

The City Dreams

Jeroen Boomgaard

The city writes itself on its walls and in its streets. But that writing is never completed. The book never ends and contains many blank or torn pages.

Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (1970)

Like an immense brain, the city directs our daily lives. Information, people, commodities – they move like stimuli and signals along the neural pathways of the streets to the nodes of storage and exchange. The city is the overarching structure that guides and accompanies our comings and goings. This is true in general of all cities and urban agglomerations, but each city, metropolis or megalopolis is different in its specific accumulation of zones, districts, possibilities, events, contacts and failures. Every urban district is different through the way in which life is made possible or impossible there. The way in which the city is experienced eludes the attempts to give it an unambiguous image or logo. Every effort at city branding eventually runs aground on the use that the city itself imposes.

It is precisely this aspect of the city that is given a voice in a number of works by Giny Vos. It happens very literally in her first large work for the public domain. The words ‘work to do’ that appeared on three high-rise office blocks in the Marconiplein in Rotterdam on the night of 21 to 22 December 1985 transmitted the frank message that this city conveys to its residents. The people of Rotterdam have for a long time had a reputation for being hard workers, but this image of the city had never been made so directly visible before. More important than the credo of her native city that Vos shows here, however, is the statement that she makes with it about the role of art in the public domain. The question of who speaks and who is addressed plays a role in the background to every debate on works of art in public space. Do the artists bring their images out into the open in the hope of reaching a public, or is it the patrons who use the work of art to give vent to their ideas about cultural education, local identity, social cohesion or gentrification? Or, in an

attempt to reverse or to disguise the one-way traffic, is it the voice of the residents themselves that is heard this time? The city speaks through Vos – the city not as an administration or organisation, nor as a residents' association or project developer, but as the intersection of built environment and everyday use. This is the city as practice, as event, historically determined and orientated towards the future, imperfect and unexpected.

The voice of the city is raised in another work from twenty years later. *Call/ The Painted Chat* (2006) shows even more clearly how the urban dimension makes itself known. When night falls, big words appear on the Westpoort municipal depot almost on the outskirts of the city. The words are taken from the jargon of the park attendants, road menders and salt spreaders who are based there, but these references to the practice that is concealed in the building alternate with words that seem to allude to a much more fairytale reality. A strange, poetic voice sings its texts in the night, words that are an expression of the surroundings as they are actually experienced there, but that also refer to everything that may have taken place or might ever take place there. It is the city that announces its existence here and at the same time fantasises about the future and about everything it has to offer to this marginal terrain. But if you keep on looking, you see that the words do not form a sentence, they react exclusively to one another. The building makes associations with the sounds it produces, it allows itself to be led from one untranslatable word to the next ('mistroost', 'moerstaaf', 'mode moer', 'lamoer'), from down-to-earth to enchanting and from descriptive to impossible. Here the city seems to be talking to itself, dreaming.

In 1997 Vos made an installation entitled *The Things That Dreams Are Made Of*. A wooden cupboard housed solidified shadows, dark figures without clear form or meaning, separated by individual blocks of LED lights on which words appeared – constantly changing, as though someone is desperately attempting to give the indeterminate figures a name. It is a work that aptly conveys the dream process: the sometimes sinister character of the shadows in our heads and the dream activity that tries to arrange and exorcise them. With this explicit dream and the impossibility of grasping it, Vos offers insight into a theme that also plays a major part in her work for the public domain. This can

be seen clearly in *Second Thought*, that she made in Groningen in 2008. An inverted transparent dome hangs from the ceiling of a bike shed and reflects, upside down, the contours of a building in lines of light. The building glows and fades, and then a bat-like shadow suddenly seems to be hanging threateningly over the building. Because from time to time the snow dome is dotted with cheery flurries of flakes of light, the first reading of the work is light-hearted. It is only on closer inspection that it reveals its more dreamy and sinister aspect. The building encapsulated in the snow dome is the nineteenth-century station that is partly hidden from sight by the new bike shed and that in its restored state has lost much of its previous function. Perhaps the prospect of a future as a snow dome is the greatest desire and at the same time the greatest fear of every building. And that seems to be the fate of the old station too. But the building also dreams of the shadow that it once cast over the city and about the power that it may perhaps have again in the future.

What is a personal dream of the artist in *The Things That Dreams Are Made Of* proves here to be a dream that is dreamt at the level of the city. And in retrospective, that is a characteristic of all of Vos' earlier works in the public domain. *Work to Do* is less of an exhortation than an uneasy thought that the city dreamily mumbles to itself, like the building in Westpoort that talks in its sleep. These dreams, like ours, always have a bright and a dark side, as can also be seen in the work that can be regarded as Vos' ultimate dream: *Castle for Mike* (1997). This work has a hallucinatory character, but was never more than a dream as it turned out to be impossible. All the same, it shows how Vos gets to the very bottom of a city. New York has here become not only a city of lights that outshines Paris, but also a city that dreams about a heroic past it has never known and whose nightmares about a closed fortress were to become reality a few years later.

