Atte Jongstra

PLURIFORM & SIMULTANEOUS
On the work of Jan van der Pol.

I once wrote a poem inspired by a linocut by Jan van der Pol entitled ‘Perspectief’.

The work was undoubtedly based on memories of his native soil, the market-gardening area of Aalsmeer. The chimney pipes serving as exhausts for the glasshouse heaters; the greenhouses themselves; leaden, overcast skies. And God pressing his weight against the panes – it’s a miracle they don’t crack. That’s the idea basically. We can paint a sombre picture in our mind’s eye, because light like this is hardly uplifting – and neither is the landscape, with a horizon that cuts across the plane like a fence. This is headache country, a world full of bile. Glazed insanity. Fear of transparency, hail and thunderstorms. Of breakage. When you pick up your bike and ride out of a place like this, it’s with a grin on your face. After all, at least once you want to roar with laughter – before death sets in. Come to think of it; maybe a racing bike would be the better option. Because obviously you need to hurry if you’re stuck somewhere where you have to get out.

And once you’ve left home, where do you end up? It took me a long time to find the right word to describe a typical Van der Pol landscape. Personally, I wouldn’t like to lose my way in the brush strokes of this painter. The paintings often remind me of Eastern Europe. The landscapes can hardly be called populous – there are scarcely any people in the artist’s images of suburbs, shunting-yards, storm-water run offs, non-areas. Everyone has passed through areas like this, but they feel vaguely sinister – you don’t stay around there for fun. Nor are you supposed to, it seems.

If you look at a Van der Pol image by itself, you see a fringe area or a variation of such a borderland. And in the case of the portraits, you often see people who seem to prefer being somewhere else. Up till now, Van der Pol has painted my portrait four times. A wondrous experience. Sure, I recognise my face, but I have rarely seen more alienated images of myself than the ones in these paintings. The sitting sessions themselves I remember as being relaxed, friendly, and peaceful. So it must have been the painter’s brushstrokes that drew me into his highly personalised

gallery of disoriented figures. I have one of Van der Pol's self-portraits on my wall at home – a remarkable likeness in more than one respect. Indeed, you look at his entire physical appearance. But the same applies to the man who we see sitting on a bench in front of his summer-house, staring into the pond: you sense that his thoughts are somewhere far beyond the picture's frame. And as a result, this summer-house, which at first glance seems so idyllic, is also submerged in a tense, pregnant world, in which both life and death – indeed existence itself – become relative phenomena.

Besides working as a visual artist, Jan van der Pol also collects tribal figurines from West Africa. And of course, this particular interest leaves some traces in his paintings, if only because of specific similarities in how the artist stylises the human physique. As such, the activity of collecting plays a crucial role in Van der Pol's entire oeuvre.
A lot can be said about the urge to collect, and indeed, a great deal of writing exists on the subject. It is worth considering, for instance, what the Zwolle memoirist Henry II Fix (1774-1844) wrote about living with his collection (and that of his father):

> "I wanted to summarise the world, but how does the world reveal itself to us? One can hardly speak of a coherent whole. The occasions on which you experience the world as a unified whole, with yourself as a natural part of it, are very rare. One generally encounters a world full of scattered pieces, disjointed. It's up to us to order them. And naturally, this arrangement does not follow the rules of symmetry. Indeed, it is definitely not a case of simply ordering them according to similarities in appearance. No, they are grouped on the basis of connections established in the emotions of the viewer. Overseeing these matters, you establish an interplay of lines that appears to have such a lack of coherence that one could easily take it as the result of chance or chaos. If, for instance, you were to see a situation or rarity that is red in nature, displayed beside another item that evokes the association of 'red', one can be sure that the actual correspondence between the two goes a lot further than that which is perceived with one's eyes. After all, when considering the sum of parts that present themselves to us in their isolation, it is not so much our senses that order them side by side on the shelves of taxonomy, as it is our memory."

Perhaps Jan van der Pol understands what Henry Fix meant to say. If they had been contemporaries, I am sure they would have had

something talk about. Many people have called Fix an ‘encyclopaedist’, and the case in point would be this concept of ‘summarising’. In addition to many other things, Van der Pol could also be called an encyclopaedist. And as in all matters, encyclopaedists come in all shapes and sizes. Of course, a key difference between Henry Fix and Jan van der Pol is that the former works in text, whereas the latter deals in imagery. For the most part, that is. Because, to employ a typical Frisian expression, both of them occasionally stick their head under the fence and graze in the bordering pasture. Henry Fix approaches a painting, print or drawing with the same intelligence as any other subject. Jan van der Pol is able to speak with authority and taste about a range of literary or scientific subjects. Encyclopaedists don’t allow a fence or hedge to limit them to a single disciple.

