

The expansive view

The Inclusive Universe of Dolf Verlinden

Weiß der Zufall, was er will?

Wolf Wondratschek¹

A visit to Dolf Verlinden in the old city centre of Groningen makes it clear; his studio is more than a workshop, more than the place where “the painter paints”. Verlinden himself speaks of a “laboratory”, the testing ground where ideas are born, worked out, and where they mature and grow.² High up on one of the walls of his studio hangs a Ukrainian flag, with two downward-facing stripes in the colours blue and yellow. Ukraine is one of his favourite travel destinations, but those familiar with Verlinden's imagery understand the true reason for his interest in the object: the dynamics of colour, proportion and scale, line and surface patterns. It is precisely the rather thin stick sticking out along the top of the flag that “makes it happen,” says Verlinden. The designation ‘painter’ falls short in the case of Dolf Verlinden, it seems. It feels like a limiting way to describe this artist, who works with space and spatiality, with rhythm and dynamic structures.

In his painting Verlinden abstains from figuration and representation, and since 2001 the last references to an outdoor painterly reality have also dissolved in pure abstraction. From that moment on Verlinden reduces suspicions of objects, still lifes and a spatial environment, as they appeared in his earlier paintings, to forms, colours and textures with their own *raison d'être*. The “world of things” makes way for grids and geometry, but also for anthropomorphic, organic forms: wordless and irreducible. The American “minimal” sculptor Donald Judd considered this singularity of properties - of colour without form, of form without the need for colour - as distinct characteristics of good art, “(...) like unblended Scotch whiskey. Free.”³ Dolf Verlinden's multiform oeuvre is based on the same desire for freedom, both in form and concept.

“The experiment is an indispensable prerequisite for innovation,” says Verlinden, and it is precisely that abandonment of the beaten path which explains why existing categories and ‘isms’ offer so little support in the characterisation of his work. Verlinden's visual language is sober and reduced, the painter renounces ornament and decoration, but minimalistic - in the sense of a somewhat generalising concept of style – he certainly isn't. Verlinden explores the boundaries of the monochrome, but also speculates on the power of complementary colours - and simply the colours that his materials offer him. Because Verlinden is by no means a dogmatic painter either, as shown by *crossovers* with assemblages and ready-mades, the use of everyday, industrially manufactured

¹ Wolf Wondratschek, *Selbstbild mit Russischem Klavier*, Berlin, 2018, p. 6.

² Quotes by Dolf Verlinden, the author in conversation with the artist, 20 July and 25 October 2018.

³ Donald Judd, “Malevitch” (1973-1974), in: *Donald Judd Writings*, New York, 2016, p. 255.

products and materials: an inner tube, zinc roof hatch, fabric lashing straps and waste wood. With these characteristics, Verlinden's oeuvre bears witness to a historical indebtedness, or rather, a reorientation on the main themes of the post-war avant-gardes. What is the attraction of the monochrome to a contemporary artist, exactly one hundred years after Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist composition, white on white* (1918)? How do we place the readymade and assembly within a painter's oeuvre? How do geometry and architectural forms relate to the "breathing", organic character of Verlinden's imagery? It is precisely in the answers to such questions that we find a foothold: where indebtedness is given new content and alliances are formed with a highly personal visual programme.

Historical frameworks - new perspectives

It was the American artist Donald Judd who in 1966 commented on the concept of 'reductive art', an alternative indication of what in the early 1960s became known in the American context as minimal art: "I object to several popular ideas," Judd stated: "I don't think anyone's work is 'reductive'. The most the term can mean is that new work doesn't have what the old work had. It's not so definitive that a certain kind of form is missing. (...) New work is just as complex and developed as old work"⁴. In relation to the development of Verlinden's work after 2001, Judd's thesis is of special significance; the year in which Verlinden's painting acquired a higher degree of abstraction and the last traces of illusionism - the canvas as a window to the world - gave way to a new concept of spatiality. Since then Verlinden has been particularly interested in concrete materiality - the work of art as an object, the material itself as a carrier of meaning - and in the relationship between the work of art and the physical space in which it moves. An association with minimalist tendencies is quickly made on the basis of these properties. The American *godfathers* of minimal art such as Elsworth Kelly, Sol LeWitt and Frank Stella also sought to create a tranquil visual language, basing their monumental paintings on geometry which interacts closely with physical space: the gallery, the museum, public space.