The ambiguous character of the dream is the characteristic of the work of Giny Vos. It is accommodating and aloof, accessible and unfathomable. That is why it fits perfectly into the urban space, or rather, into the urban dynamics that is always marked by the paradox of proximity and anonymity. It is a paradox that you cannot pinpoint generally, but that presents itself in a different guise

on every differentiated spot in the urban environment. For instance, *The Illuminated Room* (2007) shows the ambiguous character of the Limos site in Nijmegen. This former barracks has been opened up by the Nijmegen local authority for housing and, as is usually the case in urban renewal in the Netherlands in the last few years, has been filled mainly by urban villas in a secure, park-like setting. *The Illuminated Room* consists of a remnant of the officers' quarters that was later used for student accommodation. This remnant is a block of two storeys in which, when it is dark, a simple interior with a table and a chair is illuminated. What was formerly a closed barracks seems to have become less forbidding, exterior and interior blend in this typically Dutch view of an interior at night when the curtains are never drawn. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the out of plumb interior is actually cold and uninviting, the building itself is open on all sides and offers no shelter. *The Illuminated Room* is as hospitable as the residents, for whom the installation of a work of art aroused fears that it would become a meeting place for juvenile delinquents.

Time and again the seemingly friendly works of Vos turn out to contain a sting in the tail. *Miracle in between*, made in 2009 for an exhibition in the public domain in Delhi, shows another dream image: a boat of light floats in a forest of bamboo stakes. It presents a situation of transition, of in between, in every respect: it is situated on Ramlila Ground, a strip between old and new Delhi, and combines a traditional building material with the latest technology. In that sense it shares the Indian optimism about a transition to a brighter future. But the boat is also trapped in the bamboo grid, thereby raising the question of the confinement of the city in innumerable gated communities. Their ambivalent character makes it difficult to place works like these. They offer a view of hidden aspects of the city, but the role that they play for the public domain is not immediately clear. To understand it better, we should take a closer look at how these dream images are put together and what effect they have on the context in which they find themselves.

In 2008 a new station forecourt was created in Apeldoorn that is dominated by a 100-metre long glass wall for which Vos made *Travelling Sand*. By means of more than a million LED lights placed behind a wall of etched glass, she

creates a continually changing and shifting sand landscape, desert images in the heart of the city. This work too is reminiscent of a dream: Apeldoorn reflects on its past, dug up from the surrounding sandy wilderness of the Veluwe, but perhaps the city is also nostalgic for the time when it had no metropolitan ambitions, or fears the moment when it will be buried by the sand again. At any rate, a calming image confers character, without defining its meaning, on precisely that spot that is full of life and where the metropolitan dynamism is expressed in the flows of travellers and cyclists that interweave and bump into one another. This reluctance to impose meaning is typical of the way in which Vos' work allows the city to speak with its own voice. In each case her work of art does not add any extra information, does not make any explicit statement, and clothes the urban complexity and ambiguity in a clarity that conceals nothing. And although the work is often part of drastic interventions in the urban fabric, it resists the attempts to design public space. With its dreamy character, it puts up an opposition to the interventions that are intended to give the indeterminate areas of the city a clear function by means of a design aimed at specific target groups. Vos allows the public domain to become the space that the city leaves open again, a space whose significance cannot be reduced to a clearly defined use, but where the production of meaning is possible because its use has not been pinned down. The city dreams. And every attempt to wake it up is doomed to failure. No matter how precise the urban planners' interventions may be, nor how cleverly the politics of the space tries to iron out the folds, the complexity of the city ensures that there will always be new wrinkles and obstacles. The city shows its true face especially at night. That is when the alleys, streets and squares are filled with longing and unfulfilled desires, when fear creeps along the walls, when the city is content with all its cares. And in the dark the works of Giny Vos light up.

Dancing Visions of Light

Sandra Smets

'High-tech offices, comfortable homes, luxury and cultural facilities. Every means of transport outside the front door.' That is the start of the blurb for the Amsterdam South Axis, a zone where 1 million m² of extra office space will be built in the next few years to accommodate the promised luxury. The tower blocks already shine a welcome to you from the motorway.

The commercial district is deserted on an ordinary Tuesday morning in early March. It is around ten o'clock and the personnel are already sitting in their offices with high windows and design furniture. The South Axis is an important location for financial institutions in Amsterdam. Art is here an accessory to enhance the image of the financial centre. Colourful paintings hang in the reception areas, design indicates the status and taste of a corporation. Art and the world of commerce work together to radiate creativity, allure and prestige. Not many artists manage to break into this world of money and power structures, but it is possible.

Among the prestigious high-rise buildings is a purely functional office building of the KPN telecommunications company. Few windows, tight security, no nonsense. Yet it is here that a discussion is taking place this Tuesday morning on what is to be a work of art that sets the tone for the district. Seven people are sitting around a table in a conference room on the third floor: a representative of KPN, two from the South Axis Virtual Museum, the supplier of LED lights Rena Electronica, the architect Christof Schwencke, and the artist in question, Giny Vos. She designed *White Noise*, a complex light installation for the new telecommunications mast under construction outside next to the office block. Thousands of LED lamps will create a universe of stars between the transmission and receiver dishes to be attached to the staggered platforms of the tower. Technical specifications and building drawings are put on the table, a secretary joins the group to record the

minutes. ‘The “real” world’, as Vos was later to describe the meeting, a joke with a serious undertone.

The people sitting around the conference table have not seen one another for a couple of months and time is running out: *White Noise* must hurry up because the tower has been sold. It will be transferred in the summer to Alticom, another telecommunications company. So the matters to be discussed turn out to be more than what is indicated on the agenda: the tryout of the metal fencing which will presently have to hold the work of art in place.

