

Linear optimism

*"Approaching art in phenomenal and descriptive terms means approaching it, first of all, as style and as the history of style (neither of which, taken in itself, necessarily involves quality). Approached strictly as a matter of style, new art in the 1960's surprises you--if it does surprise you--not by its variety, but by the unity and even uniformity it betrays underneath all the appearances of variety. There are Assemblage, Pop, and Op; there are Hard Edge, Color Field, and Shaped Canvas; there are Neo-Figurative, Funky, and Environmental; there are Minimal, Kinetic, and Luminous; there are Computer, Cybernetic, Systems, Participatory--and so on. (One of the really new things about art in the 60's is the rash of labels in which it has broken out, most of them devised by artists themselves--which is likewise new; art-labeling used to be the affair of journalists.) Well, there are these manifestations in all their variegation, yet from a steady and detached look at them through their whole range some markedly common stylistic features emerge. Design or layout is almost always clear and explicit, drawing sharp and clean, shape or area geometrically simplified or at least faired and trued, color flat and bright or at least undifferentiated in value and texture within a given hue. Amid the pullulation of novelties, advanced art in the 60's subscribes almost unanimously to these canons of style--canons that Wölfflin would call linear."*

from: Clement Greenberg, The John Power lecture in Contemporary Art, delivered at the University of Sydney on Friday 17 May 1968. Originally published by the Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1969

This quote of the American art historian Clement Greenberg seems to be applicable to the work of Guido Nieuwendijk. Granted, some "styles" do not really fit, such as light art, computer art or performance art, but still... hard edge, colour field, shaped canvas, neo figurative, funky, op art, systematic art, pop art and minimal art ...most are there. No matter how reduced the work of Guido Nieuwendijk is, it is rich. It touches many art movements of the sixties. It seems as if many of them meet in Nieuwendijk's work. But we no longer live in the sixties. We are fifty years ahead. What is it that makes Nieuwendijk's art relevant and topical today?

To me, the text of Greenberg is an eye-opener, because it stresses the resemblances of styles within an age, rather than focusing on what those styles themselves appear to try to achieve, namely to differ from one another.

Pop Art and Minimal Art in particular, I always considered to be opposing forces. Pop Art is figurative, bases itself on reality and comments on consumerism. Minimal art is anything but figurative and does not comment on the world. At most, the minimalists wanted to polish and rationalise the world with their fundamental formal expressions. But Greenberg is right. Underneath the obvious differences lies a common denominator you could call Zeitgeist. But in the sixties such similarities would not have been widely accepted.

According to Greenberg, the linear, explicit and clear art from the sixties is in contrast with the art from the forties and fifties, such as abstract expressionism, tachism and informal art, in which paint flows and winds and is, to speak with the words of art historian Wölfflin, "picturesque". Greenberg states that in spite of an apparent multitude of styles in the sixties, in hindsight one could formulate some sort of common denominator for this period. In addition, he says, art of a certain period also responds to the preceding period. That is the legacy of the Avant Garde.

How is it that the work of Guido Nieuwendijk shows so many similarities with the clear linear art of the sixties? At the recent reopening of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, I noticed for the first time that Barnett Newman dates and signs his work on the front side of the canvas. Newman, although usually seen as one of the Colour Field painters, had his peak in the forties and fifties. In this age, artists felt the urge to manifest themselves as an artist, and to place themselves amongst the big stars in the history of art. The artists of the sixties and seventies in contrast, had a different morality. This was a time of social engagement, of mass demonstrations, political correctness and living communities. Commerce was either a dirty word or, as in the case of Warhol, was reflected

upon with irony. The individual striving is easily viewed as egoistical or megalomaniac, and thus wrong. It is not surprising that this was the period in which the personal signature in art works disappears, and linearity becomes fashionable again. Eventually, in the seventies, the entire material aspect disappears with the rise of the Conceptual Art.

Nieuwendijk too, does not sign his work visibly, but that is hardly surprising. Nobody does anymore these days. And perhaps that hits the nail right on the head. For not too long ago, artists started to sign their work again. I refer now to the painters that set the tone in the eighties and nineties of the last century: the *Junge Wilde* from Germany, Italians such as Clemente and Chia, Gruppe Normal, Basquiat or, in the Netherlands, Rob Scholte. They all sign their work. On the front of the painting, that is. This generation of artists does not base itself on the linear trends of the fifties. In contrast, these artists break rigorously with linearity. They "rediscovered" figurative art and tackled it, radically, without concern or practise. They said farewell to political correctness and entered an era of self-centeredness. The artists no longer had to pay tribute to any particular style. Consistency was no longer required, and they could copy, steal and mix styles, as long it led to success and as long as their work had its own unique style and signature. Even the Geometric paintings from the eighties too, like Neo Geo, with artists such as Helmut Federle and Gerwald Rockenschau (Nieuwendijk mentions the latter as being a source of inspiration) have a coarse soft-edge stroke. Hardly linear.

The new generation of artists, to which Guido Nieuwendijk also belongs, does not sign its work. Paint is applied in smooth layers and with hard edges. The decades of the 21st century are not anymore about egos in art. At least, not to the extent they were important at the end of the previous century. The postmodern period is over and that perhaps explains the need for linear clarity. The need for an art without signature that is more rational, formal and reduced. What the postmodern age did add to the current movement is that painters no longer have the illusion that they can change art radically. By contrast, the history of art has become a source of inspiration. This goes for Nieuwendijk as well. His most prominent source is the Pop Art of Roy Lichtenstein. The series *Zigzag* appears to be a direct reference to the brushstrokes of Lichtenstein. But whereas Lichtenstein tries to catch the stroke of the brush in his own comic style, as if he were a brand, Nieuwendijk's approach is reducing and linear. The 'image' is analysed and stripped to its most elementary principles: size, colour and form. And perhaps this is the most current, most novel of the work of Nieuwendijk: not the creation of a personal style is relevant, but the visual research and development. Thereby he may, or perhaps must, look back to the past, in order to be able to get ahead. Not by breaking with the past, but by sublimating and analysing it. And yes, that analysis is of course personal again. Without extensive graphology we can see clearly that, in his reductionist style, Guido Nieuwendijk makes use of a colourful palette and a versatile set of styles.

Jan Maarten Voskuil, December 2012