Within the American context, the work of art lost its 'handwriting' character with the rise of minimal art: the artist's 'presence' in the painting, the personal touch, was considered undesirable. The factor 'coincidence' as a driving force in the creative process was also rejected; minimal art is well-considered and reasoned and was, certainly in the case of sculpture, often industrially produced. Now, these works were created against a specific American background, as a reaction to the paint fetishism of the abstract expressionists, with Jackson Pollock as the most charismatic representative. With bravura, Pollock pushed the easel aside, laid the support flat on the floor, and made his *drippings* with sticks and trowels, applying highly-diluted synthetic lacquer to the canvas in free movements. Minimalist tendencies are far removed from this strategy of 'doing as you go along', the free-associative process of creation. For many artists 'post-Pollock', the very orientation on the early

Idem, p. 179.

twentieth-century avant-garde offered solace. The early 'inventors' of the monochrome, collage, readymade and constructed sculpture inspired new - read: non-academic - views on craftsmanship. Thanks to Kurt Schwitters' early twentieth-century collages of found objects – "Ich bin ein Mahler; ich nagle meine Bilder" - American Neo-Dada artist Robert Rauschenberg was able to state more than forty years later, in 1959: "A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric."⁵ In the Netherlands too, a focus on 'the originals' of the early twentieth century raised questions of an ontological and epistemological nature around 1960: what is art exactly, how do we know it is art, and who really determines it?

Such historical frameworks are of great significance in understanding Dolf Verlinden's oeuvre. After all, they show us where a supposed affinity with individual artists and 'isms' - with cool minimalist tendencies, with the historical, anti-painterly readymade and assemblage – is not really valid on formal and programmatic grounds. With Marcel Duchamp, the primeval father of the readymade, everyday objects were chosen *and* called art. It was a strategy with a critical, anti-painterly background, as a defence against the purely retinal character of painting: according to Duchamp, a work of art should be more than a charming wall object; it should be at least as attractive to the mind as it is to the eye. Because of the post-war reassessment of art and artistry, few artists will argue with the above: what constitutes an artwork, in subject and content, but especially in its manifestation, became the theme of the post-war avant-gardes. All these questions also recur in Dolf Verlinden's work, although the interpretation of the specific themes is a very personal one.

The combination of Dolf Verlinden's painting and appropriation - sometimes within one and the same work - makes it difficult to speak of anti-painting strategies. After all, Verlinden does not 'assemble' in spite of painting. On the contrary: a democratic combination of painting and captured, everyday elements gives many works a distinctly hybrid character, making them move in the twilight zone between *tableau* and object, between two and three-dimensionality. Moreover, a manipulation of the effect of space takes place with both painterly and non-painterly interventions. Slats, tape and rope create dynamic structures, precisely because of their connection with painting; they lead to new experiences of materiality, space and spatiality. Even when Verlinden transforms a roof hatch he found by applying straps - a pure, non-painter's intervention, similar to Marcel Duchamp's concept of the 'assisted readymade' - the painting qualities of the work stand out. The lining and composition of *Ingesnoerde ruimte* (2011), the positioning of the fabric straps, are reminiscent of Verlinden's canvases; the work is as hard-realistic as it is poetic-associative. Such works show that Verlinden's artistic premises, the theoretical foundation of his oeuvre of the last two decades, transcend the choice of various media and forms of expression. For Verlinden, the supposed opposition 'paint versus *objet*

⁵ Kurt Schwitters, cited in: Günther Kämpf and Karl Riha (ed.), *Am Anfang war Dada*, Steinbach/Gießen, 1972, p. 63. Robert Rauschenberg, cited in: *16 Americans*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959, p. 58.

trouvé is not a question of 'either or', but rather an expression of an inclusive view of art and artistry, of an expansive view and his love of experimentation.