The KPN project leader sums up the stages. ‘You can already see some scaffolding, Bolidt is being smeared onto the tower and then we shall see what the effect is. The dishes are transferred from the old to the new tower, plus a crane, permits, painting. At the earliest, we will be finished in July just in time before the builders’ holiday.’ He talks about the necessary manpower and companies involved. This is clearly a project costing millions. And time is money. ‘But does that deadline also apply to the work of art?’, asks the representative of the Virtual Museum – it is this art foundation, not the KPN, that has commissioned *White Noise*. ‘Certainly’, the KPN representative replies, ‘in the summer everything is closed, and we can’t postpone it to the long term.’

Then Vos, who has been listening motionless, breaks into the discussion. ‘Have you included the light test in the planning?’, she asks. ‘We have to carefully test whether the work of art is feasible with the LEDs that we have in mind.’ The architect nods approval. ‘We mustn’t pay our dues in the art project.’ He and Vos believe in one another’s designs: his elegant tower and her twinkling starry sky, which will eventually be united. Although they each have their own design to defend – he does not want the fences to deflect too much attention from his design, and she wants as much space as possible for her work of art. ‘These complex processes are tough and dangerous’, the architect continues. ‘But once you have the matter in your grasp, then you really have a firm hold on it.’ It sounds as though he is not just talking about the work of art. Vos joins in with a list of items that need to be included in the planning – tests, type of LEDs, prototypes. Calmly she winds up her argument: ‘It will be ready by the end of the year.’

A muttering starts and criticisms that had been kept close to the chest are now brought out into the open. KPN feels unable to go along with that planning. Vos objects that she has not yet seen a contract or payment in spite of having to pay assistants and suppliers. The architect grows irritated because there are no good drawings on the table. The Virtual Museum as intermediary is fed up with all the complications that are being raised. Still, the KPN representative remains calm. For him this work of art costing € 200,000 is a minor matter. 'Any more for coffee?', he asks and walks off to the canteen.

In the meantime Vos explains the value of the light test. 'It must be a beautiful starry sky at close quarters, but you must also be able to make out individual stars, not just one big mass of light, from a kilometre away. Testing means that we view it from different points in Amsterdam – close up, a kilometre and a half away. The last test didn't have the twinkling of the universe that I had in mind.' The representative of the Virtual Museum adds: 'It's like an Impressionist painting, dots from close up, flowers from a distance.'

The discussion moves to astronomy. The skies above Tunisia are different from the Dutch ones – has Vos given that thought? And whether it comes through those stories or because everyone has made their demands known, the tense atmosphere gives way to harmonious cooperation. Schedules are made more specific, the height and mesh of the fences are discussed, details about the painting and the cranes are raised for discussion. The supplier calculates how much time is needed for the LED lights including light tests, galvanising, system cupboards, installations and adjustments. KPN talks about additional electro-technical and mechanical engineering demands. Vos and the architect sketch every stage. Vos takes the comments by KPN and Rena into account in her planning. That yields a further eighteen extra stages for the software, 3D visualisation, manufacture frames, transport, as well as the interim tryouts and evaluations. In the end the meeting comes to a successful conclusion: the planning is settled, everyone wants this work of art, the next meeting will discuss copyright and maintenance contracts, and a new tryout in three weeks' time. There is no longer any mention of completion before the start of the builders' holiday.

The Magic of the Milky Way

It all began more than a year earlier. The Virtual Museum Foundation, which was set up to put the glossy South Axis on the cultural map, asked a few well-known artists to come up with a proposal for the KPN telecommunications mast. This new mast towers above its surroundings and has everything needed to become an icon of the city. Vos' proposal had to compete with those of three other artists. Smartly dressed and armed with PowerPoint, she plays the role of experienced participant in board meetings with verve – there is always something of a performance artist in the way she acts.

White Noise came out on top: a virtual, multi-coloured, sparkling star-studded sky in which stars fall and comets race past. Vos had conversations with astronomers and immersed herself in their discipline, but in the last resort it is her choreography that determines which stars will change where and at what tempo. All the magic of the Milky Way and astronomy is sublimated in this work of art. What look like abstract letters and numbers – verification codes from the digital world – appear amid the celestial bodies and refer to the function of the mast as a communication tower.

Vos' work has the glamour that is associated with money. All the same, *White Noise* seems to draw the Icarus moral: the hubris of big money that wants to conquer the world and the whole universe. Two years earlier Vos had made the door of a safe for Shell that opens slightly every now and then to transmit the energy from which the company makes its money – solar energy, which actually belongs to us all. Clients like Shell or KPN need Vos for their showpiece, vice versa Vos uses them to make her dreams come true and to deliver implicit commentary.

Business as Usual

The first test of the lights is set for three weeks after the meeting. By now it is the end of March. Vos spends the morning in her studio in Het Veem in Amsterdam, a cluster of artists and cultural entrepreneurs beside the River IJ. Het Veem is surrounded by ambitious building projects: prestigious new apartment blocks with expensive materials, yuppie flats and well restored industrial heritage with a panoramic view over the water give the area a hip,

upmarket character. There are no solitary attic artists here, just cultural entrepreneurs, architects, designers, web designers.

