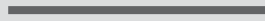


KARIN HANSSEN

THE BORROWED GAZE



VARIATIONS GTB

THE BORROWED GAZE / Variations GTB

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THE BORROWED GAZE



VARIATIONS GTB

MER. Paper Kunsthalle

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INTRODUCTION

Kurt Vanhoutte

This book is the outcome of a research project initiated by Karin Hanssen and Kurt Vanhoutte. The central focus is the installation *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB*, a series of paintings created by Hanssen. The ten synchronous replications establish a multifaceted relationship with the female *Rückenfigur* (back figure) of the famous work *Paternal Admonition* (1654) of Gerard ter Borch and the many variations that were produced in the hundred years that followed.

Next to this installation the book includes three texts that together provide a perspective on the intriguing relationship between two eras: they show how Hanssen meticulously crafts a dialogue between the 17th century and the present, broaching themes as varied as the tension between original and copy, the moral value of representation and the many ambivalences of cultural mimesis. In his contribution Johan Pas situates the artist Karin Hanssen in the context of both painting practice in Belgium and (or, partly, against) a broader postmodernist and avant-garde discursive context. The substantial text of Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat offers an eloquently detailed account of ter Borch's paintings, stressing the role of the *Rückenfigur* as a paradigmatic figure for ambiguity, for the projections and imaginings of the spectators. Finally, Kurt Vanhoutte describes the ways in which art and research are closely and inherently intertwined in the allegorical images of *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB*, resulting in a work of art that paradoxically succeeds in turning a fetishized copy into a revived original.

At the time almost identical replications of ter Borch's paradigmatic image of a woman in a satin dress circulated on the market. Today, in the era of technical reproduction and digital simulation, this practice acquires new relevance. By transferring the image of the 17th century woman to the here and now, and

by producing new variations, concepts of authorship and artistic appropriation can be critically examined. More importantly, the extensive replication also fundamentally alters the status of the original image. The tension between old and new creates the background against which the iconic woman from the past truly comes alive, for the first time displaying the complexity of her individual identity.

PAINTING AGAINST TIME THE PICTORIAL PRACTICE OF KARIN HANSSEN: A DISCURSIVE CONTEXT

Johan Pas

The authentic forgery

At a critical moment every artist realizes that what he or she does appears to have been done earlier already. To a large extent, being an artist consists in dealing creatively with this sobering thought. Those who, in the late 20th century, choose for a centuries-old medium such as painting are certainly confronted with this problem. The Belgian painter Luc Tuymans described this experience as follows: 'When I was eighteen I won a prize of the then Gemeentekrediet with a self-portrait: a sum of money and a book on James Ensor. I was convinced I had painted an original work, until I saw a self-portrait of James Ensor in the book. It was different formally, but exactly the same conceptually. So I had involuntarily made a copy and I felt truly embarrassed. I then realized that there is no other way anymore and that you had better bend this embarrassment into a workable construction. What you can do, is to make an authentic forgery and that is possibly the only thing you can do.'¹

The anecdote Tuymans reconstructs here as the aha-experience that has steered his practice can be situated in 1976. The young painter realizes that total originality proves to be an illusion and that the only workable method is 'authentic forgery' and this implies that the past cannot be denied. In 1976, this conclusion does not only coincide with the origin of punk (the first subculture that turned its back on the future), but also with the rise of postmodernism. In the same year *L'ideologia del traditore. Arte, maniera, manierismo* by the Italian critic Achille Bonito Oliva appears. In this study on mannerism in the 16th century the Italian art historian launches the term 'Transavantguardia' to describe

1. Luc Tuymans, *Schilderen is een anachronisme*, in *Belgisch Atelier Belge. Dertien kunstenaars over hun identiteit*, La Renaissance du Livre, Brussel 2001, p.163.

the artistic practice of his contemporaries. This practice distances itself from the Darwinistic ideology of progress of the neo-avant-garde and articulates that insight by the re-introduction of 'non-contemporary' techniques such as figurative painting:

'Here, there emerges a neo-Mannerist sensibility that runs through the history of art, placed horizontally outside any privileged line of development, without any rhetoric and pathetic identification, rather with the confident laterality of citation (...)'²

A few years later Umberto Eco – in his well-known epilogue to *The Name of the Rose* – states that 'postmodernism' is not a tendency that can be described chronologically, but a *Kunstwollen* of all time:

'We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just as every period could have its own mannerism (so that I even ask myself if postmodernism is not the modern name for mannerism as a meta-historical category).'³

In Western cultural history, from the late Renaissance onwards, periods of radical, innovative attempts to 'break' with the past alternate with junctures in which the reservoir of the past is a real source of new insights. This dialectical movement of revolt and appeasement turns out to be the driving force of modernity. At the moment that postmodernism reached a wider audience, among other things because of Eco's popularization, the 'Transavantguardia' was unleashed on the art world, which was craving for new blood: a number of young Italian painters (Francesco Clemente, Mimmo Paladino, Enzo Cucchi) under the rhetorical wings of Bonito Oliva. For a whole decade the radical criticism of the painted art object by the conceptual artists had made the art of painting suspect. In this sense the comeback of figurative painting in the early 1980s is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand it seems to mark the liberation from the corset of conceptualism, on the other hand it turns the clock back with the revaluation of paint, canvas, story and subject. The pictorial postmodernism of the 1980s can therefore be characterized as a head with two faces. It seems to be modern as it passes over the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s (as it implies a following 'step'), but that step is a step back, towards the painting practices dating from before the neo-avant-garde.

2. Achille Bonito Oliva, *The Ideology of the Traitor. Art, Manner and Mannerism*, Milaan 1998, pp. 17–18 (the first Italian edition appeared in 1976).

3. Umberto Eco, *Postmodernisme, ironie, leesplezier, Naschrift bij De Naam van de Roos*, Amsterdam 1987, pp. 557–558 (the first edition appeared in 1980).

Painting in Flanders

In 1976, when Tuymans won his prize and saw the light, Karin Hanssen (°1960) was sixteen. When she chose to study painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts ten years later, the 'new art of painting' was all over the art world. Prestigious international group exhibitions such as *A New Spirit in Painting* (Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1981), *Zeitgeist* (Martin Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 1982) and especially *Documenta 7* (Kassel, 1982) had paved the way for a practice in which big formats, wild gestures, vivid colours and personal stories were not forbidden anymore. The revival of painting also caused a comeback of the 'national' schools. In Belgium the new generation was launched via canonizing group exhibitions with rhetorical titles such as *Picturaal 1. Recente schilderkunst in Vlaanderen* (ICC, Antwerpen, 1981) and *Het Picturaal Verlangen* (Galerie Isy Brachot, Brussel, 1982).⁴ An 'interesting' side effect was that some historical artists, who had evolved the 'wrong' way in the eyes of the neo-avant-garde, were looked at from a more tolerant, postmodern point of view. The late, anti-modern work of Giorgio De Chirico and the contrary 'période vache' of Magritte, but also the quiet still lifes of Giorgio Morandi and the static scenes of Edward Hopper could expect new and favourable attention from art historians, curators and artists.

'Anachronism' became a valid notion to frame these and other 'deviant' practices and accept them. Painters such as Stephen McKenna and Carlo Maria Mariani introduced anachronism (once again) as a conscious artistic strategy. Thus a somewhat paradoxical (and in a certain sense 'anachronistic') situation developed in the Antwerp academy, where the modernistic trend, let alone the ideas of the avant-garde, had never gained a foothold. The way of painting that was taught there in the 1980s was 'postmodern', without ever having been modern.⁵ When Hanssen graduated at the Higher Institute in the beginning of the 1990s, however, the artistic tide in the outside world had turned. In the wake of post-modern theory, which was chiefly inspired by the French post-structuralists, painting was read in a neo-conceptual way. Emotionality and narrativity, two characteristics of neo-expressionism, were suspect. Painting was still done at the beginning of the 1990s, but it needed the necessary intellectual and critical

4. See Johan Pas, *The Longing for the Pictorial. Painting in Flanders before and after Trouble. Spot Painting*, in Marc Ruyters, Johan Pas, *Painting in Flanders after 1980*, Openbaar Kunstbezit in Vlaanderen 2005, p. 3–8.

5. See Johan Pas, 'De beste schilderij van het jaar'. Een kritische terugblik op de Prijs Burgemeester Camille Huysmans (1945–1993), in *De Terugkeer van Camille. De Prijs voor Schilderkunst Burgemeester Camille Huysmans (1945–2002)*, KASKA, Antwerpen 2003.

distance. Carefree story telling with paint was a thing of the past; exhibitionism gave way to an often melancholically tinted introspection.

Exhibitions such as *Das Bild nach dem letzten Bild* (Galerie Metropol, Vienna, 1992) and *Der Zerbrochene Spiegel. Positionen der Malerei* (Kunsthalle Wien and Deichtorhallen Hamburg, 1993/94) presented the art of painting as an ironic, cynic or deconstructing gesture. Persiflages of modernistic models (such as geometric abstraction and monochromy) turned up next to ambivalent forms of *bad painting* and recycled figuration. Gerhard Richter became the reference figure for this post-neo-expressionist painting practice. Luc Tuymans, who was one of the few painters invited for *Documenta 9* in 1992, was one of its younger representatives. The paradox of a pictorial practice at the end of the 20th century was utterly clear to him when he outspokenly stated the following in his contribution to the catalogue of *Der Zerbrochene Spiegel*: 'Das Bild ist die Negation des Bildes'.⁶ Painting in the 1990s was, in other words, painting 'against all odds'. The development of Karin Hanssen's painting can only be considered in connection with this discursive context. When she made her debut at the beginning of the 1990s with her first group and solo presentations, the international success of Luc Tuymans hovered over Flemish painting as a greyish shadow. Just like at the beginning of the 1980s there were a number of group exhibitions in Flanders around that time which tried to position the art of post-neo-expressionist painting in Flanders internationally. In 1992 the Provincial Museum for Modern Art in Ostend had taken the initiative with a heterogeneous survey of ten years of painting in Flanders. It was a reaction against Jan Hoet's *Documenta* of the same year, which was quasi devoid of paintings, and it was entitled, rather contradictorily, *Modernism in Painting*, as there was not a single modernistic painting exhibited. Tuymans was just one of the many Flemish painters in the show. Five years later his impact had become incontestable.

In the catalogue of the Belgian group exhibition *Trapped Reality* (Centre d'art Santa Monica, Barcelona, 1997) the British critic Jon Thompson wrote about the 'Tuymans-effect'.⁷ He pointed at the fact that the 'reactionary' painting of Tuymans was a symptom of the pressure on the system brought to bear by the art market and that Belgian artists copied his subdued figurative approach, blinded by his success and taken hostage by social mismanagement and the monopoly of the gallery system. However curt sometimes, Thompson's analysis shows the clear insight of a critical outsider. Exhibitions of paintings with small,

6. Luc Tuymans, *statement*, in Kasper König, Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), *Der Zerbrochene Spiegel. Positionen zur Malerei*, Kunsthalle Wien 1993, p.174.

7. Jon Thompson, *Revivalism and the Luc Tuymans effect. A personal view*, in Luk Lambrecht (ed.), *Trapped Reality*, Centre d'art Santa Monica, Barcelona 1997, pp.43–54.

figurative tableaux in toned down colours such as *Reality Revisited. De herinnering als verlangen* (Fundacio La Caixa, Barcelona, 1997) and *Het versluisd beeld* (Provinciaal Centrum voor Beeldende Kunsten, Hasselt, 2001) only seemed to confirm that insight. Paradoxically enough it was Tuymans himself who, together with the painter Narcisse Tordoier, tried to break open the shrinking and relatively reactionary perception of contemporary painting with the multimedia exhibition *TroubleSpot. Painting* (MuHKA, NICC, Antwerp, 1999).