Verlinden's work can only partially be captured in terminology such as 'non-objective', 'reductive' and what is mainly referred to within the German-speaking region as the 'concrete art of painting': concepts that arose in line with minimal art. Compared to minimalist and post-minimalist tendencies, Verlinden attaches great value to the creative process, to working at the interface of planning, intuition and coincidence. In line with this, handwriting invariably plays an important role - even in canvases that at first glance seem to have a purely geometric and tranquil character. The 'permissible imperfections', as Verlinden calls them, the unsteady line, the emphatically handmade character of his works, are far removed from a slick, technological perfectionism. It is precisely these characteristics that give his paintings and panels an unmistakably warm-organic appearance - and that is remarkable, given Verlinden's interest in geometry and basic principles of mathematics such as scale, proportions and the spatial functioning of form and volume. "I will not leave the organic any time soon. A canvas has to breathe; it is an organism that needs its own space. I consider that to be something fundamental," says Verlinden. "And yet I experience geometry as a liberation just as much; it offers grip and infinite possibilities. It is precisely in geometry that I see reason to express myself in a pure and personal way. *To the point*." Moreover, "intuition corrects mathematical principles," says Verlinden, "concepts can and often are adjusted by intuition - I believe. So it never becomes a purely rational story."

Verlinden mentions the canvas *Alfa Bèta* (2010) as an example; a reduced, two-coloured composition of linked forms that suggest space and friction, volume and movement with minimal visual means. "I was happy with *Alfa Beta*, it is both geometrical and soft," says Verlinden. "For me that was an important moment; the realisation you can be sharp within geometry. Without fear of a rationality that is out of control, without losing warmth and sensitivity. Because that sensitivity can also lie in a line, in the precision with which you position a surface." Verlinden's titles are often associative, they should never be guiding: "In looking at it, you have to be free, a title should not force meaning." The title *Alfa Beta* possesses a high degree of abstraction too, although it also shows the parameters within which Verlinden explores the field: human action, precise observations, and feeling and knowing.

A new concept of space

Neither is the somewhat complacent autonomy of the work of art, that other characteristic feature of many 'minimal' works of art, easy to reconcile with the open character of Dolf Verlinden's painting. Verlinden also considers the work of art to be autonomous, detached from a reality outside the painting, yet his canvases and panels derive their meaning and effect from an interaction with the viewer. "As a viewer, you have to set the work in motion, sharpen your view," says Verlinden. "I feel very detached from a painting that you look at with your hands on your back." The following applies

to many of Verlinden's works: the artist creates the work of art, but the view of the observer 'completes' it, the work makes the viewer a partner and *agent* in a creative and image-forming process. Verlinden searches for the spatial experience beyond the physical boundaries of the canvas, panel or paper: "I distrust the absoluteness of those boundaries, a healthy distrust is the basis of everything I do. The hybrid work *In gesprek met Mondriaan* (Conversation with Mondriaan ed.) (2015), a canvas with the addition of sloping slats placed on the ground that "earth" the work in our world, does justice to its title: neutralisation of content - no representation in a conventional sense, no anecdotalism - resulting in a free and unencumbered perception, but equally leading to a 'conversation': between the Dutch master of geometry and Verlinden, but also between Verlinden, the viewer of his work and the physical environment in which the work is located. The canvas overcomes the barrier between art and the rest of the world, wrenches the artwork out of its exalted autonomy.