The large studio of Vos is more like that of an architect than an artist's studio. A desk with a computer takes care of administration and animations, which assistants make for her. A large worktable in the middle is intended for several people to sit around it, although she ensures that she can often work there quietly without being surrounded by other people. The bookshelves contain books on art, astronomy and the exact sciences. Photographs of squares, church domes and starbursts are pinned to a bulletin board. They indicate the aesthetics that Vos aims for: grandeur, with allusions to the classical beauties of the past, to the reality of today, and to a high-tech future fantasy.

There are frames and models of new, dreamed and implemented works of art in the cupboards. One of these miniature buildings is a cardboard tower with staggered platforms, mini-dishes and photographs of what is clearly a twinkling starry sky. Vos counts the areas on the platforms again just to be sure – yes, that's right. More than eighty fences will be inserted between the railings and the floors that she is to fill with moving stars. 'Everyone keeps talking about these fences, but the final work of art still hasn't been designed yet.' And it's a 'scary' work of art too, she confesses. 'I've never had that feeling with other works before, but this time I don't know whether it will turn out like what I have in my head. That's because the work must look good and detailed from close by, but must also present an interesting aspect from a distance. It must not become a single mass of light. A lot will depend on the tests.' If *White Noise* goes completely wrong, it will cost Vos thousands. She has already invested a lot of time and money in this project with all the preparations.

For the time being the day is one of business as usual: e-mail, telephone, administration, assistants and various art projects claim her attention. Vos always works on several commissions at the same time with a duration of a couple of years per project. At the moment this means a sketch design for the Ministry of Defence, two for local authorities, a monograph, a presentation in Oregon, a big job for the RAI, and a temporary work of art beside the A1 motorway in Deventer. There is also an assignment for a transformer kiosk

running in Purmerend. ‘Saying yes or no to an assignment is above all connected with the question: Can I do anything with it? Or do I have to solve a spatial problem? In the latter case I have to take good care that I can still make a sufficiently autonomous work.’

Vos walks to the cupboard and picks up a plastic sheet with squares on it: this is a working model for Deventer. The Arts Lab there asked six artists to design a motorway work of art to help to brand the A1 motorway. Vos devised a transparent screen of ten by sixteen metres on which a future panorama in large pixels emerges from the present landscape. The Netherlands is changing fast and if you are concerned with images in the public space, you have at least to be aware of this conjuncture. She looks pensively at the plastic. ‘The nice thing about the temporary assignments is that you are given room to experiment. Then you can test out new ideas in practice.’

An assistant has done material research so that Vos can concentrate on what the image must communicate: landscape, future, the out of focus gaze, a game with advertising and billboards. Questions about wind resistance or the edges of the pixels will come later, although she still has to find a supplier who is prepared to tackle such an extremely large transparent screen. ‘Most companies are simply a bit anxious. They were more accommodating during the previous recession. Works of art like these are always risky: both they and I have to try out new techniques. Only enthusiasts really go for it.’

Another model on her worktable is the *Crystal Palace*, that is now being assembled by a team. It is a three-dimensional light vision for the new RAI building designed by Benthem Crouwel. On the table it is a wobbly curtain of snakes (in reality tubes with small lamps) next to a model made of skewers with a small white sphere above each one (in reality bamboo sticks with glow lamps that form a boat). This boat is the model for another work, *Miracle in between*, that featured at an international exhibition in Delhi, India, last year. *Crystal Palace* is an advanced sequel. It will be a three-dimensional grid of aluminium tubes with LED lamps in them, which will form different, changing patterns of light, creating not just a boat, but all kinds of looming shapes. *Crystal Palace* went fairly smoothly – there was a brief hitch when it turned out that the building was also going to be clad with LEDs on the outside. ‘In

that case I would have withdrawn my work', Vos says, 'because it would have looked like a follow-up to the cladding already in place. Every major art commission is a complex process in which you have to see whether the work remains intact if the conditions change. Benches that are placed in front of a wall. Walls that are lowered.' The LED lights on the outside did not go ahead. 'The credit crisis will have played a role. I wasn't sure of my own situation either until the money was on my account.'

In the afternoon Vos drives her red sports car to the team working on *Crystal Palace*. We travel from the studio complex to a zone full of industrial buildings where functionality prevails over beauty. Behind this zone lies Sloterdijk, where four years ago Vos tackled one of these grey boxes of bricks with a magisterial big work of art, *Call/The Painted Chat*. She had filled the side wall of the municipal depot with thousands of LED lamps which kept changing to form poetic words – 'cowboyland, 'snoeikunst' [the art of pruning], 'hoe-hoe' [how on earth, or the sound of an owl] – in letters metres tall. In the daytime the work is invisible and *Call/The Painted Chat* is nothing but a very ordinary grey wall. Other of Vos' light works are not always visible either. 'The nice thing about light is that it can be switched off. That's why it is so well suited to the elusive that I want to visualise. When the light is turned off, the whole work of art is gone.'

The car leaves Sloterdijk behind. In the countryside a little further on is the Rijk van de Keizer [Empire of the Emperor], a workplace for creative entrepreneurs. It looks like a free state. In the space between the three brick sheds there are sacks of artificial fertiliser and rubble amid a proliferation of weeds. The team are sitting on a tree stump in the sun rolling cigarettes beside an enormous polyester skull of a mammoth.