The implosion of the image

This concise reconstruction of the pictorial landscape in Flanders and Belgium between 1980 and 2000 is important. It is the background against which the present practice of Karin Hanssen has developed. She grew up in the 1960s and '70s, when post-war progress optimism toppled, and was educated in the 1980s, when the postmodern paradigm became established: she is, literally and figuratively, a 'child of her time'. Moreover, she is very well aware of the fact that a painter needs to 'position' his/her work, notably in a densely populated pictorial field strewn with pitfalls and land mines. In the middle of the 1990s, when Richter and Tuymans were *the* reference figures in painting, she developed a practice that wanted to withdraw from these spheres of influence:

I chose for the conventional, integral image as a reaction to the unusual fragment of Luc Tuymans; colour as a reaction to his minimization of the intense colours; stroke as a reaction to the 'Fotobilder' by Richter, which were apparently rendered mechanically and impersonally. I searched for a perfect balance between the painted image – with a visible stroke and emotionality (not cold and detached) and a vulnerability (I allow mistakes) – and the photographic image from the past, with the typical technicolor colours of the films from the 1950s.⁸

Hanssen's reference to mainstream films from the post-war period is at odds with Tuymans' cinematographic references, which, according to her, are more related to the *Nouvelle Vague*. She uses anonymous, conventional looking visual material which has a great recognizability, partly because she handles the original images integrally. In a way, she 'borrows' the frame (and therefore the look) of someone else (painter or photographer). This is definitely not cutting, cropping and pasting. This *latent constructiveness* of her landscapes, interior tableaux and anonymous portraits makes us think of the seamless way in which Jeff Wall conceived his first photographic tableaux. It is a well-known fact that Wall really

8. Karin Hanssen, e-mail to the author, 22.2.2012.

'paints' with photographic material. As are his implicit and explicit references to early modern (French) painting in the 19th century (Eugène Delacroix, Edouard Manet). In a certain sense, Wall's practice is evidence of an 'applied' art history, in which composition schemes, expectation patterns, iconographical references and semantic interactions are the material. Nor is Hanssen occupied with subtle textures, subjectivistic brush strokes or expressive paint treatment. Her pictorial *touch* is plainly visible, but does not show much differentiation. It usually seems uniform and relatively evenly applied to the entire surface of the canvas.

Hanssen's field of research is not so much the nuanced pictorial expression as the previously existing photographic composition, which she actually treats as a compositional *readymade*. She talks about a 'displacement' of her visual source, an intentional re-contextualization which, as far as she is concerned, is related to the practices of Marcel Duchamp and, closer at hand, the Belgian installation artist Guillaume Bijl. By decontextualizing and pictorially re-materializing the images (which were originally meant for magazines and other popular media) a tension grows between recognition and alienation. In this respect she refers to the 'flashback'. Paradoxically enough she carries out her research with paint. Photographs (still!) evoke associations with a certain form of veracity, but paint (the material) de facto embodies fiction. What has been painted is indeed by definition 'manipulated'. When a painter uses a photograph to achieve a painted image, a semantic paradox arises. The veracity of the photograph is deconstructed while painting, but something else and new is 'constructed' at the same time. This field of tension between construction and deconstruction is permanently present in Hanssen's paintings.

The iconography she uses, moreover, is all about *apparent recognition*. Her images not only go back to photographs and stills from the 1950s, '60s and '70s, but also make use of the composition schemes and centuries-old conventions of landscape and genre painting. These were recycled by photographers during the course of the 19th and 20th century and inspired post-war filmmakers and advertising people. This recycling process resulted in generic images that are particularly 'recognizable', but the origin of which has been lost. That is precisely the reason why they emanate such an anonymity. This cycle of the image (from painting to photograph and back) implies that Hanssen's paintings are in fact images of images, and their references to a non-artistic reality are seemingly non-existent. Opposite the mimetic effect of realism and the subjectivistic value of expressionism Hanssen puts the implosive working of a radical postmodernism. The authenticity of Hanssen's images lies in their non-authentic character. She does not really aim at empathy or communication, but rather at frustration. The spectator sees, recognizes, associates, but at the same time hits a sighing semantic emptiness that is the result of the non-expressionist writing and the generic char-

acter of her images. The characters are anonymous, the places are not identifiable, the temporary character is indefinite. Still, the images possess a 'patina' that situates them 'beyond the contemporary'. What in some of Hanssen's paintings seems to be pure nostalgia at first sight (the reference to a popular and optimistic iconography of post-war modernism, the cult of consumption and the discovery of leisure) appears, however, to be originating from a critical intention: "I use the leap in time as a figure of speech to make today's (social) structures more clearly visible and to question them."⁹ But they reveal a fundamental melancholy at a deeper level. Indeed, the paintings demonstrate the idea that all images are made and that any thought of progress is an illusion. 'To depict' and 'to represent' are not under discussion anymore. 'To imitate' is the only option.

In this sense the title of the series of paintings in this book, *The Borrowed Gaze*, is not only eloquent but also meaningful. The painter realizes that the only honest way of acting consists in appropriating the look of someone else, in an articulated manner. It is as if we look together with her while she recycles someone else's point of view (in this case of a 17th-century Dutch genre painter) and we feel how the artist circles around a motif that fascinates her (a female back figure) and tries to get a grip on it while drawing and painting. At the same time, the motif always seems to escape from this probing pictorial approach. It is therefore significant that the face of the female back figure is never shown. It is *the dark side of the moon*. Moreover, Hanssen's obsession with the anonymous female figure that appears in ter Borch's paintings takes her back to a premodernistic way of working. In a manner of speaking, she paints 'against time'. She further explores the visual theme from the 17th century, as if there had never been any avant-garde. Hanssen uses anachronism as a form of artistic anarchy as regards the command to be 'contemporary'. Apart from that, she also ignores the modernistic obligation to be 'authentic'. In her visual research, meanwhile, she makes little distinction between original work by ter Borch, copies, replicas, reproductions and falsifications. Hanssen's domain is the paraphrase and the pastiche, the literal 'reproduction'. In other words: 'the authentic forgery'.¹⁰

9. Idem.

10. The process of assimilation and processing is well demonstrated in the publication 'Track Report *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB*', which is conceived as a scrapbook with reproductions, self-made photographs, scans of texts and personal notes. The reader imagines himself to be in the artist's studio and witnesses her reading, thinking and working process. While Karin Hanssen's paintings – just like the anonymous back figure – seem to defy every interpretation possible, she throws the door of her studio wide open in the publication of her study of the original source material. See Karin Hanssen, '*The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB*, Track Report 12/01', Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen, 2012.



TOURNEZ S'IL VOUS PLAÎT! TRANSCRIPTIONS OF A RÜCKENFIGUR BY GERARD TER BORCH

Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat

Tournez s'il vous plaît! (*Turn around, please!*) is a meaningful utterance when directed at a living person. This request becomes paradoxical when a painted, drawn or performatively represented *Rückenfigur* (back figure) is addressed. It is precisely this aesthetic boundary between reality and appearance that Goethe has apostrophized with this expression in his *Wahlverwandtschaften*.¹ In his novel Goethe describes how people entertained themselves in the evening presenting *Lebende Bilder*, imitations of famous images from the history of art. One of the scenes represented related to a painting by the Dutch genre painter Gerard ter Borch and was known to the contemporaries via an etching by Johann Georg Wille entitled *Die Väterliche Ermahnung (Paternal Admonition)*. One of the spectators expressed his wish 'einem so schönen Wesen, das man genugsam von der Rückseite gesehen, auch ins Angesicht zu schauen' ('to see the face and front of so lovely a creature, when they had done looking at her from behind'), and called out aloud: 'Tournez s'il vous plaît!' 'Die Darstellenden aber kannten ihren Vorteil zu gut und hatten den Sinn dieser Kunststücke zu wohl gefasst, als dass sie dem allgemeinen Ruf hätten nachgeben sollen'. ('The performers, however, understood their advantage too well, and had mastered too completely the idea of these works of art to yield to the most general clamour.')

fig. 1

If the actress (Lucinde) had complied with the spectator's wish and had indeed turned around, she would have destroyed the work of art, the fiction, but also the desire, the phantasies and the imaginings the turning away had produced.

pl. 1

Gerard ter Borch, *De Galante Conversatie (Paternal Admonition)*, around 1655
Oil on canvas

1. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften. Ein Roman*, in: *Werke*. (Hamburger Ausgabe 11), München 1982, vol. 6. chapter 5 of part 2, p. 393ff.



fig. 1



fig. 2

In the following text we will examine the function of this *Rückenfigur* as a *paradigmatical* figure: paradigmatic for ambiguity, for the projections and imaginings of the spectators.²

So let us consider this figure. First its original reproduction and then how it has travelled, making purely imaginary journeys in different interpretations and ‘real’ trips in other visual contexts, in transcriptions that once more lead to new meanings.

The original figure was painted by the Dutchman Gerard ter Borch around 1655.³ Two versions (both by ter Borch) of this genre painting are known, one is in Amsterdam, the other in Berlin. At the time the paintings had no specific titles and were traded as *geselschappies* or *conversations*. In 1765 the German copperplate engraver Johann Georg Wille made a graphic copy of the painting for the French king and entitled it *Instruction paternelle*, which Goethe and his contemporaries translated as *Die Väterliche Ermahnung* (*Paternal Admoni-*

plate 1

fig. 2

2. The *Rückenfigur* does not fulfil this function *per se*, but only in a certain context – she can also take over other functions, such as anonymization or doubling the viewer’s position.
3. S. J. Gudlaugsson, *Gerard ter Borch*, vol. 2, Den Haag 1959–60, vol. 1 p. 97 and vol. 2 Cat nr. 110; *Gerard Ter Borch, Zwolle 1617 – Deventer 1681*, exh. cat. Landesmuseum Münster, Münster 1974; Alison McNeil Kettering, *Ter Borch’s Ladies in Satin*, in: Wayne E. Franits (ed.), *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art. Realism Reconsidered*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 98–115; *Love Letters. Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer*, exh. cat. Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, Greenwich / National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, edited by Peter C. Sulton, Lisa Vergara, Ann Jensen Adams in collaboration with Jennifer Kilian and Marjorie E. Wieseman, London 2003, pp. 90–107; Sutton in: *ibid.*, pp. 17–22; Adams in: *ibid.*, p. 63ff; *Gerard ter Borch*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Washington / American Federation of Arts, New York, ed. by Arthur K. Wheelock, New Haven / London 2004/05; Barbara Weber, *Im Spannungsfeld von Subjektivität und Kommerz. Die Kopien der Rückenfigur aus Gerard Ter Borchs “Die väterliche Ermahnung”*, Dissertation, Wien 2008.

tion). Titles establish a point of view, they are not neutral at all, but interpret. And so ter Borch’s painting was read as an anecdotal picture of family decorum until the 1930s. Then iconologically orientated research saw it as a moralizing warning of the salability of love. The family became a brothel.⁴ The father became an officer, the daughter a whore and the mother a procuress. A coin was phantasized between the man’s fingers, which, however, cannot be seen in the paintings in Berlin and Amsterdam. Various explanations followed, ranging from a betrothal scene, (‘*Verlobungsbild*’)⁵, to an allegory of taste, (‘*Allegorie des Geschmacks*’)⁶. How can these different, even contrary interpretations of the same painting be explained? The mere reference to the historically determined reception is neither sufficient nor adequate. The ambivalence of the image itself, the aesthetic staging of the theme provokes these subjectively different reactions. More recent investigations have shown that the quintessence of ter Borch’s female figures lies in their ambiguity precisely. Alison McNeil Kettering has characterized the painter’s female figures dressed in white satin as ‘the principal ideal of feminine behaviour’⁷. In their beauty, passivity and distinguished reserve they met the requirements of the moralizing books on etiquette and answered the descriptions in the popular petrarchan poetry of the time. The white satin dress, once again equally indicating purity and wealth, conceals and replaces the naked female body in a fetishistic way. All in all: an ideal *Weiblichkeitshülle*. An unequivocal interpretation is complicated by the fact that ter Borch himself has put similar female figures in these white satin dresses in morally rather doubtful contexts. One example is *De Galante Officier* (*The Gallant Officer*), a painting showing an officer offering a woman money for love. This painting is now entitled *Galante Conversatie* (*Gallant Conversation*) and must have been extremely ambivalent for ter Borch’s contemporaries. A story is hinted at, but not yet told; there is no narrative. Above all, there is no (written) text that we can use for the interpretation, nor is there an established image tradition. For ter Borch’s contemporaries too this form of a profane scene with a thematic vagueness was entirely new.

4. First in W. Drost, *Barockmalerei in den germanischen Ländern (Handbuch der Kunstwissenschaft)*, Potsdam 1926, p. 187; Jan Kelch, cat. text in: *Von Frans Hals bis Vermeer. Meisterwerke Holländischer Genremalerei*, exh. cat. edited by Peter C. Sulton, Philadelphia Museum of Arts / Gemäldegalerie Berlin / Royal Academy of Arts London, Berlin 1984, cat. nr. 9, pp. 144–145; J. P. Guepin, *Die Rückenfigur ohne Vorderseite*, in: exh. cat. Münster 1974 (see note 3), pp. 31–38. Also Gudlaugsson 1959/60 (see note 3).
5. P. C. Sulton in: *Frans Hals*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Art Washington / Royal Academy of Arts London / Frans-Hals-Museum Haarlem, ed. by Seymour Slive, München 1989–1990.
6. Eduard Hültinger, *Holländische Malerei im 17. Jahrhundert*, Zürich 1956, p. 47.
7. Kettering 1997 (see note 3) pp. 98–115.