"What you *don't* paint is what you want to show." These are words that Verlinden speaks almost casually during a visit to his Groningen studio. And yet this somewhat enigmatic formulation is of great significance for his work after 2012, the year of the first *Kantelmoment* (Tilting Moment ed.), multi-part series in oil on panel, in wood and lino prints, in the form of lead wall sculptures and as an animation. The origin of *Kantelmoment* is an almost monochrome panel in a modest format, a work that "came at the right time in my search for dimensionality and space," says Verlinden. The panel has a slightly tilting, painted rectangle within the boundaries of the surface, and inspired Verlinden to show a series in conjunction in which the tilt increases by a few degrees each time; the rectangle retains its fixed proportion, but the tilt within the surface constantly changes in size.

Kantelmoment is an important work for various reasons. Its composite, serial form is even more emphatically related to the physical environment and the viewer than the singular works. The work is an 'eye hopper', according to Verlinden, the series gives the perception of space a distinctly dynamic character. And with the presentation of the complete series, a tour of the tilting surface, the time factor, the cyclical character of a series with a beginning and an end - and ultimately also infinity - becomes tangible. The monochrome, the single-coloured surface, plays a special role within *Kantelmoment*. Precisely because of the limitation to the tilt, the upright surface is missing, the moment when the white background no longer cracks and shifts, but has become a monochrome black. The absence of this pure monochrome is meaningful, it "appears before your eyes, precisely because of its persistent absence," says Verlinden; this is the moment "(...) when 'something' and 'meaning' coincide."

Kantelmoment is also a reflection of the process-related character of many of Verlinden's works. "A work is never an end point, no work is isolated," says Verlinden: "The meaning is in the context, every work exists by the grace of its predecessor." It is this dialectical approach to one's own oeuvre, the conviction that the conditions for development lie in the preceding steps, which is expressed in *Kantelmoment* within one and the same series. This expression of the process, of the work as a report, with tangible intermediate steps, considerations and moments of choice, can also be

observed in the recently-created *Festo Variaties* (2018), a nine-part series of works on paper. The numbered sheets were created in succession, based on a perforated sheet of sandpaper from Verlinden's sander, of the brand Festo. The holes in the sandpaper, intended for the removal of dust, formed the mould for stamped compositions in green and black. Verlinden stamped with a round ice-lolly stick: the exact diameter of the perforations. Once horizontally, once vertically: Verlinden uses the same sheet of sandpaper for each sheet in the series twice, for green prints when the sandpaper serves as a mould standing up, black when lying down. The numbering of the sheets within the series corresponds to the number of stamps per sheet. And shown as a series, the *Festo variaties* have a pronounced dynamic character, similar to the *Kantelmoment*.

Each sheet 'functions' thanks to the preceding and succeeding sheets – and the fact that the human eye is always looking for something to fix on, for where similarities and deviations, the addition of yet another dot, send the experience of space and composition. The *Festo variaties* not only 'send', they also 'receive', and in their effect and meaning, it is exactly this interaction which plays a key role with the viewer.

We can state that it is precisely in the recent *Festo variaties* that the benchmarks of Verlinden's visual programme are expressed. These works are concrete and organic, in their starting point *and* their effect. After all, the perforations in the sandpaper are a given fact, they possess the 'handwriting' of the industry, but it will only become a 'Verlinden' with the perforated holes that the artist chooses. The series bears witness to a balancing act at the intersection of chance and intention, of randomness and calculation. It is a meeting of seemingly opposing forces that we also recognise in so many other works by Verlinden: the *Festo variaties* resonates both the methodology of a basic conceptual pattern - the division of thinking and doing, of conceiving and executing - and Verlinden's outspoken love for the artisanal aspect of painting. The series is both autonomous and an expression of Verlinden's sharp eye for 'the secret language of things', for the unexpected potential from the everyday realm, which is given a new life within the realm of painting.

"Maybe I'm getting even sharper in my abstraction, even purer. Even though I certainly don't control that," says Verlinden. "It will have to prove itself. Being pure is the most important thing. I have to be able to live with it." A pure, but approachable abstraction with a human dimension: it is this juxtaposition that gives Dolf Verlinden's oeuvre its exceptional status and quality.

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