Chris Heijens, who forms the technical company Yens & Yens together with Andries de Marez Oyens, is in charge of the team. 'Come inside', he says, 'we've made an assembly line. Just like Ford.' An extremely precisely designed workbench, custom-made for *Crystal Palace*, stands in the working area. The positions of the workers, work trays, cables and power points have been calculated exactly to the millimetre. 'The stuff is too fragile and too expensive to make mistakes.' Dozens of parts are carefully picked up with tweezers,

assembled and soldered: cables, rings, plastic coverings, caps, wires, and of course the LED lamps themselves. Silver stickers are attached to them. It's not that you will be able to see the underlying copper colour once the whole thing is hanging, but you never know. There is no room for taking risks here.

Heijens has spent weeks combing the country and abroad for every ring and screw, because the quality has to be perfect as well as fitting within the budget. 'My work always looks natural', Vos says, 'it doesn't look complicated. And it takes a lot of effort to make it look so effortless.'

In this case that means ten weeks of work for six pairs of hands, who have been individually trained by Heijens after a period of trial and error. With his team of musicians and artists who can earn a bit on the side in this way, he has been a partner with Vos for years, but he is not the only producer with whom she works. They briefly run through the maintenance of the projects; everything is going smoothly, at least as far as is within their control. 'We recently had an error message, which is very rare', Heijens grins. 'We pulled out the plug and put it back in. Everything worked again.'

In the meantime he has walked outside. 'Look', he says with pride, 'I've invented an M-folder. It suddenly came to me in the weekend.' It is a strange-looking foam rubber thing that saves his team from having to unroll dozens of metres of electric wire by hand to fit it into the tubes. 'We are an invention richer after each joint project with Giny.' Vos nods. She once applied for a patent for one of her inventions years ago, just for fun, to see how it works. 'Once was enough. You find yourself in such a bizarre world. Some people are fully employed in trying to make a living with patents. A new technique is developed for almost every one of my projects, but I don't use it again – a work of art is unique. Somebody else can apply for the patents.'

Heijens is a musician, Vos an artist, but they both keep up with technological developments via the internet. 'Have you seen the latest LEDs on YouTube?', she asks. 'Terrific!' – immediately following up with the remark: 'It's fantastic material, but LEDs are at the same time so ugly and cold.' It's a question of looking beyond them: in the end that technology is a device that you no longer even see. 'Not in *Crystal Palace* either', Heijens enthusiastically joins in.

‘Dancing visions of light that appear and fade. This will be so fucking bright, the viewers won’t be able to understand how it’s done.’

The name *Crystal Palace* refers not only to the crystalline way in which the light will sparkle in the building. The first world exhibition was held in the Crystal Palace in London in the nineteenth century. It displayed the world of objects in which we live. The RAI, with its series of trade fairs where new products are displayed for the world market for a few days, is a successor to it. These enormous presentations follow one another in rapid succession as one product is quickly replaced by the next one. Vos’ *Crystal Palace* is about this perpetuum mobile by making objects appear and disappear. She has decided that they must not move too quickly. A certain slowness will enable the work to maintain its magic.

Heijens and Vos continue their discussions amid the tree-stump furniture – about the quality of the aluminium, the plexiglass, resistance to rain, payment, advances, planning. The work will be unveiled in September by Prince Willem Alexander, but Heijens considers that the sooner it hangs the better. Then there is enough time to test it out – also for the software, which still has to be written. ‘I presented it to the client with the image of a car inside’, Vos smiles, ‘but I don’t know whether it will be there. A building dictates certain things, just as technology does. You have to free yourself from that. This work will assume a story of its own. It’s not a billboard for the Car RAI.’

Everything is running – Vos returns to the studio. Back in the car she tells me about the collaboration with technical partners like Yens & Yens. ‘I’m not easy. There’s always room for improvement. Sometimes the companies I work with come up with technical solutions that delight them, but I’m still not satisfied. It’s always a bit of a fight, but the difference is critical. A good work does not just make the place special, it even makes the surrounding space adapt to it. It stretches the surroundings. If that works, it’s terrific.’

That evening was supposed to be the moment of truth for *White Noise*, but that did not happen. The test on the KPN mast was a failure. Only one of the twenty-four minutes of software functions. Then the mast is enshrouded in darkness again. Still, that one minute is promising, Vos later mails from Berlin. The work is gradually becoming less scary. By now it is the end of April

and KPN decides to do another test with the fences – the planning is modified again.

Two weeks' retreat in an apartment in Berlin give Vos a breather to make the images for *Crystal Palace*. She is inspired by *Der Lauf der Dinge* [The Way Things Go] by Fischli and Weiss. The Swiss artistic duo made a video about objects that set one another in motion by gravity and ignition. Sparks and chain reactions are the basis of a choreography for *Crystal Palace*, she decides. They are a metaphor for the ephemeral nature and scale of the trade fairs that are held for such a brief period. Not everyone likes metaphors in a work in the public domain, but they are important. They ensure that the more attentive spectator sees nuances and ideas beyond the wow effect that is produced on the hasty passer-by.

In Berlin, the work to flank the A1 motorway increasingly becomes a romantic landscape. She also suddenly sees new possibilities in a municipal tunnel and the commission for the Ministry of Defence. And on top of that the job of filling those eighty fences in front of the KPN mast...