My thesis is that, in the second half of the 17th century, ter Borch, Vermeer, Hoogstraten and other Dutch painters developed new forms of portrayal, the quintessence of which is the production of imaginings and ambiguity.⁸ The way art history has dealt with these works is explanatory for the principal question. Until a few years ago contrary opinions about these and similar paintings were irreconcilable, as fixed messages were attributed to them. The paintings were, almost without exception, interpreted in a moralizing and didactic way; the method was (also almost without exception) iconology. Only in the last few years a number of researchers have ascribed *Mehrdeutigkeit* or ambiguity to the paintings of Dutch masters, in particular ter Borch and Vermeer.⁹ Eddy de Jong, the most prominent representative of Dutch iconological research, has registered this change himself. He concludes that this reversal is caused by the theories of postmodernism.¹⁰ It is remarkable that art-historical research has not noticed or denied the ambiguity of these works, even not at a time when ambiguity in art – but also in other theoretical fields – was a truly determining category.

The Rückenfigur

The ideality and simultaneous indefinableness secured this female *Rückenfigur* an unequalled career. There is no other figure in Dutch painting that was copied or paraphrased so often.¹¹ Precisely because it was not defined by a certain narrative, the figure could be put in different contexts. Thus it was used as a single figure, but also in combination with other, different figures, dressing, making music or pursuing other activities. The *Rückenfigur* was particularly suited for these forms of re-contextualization because of its vagueness. Ter Borch's pupil Caspar Netscher, for instance, changed her into a *Vrouw die een Liefdesbrief Leest* (*Woman Reading a Love Letter*).¹² A young messenger with a big hat waits for an answer. The female figure is framed by a canopy bed; the

8. Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, *Das Sichtbare und das Unsichtbare. Zur holländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Köln, Weimar, Wien 2009.
9. Hammer-Tugendhat 2009 (see note 8); Wayne E. Franits, (ed.), *Looking at Seventeenth Century Dutch Art. Realism Reconsidered*, Cambridge University Press 1997.
10. Eddy de Jongh, *On Balance*, in: Ivan Gaskell (ed.), *Vermeer Studies*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London 1998, pp. 351–365.
11. Weber 2008 (see note 3), pp. 34–62, Fatima Yalcin, *Anwesende Abwesenheit*, München, Berlin 2004, pp. 114–123.
12. Gudlaugsson 1959/60 (see note 3), 110 ll.n.; Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting*, Doornspijk 2002.



fig. 3



fig. 4

letter is held, probably not coincidentally, against the background of the dark slit of the opening bed curtain.

From the 1630s till the 1670s the motif of women reading love letters indoors developed into a favourite theme of Dutch painting.¹³ There is hardly a Dutch genre painter who has not busied himself intensively with this theme. Sixteen works by ter Borch alone deal with the theme, only six by Vermeer. This can only be understood within the context of the culture of letters in bourgeois Holland, the country with by far the highest literacy rate in Europe, where most books of that period were printed. In the last few years literature and cultural scientists have explained that and how the culture of privately reading letters, but also novels, contributed essentially to an interiorization of feelings and thus also to an intensification of imaginary phantasy worlds.¹⁴ The letter theme in painting is therefore not just a random theme, it is *the* congenial theme.

Hoogstraten

plate 2

De Slofjes (*The Slippers*) is attributed to Samuel Hoogstraten and dated at the end of the 1650s.¹⁵ This example will show *how* the effects of ambiguity

13. It has been shown that they were *love* letters indeed. *Leselust. Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer*, exh. cat. Schirn Kunsthalle, ed. by Sabine Schulze, Frankfurt a. M. 1993; exh. cat. Dublin, Greenwich 2003 (see note 3).
14. Rüdiger Campe, *Affekt und Ausdruck. Zur Umwandlung der literarischen Rede im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Tübingen 1990; Albrecht Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr. Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts*, München 1999.
15. Celeste Brusati, *Artifice and Illusion. The Art and Writing of Samuel van Hoogstraten*, Chicago 1995; Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, *Kunst der Imagination/Imagination der*

are produced by a specific aesthetic *mise-en-scène*. The *Rückenfigur* of ter Borch is referred to here, notably as a *picture in a picture*. Hoogstraten clearly quotes the paraphrase of ter Borch by Netscher. He copies very accurately, still he has omitted the corner of the letter visible in Netscher's painting. How then can we know that it is a woman reading a letter? We know, not because we see it, but because we recognize this motif from a tradition of images we have mastered. The picture can only be understood within a specific culture with fixed codes. So Hoogstraten here bets on the literacy and imaginative powers of his recipients.

From a doorstep we look into three consecutive rooms through open doors. There is a broom against the opposite wall of the first room, next to it a big towel hangs from wooden shelves, the door casing is framed with flax – everything points to female diligence. Through a door opened to the left we look into a corridor; the incidence light from the right indicates a fourth invisible door, which apparently leads outside. In this corridor ablaze with light we only notice a round mat with two greenish wooden slippers. The spectator 'trips' over these shoes and is, as it were, forced to halt and asked to think about the significance of the footwear. Removed shoes are often found on Dutch genre paintings. Iconological research has led to contradictory results: countless phrases, myths, fairy-tales and wedding rituals have proved their significance as erotic allusions.¹⁶ On the other hand, and referring to Plutarch, the motif of the pulled-off shoes was interpreted as a symbol of virtuousness.¹⁷ That leads to the conclusion that the depiction of *removed shoes* in Dutch genre paintings is semantically charged, but can call forth different associations (at the same time). The shoes in Hoogstraten's painting are not in the first room, are not next to the explicit attributes of female diligence, but are also not in the third, more intimate room. They are somewhere in between. It cannot be made clearer that the semantic fixation of the shoes can only be defined by their place *between* the rooms. This corridor is but a *space in between*. Shoes and inter-space are mutually interpreted as openness, indefiniteness.

Kunst. 'Die Pantoffeln' Samuel van Hoogstratens, in: Klaus Krüger/Alessandro Nova (ed.), *Imagination und Wirklichkeit. Zum Verhältnis von mentalen und realen Bildern in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit*, Mainz 2000, p. 139–153; Hammer-Tugendhat 2009 (see note 8)

16. Zur erotischen Symbolik von Schuhen in vielen holländischen Bildern: Aigremont, *Fuß- und Schuhsymbolik und Erotik*, Leipzig 1909; Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens, vol. 7, 1987, col. 1292–1354: *Schuh* (Jungbauer); Eddy de Jongh in: *Tot lering en vermaak. Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, exh. cat. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam 1976, pp. 259–261.

17. Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue. Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 77–79.



pl. 2

Samuel van Hoogstraten, *De Slofjes* (*The Slippers*), around 1658–1660
Oil on canvas

A third door with a massive bunch of keys opens the last room. The golden damask cloth that covers the table and that was also used to upholster the chair intensifies the radiant light in the room. Next to the painting there is a framed mirror, which significantly does not reflect anything.¹⁸ The look through the open doors into the rear room is the look into an intimate, female area. This intimacy, this privacy and closeness is opened to the eye of the beholder. The bunch of keys, which stands out significantly against the bright background, is in the lock directly under the painted female figure. The key not only indicates the power of the household keys of the woman, but, since the Middle Ages, also points to a sexual symbolism. It is used as a sexual metaphor in various Dutch genre paintings.¹⁹ However, the key also functions as *clavis interpretandi*. In Holland during the 17th century it was a customary metaphor for the opening up of the truth. The key opens the door (the painting), but what we see is just another painting.

In Dutch painting there are hardly any interiors without human figures. As Victor Stoichita has written, interior painting thematizes the new environment for painting: it is not the church anymore, nor the court, but the private home.²⁰ When Hoogstraten shows empty rooms without people and with just a painting on the wall, he reflects on this new environment and on the

function of bourgeois painting.²¹ Hoogstraten quotes a paraphrase image – he transcribes a transcription.²² He could have used another example or he could have devised his own version of the letter motif. In any case, the *Rückenfigur* is unusual within the iconography of the letter motif.

Excursion

In order to be able to assess the significance of the choice of precisely this *Rückenfigur* within the context of the letter motif, we have to give a brief sketch of the development of the motif of a woman reading a letter. This excursion will clarify the question of the stages in the development of ambiguity and their causes.

One source for the origin of the motif is the iconography of Bathseba.²³ In the medieval representations, particularly in the typologically organized *bibles moralisées* which related the events of the Old Testament to the New Testament, David became the precursor of Christ, Bathseba became the prefiguration of the church and Urias became Satan. In the renaissance and the baroque the figure of Bathseba grew into a favourite theme in painting, while the story left open the possibility of a voyeuristically conceived nude. As the media changed, the messenger changed into a matchmaker, who brings Bathseba a letter. The biblical story guarantees that the spectators know the

18. The mirror motif radicalizes the question of the significance and the function of the painting, see chapter *Spieglein, Spieg/ein an der Wand* in: Hammer-Tugendhat 2009 (see note 8). Gustav F. Hartlaub, *Zauber des Spiegels. Geschichte und Bedeutung des Spiegels in der Kunst*, München 1951; Heinrich Schwarz, *The Mirror in Art*, in: *The Art Quarterly* 15, 1952, pp. 97–118; W. M. Zucker, 'Reflections on Reflections', in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1961–62, pp. 239–250; J. Bialostocki, *Man and Mirror in Painting. Reality and Transience*, in: *Studies in Honour of Millard Meiss*, New York 1977, pp. 61–72; Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Der Spiegel. Entdeckungen, Täuschungen, Phantasien*, Gießen 1996 (1986); Nicolaas J. Brederoo et al., *Oog in oog met de spiegel*, Amsterdam 1988; Rolf Haubi, "Unter lauter Spiegelbildern ..." *Zur Kulturgeschichte des Spiegels*, vol. 2, Frankfurt am Main 1991.
19. Malcolm Jones, *Sex and Sexuality in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art*, in: Daniela Erlach / Markus Reisenleitner / Karl Vocelka (eds.), *Privatisierung der Triebe? Sexualität in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, pp. 187–304, here p. 219 ('Der Schlüssel, der ins Schloss passt, als Metapher für den Koitus'); Peter L. Donhauser, *A Key to Vermeer?* in: *Artibus et historiae* 14 No. 27, 1993, pp. 85–101.
20. Victor I. Stoichita, *Das selbstbewusste Bild. Vom Ursprung der Metamalerei*, München 1998, pp. 180–181. Zur weiblichen Konnotation des Interieurs: Heidi De Mare, *Die Grenze des Hauses als ritueller Ort und ihr Bezug zur holländischen Hausfrau des 17. Jahrhunderts*, in: *kritische berichte* 1992/4, pp. 64–79; Elizabeth Alice Honig, *The Space of Gender in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting*, in: Franits 1997 (see note 3), pp. 187–201; Marta Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes. Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Berkeley 2002.

21. It has to be remarked here that Hoogstraten was one of the few Dutch artists who also wrote a theoretical tract. So he was perfectly capable of this form of pictorial reflection. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst*, Rotterdam 1678, (reprinted 1969); Hans-Jörg Czech, *Im Geleit der Musen. Studien zu Samuel van Hoogstratens Malereitraktat 'Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst: anders de zichtbaere werelt'*, Münster 2002 (Niederlande-Studien 27); Thijs Weststeijn, *De zichtbare Wereld. Samuel van Hoogstratens kunsttheorie en de legitimering van de schilderkunst in de zeventiende eeuw*, vol 2, (Dissertation), Amsterdam 2006.
22. Ludwig Jäger, *Text-Bild-Verständnisse*, in: *Asymmetrien. Festschrift zu Ehren von Daniela Hammer-Tugendhats 60. Geburtstag*, ed. by the Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien, Wien 2008, pp. 31–37; Ludwig Jäger, *Transkriptivität. Zur medialen Logik der kulturellen Semantik*, in: Ludwig Jäger / Georg Stanitzek (ed.), *Transkribieren. Medien/Lektüre*, München 2002, pp. 19–42.
23. Just a reminder of the story from the Old Testament: King David saw the extraordinarily Bathseba bathing, coveted her, had her (physically) collected by a messenger and slept with her. When she became pregnant he sent her husband, Urias, to the front where he was killed. Then David took Bathseba as his wife. Elisabeth Kunoth-Leifels, *Über die Darstellungen der 'Bathseba im Bade'*. *Studien zur Geschichte des Bildthemas 4. bis 17. Jahrhundert*, Essen 1962.



fig. 5

content of the letter. Indeed, we cannot read the letter, yet we surmise what is in it. Therefore, ambiguity is not an issue here.

Still, ambiguity becomes a theme in Dutch painting in the course of the 17th century, on different levels: ambiguity can be part of the representation and be *shown per se* or it can be evoked with the male and female recipients.

