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Just love?

Oratie van Paul Ziche

Interview met Charles Avery

Departementshoofden ondervraagd

The Hunt for Meaning

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We can philosophise all we want about aesthetics and philosophy in art; we can try to separate disciplines and draw lines between them, but we can also address the artist himself. Ever wondered what truth might feel like? Where the Noumenon might reside? **Charles Avery** has, and is currently exhibiting with *'The Islanders: An introduction'* in Boijmans, The Hague. Below, a philosophical plunge into the world and philosophy of *The Islanders*.

The Islanders can and has been compared to numerous books and authors (H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Borges, Swift and perhaps even Thomas More and Francis Bacon). Are the comparisons justified, and if so, how? Or are they rather out of order, a novel being something vastly different from visual art, and if so, in what way does your work differ from the dystopias, utopias and fictional worlds of those novels?

I think visual art's unique advantage is the possibility to create a non-linear body of work, in a way that is very hard for a novel, or a film to achieve. What *The Islanders* project amounts to is a set of objects, drawings, texts, which have a pure meaning in relationship to one another (as well as the new meanings they attract when they leave the studio and go out into the world) amongst which the viewer/perceiver exists.

Although many of these writers could be cited as inspiring, their output was very different. I think the appearance of influence is more to do with their concerns being similar, and those are fairly timeless concerns, that have been and always will be preoccupations of humanity.

And finally, my work is very different in the way that it is brought about. Rather than creating an opus which I will then reveal to the public, it reveals itself incrementally as I produce it, and I am still not clear where the project is going, or what it will amount to. It will not have an ending, either within the fiction, or practically speaking, because it is not linear.

A novel I did take great inspiration from is Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

The Islanders live in a very different yet similar world to ours. Take, for instance, the stuffed 'Ridable' with the head of a dog, body of a llama and an ostrich's legs. We can recognise this animal, in a way (albeit not 'as such' in our world). In that sense, your art is still far more representational than, say, surrealism. Do you consider yourself more 'classical' in that sense?

I've never worried too much about my position within the history and language of art, or rather I've worried to such an extent that I have sought to create my own language and state to devolve myself - achieve some kind of independence - from that story.

I wanted the Ridable to look plausible, I don't want the tone of the project to be surreal, or 'weird'. For me the Ridable is no stranger than any creature that might show up in a new antipodes.

In *The Eternal Forest* a mythical beast is said to reside, called the Noumenon. According to Kant, the

noumenon or thing-in-itself cannot—in principle—be known to us. Yet it resides in the forest. Can we extrapolate any philosophical theory (idealism, perhaps) from

"It is the subject who is the vital agent. That is what the hunter represents: the idea of free will."

this ostensible paradox?

As you say the Noumenon is only *said* to be in the forest. Nobody has ever been into the forest and escaped to tell the tale. The forest is how the Islanders account for an unknown territory beyond the latitude known as Descartes' axiom (akin to the arctic circle on the terrestrial sphere), the line which defines the limit of the known world. So nobody has ever seen the forest, let alone the Noumenon – it is an entirely inferred entity. There are subjective accounts from individuals who claim to have transcended Descartes' axiom, and one character who claims to have fought the Noumenon – accounts which are valued according to their style and the conviction with which they are told – but they are not empirically verified or verifiable.

The idea of the Noumenon, and the eternally hopeless yet eternally hopeful hunters who pursue it, is a pretty blunt metaphor for the belief in an ultimate truth (even if we feel it cannot be attained). As such it is the adversary of will.

The inhabitants struggle with similar problems and philosophical issues as ‘we’ do. Can—or more importantly should—the Island be interpreted as a satire or social critique? In other words, is the result of what visitors and critics ‘read’ from your exhibition intentional?

What I am attempting to do is to create a structure, of which there are many possible interpretations, and that this will be obscured by the texture of the Island. It is nevertheless important that this structure has enough integrity that it compels the viewer to interpret and is not too loose that the terms of it just float apart into the world to be lost in their arcane significance forever.

A lot is intentional but various audiences have also made me aware of metaphorical value that I feel was not deliberate. There is some satire but I wouldn't want the project as a whole to be regarded as satirical.

It is important that it is perceived as a meaning thing, as being about meaning, but it is not necessarily desirable for it to be known what particular elements signify. By meaning, I mean function, intention, application, significance. An artwork is an object brought about with the specific function of meaning, having no other function. But the term *artwork* is not to be confused with the term *art*. *Art* is not the totality of *Artworks*, but a quality of *artness* which inheres in all objects to a lesser or greater degree. That is my definition for the term *art* (which is in itself enigmatic): it *means* it means; i.e. the meaning of which is to *mean*.