Render Farms

Now that all the different parties are working on their own part in *White Noise* and *Crystal Palace*, Vos can concentrate on the animations that both works require. *Crystal Palace* is given priority because it is the first in the pipeline. Vos spends a boiling day in July in Utrecht with 3D-animator Bram Verhavert. His office in a former school, beneath a flat roof, contains little more than two powerful computers. He uses these exceptional computers to make 3D applications for clients like Vos. When Verhavert made the animations for *Travelling Sand*, a digital landscape for Apeldoorn railway station, in 2006, the office was full of paper. Vos had drawn sand landscapes dozens of metres long on them. It was Verhavert's job to make sure that the computer understood all those panoramas and made the shifting sands flow naturally into one another. There was no other way, because you cannot simply project film of shifting sand, especially when you want to visualise the essence of travelling sand, as Vos wanted.

It took the computer months to render these images. Vos and Verhavert almost farmed this process out to the US render farms with thousands of computers that the Hollywood studios use for digital film effects. But thanks to a powerful extra computer with a special graphic card and an extra ventilator, Verhavert managed to pull it off. Now the same computer displays falling stars: pieces of *White Noise*. Verhavert uses the mouse to make the mast rotate. 'That's how it looks from the motorway', he says. 'How much time do people spend in the traffic jam?', Vos asks. The choreography must be exciting enough to rivet everyone's attention, including the drivers.

Verhavert then shows the stars from a distance. They still sparkle on his screen. Vos wonder whether they will sparkle in real life as well: 'LED light becomes uniform from a large distance'. The gap between animation and reality leads the conversation to the impossibility of presenting a work in the concept stage. 'That's why I am so opposed to people having a say', Vos states categorically. 'If people buy a sofa, they are surprised how different it looks at home. Some of them form a completely wrong impression of a work of art that they don't know.' If Vos is asked for a commission and hears that the residents have a share in the final decision-making, she turns it down. 'You mustn't let residents decide, you must inform them, make them participants. People almost always choose what they know. That's fine for entertainment, but not for art. Otherwise new ideas never get a chance.'

They switch to the software for *Crystal Palace* for a moment. Andries Oyens from Yens & Yens has written the software. That programme worked with formulae, but in Verhavert's variant they can build visually. 'We can ask for a patent for this', Vos says. 'Is it new, then?', asks Verhavert. 'Yes', she says, 'but I'm not interested in patents, it's a miserable life. But if you like...' Verhavert just stares at the screen and reacts calmly. 'I don't need a miserable life', he says, while he opens the animations for *Crystal Palace*. Curves and diagonals loom up. Vos looks attentively to see which curves are and are not possible. They go back to *White Noise*. Verhavert shows her new stars. The rotation involves a further complication: because of the staggered platforms, the stars never fall perpendicularly. Verhavert: 'Rotating animations aren't on.' Vos nods. She must take good care in the months ahead to ensure that the fences

are positioned as precisely as possible. The rest of the afternoon is spent on photographs of black holes and star bursts. Vos and Verhavert spend hours seeing which of the 1,200 LEDs should light up. It is a long, hot afternoon, one of many to come.

A Strange Profession

It is a strange profession in which Vos engages. Attending meetings, discussing fences and maintenance contracts form an important part of her work, in which she is dealt the trickiest cards. How do you explain in meetings with planners, CEOs, architects and residents that the poetic autonomy of your work is at risk if a fence is made taller or shorter, with a looser or tighter mesh than agreed? She tackles those hurdles with unlimited energy: 'It's the only way for me to do what I want to do. The public domain is my ideal workplace, in fact it's my studio. I want to key in to the scale of the world.' Vos has had to invent her profession by herself. When she went to the art academy in the 1980s, cultural entrepreneurship was not taught. The term did not even exist. She grew up in Rotterdam, where she celebrated her departure with her first big work of art in the public domain during the longest night of the year. With a little more than five hundred guilders, a lot of agricultural plastic and a group of friends, she went into the office blocks on the Marconiplein on 21 December 1985. They covered enough windows for the remaining illuminated windows to spell the words WORK TO DO. Vos still uses it in her portfolio and remarks that her assistants, who were often born around the time that she made this work, are impressed by it.

Looking back, *Work to Do* marked the start of the large-scale light art of Vos, works of art that are so large and complex that she can only achieve them in cooperation with other parties. The difference between *Work to Do* and the art that followed it lies mainly in the work behind the scenes. *Work to Do* was a cheeky stunt by a young artist with a lot of guts. Now Vos is in charge of a business with a team that works on long-term projects. It is art that takes place outside the museum circuit, but which makes no artistic concessions and is used to budgets that would make museums water at the mouth.

Vos moved to Amsterdam to study at the Rietveld Academy. She had her doubts about the choice, as Delft with all its technological studies was attractive too, but in the last resort it was art, not technology, that was her prime concern. The Rietveld Academy welcomed her with open arms for *Golden Years*, an installation that she had created shortly before: a US car with Vos at the wheel, her hair streaming behind her, was shown on monitors and via projections to the accompaniment of David Bowie's *Golden Years* – half real, half dream. It was an ironical self-portrait of a successful cultural entrepreneur. Her work was already related to high and low, alienation, criticism of the unimaginative world where everything is simply what it is – a car, a security video, a transmission mast.