Representation of ambiguity

Rembrandt occupied himself with this story in his version of 1654.²⁴ Apparently, Bathseba has already read the letter. Rembrandt manages to represent Bathseba as if she is thinking about the letter by using a specifically aesthetic mise-en-scène: the story is radically reduced to Bathseba and her maidservant, all action is stopped, the story has been internalized by Bathseba and her pensive look connects meaningfully with the letter. Because we know the content of the letter through the biblical story and also that Bathseba is now faced with a decision, we interpret, because of the unreadable letter, Bathseba's expression as lost in thought about that decision. *Pondering* is difficult to depict, and the object of the reflection, in this case the letter, helps to interpret Bathseba's expression. The pensive, melancholic and introspective figure of Bathseba is further elaborated by the bowed head, the slightly raised eyebrows and especially by the downcast and darkened eyes and the lost look. The specific incidence of light underlines the interiorization: the shades of red and ochre that glow from the shadowy darkness, especially the golden gleaming robe, immerse the painting in a mysterious light.

24. More elaborately discussed in: Hammer-Tugendhat 2009 (see note 8) with additional literature.



fig. 6

The text of the letter is established by the narrative; in fact, it is not about a decision, it is an order of the king. But with Rembrandt this is reinterpreted thus: the messenger, who physically comes to collect Bathseba, is changed into a letter. Rembrandt shows Bathseba's sinner conflict: obeying the king, remaining faithful to her husband, possibly longing... Rembrandt depicts ambivalence, more precisely in the mimicry of the face.²⁵ This form of thematization of individual, psychic ambivalence is new. It has to be understood within the context of the developing bourgeois society in Holland. There are analogous developments in philosophy, even with a philosopher of whom this could hardly be expected: with Descartes, who lived in Amsterdam in Rembrandt's time. In his later work *Passions de l'âme* (*Passions of the soul*) he describes this form of emotional ambivalence. As an example, he tells the story of a man who is faced with an inner conflict when his unbeloved wife dies: on the one hand, he is happy that she has finally died, but at the same time his tears flow as he grieves for her death and weeps for the memories of better times spent together, for fear of being alone – an amassment of contradictory emotions.²⁶ That is the

25. Joseph Leo Koerner, *Rembrandt and the Epiphany of the Face*, in: *RES* 12, 1986, pp. 5–32.

26. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (*Les passions de l'âme*, Amsterdam 1649). French-English, translated by Stephen H. Voss, Indianapolis 1989, Art. 147: 'And although these excitations of the soul are often joined with the passions that are like them, they may also frequently be found with others, and may even originate from those that are in opposition to them. For example, when a husband mourns his dead wife, whom (as sometimes happens) he would be upset to see resuscitated, it may be that his heart is constricted by the Sadness which funeral trappings and the absence of a person to whose company he was accustomed excite in him; and it may be that some remnants of love and pity presented to his imagination drew genuine tears from his eyes – in spite of the fact that at the same time he feels a secret Joy in the innermost depths of his soul (...)'

way Descartes describes ambivalence, even if he does not call it that and does not psychoanalytically explain it, as Sigmund Freud will later.

Profanation

In the early 1630s the letter motif frees itself from its biblical context and now turns up as a profane theme: a woman who reads a love letter, receives one or (seldom) writes one. The profanation of the theme does not only cause the loss of a religious framework, but also of the relation to a concrete, defined kind of text. When there is no fixed textual basis anymore, there is room for ambiguity. The earliest known paintings with women reading love letters are by a genre painter from Haarlem, Dirck Hals, the brother of the famous Frans Hals. Different versions have been preserved: 'dramatic', 'melancholic' and 'harmonious'. In the first version the woman tears the letter apart; the whole *mise-en-scène* is dramatic, the pose, the gestures, the mimicry, the gloomy colours, the large empty room. In addition the *painting in the painting*, showing a storm at sea, underlines the dramatics of the scene.²⁷ In the 'melancholic' painting a cheerful moonfaced woman in festive dress sits nonchalantly on a chair, with a calm seascape behind her.²⁸ Although there is no definite text that relates to the painting, the entire aesthetic *mise-en-scène* (composition, gestures, mimicry, colouring, *painting in the painting*) makes clear if there is good or bad news. Profanation alone does not guarantee ambiguity, it is, however, the condition for a possibility.

Production of ambiguity

Artists such as Gerard ter Borch, Vermeer, Hoogstraten and others realized this opportunity from the middle of the century onwards. In the Baroque versions by Dirck Hals, which still entirely follow the rhetorical rules, the body expresses what moves the soul, according to the representation of an analogy between the inside and the outside, which goes back to classical antiquity.²⁹

27. The seascapes are metaphors for love. exh. cat. Dublin Greenwich 2003 (see note 3); Otto Goedde, *Tempest and Shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish Art. Convention, Rhetoric, and Interpretation*, London 1989.

28. The painting (1633) is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the third 'melancholic' painting (1631) is in the Khanenko collection in Kiev. Britta Nehlsen-Maarten, Dirck Hals 1591–1656. *Oeuvre und Entwicklung eines Haarlemer Genremalers*, Weimar 2003.

29. Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis. The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, New York 1967; Volker Kapp, (ed.), *Die Sprache der Zeichen und Bilder. Rhetorik und nonverbale*

fig. 6



fig. 7



In ter Borch's work the body does *not* express what goes on inside. The painting *De Brief* (*The Letter*) reveals a bourgeois interior. A distinguished lady is clearly going to write a letter and leans her head on her hand in a melancholic gesture. She seems to have stopped writing awhile, musing and watching a younger woman in front of her. The latter wears the well-known satin dress and is poring over a letter. A small boy with a serving tray also looks up at her. There are most certainly narrative moments, but they do not fit together into a tight story. Two women – two letters? Does the young woman read the letter of the older woman's lover, which the older one is now answering? The young woman reading appears to be utterly concentrated, but we learn nothing at all about the possible content of the letter or her emotions. Upright, with stiffly bent arms, she does have a psychic inner life, but she does not reveal it.

fig. 8

The painting by ter Borch that was entitled *Nieuwsgierigheid* (*Curiosity*) in the 18th century has a similar *mise-en-scène*³⁰, which hints at a story that is, however, never told. There is a young woman spying over the shoulder of a woman writing: does she represent curiosity or does she help with the phrasing of the letter? In any case, she can see the content of the letter, which we are not allowed to. The third figure is truly remarkable: a lady in a satin dress with a very low neckline who looks outside the painting. She reminds us of the commentator figures, which Alberti recommended to the painters as go-betweens between the spectators and the painting.³¹ But this female figure has no deictic function,

Kommunikation in der frühen Neuzeit, Marburg 1990; Campe 1990 (see note 14); Michael Baxandall, *Die Wirklichkeit der Bilder. Malerei und Erfahrung im Italien des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main 1984 (1977) pp. 76–93; Hammer-Tugendhat 2009 (see note 8).

30. Exh. cat. Washington / New York 2004/05 (see note. 3), cat. nr. 35, pp. 138–140.

31. One should think of Masaccio's *Trinität* (*Trinity*) and the Dutch versions by Jacob Duck



fig. 9

she holds a rather undefinable piece of cloth in her hand, most probably a handkerchief. No rhetorical gestures, no mimicry, no commenting paintings in the painting. It was no accident that various stories were devised in research. Does the little dog reflect the position of the spectator? It sits upright and apparently attentive on the footstool, but it cannot see above the edge of the table and has only the purple colour of the table-cloth in front of its nose and eyes.

We know that we are dealing with love letters, so everything is about love and feelings. But we learn nothing about the concrete content of the letters or about the stormy feelings. My thesis is that, just because of that, emotions are represented as individual, as intimate and invisible for the others. By the evocation of emotion and the simultaneous non-definition of the specific affect imaginings are initiated with the male and female spectators.

Back to Hoogstraten

For his representation of a *painting in a painting* Hoogstraten decides on the letter motif, quotes a paraphrase of the *Rückenfigur* by ter Borch who refuses any mimical expression (simply because we cannot see her face) and even deletes the detail of the letter: he therefore does about everything possible

and Nicolaes Maes. Frauke Kreutler, *Vermittlerin ohne Kommentar. Die Konstruktion von Intimität bei Gerard Ter Borchs 'Die Neugier'*, Diplomarbeit, Wien 2002; Claude Gandelman, *Der Gestus des Zeigers*, in: Wolfgang Kemp (ed.), *Der Betrachter ist im Bild. Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik*, Berlin 1992, pp. 71–93; Martha Hollander, *The Divided Household of Nicolaes Maes*, in: *Word & Image. A Journal of Verbal / Visual Enquiry*, vol. 10, nr. 2, April–June.

to turn this *painting in a painting* into a picture of imagining for the spectators. Hoogstraten's work puts the associations of the recipients into action, who are going in various directions, as proved by the diverse interpretations within the framework of research. A dangerous tension can be read between the first room, characterized by female diligence, and the last room. Male and female art historians such as Foucart, Langemeyer or Werche have explained it this way, in a moralizing way: as a warning picture for the housewife, not to give way to temptation, or as an exposure, as immoral things are happening in this apparently respectable and reputable home.³² The corridor through the three rooms can also be experienced as an initiation, from the workroom to the rooms with the auras of love and art. One can imagine a bed behind the door and phantasize what is happening, as indicated in the *painting in the painting*. The painting seems to show a seduction, however, not by any concretely present male protagonist: in the *painting in the painting* a woman is seduced by a letter, a text – and we are enticed by the painting, by art. The painting evokes different phantasies in us (which quite often tell a lot about us), but at the same time it shows that these are our own phantasies. This work is an inter pictural reflection on the function of painting in its possibility to create ambiguity. Because Hoogstraten does definitely not show a painting with a woman reading a letter, but an empty interior with a *painting* about this motif. The mirror is not next to the painting by accident and it is just as fragmented as all the other things in this room, making us aware that we just cannot see everything. The mirror is a metaphor, saying that we encounter ourselves when we look at a painting.

Historization of Ambiguity

Only a few observations have been made here on this great theme which largely transcends my contribution. There was, as it were, a rush of ambiguity in Dutch painting in the 17th century. Obviously, we have to consider the precursors: first of all the Dutch genre painters Esaias van de Velde, Pieter Codde and Willem Duyster. They have hardly been paid attention to in this context so far, but they portrayed ambiguous social constellations in the 1620s and 1630s

32. J. Foucart, *Le tableau du mois nr. 29: 'Les Pantoufles' par Samuel van Hoogstraten*, (hand-out at the Louvre, see documentation in the Louvre) September 1996. Also Gerhard Langemeyer in: *Stilleben in Europa*, exh. cat. Westfälisches Landesmuseum Münster / Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Münster 1979, pp. 220–241; Bettina Werche in: exh. cat. Frankfurt a. M. 1993 (see note 13), p. 228.

already.³³ In any case, they worked simultaneously with artists such as Dirck Hals, but they struck out on a different course, which was then further developed by painters such as ter Borch, Vermeer, Hoogstraten and others in the second half of the century. Also the conditions in Dutch art in the 16th century have to be taken into account, in particular Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel the elder,³⁴ Pieter Aertsen³⁵ and, generally speaking, manneristic art (apart from the Netherlands especially the Giorgione circle in Venice should be discussed.³⁶). This *rush of ambiguity* does not happen in Holland just by accident, and not in the counterreformational, feudal-absolutist countries. This is extremely important to explain the relation between ambiguity in art and the discursive, social and economic context. The representation and also the experience of ambiguity are connected with the city-bourgeois culture in which privacy³⁷ and individuality are valued in a new and positive manner. Linked to that, they are also conditioned by a developing art market focusing on the individual buyer and ousting the publicly commissioned art. The art market,

fig. 9

in its turn, enables the development of profane painting, made possible by the specific religious situation. However, the representation of ambiguity is not merely the result of social (bourgeois) relations. By *making ambiguity visible* and, more precisely, by *producing* numerous and plainly ambivalent imaginings with the male and female recipients Dutch painting has made an active contribution to the establishment of modern subjectivity.³⁸

‘Realism’ and ambiguity

The significance of Dutch painting for the development of ambiguity, imagination and also subjectivity is paid too little attention to in research. For one thing, this applies to cultural-scientific research in general, which ignores the semantic potential of paintings because of its one-sided concentration on language and written texts. Taking into account the visual arts could lead to a shift in perception, even to a correction of the established chronology. In Holland, experiences of ambivalence/ambiguity were already reflected in the medium of painting in the 17th century, and they were only formulated as notions in the 18th century.