Say one is of the stamp of a Fix, Van der Pol, Larousse, Brockhaus or Winkler Prins. You want to take in the world in its totality and furthermore, you wish to share this vista with those around you. You will need to create order in chaos, but how to go about this? After all, there are things that can only be brought in connection with each other by intuitive means. Intuitive classification: a blessing in a world that attaches so much importance to logic.
I recently ‘read’ the *Parallel Encyclopedia* (2007) by the Swiss-Dutch artist Batia Suter. A book of imagery. In it, I encountered dung beetles, turbulence, coffee cups, the planet Mars, the sea urchin, a car blown over by the wind, two women fighting a pistol duel, the fat-tail sheep, frostwork, the photographer Nadar in the wicker basket of a hot air balloon, a drilling platform, a pyramid, Stegeman spicy gammon, a urinal full of ice cubes, Congo woodcarving, the new thermoplastic paper igloos of the Municipality of Amsterdam, Dante’s beaked profile moulded by an unknown master… ‘Just about everything’ sums it up quite nicely. Most pictures were taken from old books and magazines. One could easily take Suter’s *Parallel Encyclopedia* for the work of an insane collector. But this would be a mistake. It offers a splendid demonstration of what can be achieved through *ars combinatoria*. Another name for it would be *correspondences*: the form of ‘knowledge’ that concerns itself with intuitive connections. One of the practitioners of this genre was the writer August Strindberg (1849-1912), whose paranoid streak proved very useful for uncovering the interrelation of the most disparate phenomena. “The onion’s bulb truly resembles the Earth’s rotational ellipsoid; its shoot rises straight up like the Earth’s axis and supports the flower, which reflects a sphere dappled with six-pointed stars.”

By now, we have been taken considerably off course. After all, Jan van der Pol does not depict urinals with ice cubes or municipal paper bins. Nor does he suffer from a pathological urge to bring things in connection with each other. Jan van der Pol's *ars combinatoria* constitutes a more relaxed fusion of elements, by which I expressly do not mean to suggest that his mixing of aspects reflects a noncommittal attitude. Taken as a whole, Van der Pol's drawings, paintings, linocuts, etc. reveal something akin to a 'sphere of influence' – a 'complex of factors'. Things are no longer what they would be on their own, and once combined, the images explore territories that none of the individual aspects ever ventured into before.

In order to create such a complex or atmosphere, Jan van der Pol employs a variety of figures that make repeated appearances in his work. We shouldn't assign a fixed meaning to such figures. A figure can have an entirely different significance in connection with the one element than it has under the influence of the other. Indeed, it is impossible to speak of symbols in this context. I have a strong suspicion that the artist often uses these figures to ward off the threat contained in the numerous disquieting landscapes and cityscapes that he traverses in his pictures. Chimney pipes, circles, diminutive human figures with spread arms, hovering, torso-less heads: these figures show that Van der Pol has cycled through this landscape, stepped off his bike and planted his sole on the grass – so that he would at least find something familiar if he should revisit this place: a recognisable mark. It's strange: I imagine that if he would indeed return here, the chimney pipe will have suddenly transformed into a tower, or a memorial.
The circle appears in the guise of a sun, the human figures, the disembodied heads, a self-portrait.
Because there are always new options, nothing ever stays the same. When you have uncovered the definitive survey of our Galaxy, as a Van-der-Pollian space-head does in one of the artist's linocuts, the knowledge that it could also be something different could only lead to a mixture of baffled disbelief and jubilation.

I am presently reminded of an hourglass – or rather: its shape. For the encyclopaedist Van der Pol – the condenser – the world by necessity tapers: it is reduced; contracted. At the same time, his work continuously strives to explore new alternatives to what has already been established. The artist seeks out multiplicity of meaning – the image's synchronistic quality. Viewing the image above, as one reaches the horizon any

illusion of a comprehensive overview, a theory or a conclusion is exploded.

