

# INTRODUCTION

## BLUEPROJECT FOUNDATION

In the spring 2015, *Il Salotto* hosted its first site-specific work, “Un nuage sur mes épaules”, by French artist Lionel Estève, after presenting two monographic exhibitions about renowned artists as Wolfgang Laib and Chen Zhen, and before the exhibition dedicated to Michelangelo Pistoletto. In May 2016, Pieter Vermeersch's piece opened in *Il Salotto* at Blueproject Foundation: a site-specific installation designed and built for this particular space at the foundation.

In this exhibition, Pieter Vermeersch furthers his investigation and reflection about that which he calls “zero degree of images” and primary architecture. He ventures into the potential of paint through colour's analytical abstraction, revealing the argument between image and its zero degree. This argument calls forth the words of art historian Victor Stoichita in his book *The invention of the painting*: “The empty walls of protestant churches are not merely empty walls; they are silent walls. They are paintings that have been whitewashed, deleted, undone, absent paintings. And it is precisely from that ‘zero degree’ that painting recovers all its strength, that it discovers and understands its very own specificity; a self-awareness fully comprehended by 17th century art.” And we can safely say that it has also been fully comprehended by art in the following

centuries up until today, echoing in work such as Vermeersch's, who finds in this zero degree of images the full potential of painting and revitalises it.

Architecture, on the other hand, structures the pictorial space through the construction of specific elements, and serves Vermeersch as a means to question narrative. According to his vision, primary architecture is one dispossessed of any practicality, functionality or use whatsoever, reaching a spatial zero degree as well. Image and space, at their most essential, disable any potential narrative in the artist's conception.

The installation consists of two intersecting walls: one is the support for the painting on both sides, while the other cuts through it. The resulting space allows the viewer to watch from a distance or step inside. This second wall, made of exposed brickwork, with no finishing whatsoever, is the first of its kind to be used by Vermeersch in his work. The painting, in a process already renowned in his oeuvre, stems from a mathematical process of decomposing space for its later pictorial construction. A construction based solely upon colour, whose result is a perfect colour gradation, in this particular case made out of 65 different shades of colour.

The installation acquires a particular

volume through which two primary colours (blue and red) used by the artist expand through space, strengthening the paint gradation on the surface of the walls. The contrast between the painting and the brick wall, both in its visual perception and its execution, reflects the artist's concerns with regards to image and (primary) architecture.

This catalogue means to reflect the exhibition through photographs of the installation, as well as an interview with Vermeersch in which he goes into detail about his artistic practice. This edition has been put together in direct collaboration with Pieter Vermeersch, whom we wish to thank for his collaboration.

# INTERVIEW TO PIETER VERMEERSCH

AURÉLIEN LE GENISSEL

**Aurélien Le Genissel:** My first question, predictably, is: how did you get started, or why did you decide to become an artist? Could you tell us a little about your first years, and how you made it to where you are today?

**Pieter Vermeersch:** Being in the arts is something very natural for me, since my family –my grandfather, my father and his sister and brother, my mother and my three brothers–, they're all in the arts. I'm the third generation. So, growing up, many things were related to art. However, my parents never pushed me or my brothers in that direction, although I was used to drawing since I was a kid. When I was 14, I remember very clearly, I was seated on a bench, at school, with a large park in front of me and suddenly it became very clear to me that my life would be dedicated to art. It was so clear that there was nothing else at that moment. That was my ambition, and my mission was born right at that moment.

**A.L.G.:** Your work directly relates to and reflects on painting as a medium. Was it the most immediate and obvious medium from the beginning? From all the paths that were open to you at that time, was painting the most suitable and natural?

**P.V.:** It's difficult to answer this question. I feel I am a painter, and that

is existential. I mean, it's not a matter of choosing whether to sculpt, draw or film, it's a matter of how I understand myself. I have always felt that I am a painter.

**A.L.G.:** Could you talk about the process that took you to the installation currently on display at Blueproject Foundation? What elements of the work did you take from your previous oeuvre, and what was the line of thought you meant to explore in this particular project?

**P.V.:** It all started seven or eight years ago when I was working with the images I use for the paintings. And then there was a sudden necessity to react to those images. The very basic idea, which remains the same nowadays, but it has been enriched by other elements, was to approach these images as being something from out there, with no trace, no focus, no narrative, a sort of infinity in itself. Something we can't grasp. Far away, erased or lost. Colour, for example, in the way I approach it, lies in that interest. Colour, the way I see it, is something beyond the linguistic frame. I see these images I'm talking about from that perspective, but suddenly I had the necessity to bring the work back to a more concrete reality. It was then that the photographs, which are, at the same time, the source of my paintings, came out. A photograph contains the moment it captures,

but in my photographs there is no such moment because the narrative is gone. You can't trace the origin of the moment, nor the place or subject because the picture has turned into an abstraction, it has been transformed into the idea of time. Working with the photographs and the idea of image were things I needed in order to go further and explore something more physical, more dramatic, in a way. Therefore, when the photographs were painted I literally went into the painted image by scraping a part away, almost an act of destruction. It happens when the image is still in a complete liquid state. When a painting is finished, the oil takes a long time to dry and the painted image remains in a liquid state for hours. It's fascinating to physically go into that state and bring the image back to a reality of here and now. A trace to trace the moment again.

