



Onamatopee OMP50.1 / NEST

Duo exhibition and publication by Peter Koole & Anne Dijkstra

2010

Great speech, wrong hall

For years I've been fascinated by art that unites the literary and the visual. Not by literature that merely annotates or describes the visual, and not by images that merely illustrate a text- but rather by the domain in which both are represented equally, intertwined. If my fascination has led me to some kind of deeper understanding, it must be the notion that the relation between the literary and the visual is never just a fleeting affair and might sometimes culminate in good work.

Marcel Broodthaers is a fitting example of an artist who manages to maintain the merits of the literary world within his work. Broodthaers started off as a poet. After accepting that his poetry books weren't successful, he stacked them up and had them immersed in plaster. This art piece was the start of a glorious career, but to Broodthaers' surprise, no one seemed interested in the content of the books sticking out of this massive stack.

Why does the phrase La Musée d'art Moderne, painted above a self-portrait of Broodthaers wearing a green comic nose, continue to uphold artistic authority over time, while the wordplay of Palais des Beaux-arts above the graphic figurations of René Daniels does not? And am I even allowed to consider this? The autonomy of a visual artwork seems to restrain us from denouncing the text included as part of it as utter nonsense. Indeed, visual artists seem to feel entitled, often unjustly, to having the literary at their disposal. I decide to talk through this subject with some poet and artist friends.

Poet K. states that a visual artist and the visual arts are not able to engage with any other discipline on equal terms. Unlike other disciplines such as music, theatre, literature and dance, which are indeed able to mutually propel one another towards greater added value, any interaction of another discipline with visual art will generate negative friction from the beginning. No matter in what kind of interdisciplinary relation visual art engages, it will always strive to be dominant. This conviction of the dominant role of visual art and its denunciation of any compromise whatsoever, reinforces the artist's intangibility and autonomy.

I then speak with artist W., who, without any musical knowledge or background, composes for professional classical ensembles on the basis of his social concepts. W. is warmly welcomed within the world of modern, composed music. He is accordingly quick to assert that his work is part of the visual arts: "I am no composer", he says. Why? Perhaps because if a visual artist were able to come closer to this alternative point of view out of enthusiasm for this other discipline, he would risk lifelong exile from the less than tolerant world of visual arts. Even the major retrospective exhibition of theatre- and television celebrity Wim T. Schippers at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam failed to assert his status as a visual artist. He has only been granted a footnote for one performance at piece in the pages of art history.

From 2004 to 2006, under the banner of “Poetry & Art”, I included within the Poetry International Festival programme projects uniting poetry and art, curated by artist Kamiel Verschuren. The festival seeks to maintain a reputation for upholding successful relations with other disciplines such as theatre, music, dance and film. Relatively self-contained and subservient to the poetry readings, these disciplines assimilate quite well into the programme, billed as entr'actes or Pauseprograms. Visual arts, however, don't. The visual artists taking part in the Poetry & Art projects set an instant and direct course to structurally modify the DNA of the festival. If their contribution did not fundamentally alter this DNA, and therefore affect the entire festival, they reasoned, their role would be reduced to that of mere decoration, or even worse, design. No matter how much I have defended the DNA of the festival, being an artist I understood their attitude all too well.

Artist D. keeps it short. “Art is to be placed on the wall, while language doesn't have such a function of conservation,” he says. “Language reads from left to right, from the top downward, and hops under the grid into the cat's box”. There seems to be a difference when comparing the ‘preservability’ of art to the ‘preservability’ of language. Broodthaers made that very clear in a film, writing poetry with pen and ink on paper under a rainy sky.

With growing amazement I listen to the perspective of sculptor V., who proudly announces that his visual process runs along the tracks of language: initially making chairs and proceeding to chair-like forms, he accordingly writes the word stoel (chair) on a plate in his studio and translates it into English, in consideration of an international career. For reasons incomprehensible to me, he subsequently crosses out the first two letters to found the Musee D’Air Moderne; a plinth with nothing above it; apparently an art piece to match the tradition of Piero Manzoni, who pushed his Socle du Monde upside down into a lawn in 1961. “Excellent interplay of art and language, isn't it?” V. adds delightedly.

T. is an artist renowned for his performances. I have cherished a dispute with him for some years already. According to him, the written and spoken words that arise directly from his performances are considered suitable for a poetry stage. Still, the language itself isn't the point of departure – the performance is. The words that flow from this performance cannot therefore stand apart from the autonomous and inviolable cult that revolves around the artwork.

Where have all these conversations led me? To realise that the arrogance of the visual arts and the visual artists bring about a freedom and impunity to appropriate other disciplines as part of visual art? The lack of knowledge of and respect for these other disciplines has sometimes delivered painful artistic results

Furthermore, most successful present-day artists are those who are able to describe their work best. Language is supposed to make the work relevant. There is little visual art today which is not reliant on language. “Wer nicht denken will, fliegt raus,” Joseph Beuys stated. But the use of language within visual art loses impact when exhibited in a gallery- a place where anything at all can be expressed. It's a case of “great speech, wrong venue”, according to poet K.

As soon as the artist truly feels the urgency to embrace language, he or she shows the willingness to leave his or her autonomous position and engage with the world outside this traditional frame and outside the very walls of the gallery itself– for the sake of language. Now he or she is forced to literally take a tangible position equal to that of his audience. Within such a context, and we cannot underestimate this, the artist reveals him- or herself, takes a stand and manifests his or her own vulnerability. This new appropriation delivers an abundance of poetic possibilities to the artist, through the medium of language.

The artists Anne Dijkstra and Peter Koole (who also took part in the Poetry & Art exhibitions) have had the guts to appropriate words that equal their images: very consciously, acknowledging multiple

layers of meaning and staying open to multiple interpretations. Like poets, they also showcase their vulnerability.

“If judgement is passed, then I was sick,” Dijkstra writes on one of his least developed drawings, which, with regards to his other work and the text balloon in which the words are written, is a portrait. The subject is sick – or is it the artist himself who closes the safe, classical distance between the work and its viewer in order to apologise on behalf of himself?

The artist Peter Koole positions a small set of kitchen steps in front of his work *The Defence Minister s*. In the text on the lower part of the painting, he invites the audience to mount the steps and put any worm-shaped body part of preference into the hole on the forehead of the minister depicted. The steps might also offer the opportunity to detach the work from the wall and to descend with it into the dangerous, social area where it might be touched and disfigured. “If it’s got legs, we’ll use arms”, Koole wrote in the text on the canvas.

Bas Kwakman