As far as novels are concerned, critics feverishly compare the main protagonist with the author. So let me make a similar but different move. To what extent do we not compare the protagonist to Charles Avery (an alter ego etc.), but rather understand the protagonist as being you; reporting from the island, from (your) imagination? It seems, after all, that there is no other medium than yourself, shaping the world and reporting from it at the same time. Far-fetched?

Not at all far-fetched, but my experience has been that people assume the protagonist to represent me. Having arrived on the Island, believing himself to be its discoverer, this character is soon disabused of his conceit when he meets a young lady on the shore. He states that ‘*Through a series of misunderstandings I came to believe that she was called Miss Miss, and she, that I was named Only Mcphew.*’ Thus we never find out the identity of the two main characters. I want to maintain this ambiguity, such that these two prota-

gonists may represent every man and woman (interchangeably), including myself.

I toyed with the idea of not disclosing the sex of the hunter, but that proved practically impossible, which is why I invented the character of Miss Miss, to act as his anima, and to be everything that he is not. The pair have an eternally unrequited love – a rather one-sided affair, for the hunter is devoted to her, and she demonstrates not the slightest interest in him, or even an awareness of sex.

It is the viewer or perceiver who is the subjective element, giving all the terms of this project form/meaning. It is the subject who is the vital agent. That is what the hunter represents: the idea of free will. One who simultaneously invents and discovers the Island.

“The truth is like a mysterious leviathan
which surfaces very rarely.”

What is the difference between art and philosophy?

The idea that visual art is a totality of objects, and literature/philosophy are concepts is nonsense. They are all ideas that we perceive, and all of these ideas are trafficked from one mind to another by the physical world. There is no concept of the number 2 independent of all the inscriptions or utterances of it. No two 2s are the same. A word has a shape. I don't think the term ‘visual-art’ is that helpful when attempting a thorough definition.

I think artists and philosophers – in their most exalted form – are those people who are not satisfied with the given world view, and seek their own understanding, so the connection is the idea of truth. Perhaps we could say they are travelling to the same destination, but by circuitously diverse routes. But there is no absolute distinction, as with all categories, they crumble when one is attempting a thorough definition.

Personally speaking I am an artist because I enjoy the texture of the truth, of the ideas that pertain to it, but I have neither the intellect nor the inclination to try and prove anything. Still, I am no nearer answering your question, so let me end on the three basic characteristics which I feel defines the artist/philosopher:

1. The idea the artist has of his/herself that they act upon the world, and that this action is essential.
2. The Quixotic determination that motivates them, the subjective conviction as to the value of their activity.
3. Professionalism: the need to produce physical evidence of their mental journey, to sell, in order to fund the next, more intrepid adventure to the subjective realm.

How do you deal with the idea of science within the project, how does art relate to science?

On the scale of how people deal with the idea of truth, there are two polarities which are exemplified by the two states of this fictional world. There are the Trianglelanders who are prone to analysis, and the Islanders, who are prone to logical inference, based on axioms derived from revelation.

Both disciplines seem to hold as sacrosanct the idea of truth, of trying to understand the world. But whereas the Trianglelander seeks to possess the truth, cage it – think of it as an animal again! – perhaps the Islander has a more sympathetic, ecological relationship with it, kind of like a safari. Or let's put it this way: the truth is like a mysterious leviathan which surfaces very rarely. When it does so you can get in the sea with it, and swim alongside it, touch its rough skin, feel it, but at some point the beast will dive, and all you can do is watch it disappear into the depths and cherish the moment you had with it.

Where is the project of The Islanders going from here on?

The next stage of the project is to focus on the town of Onomatopoeia. The town is the gateway to

the dark, subjective, un navigable interior of the Island. That wilderness it kept at bay by a wall that encircles the town. It is a citadel of objectivity. In practical terms, this amounts to a very detailed architectural rendition; from its topography, to planning, to studies of individual buildings, in some cases where Island parables take place inside a building the interiors will also be described in some detail. This will take the form of computer models, as well as some real models of key edifices. It amounts to creating a 'set' where all the action will take place. The computer model of the whole of Onomatopoeia will never be revealed, but remain a private resource, but it will be evinced through the drawings I make. The model will ensure a spatial integrity or consistency to the town, which is essential if it to represent the idea of objectivity.

Beyond this there are various other themes which I am quietly pursuing. As for the long term form of the project, that is vague!

Van 28 februari tot 7 juni 2009 is de expositie 'The Islanders: An introduction' te zien, te lezen en te onderzoeken in het Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Den Haag. Tip: op woensdag is het museum gratis toegankelijk.



Ridable, 2008, 156cm x 51cm x 150cm, Taxidermy, Image courtesy of Charles Avery & J.K.Loker