**A.L.G.:** You do the wall paintings in parts (I saw you doing it) but I don't know if you divide your canvas paintings in the same way you do with walls. Do you use different techniques in each case?

**P.V.:** It's another kind of division, it's more like a grid. In the wall paintings I divide the space in strips, but in the painting I use a grid, a grid of different colours.

**A.L.G.:** Would you say that it's the same technique?

**P.V.:** Yes, it's fundamentally the same.

**A.L.G.:** So, to come back to your explanation, do you see the raw brick wall you presented in the foundation (the one that intersects the installation) as a gesture that mirrors the scraping you do in your paintings? As a way to introduce concrete aspects in your more abstract work about colour and space? Or is it something different?

**P.V.:** It's different, but it comes out of that idea. Every medium, and every execution of that idea on a different medium, is actually a different work and has a different focus. The main idea remains the same, but when you face a different medium, there are other possibilities, there is another ontology. The walls have been built for the wall paintings and painting on the wall turns the wall's physicality into a different one. The actual physicality has been taken away by an illusory element. It becomes an ephemeral physicality on top of a specific one, which is counterbalanced by the brick wall, an architectural element. It's very much the search of a relationship between opposite worlds. Given that the work is not a painting, there is certainly space to deal with, actual space, and there is where my interest in architecture has always lied. I call the way I approach architecture in my work "primary architecture".

Primary architecture actually means a shelter, a roof, but I want to focus on architecture in which every sense of utility, practicality, functionality is gone, and all that remains are just the elements that divide, create and alter spaces. This is what happens here in this installation. The brick wall creates space, physical space, in combination with the painting, which also creates a space from an illusory perspective. This is the first brick wall I have ever used in the sense of a real brick wall, rough, exposed, stripped of its functionality. And on the painted wall, the layers are also stripped down. Everything is stripped down to its basics, its most essential, which is then a connection for a discussion between the two [walls]. What is happening here is a discussion, a conversation, a reaction, a merging. I was looking forward to creating this kind of dynamic for a long time and I finally had the chance. It's finally there in the way I envisioned it.

**A.L.G.:** It is obvious that space is a big part of your work, but, in a way, so is time. It has been said about your work that it often comes close to the concept of "space-time". I think that that can be seen in the work on functionality or criticism of classic narrative that you often talk about, as can be seen in your use of colour, of gradation, that "degree zero of an image", or of primary

architecture. What is your perception of time, of the imbrication of space and time in your work?

**P.V.:** Space and time are brought together in my work because I'm very interested in existence itself. I believe that space-time, or time-space, is the fundamental basis for existence. To me, it is all about existence. The mystery of existence. As Wittgenstein said, and I couldn't agree more, is not how the world is, but that it is. That is the mystery.

**A.L.G.:** You used before the notion of the sublime. Immanuel Kant defines the sublime as something that upsets, overwhelms or surpasses the categories of human understanding; and time and space are exactly that. Whenever I discover one of your wall paintings, I am always surprised by that feeling of vastness, a saturation that brings me to experience time and space in and of themselves, in a way. Do you think your work can be related to that philosophical idea of the sublime, that is, a feeling aroused in the viewer of the very idea of existence?

**P.V.:** Somehow the sublime is something inherent to my work, I guess. I don't intend to reach it as such, or use images that deal with this idea, but it just happens. In the way I work and the way the existential is part of it, the sublime can be felt.

**A.L.G.:** On this idea of time, Vladimir Jankélévitch says in his book *L'Irréversible et la Nostalgie*: "Irreversibility always goes hand in hand with temporality, there cannot be an idea of temporality without irreversibility, no idea of irreversibility without temporality." Is that something you're interested in working on, something you believe can be felt in your mural installations?

**P.V.:** Yes, I could say that. The paintings and the wall paintings are so much about time that when you speak about time the irreversible is inevitably there. It is also in the way of painting, in the technique, but it's not something I want to focus on, it's just inherent to the process (the same goes, definitely, for the wall paintings). You can read it both ways, as something that appears or something that disappears. Something that goes into the future or goes backwards. In my current way of working, I see it as appearing. I would compare that to a Polaroid, in which an image emerges, takes form. However here, instead of an image, it's the idea of photography, analogue photography. Although this is not about photography, it's about time, again.

**A.L.G.:** In that sense you materialise the time in space.

**P.V.:** That's it, I try to reach an echo of

what you mentioned.

**A.L.G.:** It's transforming one into the other.

**P.V.:** It's transforming something, one thing into another, as you say. This is the engine, somehow.

**A.L.G.:** In that sense, your work has, in a way, a mathematical dimension, there is something very mechanical and analytical about it. In your creative and productive process, you use a very precise and repetitive technique to achieve results which, paradoxically, tend towards poetry and the undefined...

