

HAN SCHUIL on AB VAN HANEGEM

## Möbius, Van Hanegem, Frith

Amsterdam, 1987: a studio in the Rijks Academy for the Visual Arts. A knock on the door is answered abruptly with a coarse, "Come in," as if to say. "Who's there anyway?" And a young man, undeniably formed by his origins in the Zeeland province, with a suspicious but questioning expression and a head full of Rasta hair, meets the caller. The visitor, who just happens to be a contemporary who attended *De Ateliers 63*, the bastion of the modernistic creed, senses reproach for intruding upon privileged domain. Van Hanegem has clearly been seized, if not infected, by the postmodern virus. Following a tedious back and forth, the artist reveals his leanings towards Rob Scholte. Van Hanegem himself paints particularly well-executed 'pastiche' of fourteenth and fifteenth-century artwork, for example Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Piero della Francesca. He combines these paintings based on frescoes with works evoking an association with modernism, especially where he has added geometric elements: postmodernism in action.

Is this a passing trend signifying a deconstructive, eclectic end of the artist's artist? Or might it be the hint of a veiled but profound love for the art of painting at that particular moment in time, and above all for the art of painting itself from the trecento and quattrocento? Look at it this way: a young artist is captured by the new postmodern dogmas but still in his heart of hearts mesmerized by painting and sculpture that goes beyond the ironic commentary on centuries of art-making.

Though not always effortless, many discussions follow. The Rasta-man from Zeeland is rather taciturn and reluctant to open up. Oddly enough, he does not like reggae music or Bob Marley. He has a penchant for tight clean experimental music along the lines of Zappa, Captain Beefheart and Frith. Mainstream is an abomination. He says music is vital for him and that he cannot do without it. His discussion partner — neither modernist nor postmodernist — provides contrasting standpoints making for animated debate. This is underscored by the belief that something extraordinary is at hand.

Amsterdam, 1995: Van Hanegem's own studio. A radical transformation has taken place. The dreds are gone as are the direct references to existing art. Gone too are trecento and quattrocento. Postmodernism as a firm conviction is no longer discernible. He stands on the shoulders of art history, i.e. the art history that he understands through and through. His former work has been replaced by constructions from architectonic forms and frameworks with dizzying effect heavily leaning on isometric perspective and a tangle of snaking tubes, winding brushstrokes with sporadic organic explosions trigger thoughts of abstract expressionism. Abstract expressionism is an old love, particularly Willem de Kooning. Van Hanegem approaches certain colors that appear in Kooning's work, *The Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*.

Visual deception, evoking thoughts of Escher, is unquestionably purposeful. This is Van Hanegem's mode of work and what he is known for. But Van Hanegem is different than Escher, harder and not as anecdotal. You cannot look away from a swiftly passing tennis ball in an otherwise nearly abstract painting; a work that could be perceived as narrative such as the tennis ball is minimal and restrained. This is the beginning of Van Hanegem's universe and the foundation of his reputation, and the point where it becomes tangible, highly mathematical, constructed, accurate, and approaching total perfection. Ab van Hanegem is related to Willem van Hanegem, the soccer player world-renowned for his passes and curved kicks executed with powerful accuracy. It is in the DNA.

Berlin 2003: Van Hanegem's studio. Amsterdam has been left behind for half of his time; he currently spends the other half in Berlin where he rents a story with a studio. As individualistic as he is, he settles where creativity flourishes. His work is primarily without identifiable figures, some would call them abstract. Topology, the branch of mathematics dealing with traits of figures that remain unchanged despite natural deformations, as well as the Mobius strip (a topological phenomenon) are prominent in his work: blob-like forms, some simple and flat while others are extremely complex and three dimensional, making the eye uncertain of where to focus, as well as many hard-colored forms contrasting with the gentle color transition. The forms' plasticity is given an illusory sense of radiation. He has become the master of the spray gun. Escher too made a famous Mobius strip — the piece with the ants — titled 'Möbiusband II.' Van Hanegem first became familiar with this work as a teenager and knows it well. Still, Van Hanegem's work is very different. As mentioned earlier, it is most precise and well carried-out but harder, devoid of anecdote, and without 'playfulness.'

Andratx, Mallorca, 2005: Van Hanegem's studio in Centro Cultural Andratx. After a long talk about his intricate and magical constructions, and a deep gulp from his beer bottle, Van Hanegem casually remarks, "I actually would have liked to have first studied mathematics or architecture."

Berlin, 2019: Van Hanegem's studio. In the interim, Van Hanegem has lived permanently in Berlin but often goes back to visit Vlissingen, the town where he was born and raised. Around 2010, Van Hanegem came in contact with the work of K.O. Götz by chance. Götz was the old master of informal painting; he passed away in 2017 at the age of one hundred and three (Who could ever claim that art is detrimental to health?). Van Hanegem was gripped by recognition. In Van Hanegem words, "I had always had great enthusiasm for the language of abstract expressionists but Götz's handwriting was immediately familiar to me. He saw something in Götz that had the power to unite his fascination with mathematics and topology. Van Hanegem goes on to say, "In this gestural painting there is always room to correct the 'gestures' subsequently and fully implant them in my own architectonic model. The concept of 'subsequent correction' calls for some clarification: Van Hanegem is radical enough to use tiny brushes to correct wildly applied excess paint, as it were, to remodel and replastify on a micro-level. Is it the urge for perfection within the formal sense or the absolute resolve to bend the image to his will? Of course it is the latter.

The studio is full of paintings, some completed and others unfinished. The distinctive geometric and architectonic models of the past are overgrown, heavily overgrown or overrun with wild brushstrokes, calling on associations of outbursts of paint, approaching ruins in a jungle or forest. The traces of a structure, the framework of an image, are still clearly visible. The function of the brushstrokes is just as important; they have merged together. It could be seen as a synthesis, a new totality, where the brushstrokes – even paradoxically – stand as an edifice; this is not a sloppy accident while applying paint. The brushstrokes have become architecture themselves alongside, on top of, and within the geometric framework. In Van Hanegem's current work, architecture and geometric models feel at home in the chaos, and the chaos, in turn, feels at home in its architecture and geometry.

Amsterdam, 2020: Eenwerk, where Van Hanegem's 'Dizziness as Illusion' is presented. What we see is the emergence of a total synthesis of his fascination for mathematics, architecture, and the expressive informality.

With his recent work Van Hanegem has reached a momentary pinnacle of his ability.

Han Schuil, Amsterdam 2020