In 1988, the young, unknown art student who had not even graduated managed to convince a courageous museum director to give her the run of the entire Stedelijk Museum in Schiedam. She filled it with large, abstract, heavy sculptures inspired by Judd, Serra or perhaps – to stay in the public domain – Lon Pennock. They were grand gestures to show that art is tough and masculine, must control the space and command respect. Visitors walked past the megalomaniac abstractions in search of spirituality, as one is supposed to do with that kind of art, until they reached the exit and could see the monitors of the custodians' room: the abstractions formed the letters 'Watch' on the security screens. A good work gives you something you had not imagined in advance. 2D became 3D, Vos discovered here, and small dolls teemed between the letters – museum visitors who had unwittingly become actors in a performance video.

Depriving art of its gravity, as in Schiedam, is something that she has continued to do. In the successive years the hardware has become less and the light has become more elusive. She has taken more and more to working outdoors, in the Netherlands and sometimes abroad. She uses small works of art for festivals for experiments on which she can draw for the large assignments, and vice versa. And the large assignments have grown in complexity. That is connected with her ambition, but also with how the world is changing: building projects, the number of parties interested, and participation procedures are all growing. *Travelling Sand*, in front of

Apeldoorn station, took four years and entailed an ongoing struggle over important details, in which Vos had to present reports on vulnerability to vandalism, visual axes and other technical matters.

She wouldn't say no if she were offered a museum again to do her thing. 'It enables you to raise certain issues that you couldn't do outdoors. Because people come specially for it, it's easier for you to use a complex language.' In 2004 she filled a space in the Deventer Arts Lab with 340 100-watt lamps. They gave off an enormous amount of light and also made a Hertz noise that you could feel pulsing through your whole body. Once every couple of minutes a heavy shadow passed through the space and made it completely dark. 'You can't do that in the public domain', Vos explains. 'It's technically impossible and you can't inflict it on people. Outdoors you have to reach people in a different way.' The presentation was connected with the Witteveen+Bos prize for technology that she had been awarded for her oeuvre. The prize now hangs in a frame on the wall of her studio besides the patent for which she once applied for a LED light system. A practical patent and an art award – this diptych represents the two worlds in which Vos operates.

Constellations and Balls of Fire

2009 is a busy year for Vos. The summer is turning to autumn and the winter looms up. In October it can get freezing cold on the KPN mast, and if there is a strong wind as well, the workers up there do not feel at all comfortable. The unveiling of *White Noise* is finally fixed for 2 December. In fact that is the perfect time to start up an installation in lights because the days are so short. All the parties have worked hard, sometimes burning the candle at both ends. Vos has had to make drastic alterations to her design once she discovered that the dishes are all suspended from one platform and are not distributed over the mast like pearl necklaces. It can be done, she remarks. And the light test in November finally reveals that the animations look equally good at close quarters and from a distance. This is a breakthrough for Vos: it is going to work.

Another welcome circumstance is that *Crystal Palace* was completed in September so that since then she has had her hands free for *White Noise*.

Crystal Palace was more complicated than she had expected. The search for the right forms turned out to be difficult and the Fischli/Weiss concept did not work at all – she only managed to get the rhythm right once the forms became more ephemeral. The reactions to the inauguration were positive and the Crown Prince, who unveiled the work, was very interested in the technical side.

Fortunately 2 December is a clear evening. The unveiling of the KPN mast is celebrated in the adjacent tower block of Ernst & Young. Dozens of guests arrive from the world of art and commerce and are escorted up from a luxurious reception area. ‘21 floors in 9 seconds’, the hostess smiles between the shiny walls of the noiseless lift. The upstairs lounge with its minimalist interior is surrounded by glass. It offers the guests a spectacular view of the commercial district below and of the KPN mast, whose platforms are at eye level.

W139 director Gijs Frieling opens the official part of the ceremony with a call for more commercial patronage. After all, the highlights of art history were created thanks to strong-willed principals. Vos voices her reservations in the ensuing discussion: patrons must not become too dominant. She always wants to implement her own idea above all. Art and the economy alternate in the other speeches. The director of the South Axis Project Bureau states that the recession is not as bad as it seemed and that the high-rise buildings are growing higher. The councillor lets out the secret that the A10 motorway is going to be covered by a boulevard. The architect talks about his mast – ‘it’s my design in the daytime and Giny’s at night’. An hour later the guests can head for the balcony. The moment has arrived.

Vos holds her breath as the mast remains black for a minute. But then the light installation erupts with a big bang in sound and image. Stars emerge from a large ball of light, spread over the platforms of the mast, and take up a fixed place there – blue, red, white. Some are big, others small. Once the constellation has settled down, the second part of the choreography begins. What had seemed impossible in the computer programme during the summer takes place: stars start to fall. Others fade out. And some dots of light merge to form letter-shaped constellations. There is no sign now of last week’s stress

when it was discovered that by no means all of the LED lights had been installed in the right place.

While the Ernst & Young staff go the rounds with champagne, Bram Verhavert continues to stare at the mast. He still looks wide awake for sometime who has been working until half past six in the morning to finish the last details for the choreography software. It's now possible to see in practice that the work presents a sparkling spectacle from various distances, even for the surrounding residential districts. 'Just suppose', he says, 'that a kid is looking out of the window over there at eight o'clock in the evening, sees this and grows up with this view.'