Jan van der Pol frequently depicts a wide variety of elements which exist simultaneously in the picture's plane. The simultaneity of the image – a fascinating subject that has undoubtedly received extensive treatment by other writers. But you don't need words to describe it: just look for yourself. American Airways lets its entire fleet take to the skies, and at the same time parades it across the airport grounds – using stationary planes, to be precise. While this is obviously impossible in an aeronautic or technical sense, the creation of such an image is the artist's prerogative. Of course this is a twentieth-century picture. In the Middle Ages, the principle of simultaneity was possibly even more widely celebrated. All stages of Christ's passion in a single image; made visible at a glance. Once you become aware of the temporal factor in visual art, it automatically becomes a great deal more interesting than before.

Jan van der Pol is an erudite artist. I don't mean in a postmodern sense: his brushwork and use of symbols are too personalised for such an interpretation. Very rarely do you come across literal references in the artist's work. By no means do Van der Pol's considerable intellectual capacities appear to interfere with his process of 'draining off the imagination', as people used to call it. The person of Jan van der Pol is evident in everything that Jan van der Pol produces. His work is instantly recognisable.
At this point, I would like to provide an overview of Jan van der Pol's specific brand of erudition. The problem is that in contrast with, for example, works of literature, drawings and paintings often lack a title. In Van der Pol's case, direct quotations are even relatively scarce. As a result, when viewing the various paintings we cannot say: ah, yes: there a reference to that medieval panel, or look, there's that 18th-century engraving. Van der Pol's erudition is absorbed by the deeper layers of his work. Consequently, I am free to give my own, personal take on Van der Pol's oeuvre.
"Will it still make any sense, sir?"

In the years when I strived to develop my own erudition, I acquired a taste for what is known as 'visual rhyme'. I hesitate to define the meaning of visual rhyme in all too precise terms, but whatever it may mean, it's fun to give it some thought. You basically call up an artistic simultaneity all by yourself – occasionally with sensational results. In the course of what I may as well call my 'Jan van der Pol research', I came across a

fascinating website that I wouldn't be able to track down again just like that – that's how these things go nowadays. This site was extremely disorienting. It leads the regular visitor through an immense visual database, apparently without reason: he is driven from pillar to post. One result can show visual material made a thousand years earlier than that of the next. According to the site's makers, the connection between the various images is not so much logical, as 'lyrical' or 'encyclopaedic'. Artistic content does not come into play: it's about what is shown in the pictures themselves – a large share of the images come from advertising. Nor does the time of production play a role. Everything is made contemporaneous. And the nice thing is that many of the individual pictures themselves also show this synchronism. If time is suspended, the heavens can indeed be filled with a fleet of airplanes – impressive.

Old; familiar; the Middle Ages. In terms of visual culture, before to the Renaissance 'simultaneity in the image' could sooner be considered the rule than the exception. Maybe because – like the American Airways advertisement and the Fir Plywood imagery – in a certain respect those images are also advertising; propaganda. If we merge the encyclopaedic aspect referred to earlier with this unmistakeable aspect of propaganda, we arrive at examples like Goethe's theory of colours. Take several of the illustrations in *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810), for instance: there's an amazing resemblance with how Jan van der Pol structures many of his larger paintings.

Or consider the 'synchronism' in a painting like Pieter Breughel's depiction of proverbs and expressions (although these aren't divided into different 'compartments'), or the pious altarpieces that present Jesus' entire life a single glance.

In closing, I would like to say something about that aspect of Jan van der Pol's painted work that I am least equipped to talk about – namely the act of painting itself: the artist's technique; the position of his brush; his strategic brushwork; tactical brushwork; the tectonics of the canvas; the daubing. I recently attended the opening of an exhibition featuring new work by Van der Pol. There was a striking lack of pluriformity – just one image per painting. The work was lighter, too – cheerier – at no point was I reminded of Aalsmeer, or of Hungary or the Balkans.
There was one picture that I felt I could say something sensible about as a layman. The painting depicted a chasm, and I had the sensation of being sucked in. For a moment, the feeling was quite confining, but strangely enough, immediately after I had the sensation of being

launched from a cannon into free space. I took a closer look at the picture and realised it was the brushwork: it pulled you in and just as quickly threw you back out again. Fantastic.
Naturally, I felt the urge to give the artist a full report on my observations. But Van der Pol was doing the honours, as these things go: best keep it brief then.
“Great painting, Jan. Lots of speed…”
“I think that one worked out…”
He may well be right.