sixteenth-century edition of the *Hieroglyphica*. [3] Rather, Van der Pol's images are self-contained, and together form a composition. Van der Pol feels a natural admiration for the text of the *Hieroglyphica*, which he views as a concrete life experience. This perspective reminds you of his conception of poetry: he unhesitantly accepts human incongruities. It's simply the way people are: it's a good thing. But the publication also immediately confronts you with Van der Pol's rational side. He emphasises the observations that lie at the root of these weird and wonderful descriptions. He firmly rejects the esoteric interpretations of Horapollo's treatise that are also bandied about. Indeed, Michael van Hoogenhuyze's announcement that that he believed he had discovered fragments of descriptions by Aristotle while translating the *Hieroglyphica* from the Greek was enthusiastically received by the artist.

Perception and observation are fundamental to Van der Pol's work, in other words. This applies both to his paintings and to *IUOEYA*, a publication that I have not included in the aforementioned list of 23 books because it concerns a collection of prints. Both media present opportunities to establish meaningful connections within a wide variety of information and present the result as a single composition. But the artist has another reason besides for ordering the images: one that also has to do with his penetrating curiosity. *NIGHTBOOK, NIGHTWORLD* suggests that he is beset by these images in the dark hours of the night. There's a beautiful word for this in German, *heimsuchen*: 'to visit' in the Biblical sense. The images pursue him; are re-projected on the dark screen of the night. This

[3] A copy of this book, which was printed in Paris in 1551, can be found in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague.

experience includes moments of obsession, a circumstance that satisfies the more absurdist, surreal aspects of his work.

Bizarre and salacious tales

Surrealism influences Van der Pol's art in a number of ways. For many years now, the artist has admired the work of Max Ernst, particularly his books of collages *La femme 100 têtes*, published in 1929, *Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel* from 1930 and *Une semaine de bonté*, published in 1933. To make these collages, Ernst used images cut from a wide range of Victorian illustrations. This resulted in bizarre and salacious tales starring a range of girls and ladies. But Van der Pol's main interest does not lie in the Freudian meanings found in our subconscious. He sees Surrealism as a method for deconstructing text and imagery and creating 'new' narrative opportunities. 'New' needs to be used parenthetically, since according to Van der Pol, the Surrealism of the early twentieth century was even more important than Cubism in breaking with the naturalist imperative that had dominated Western painting for so long. It engendered a new interest in efficient narrative formats and techniques that had formerly been tabooed under the influence of academic conventions. When Van der Pol seeks to illustrate this influence, he refers for example to the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century convent churches in the Moldavian region of Bukovina, which are covered in figures and narrative tableaux and offer a graphic and unruly depiction of Heaven and Hell. But although he has a certain preference for composite and narrative images, neither Van der Pol's books nor his paintings should be seen as simple visual narratives. His work is too firmly rooted in the traditions of Western painting for this. The image reigns supreme. This becomes particularly clear when you reorder the themes, highlighting how Van der Pol draws and paints landscapes and portraits, parks and architecture. This series of basic themes shows an artistic conception that is almost classicist in nature and at the same time completely contemporary. The artist's work represents the image of the landscape evoked by the anthropologist Marc Augé in *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. [4]

Close encounters of any kind

Jan van der Pol's paintings can be seen as a composite of images. However, this composite

[4] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), Verso, London.

can also be reduced to a common denominator. Together, the various figurative and abstract elements form a single landscape; a unified image of the world – albeit one that is fragmented and marked by human intervention, even when it presents itself as 'nature'. Particularly in the case of landscapes, 'nature' can hardly be taken at face value. In his dialogue *Natura Deorum* – 'On the Nature of the Gods' – Cicero used the concepts of 'first' and 'second nature' to distinguish between the wilderness created by divine force and the nature that had been shaped by Man. 'We sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilise the soil by irrigation, we dam the rivers and direct them where we want. In short, by means of our hands we try to create as it were a second nature within the natural world.' [5] In our own times, it seems as if the man-made landscape has entered a new phase. It has become an economised and politicised space; a space that wherever you go, bears the traces of use and abuse, industry and infrastructures – even those areas that are seen as 'wilderness'. After all, most of this wilderness has presently been confined to nature reserves. [6]

For Van der Pol, this situation is by no means unfamiliar. He grew up in Aalsmeer, on the edge of the Haarlemmermeerpolder. The village has for many years been dominated by greenhouse farming and floriculture. The artist's memories blend seamlessly with his current experience. The greenhouses were heated with steam boilers. The skyline was dotted with chimneys. Due to local air traffic, you were not allowed to fly large kites. The butterflies collected by his father were attracted by the enormous lights. His grandfather spent his time with two gibbons in a heated greenhouse. So it's not particularly surprising that Van der Pol frequently draws parks; that his landscapes are transected by roads and railways. They are contemporary versions of the classical landscape. And more besides: in his paintings, the ultramodern physical landscape and the media landscape converge. Like the work of the Belgian Luc Tuymans, or his friend the Hungarian artist Ákos Birkás, Van der Pol's images are strongly influenced by the media. He combines images that he has observed first-hand with photographs from around the world. He paints close encounters of the first, second and third kind – although these stages are not intended to refer to alien encounters, but to the mediated or unmediated phasing of perception. The landscapes have been photographed straight on, or are viewed through the window of a train or truck cab. He uses photos with

[5] The Cicero quote was taken from: John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (2000), University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
[6] The term 'third nature' is limited to parks. It was first used by the humanist Jacopo Bonfadio in 1541.

imperfections, perfect photographs, pixelated images from the Internet and pictures that have been striped by his faulty printer. The images offer a range of scales and perspectives, and all these qualities compete for the viewer's attention.

NIGHTBOOK, NIGHTWORLD resembles a ride through our contemporary landscape; a study of how the world is recorded by our eyes and lenses; an ode to the afterimage (our recollections in the dead of night) and a wry gaze at the consequences of human activity. Because Jan van der Pol's aesthetic preferences reveal a clear ethical perspective. Human activity implies war and disaster; it refers to the tension between the individual and the mass; plan and incident; to a world filled with people and technology.