But also in the discipline of art history itself the ambiguous character of Dutch painting is all too often overlooked.³⁹ The realism of this art is often still read as *mimesis* or as the description of optical phenomena, maybe also as medial self-reflection. Meanwhile the iconologists attribute various polysemantic levels to the diverse objects pictured, but still they are mostly interpreted as fixed meanings in an emblematical sense, as it were in imitation of the medieval Augustinian quadruple significance of texts: literal/historical, allegorical, moralizing and anagogical. Dutch painting does not only articulate various, but still fixed levels of meaning in its respective contents, it also opens up individual possibilities for interpretation. New and totally unmedieval is the thematization of human ambivalence and the individual psyche.⁴⁰ Male and female art

33. About the letter versions of the two genre painters from Amsterdam Pieter Codde (1599–1678) and Willem Duyster (1599–1635): exh.cat. Dublin / Greenwich 2003 (see note 3), pp. 84–89; Wayne E. Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, New Haven/London 2004, pp. 57–64. About the *Vrolijk Gezelschap in Openlucht (Merry companies in the countryside)* by Esaias van de Velde from the 1620s: H. Rodney Nevitt Jr., *Art and the Culture of Love in Seventeenth-Century Holland*, Cambridge 2003, particularly pp. 57–65. See also: Hammer-Tugendhat 2009 (see note 8), chapter: ‘Affekt/Emotion/Imagination’.
34. Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, *Heterogenität und Differenz. Zur Aktualität der Kunst von Pieter Bruegel d. Ä.*, in: Annegret Friedrich (ed.), *Die Freiheit der Anderen. Festschrift für Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff*, Marburg 2004, pp. 24–37; *ibid.*, *Peripherie und Zentrum. Eine Glosse zu Pieter Bruegels d. Ä. ‘Bekehrung Pauli’*, in: Edith Futscher/Stefan Neuner/Wolfram Pichler/Ralph Ubl (eds.), *Was aus dem Bild fällt. Festschrift zu Ehren von Teja Bach*, München 2007, pp. 229–235.
35. Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, *Wider die Glättung von Widersprüchen. Zu Pieter Aertsens ‘Christus bei Maria und Martha’*, in: Peter K. Klein/Regine Prange (eds.), *Zeitenspiegelung. Zur Bedeutung von Tradition in Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft, Festschrift für Konrad Hoffmann zum 60. Geburtstag*, Berlin 1998, pp. 95–107.
36. See Verena Krieger, ‘At war with the obvious’ – Kulturen der Ambiguität. *Historische, psychologische und ästhetische Dimensionen des Mehrdeutigen*, in: Verena Krieger/Rachel Mader (eds.), *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, Köln 2010; Klaus Krüger, *Malerei als Poesie der Ferne im Cinquecento*, in: Krüger/Nova 2000 (see note 15), pp. 99–121; Marianne Koos, *Bildnisse des Begehrens. Das lyrische Männerporträt in der venezianischen Malerei des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts – Giorgione, Tizian und ihr Umkreis*, Emsdetten/Berlin 2006.
37. About the establishment of privacy in Dutch painting, especially see the works of David R. Smith et al.: *Masks of Wedlock. 17th-Century Dutch Marriage Portraiture*, Ann Arbor 1982; I. Janus: *Privacy and the Gentleman Ideal in Rembrandt’s Portraits of Jan SIX*, in: *Art History* 11/1988, pp. 42–63.

38. Charles Taylor, *Quellen des Selbst. Die Entstehung der neuzeitlichen Identität*, Frankfurt a. M. 1994; Reto Luzius Fetz (ed.), *Geschichte und Vorgeschichte der modernen Subjektivität*, Berlin et al. 1998; Rudolf Behrens (ed.), *Ordnungen des Imaginären. Theorien der Imagination In funktionsgeschichtlicher Sicht. Beiheft der Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, Hamburg 2002.
39. For a thorough study of the relevant research literature: Hammer-Tugendhat 2009 (see note 8).
40. Also here the precursors should be analysed, such as the miniatures in the late medieval novel *Le livre du Coeur espris* by René d’Anjou from the 15th century. Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart*. Chicago / London 2001.

historians who are predominantly occupied with modern art, especially since the beginning of the 20th century, often misunderstand the 'mimetic' form of representation as a mere *portrayal* of visible (or social) reality.

Ambiguity and socially intelligible codes

Ambiguity in Dutch painting is *not arbitrary*. In the case of our theme, the letter motif, the market for letter books exploded at the time the related paintings were made.⁴¹ These letter manuals also drafted models for love letters and at the same time supplied possible answers. For the answers, however, different possibilities were conceived: carefully reserved, prudishly affected, rejective, from willing to passionate surrender, purposefully addressed to different clients: virgins, widows, wives. The model love letters in the manuals pretended to be the expression of the most personal and intimate emotions, but they were written with established codes and fixed turns of phrase. In Holland the *dichtbrieven* (*poetic letters*) flourished. They were letters to friends or lovers that were published, giving birth to the genre of the epistolary novel. This means that the men and women who viewed the paintings with female figures reading letters certainly made different associations, according to sex, age, social class, personal experiences and cultural knowledge. But these associations were part of certain codes that were fixed and therefore intelligible. Important is the complex dialectical relation between, on the one hand, the cultural, discursive framework – determined by social practices and by language – and, on the other hand, the development of subjectivity, of individually different and ambiguous imaginings.

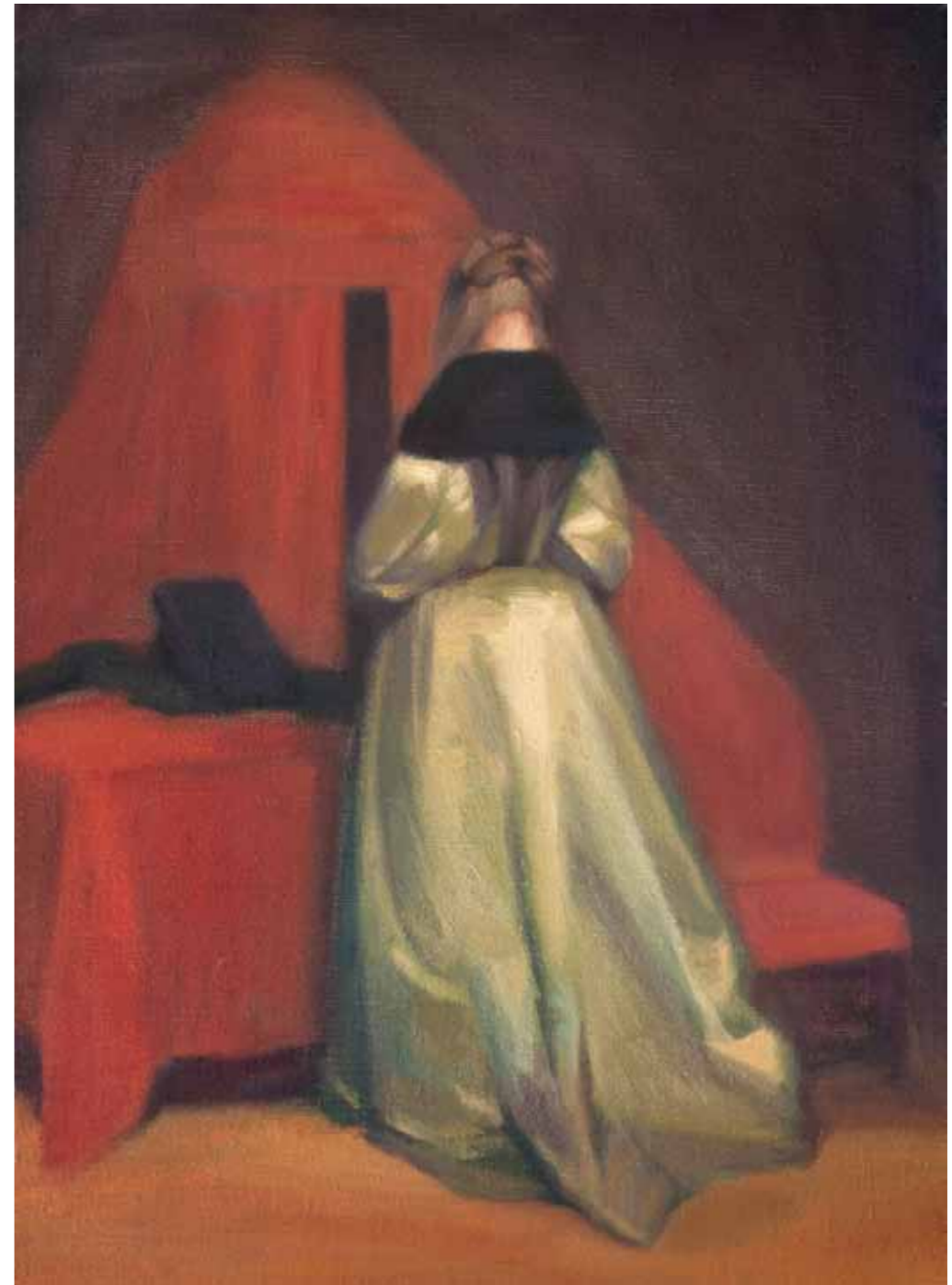
This conclusion leads me to the question: what is the relationship between ambiguity and socially intelligible codes in contemporary art?

41. Exh. cat. Frankfurt a. M. 1993 (see note 13); exh. cat. Dublin/Greenwich 2003 (see note 3), Hammer-Tugendhat 2009 (see note 8).

Figures

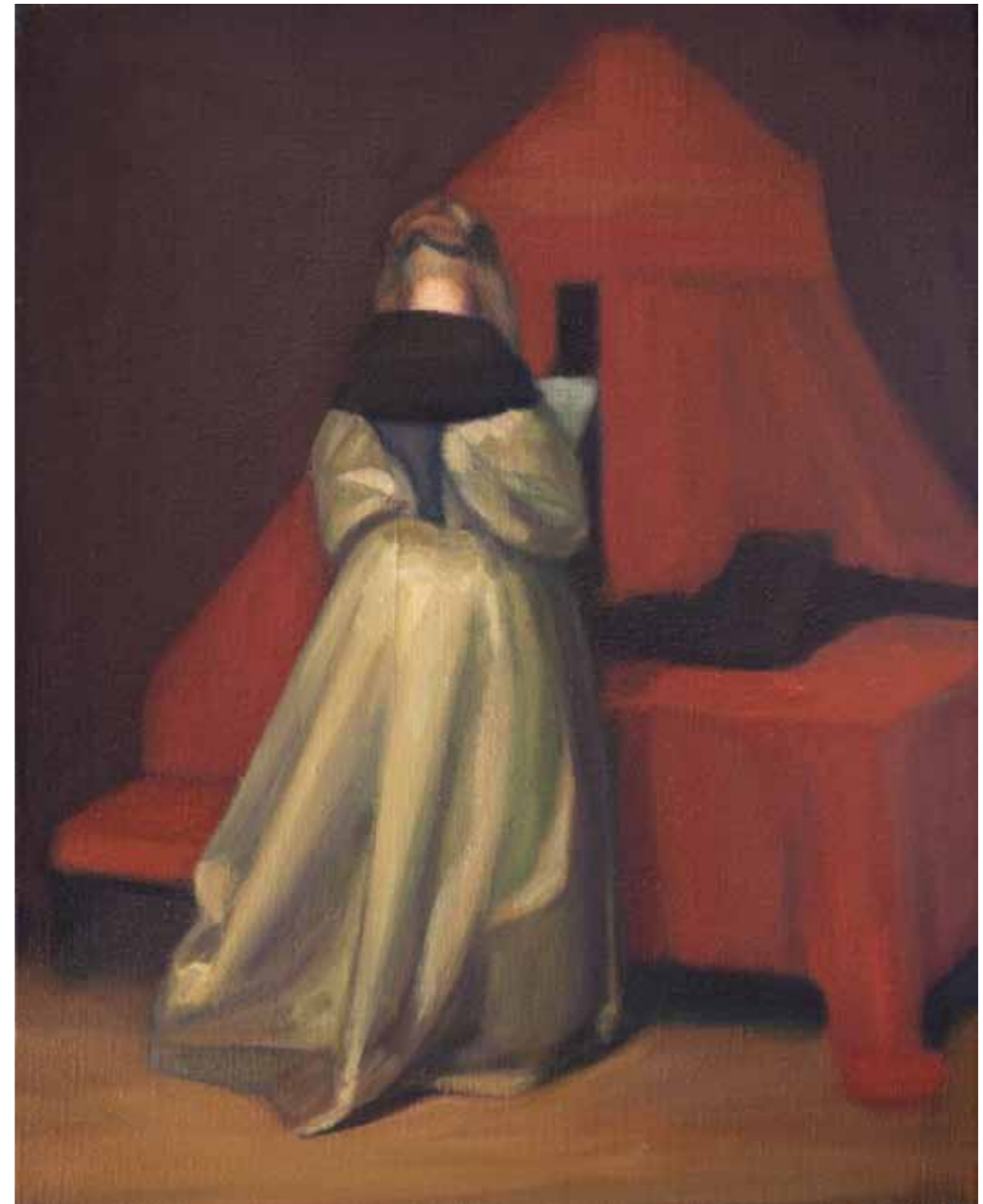
- fig. 1 J.G. Wille, *Väterliche Ermahnung* (*Paternal Admonition*), etching from ter Borch 1765.
- fig. 2 Gerard ter Borch, *De Galante Officier* (*The Gallant Officer*), around 1662–63, Paris, Louvre.
- fig. 3 Paraphrase from ter Borch, Female, *Rückenfigur* Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie.
- fig. 4 Caspar Netscher (attributed to), *Vrouw die een Liefdesbrief Leest* (*Woman Reading a Love Letter*) Paraphrase after Gerard ter Borch 1656, location unknown.
- fig. 5 Rembrandt, *Bathseba*, 1654, Paris, Louvre.
- fig. 6 Dirck Hals, *Vrouw die brief verscheurt* (*Woman tearing up a letter*), 1631, Mainz, Landesmuseum.
- fig. 7 Gerard ter Borch, *De Brief* (*The Letter*), around 1660, Londen, Buckingham Palace.
- fig. 8 Gerard ter Borch, *Nieuwsgierigheid* (*Curiosity*), around 1660, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- fig. 9 Willem Duyster, *Vrouw met een Brief en een Man* (*Woman with a Letter and a Man*), early 1630s, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst.