**P.V.:** It is very analytic indeed. You don't see it in the final result, but it's a very analytic process, quite the opposite of what we finally experience in the finished work. I really like the idea of mathematics becoming something completely mysterious. This very rational approach turning into something else is key to me. Were it done the other way around, not having this rational basis to the process would be too dramatic. I think there is a necessity in my existence to balance both parts.

**A.L.G.:** Is that why you often say "my work is very prosaic"? In that sense, is it important to you to have something

trivial as a starting point, something tied to tangible reality (such as a piece of a photograph in your paintings)? Your work has been often defined as mystic or spiritual, yet you do not like being compared to Rothko or Newman because they are, as you say, a lot more dramatic. I would say that what interests you is to counterbalance the existential, metaphysical abstraction that comes through in your work with something very specific to hold on to. Is that so?

**P.V.:** Exactly. I can give you an example from my early works: I would systematically paint the windows of a space during the entire period of the exhibition. Every day I would wash it off and paint it again, changing the colours. Entering the space was a completely mystical and all-encompassing experience because of the way light reflected differently on the colours on the painted windows. It was an immersive experience. In order to counterbalance that, and I saw this as an element of demystification, I placed a monitor with a video showing the whole process of painting of the exhibition. Every day, a bit of video material was added. So a very ordinary action was present at all times.

**A.L.G.:** This reminds me a lot of that postmodern trend that insists on the loss of a progressive, idealist

discourse, the loss of a certain position of innocence. Artists seem to feel somehow obligated to counterbalance or demystify that narrative or aspiration through various techniques, be it irony, quotes or self-reference, especially in film and literature, to mention one. Listening to you, I feel there is some of that deconstructive desire in your artistic movement.

**P.V.:** It appeared as a necessity. I was not creating another frame or layer. It was just a natural thing. It has to do with the scraping I mentioned earlier.

**A.L.G.:** You have done work with mirrors. What interests you about them as objects, symbols or functions?

**P.V.:** In the beginning I employed mirrors to introduce the idea of image. An image that was self-conscious, an object that sees and reflects. Basically the opposite of what I was mostly creating, which had more of an abstract character.

**A.L.G.:** But you do not always use them, you do so depending on the available space...

**P.V.:** It depends very much on the features of the space. In some cases, the exhibition spaces were doubled, so you have the image of the exhibition being in the exhibition. In some other places it was more an optical illusion,

creating a feeling of a space behind the mirrors. In others, it worked as a scan, as in *Untitled* (M HKA, Antwerp, 2006) in which there was a constant process of scanning. It was a very dynamic and energetic space. I also like to think of it as a time collage. If you stand in the rotonde, because the space is a circle, everything reflected by the double mirrored wall matches the real edges and outlines of the space completely. What is reflected is actually something that is behind you and merges completely with the visual information of the real space. You can see it as a real time photograph captured in that circle. The mirrored wall could also be made to turn on its axes with a gentle push. This created a constant scanning of the space, and therefore, a real time collage in motion.

**A.L.G.:** How did you arrive to your new series of paintings, in which you employ marble? What brought you to this particular material in this process of evolution?

**P.V.:** Again, it's an answer or a way of dealing with the idea of space-time, but in a completely different manner. When I was a very young boy I was interested in geology and history. I wanted to become an archaeologist. The desire to dig in matter (or time) has been there ever since. I have always been fascinated by marble stones,

impressed by how one could trace different periods, events or accidents in their very matter, in the huge scale of history. It's time concentrated in matter. You have it in front of you, you can touch it, you can sense it, look at it, and still you cannot grasp it. Our brain is not able to capture all this complexity of years, all the moments that lie in there.

**A.L.G.:** Is the essence of abstract, distilled time that comes across in your paintings and colour gradation the same you encounter, albeit under a different shape, in marble?

**P.V.:** There is a parallel. In nature you don't see marble, you see a stone. By cutting and polishing, something emerges. Something beautiful. There's a mystery there, a fascination I had to deal with. Then I try to understand the stone, which in my way of working means to merge with the stone, using paint dots, trying to merge with the nature of the stone, its colours, etcetera. But there are also layers that reject these things. I see this process as an act of activation, the painting activates something else. In this case, not the marble stone itself but what lies behind it. There is a reactivation of time through the addition of a layer from today.

**A.L.G.:** Who are your artistic models,

the artists you feel most indebted  
our connected to, even if it's merely  
through opposition or the dialogue you  
can spark with them?

**P.V.:** It's curious, but I'm always  
interested in every artist who does the  
opposite to what I do. I'm more triggered  
by people who are on completely  
different track than people who are  
somehow closer to my practice. There is  
just one exception and that is Gerhard  
Richter. For me Richter is the best  
painter after the Second World War. He  
is essential in art history, someone you  
can't avoid.