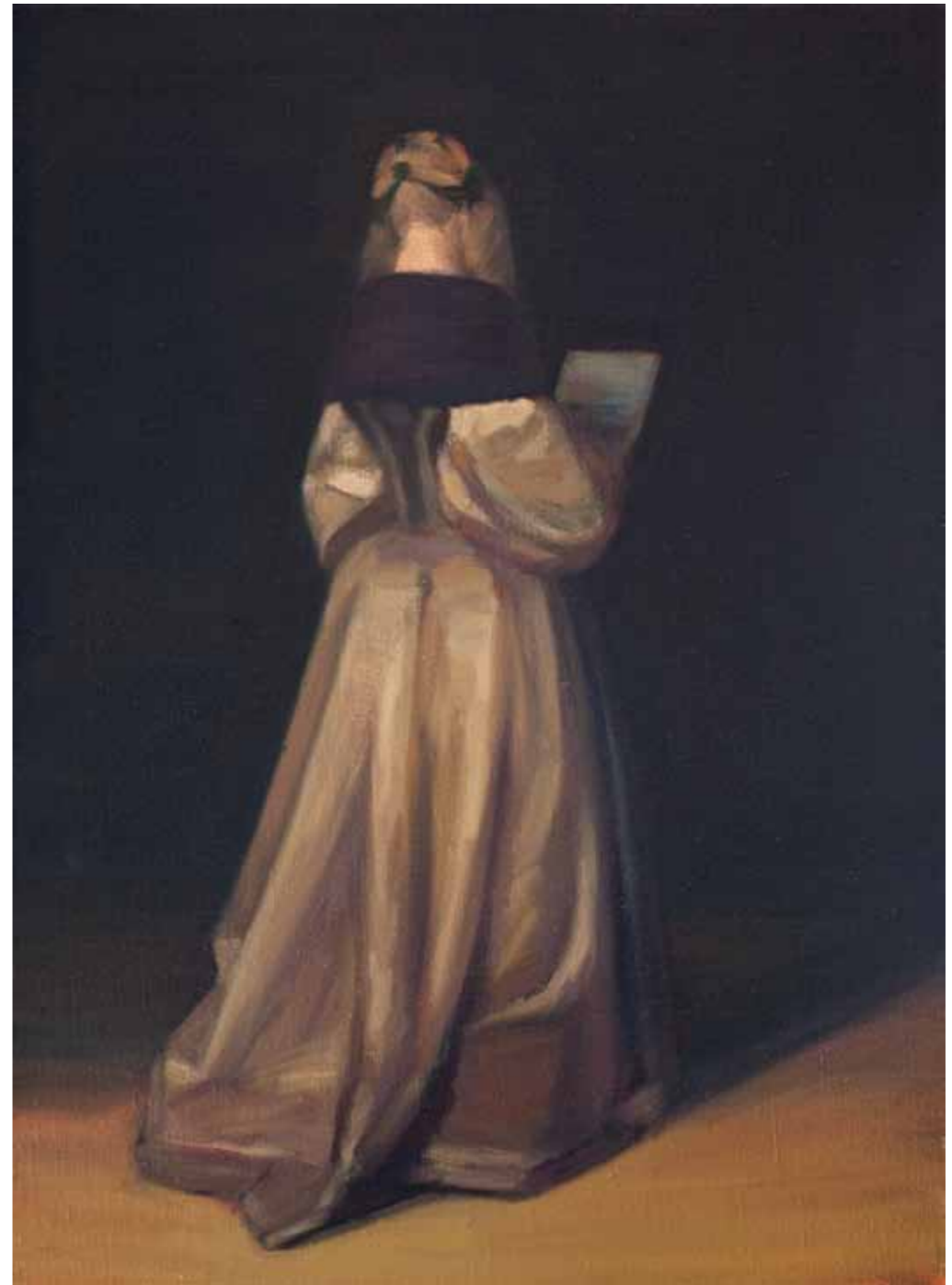


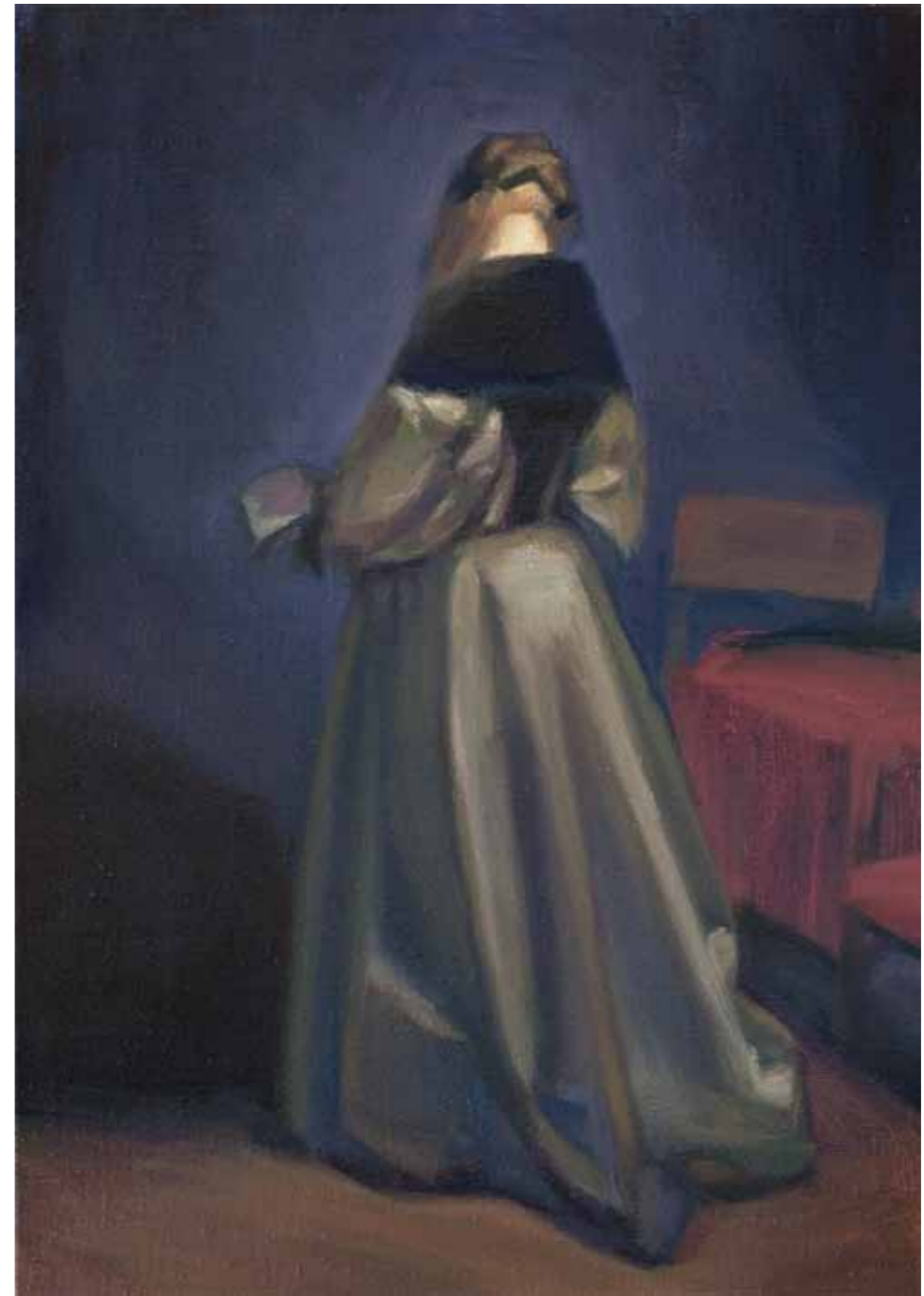












*THE BIRTH OF CRITICISM
FROM THE SPIRIT OF ART:
KARIN HANSSSEN'S
ALLEGORIES OF SATIN*

Kurt Vanhoutte

Logic of invention

The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB was realized between June 2010 and September 2011 as a preliminary investigation in the doctoral project Karin Hanssen is working on at the moment within the framework of a collaboration of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Antwerp. When Hanssen suggested me to help think about the doctorate the debate on research in the arts was in full swing. The consensus prescribed innovative artistic work linked to a thorough reflection on that work and its cultural conditions. It was, however, less clear where that critical reflection would be situated and how it had to externalize itself. Can an artist be expected to write up her experiences as theoretical considerations? Should the visual artist willy-nilly master academic skills? Or, conversely, is the sovereignty of the work of art to be respected, because it is eminently capable to speak for itself? This choice then in turn would raise the question what makes a doctorate in the arts distinctive against the background of a century in which art is, almost of its own accord, meta-art, because the avant-garde discounts the statute of art in our society as a problem in the work of art. The image as such versus reflection by text – there still seems to be no answer. I cannot escape the impression that the discussion regarding the doctorate is stuck between both positions today. This way it seems doomed to reproduce the truism that research in the arts precisely wanted to undermine: the incommensurability of word and image, the fundamental inability to convert both into one another. To the extent that this is particularly the case in the institutional discourse this can lead to the logic of conformism. The artist is then confronted with continually changing criteria and is expected to conform

to them. And the adaptation to the standard of the prevailing debate is then, cynically enough and 'en cours de route', labelled as 'research'. It is obvious what threatens to get lost on the way: a certain boldness, or at least courage, of the artist and – what else may be expected of her? – the willingness and the strength to make precisely this incommensurability of word and image productive.

Instead of an exhausting search for the hermeneutics that bring together word and image the artist could decide to sidestep the problem. She would then come close to what Gregory Ulmer has called 'heuretics', prompting the connotation of heresy within the field of interpretation. Heuretics originate in theology, but indicate its flip-side, the dark or repressed margin of conventional strategies of art and its interpretation. One could, according to Ulmer, interpret texts and images, or one could employ the unstable dialectics between words and pictures as a means of invention and thus use it heuretically. Hermeneutics ask what can be made *of* a work. Heuretics ask what can be made *from* a work:

'The relevant question for heuritic reading is not the one guiding criticism (according to the theories of Freud, Marx, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and others: What might be the *meaning* of an existing work?) but the one guiding a generative experiment: Based on a given theory, how might *another* text be composed?'¹

This shift of emphasis takes the attention away from a uniform model to a logic of invention and creativity. Ulmer mentions Breton, who's re-reading of Freud and Marx presented a surrealist critique of bourgeois ideology by proposing and performing alternative attitudes and thus fusing artistic and theoretical concerns in one move. It is also probably possible to hear in Ulmer's inventional project an echo of Susan Sontag's earlier plea *Against Interpretation*, which stated that '(i)instead of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'². It is also quite conceivable that Michel Foucault recognized a similar aim in the work of Paul Klee when he described it as 'a space without name or geometry by intertwining the chain of signs and the network of figures'³. Correspondingly, it might be possible to delineate a heuretical line of thinking, a tradition of both artists and critics who, in the 20th century, did not want to cling to the belief in a central, unifying methodology of arts and art theory, from which all questions and topics subsequently emanate.

As far as I know, that heretical compendium still has to be written. And as any repertory, however divergent and unfaithful, it presupposes a selection; in a broader sense this means that not every artist is suitable to aspire to a doctorate

1. Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuretics. The Logic of Invention*, Baltimore and London 1994, pp.4–5.

2. Susan Sonntag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York 1965, p.36.

3. Michel Foucault, 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', in: *October*, N° 1 / Spring 1976, p.14.

in arts, because it implies a certain predisposition of the work of art to blend art and reflection. If that book is ever written, Karin Hanssen would get a place in it, as far as I am concerned. In this short contribution I will try to show in what respect her remake of ter Borch bypasses the many truisms of research in the arts to audaciously, with vigorous yet graceful lines, create an installation that, as Walter Benjamin would put it, enhances 'die Geburt der Kritik aus der Geiste der Kunst' ('the birth of criticism from the spirit of art').⁴ Benjamin saw this birth happen, more specifically, in the allegorical work of art, that 'gewissermassen schon in sich (...) die kritische Zersetzung [trägt]' ('already and to a certain extent carries the critical laying-apart in itself'). (ibid.) That way *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB* represents the quintessence of research in art. Via the allegorical nature of the images the work externalizes, as if by itself, a critical and analytical impulse with regard to art history, and the exteriorization of the process appears to be inherent.

Allegorical doubling

The quotation from Benjamin is not only telling because of his highly accurate, one might say, heuretical way of aligning art with criticism (initially meant as a reaction against Nietzsche's artistic creed in terms of myth and universalia). Above all, Walter Benjamin seems to be an excellent dialogue partner considering Hanssen's work in general and this installation in particular. It is probably no coincidence that Beatrice Hanssen, the renowned author of various books that have influenced, not to say shaped, the reception of Walter Benjamin worldwide, is her sister. The artistic work of Karin Hanssen can indeed be understood while referring to the allegorical image language that was so dear to Benjamin in his writings about the German tragedy and, later, the poetry of modernity. What is more, the work at the basis of this catalogue has, according to Hanssen herself, originated from her lecture of Benjamin's key essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* ('*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*'). Moreover, *Variations GTB* thus bears witness to her ongoing dialogue with Walter Benjamin, elaborating the latter's views on allegory and aura, yet at the same time making work *from* Benjamin rather than *of* the German literary and cultural critic.

Benjamin's theory of the allegorical image, which proceeds from the observation that allegory is an approach as well as a performance, a perception as well as a technique, defies summary. The allegorical can be minimally formulated as

4. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I-3, Frankfurt am Main 1991, p.952.

one work re-enacted through another, however fragmentary or discontinuous their relationship may be. As a rule, then, its structure corresponds to the logic of the doubling, because the artist generates an image through the ruthless appropriation of other images. Benjamin more particularly studied this process as it takes place *within* the structure of the work of art. There the original becomes something other ('allos' meaning other, 'agoreuein' meaning speaking), that might still bear faint traces of the original but that first and foremost generates another meaning, originating in the excess that occurs when original intentions and connotations are supplanted by new ones. The allegorical temperament resists hermeneutics and the act of interpretation altogether, because it signals an unbridgeable distance to the original instead of seeking out, disclosing and preserving seminal meaning. This is also the disposition at the heart of Hanssen's art.

Karin Hanssen has enjoyed international recognition and acclaim with paintings that thematize the flash-back through the appropriation of photographic and cinematographic imagery from the 1950s to the 1970s. The situations and figures depicted in her work bring to mind the decades that discovered leisure and experienced the advent of consumerism. On a more personal note, Hanssen thus poses as the interpreter of her own formative years, her entry as a child into adolescence, and, ultimately, her evolving into an artist. When we look at these emblematic appropriations, however, the first thing that draws our attention is the peculiar way in which the paintings do not acknowledge but transcend the historical conditions of the original image, giving the specific a more general implication through a dream-like abstraction of the setting, the strange aloofness of its inhabitants and, generally spoken, the diversion of the pure gaze. In a general way this approach is comparable to the painted images of – to name the most important artists – Gerhard Richter, Neo Rauch or Luc Tuymans, yet it displays specific characteristics and shows a personal signature in manipulating the archive of images that make up our collective imagination. Hanssen's paintings clearly elaborate on the themes of social determinism, yet they somewhat ambiguously also retain a resilient quality, allowing for a strong emotional and poetic appeal through a paradoxical mix of empathy and criticism.

Sensual appropriation

Hanssen's unique style is most apparent in the current installation. *Variations GTB* takes its cue from the Dutch Golden Age, an era in which art as commerce, morality and social value are all entwined. More concretely, the series of works take as their subject a historically famous scene, the so-called *Paternal*

Admonition by genre painter Gerard ter Borch, (1617–1681). The title denotes a father reprimanding his daughter, but today it is believed that ter Borch rather wanted to depict a customer propositioning a prostitute in a brothel. The portrait of the woman, a *Rückenfigur* (back figur) in a fine dress, seems to have been immediately popular at the time. Gerard ter Borch himself made several copies of the woman, and there are approximately thirty versions known that were made by other artists. Interestingly, these duplicates all detach the female figure from the original setting and reinsert her in ever new situations. Time and again, she appears with her back turned towards the beholder, a hollowed-out figure and an empty signifier, mediating her readiness to be appropriated at the intersection of the economic (the duplicates: serializing images for commercial success), the aesthetic (the depicted gesture) and the narrative (prostitution). A confiscated image on several levels, then, the woman in the fine dress has previously entered the consuming process of appropriation. An image there to be used once more in a different context, she has always already been subject to sexual and commercial commodification, a body necessarily mediated by the gaze of the artist and – when sold – of the beholder. Hanssen somehow continues this layered procedure, meanwhile probing the status of the woman permeated by the perception and memory of the Golden Age. Inherent in this approach is an oscillation between commodification and reanimation, as if aiming at reviving the fossilized shell of the female body. This dialectics can be called rather unique, it is the source of the theoretical significance of the installation. More specifically, in allegorizing Gerard ter Borch's iconic figure, Hanssen, in her typical style, both recaptures the commercialized woman as object in its own right, and at the same time somehow restores the identity of the commodified body, saving it from oblivion.

More specifically, *Variations GTB* consists of ten paintings that are each a variation on the same *Rückenfigur* such as it first shows in *Paternal Admonition* by ter Borch and furthermore in *Lady in White Atlas*, presumably by Caspar Netscher, ter Borch's son-in-law and an apprentice in his studio, and the *The Messenger*, purportedly also painted by ter Borch. Whereas the woman remained unchanged in all her varying appearances at the time of ter Borch and was inserted as an ideal image in new situations time and again, every painting by Hanssen articulates the mysterious figure in a different way. Not only the settings vary, also the woman herself changes and acquires singular features. Hanssen approached each work individually; they were not painted as a series, so that each execution ultimately keeps its own power of expression. At the same time the individual work in the setting of ten paintings interacts with the other images, reinforcing its own character by contrast and increasing the appeal of the woman in the total image. In other words, the serial character

of this presentation enriches the identity of the woman represented. This inversion of the logic with ter Borch, who put the identical woman in different settings, is the core of this installation. It presupposes that, in this case, the reproduction does not lead to a further disembodiment of the woman as a figure, but, on the contrary, under Hanssen's hand grows into a woman who appropriates her figuration. That way the multiple personage in the installation gradually discards the principles, methodologies and ethical conducts that she embodied before and that transformed her to *parti pris*. This step by step emancipation can best be understood by discussing the three main groups the ten paintings are divided into in order of their creation.

The first group originated from Caspar Netscher's image in which the female figure is put before a canopy bed with next to her a nonreflecting mirror on a small red table and a taboeret covered with the same red cloth. There is also one *pasticchio*, the version with the letter, which is composed of *The Messenger* and Netscher's image. The woman in the picture turns away from the public even more, as if she wants to shield the words in her hand from the beholder. Her pose increases her attraction and stimulates the spectator's curiosity. This fact will later be fully exploited in the third group, which closes the series with a comparable image. Also today the woman does not face the beholder and this sets the tension between the works from the Golden Age and those by Hanssen. There is no way that the woman will show herself. But, whereas this pose was formerly an object of a courtly morality, it will really withstand this objectification in Hanssen's work. In an article of 1993, Allison Kettering has suggested that ter Borch's painting embodied common Petrarchan poetics of the woman as the distant, indifferent, beautiful mistress, forever turning away from her suitor, and in this case also from the viewer.⁵ In ter Borch's days, the artist's sister, Gesina, the model for this painting and its many copies, as so many other burghers collected courtly poems depicting the supreme female and the devoted man. More specifically, in the bourgeois era of ter Borch the exciting combination of chastity and sensuality proved to be possibly even more erotizing than in late medieval and Renaissance poems. And here the incomparably realistically painted dress plays the central role. The satin dress constructs an ideal of female beauty, that, above all, dresses the woman in the image of her submission to the male morality of the era, in the unequalled elaboration of the cloth, its texture and play of light. She is her dress. And the reason why the painting was so immensely popular in its many versions must probably be looked for in the fetichizing of the female body just as much as

5. Alison McNeil Kettering, 'Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin', in: Wayne E. Franits (ed.), *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art. Realism Reconsidered*, Cambridge 1997.

variation
1, 2, 5, 6

var. 5

in the mastery of ter Borch's craft: together they constituted the commercial value of the work. In the seventeenth century shiny satin more particularly stood for becoming reservation, but in the painting it just as well possessed the same sensual sheen that can be seen in the beautiful female neck. It is clear that the function of the dress is toned down by Hanssen, so that the woman can free herself from her silver straitjacket. At the same time the emphasis remains on the neck, which in ter Borch's work is marked as the area of femininity between dress and hairdo. By deleting the shiny effect of the satin – an intervention that is underlined by including the darkened mirror next to the woman – she is so to speak first liberated. It is characterizing for Karin Hanssen's personality that she does not do this while abandoning the woman's sensuality, which indeed formed the core of her ambivalent position with ter Borch. She cuts out the woman, but keeps her sensuality. Hanssen even goes so far as to accentuate the main pleats in the dress, which straightly directs the erotic gaze. The result is that the woman is saved as a sensual individual.

Hanssen's artistic determination in her dialogue with the formation of theory is situated in this rescue. Benjamin's *Artwork* essay has been referred to before as a source of inspiration for the installation. It is well-known that in this essay the author proposes the thesis that the painted image, and by extension all art, loses its essential core when it is reproduced by new technologies such as photography or cinema. Benjamin called this lost core the aura of the image. He referred to the melancholic description by Pirandello to underline the devitalisation that takes place in the logic of the doubling, in this case of the actor's body by the film image:

'The film actor, (...), feels as if in exile – exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort, he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image (...)'⁶

The melancholy that arises as a consequence of the grief for a lost origin is the same as the one in the heart of the allegorist. In the allegorist appropriation the image is incapable of generating any meaning or significance of its own. Life flows out of it, and any meaning it has, it acquires from the allegorist. Therefore, according to Benjamin's description of the Baroque 'mourning play' (*Trauerspiel*), allegorical appropriation is consistently attracted to the fragmentary and the incomplete, to transience and decay, depicting history as an irreversible process of mortification – Richter en Tuymans involuntarily spring to mind, as Benjamin states that:

6. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York 1968, p. 229.

'... in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, had been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head.'⁷

Projected onto the age of ter Borch, an era in which copies were made freely and openly, Benjamin's thesis nonetheless also sounds like a pre-eminently historical idea, the tenability of which is limited to modernity. In other words, the tension between original and reproduction is essentially a snapshot in time, which does not agree with the reality of the Golden Age as far as the past is concerned and which does not appear unequivocal either today. Although the 17th century also utilized new technologies such as the camera obscura in the production of copies, by no means did it attach the same value to the original and consequently the copy could never imply a toning down of the original. For Benjamin the image lives on thanks to its reproduction (also the allegorist 'saves' in this way), but it pays the price of its innocence. In *Variations GTB* the woman does not renounce her identity in order to degenerate into a melancholy image of the woman as a whore (according to Benjamin, for that matter, the pre-eminent allegory of modernity in Baudelaire). With Hanssen her sensuality does never contradict her dignity as a woman. Maybe she succeeds in allowing the woman to be a woman, because the original image can hardly be explained as original. In any case, the woman in the installation seems to assess Benjamin's thesis critically. As a consequence of this resistance in regard to Benjamin the latter's own poetical metaphors suddenly resound all the louder, for instance when he compares the allegorist to 'a stern sultan in the harem of objects', whose invasion of the original is characteristic of 'the sadist ... [who] humiliates his object and then – or thereby – satisfies it'.⁸ In the same logic the aura is a female principle, which is lost under the groping gaze of the man and leaves her devitalized. By contrast, in Karin Hanssen's variation on ter Borch – who himself is in turn objectivized to 'GTB' in the name of the installation – the woman is a subject who does not renounce her aura. It is a matter of agency.

Possibly because of the same reason Hanssen also removes the cord with which ter Borch attached the canopy to the ceiling. The removal of the anecdotal elements of the space is consequently continued in the second group of images, in which the image is further emptied to make room for the woman. The first painting of this group is a reduced image based on a fragment of *Paternal Admonition*, the second one a reprise of the fragment with a background that is

7. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London & New York 1998, p.166.

8. *Ibid.*, pp.184–185.

even more reduced – also the furniture has gone now – but with the inclusion of the floor from the painting *Helena van der Schalcke*. Paradoxically enough this abstraction enhances the mystery of the turned-away figure up to the point that it acquires an almost religious aura. One can imagine that Hanssen reaches another boundary here, which reflects the fetishizing objectification by conversely giving the image an almost transcendental aura. If carried through and if dialectically reversed this once more could have an objectification of the woman as a consequence. It could, to use the same imagery as a little while ago, result in a cultic image of the woman as the Madonna. The third group, all of them pasticcio's derived from *Helena van der Schalcke*, which shows the woman in a grandiose and monumental way in a vague spaciousness, seems to strengthen this impression at first sight, she nearly becomes an icon of femininity. Still, this is ultimately not the case and Hanssen manages to keep the aura of her personage in a dialectical tension, so that she does not fully grow into an emblem or yet another ideal either, thus in the end losing her private character. For this reason this group is dearest to me: because the three paintings, the culmination of the whole installation, display the singular beauty of the woman in a timeless and undefined space, celebrating her emancipation at the same time as her serialization. In this sense the letter in the final image punctuates the aura. It refers to the singular situation of the woman, which extends beyond the frame, and at the same time again formulates an appeal to the beholder, whose voyeurism is fueled, so that we become aware that this dimension has never disappeared from the work since ter Borch.

var. 7, 8, 9

var. 9

Afterlife

At the end the portrait of the woman becomes the site for a debate that poses crucial questions for our times when considering the aesthetic, commercial and moral values involved in the serialized copying of the figure of a prostitute. The field of tension between original and copy is one of these crucial questions. But just as well – to paraphrase a book of W.J.T. Mitchell – the loves and lives of an image.⁹ Because in Hanssen's attempts to wrest this woman from the codes and duties of her time, by continuing the series, she raises questions about the capacity of the image to exist on itself despite the template that fixes her time and again, in years past but also now, in the triangle between artist, canvas and beholder. The question of what the image *itself* wants is probably the most far-reaching. If we consider the image to be an organism, how does it meet us?

9. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago 2005.

var. 3, 4, 10

var. 3

var. 4

It is the most improper reversal, because it defers hermeneutics, which traditionally probes for meanings and firm ground, and requires an almost archaic, magic change of place. This inversion unsettles the modern approach of the image. Averse to all explanatory schemes from art history and theory, apart from artistic training programmes and endless notions of spectatorship, even against the economy which invariably impregnates the work of art beforehand with a commercial value – the question is: what does the picture *really* want?

‘What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology. (...) Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled into a “history of images” nor elevated into a “history of art” but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities.’¹⁰

This suggestion boldly shifts the question from restriction to desire, from the dominant model of the gaze to be opposed to the invitation to the subaltern and the objectified to raise its voice. Thus, the question of the agency of the image flirts with a superstitious attitude toward images, one that returns us to animism and idolatry. Surely, it contains a heuristical impulse. It turns our attention to a possible life of the image of the woman in the satin dress, an (after)life that has acquired increasingly clearer contours as the paint of the portraits dried.

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10. Ibid., p.47.

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<p>www.karin-hanssen.be</p>	<p>GROUP EXHIBITIONS FROM 2001 ON (SELECTION)</p>	<p>2007 <i>New Collection</i>, Voorkamer, Museum Wuyts-Van Campen, Lier</p> <p><i>100 Drawings</i>, Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, Tianjin, China</p> <p><i>Donkerte/Darkness</i>, Open Air Festival, AIR, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Speeltijd</i>, KAB, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Too near, too far</i>, Tanya Rumpff galerie Haarlem, The Netherlands</p>	<p>2001 <i>The Big Show</i>, Healing, NICC, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Kunst en Zwalm</i>, Zwalm</p>	<p>2010 <i>The Thrill of it All</i>, texts Philippe Van Cauteren, Gregory Salzman, David Broker, MER Paper Kunsthalte Vzw. Ghent.</p> <p><i>NOW=The Time</i>, texts Philippe Van Cauteren and Karin Hanssen, KunstVerein Ahlen, Germany</p> <p>2004 <i>Modern Living</i>, texts Alain de Botton, Gregory Salzman, Objectif_ Exhibitions, Antwerp.</p>	<p>2007 <i>Speeltijd</i>, KABerchem, Bert Danckaert, Marc Holthof, Willem Elias, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Objectif Exhibitions</i>, group shows, Antwerp 03/07</p> <p>2005 <i>YOKOHAMA 2005, 2nd International Triennale of Contemporary Art</i>, Art Circus [Jumping from the Ordinary], Taro Amano, Japan</p>
<p>SOLO AND DUO EXHIBITIONS:</p>	<p>2012 <i>(Vacanza) Permanente</i>, at NICC, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Fat Birds don't Fly</i>, Netwerk Center for Contemporary Art, Aalst.</p> <p>2011 <i>YOU & ME</i> Collection presentation of The National Bank of Belgium at the NBB</p>	<p>2007 <i>New Collection</i>, Voorkamer, Museum Wuyts-Van Campen, Lier</p> <p><i>100 Drawings</i>, Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, Tianjin, China</p> <p><i>Donkerte/Darkness</i>, Open Air Festival, AIR, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Speeltijd</i>, KAB, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Too near, too far</i>, Tanya Rumpff galerie Haarlem, The Netherlands</p>	<p>PROJECTS</p>	<p>2010 <i>The Thrill of it All</i>, texts Philippe Van Cauteren, Gregory Salzman, David Broker, MER Paper Kunsthalte Vzw. Ghent.</p> <p><i>NOW=The Time</i>, texts Philippe Van Cauteren and Karin Hanssen, KunstVerein Ahlen, Germany</p> <p>2004 <i>Modern Living</i>, texts Alain de Botton, Gregory Salzman, Objectif_ Exhibitions, Antwerp.</p>	<p>2007 <i>Speeltijd</i>, KABerchem, Bert Danckaert, Marc Holthof, Willem Elias, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Objectif Exhibitions</i>, group shows, Antwerp 03/07</p> <p>2005 <i>YOKOHAMA 2005, 2nd International Triennale of Contemporary Art</i>, Art Circus [Jumping from the Ordinary], Taro Amano, Japan</p>
<p>2012 <i>THE BORROWED GAZE/ Variations GTB</i>, Karin Hanssen and Leah Bullen, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra (AUS)</p> <p>2010 <i>NOW = The Time</i>, KunstVerein Ahlen, Ahlen, Germany</p> <p>2008 <i>ABC, 123</i>, Crown Gallery, Brussels</p> <p>2007 <i>As You Like It</i>, The Agency Gallery, London, U.K.</p> <p>2006 <i>Beach</i>, Karin Hanssen and Janice McNab, The Agency Contemporary, London, U.K.</p> <p>2005 <i>Beyond the Black Sun</i>, Karin Hanssen and Emily Wolfe, The Agency Contemporary, London, U.K.</p> <p><i>Time Structures/Small World</i>, Onetwenty Gallery, Ghent</p> <p>2004 <i>Modern Living</i>, exhibition + presentation of the book, <i>objectif_exhibitions</i>, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Modern Living</i>, Plattform, Berlin, Germany.</p> <p>2003 <i>Time of Your Life</i>, La Pommerie et Mouvance, St.-Setiers, Limousin, France</p>	<p>2011 <i>YOU & ME</i> Collection presentation of The National Bank of Belgium at the NBB</p> <p><i>Von dort aus – Nieuwe kunst uit België/ Art nouveau de la Belgique II</i>, Galerie Christian Nagel Berlin at the auction house Lempertz in Berlin, Germany</p> <p><i>Von dort aus – Nieuwe kunst uit België/ Art nouveau de la Belgique II</i>, Galerie Christian Nagel Cologne, Germany</p> <p><i>Salonaise</i>, Centrifugal projects, Trajector Art Fair, Hotel Bloom! Brussels</p> <p><i>Collecting</i>, VanAbbemuseum – Library (NL)</p> <p><i>The Power of Drawing</i>, Geukens De Vil Gallery, Antwerp</p> <p><i>Kanttekeningen</i>, Museum Maagdenhuis Antwerp</p> <p>2010 <i>Les Choses Perdues</i>, Vegas gallery, London, U.K.</p> <p>2009 <i>Uit het Geheugen</i>, Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent</p> <p><i>Het zelfde en het andere</i>, Zebrstraat, Ghent</p>	<p>2006 <i>Hundert Küsse sind besser als einer</i>. Editionen / Krinzinger Projekte, Wien, Austria</p> <p>2005 <i>Jumping from the Ordinary</i>, Yokohama 2005, 2nd International Triennale of Contemporary Art, Japan</p> <p><i>Capturing Utopia</i>, Fournos, Athens, Greece</p> <p><i>Belonging</i>, Sharjah Biennial 7, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates</p> <p><i>Heal the World</i>, The Third Line Gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates</p> <p>2004 <i>Working Ethics (from a certain Flanders)</i>, Krinzinger Projekte, Vienna, Austria</p> <p><i>Wish you were (t)here</i>, Stedelijk Museum Aalst</p> <p><i>Zie Tekening</i>, Project Voorkamer, Stedelijk</p>	<p>2012 <i>The Borrowed Gaze</i>, Artist in residence at CCAS (AUS).</p> <p>2007 <i>Les Dames Blanches</i>, debate at ART BRUSSELS 2007, with Edith Doove, Ria Pacquée, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, Ulrike Lindmayr, Karin Hanssen, April 2007.</p> <p><i>The Trojan Horse, or the Abuse of the Conventional Image</i>, lecture, Karin Hanssen, March 28, 2007, Event on the occasion of the exhibition 'As You Like It', Flanders House, Londen.</p> <p>2005 <i>Unveiled/Sharjah, Dubai</i>, bookproject, United Arab Emirates</p> <p>2003 <i>Unveiled/ La Pommerie</i>, bookproject Artist in residence, La Pommerie, St.-Setiers, France</p>	<p>Collective catalogues</p> <p>2011 <i>Flag Art</i>, Mu.ZEE, Ostend.</p> <p>2010 <i>Collecting</i> VanAbbe Museum catalogue, Eindhoven, (N)</p> <p><i>The power of drawing – catalogue</i> Geukens en De Vil Gallery, Antwerp.</p> <p><i>Lady and World* the Colorful Art Exhibition</i>, Huitai Art Center Tianjin, China.</p> <p>2009 <i>Uit het Geheugen</i>, Museum Dr. Guislain, Lannoo, quadri (texts Christine Van Broeckhoven, Mark Ruyters, Bernard Dewulf, Maja Wolny, Douwe Draaisma), Ghent</p> <p><i>Fading</i>, Museum Elsene, Sven Vanderstighelen Snoeck uitgeverij, Brussels</p> <p><i>Drawing Actions</i>, Kris Van Dessel, De Halle, Geel</p> <p>UN-SCR-1325-New York, Jan van Woensel, Francis Richard,</p>	<p>2005 <i>YOKOHAMA 2005, 2nd International Triennale of Contemporary Art</i>, Art Circus [Jumping from the Ordinary], Taro Amano, Japan</p> <p><i>Belonging</i>, 7th International Biennial, Sharjah, Time Structures, Bea De Souza, United Arab Emirates</p> <p>2004 <i>Portfolio Kunst NU</i>, SMAK, Ghent</p> <p><i>Working Ethics – from a certain Flanders</i>, text Philippe Pirotte, Krinzinger Projekte, Vienna</p> <p><i>Handleiding</i> 02-03, Netwerk Galerij, Aalst</p> <p><i>objectif_exhibitions</i>, Antwerp</p> <p>2003 <i>Happiness Land</i>, Project & Project, Oktober '03, Antwerp</p> <p>2002 <i>Act</i>, Hedendaagse Belgische Kunst, Brussels</p> <p><i>The Big Show / Healing</i>, Wim Peeters, Nicc, Antwerp</p> <p>2001 <i>Handleiding</i> 98-00, Edith Doove, Netwerk Galerij, Aalst</p> <p><i>Kunst in Vlaanderen na 1975</i>, Florent Bex, Mercatorfonds, Brussels</p>

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VISUAL POETICS



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