Vos is congratulated, it has all worked. The traffic below the mast and the illuminated skyline in the background seem to blend with Vos' starry sky above them. With the best outdoor art, Vos once said, the surroundings adapt to the work of art. In that case *White Noise* is an extraordinary success. Two days later the newspapers report that meteorologists and astronomers predict spectacular nights for December: with a clear sky there will be unusual showers of meteors, with hundreds of falling stars and even fireballs around midnight. It is as if it has all been planned.

It is questionable whether Vos notices. She is back on the phone days after the unveiling. The transformer kiosk in Purmerend has to be developed, there are a couple of other assignments, she has to submit a grant application before January, and there was a sketch for which she has suddenly had a brainwave...

Daria Ricchi

Creation of Architectural Spaces Through Art

‘Art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible.’

Paul Klee

‘What I seek to do, is to create an “image” that makes particular aspects or elements of this environment visible, which would otherwise go unnoticed.’

Giny Vos about her project *Brainstorm*

Art and architecture have always been intertwined and it has always been hard to determine where one ends and the other begins. I will identify architecture first of all as an interior space – a place enclosed by borders and defined by means of these borders: its walls. It is a defined space, as opposed to the external space, the space outside the borders. It is only at a later stage, through art, that these borders can be broken down. Moreover art, because it allows for free reflection and thought, has recently been seeking out the participation and active involvement of the observer, who then becomes a user. The most evident difference here lies precisely in the user’s involvement. Architecture limits movements and organizes activities according to a set of rules. Art helps us first of all to reflect on space, both interior and exterior, and then contributes to giving it a new form. And the user is free to suggest new interpretations. The field of action of this new binomial is not architecture’s traditional one, but at times trespasses into the realm of art.

The work of Giny Vos could be analysed according to either a diachronic or a synchronic approach.

According to the diachronic approach, it is possible to notice an evolution from the beginning of Vos’s work, when she started experimenting with light through the use of video, neon and finally LEDs, progressively refining her ability to use these technologies. With a synchronic approach, the work of Giny Vos could be divided into three different typologies of work, corresponding to the three spatial coordinates in which any event or physical object is located: the artwork inside a building, inside its space, the fundamental category of architecture; the artwork on the surface of the building, which becomes a sort of threshold between the interior space and the exterior public space; and the artwork

outside the building which becomes an independent work of art in the urban space. The diachronic approach represents time, it is an historical narration of her work that changes and develops in a consequential manner. On the other hand, the synchronic approach represents space. In a synchronic approach, we consider the three different categories of space regardless of when the work was realized. In this sense, time becomes static, it is a consistent element, a-chronic, whereas space becomes the element we consider variable and subject to change.

In this sense, architecture is everything but changeable, whereas visual and new media art tend to be in constant motion. A building and its surfaces are by definition static, whereas the work of Giny Vos is not, its consistent element is one of movement achieved through light. Vos's work makes architecture move. But, how does movement relate to architecture?

The most interesting part of her work lies in her ability to make something flexible and movable that normally is not.

In one of her interior projects, *Spacesaver*, installed in a school in Utrecht, Vos builds a structure made of strings of neon light. They gradually turn on and off, making the geometrical space move. The space continues to be geometric, but the strings draw different virtual surfaces that can be perceived by sitting on the ground floor and looking at the ceiling, or sitting on the upper level and watching the neon lights superimposed on the ground floor.

Furthermore, the lights' varying speeds can influence the rhythm of the users' movement in the space and the reflections on the transparent sides of the walls (plexi-glass or glass) visually multiply the space. In other words, by using light, the artist leads the visitor to experience a much wider space.

This school is a standard building and the tools – the material and the colours – that Vos uses in the work are the same: basic materials with pale colours that speak the same language of the school. It does not displace the viewers, but agreeable locates them in their environment.

Conversely, in other works inside buildings that we will later analyse, such as *Solar Treasure* or *Le Poème Electronique 2*, thanks to Vos's intervention, the built constructions – offices or headquarters – lose their neutral properties, and the users experience a kind of agreeable estrangement. By estrangement I mean the capacity to remove a set of associations from a familiar place and to recreate a fictive environment. Giny Vos constructs environments in which, the very moment you come to understand the space for

what it is – an office, a station, a school – the work of art undermines the very notion of that sense of place, turning it into something unexpected.

When the work of art is applied to the surface of a building, its external protective part, the project becomes a kind of set design, the architecture acquiring not only a mobile but also a discursive dimension.

In *Call/The Painted Chat*, white LEDs are fitted to the profiled cladding along the entire length of the façade. Switching off a number of these LEDs creates voids that generate words. These words are constantly changing and form series that have an associative relationship with the surrounding environment. The façade is visible from the approaching road, the railway, and the main road that runs alongside the building, catching the viewer's eye or intriguing the casual passer-by.

The discursive dimension plays a major role in Vos's work. It does not serve a political function, but its main aim is to amaze and wonder. Thanks to the performative character of the building, the viewer can enjoy the space, without necessarily having to become part of it in any way. The artist uses LED and light precisely to reaffirm the material construction. Therefore, besides its merely practical, sheltering function, the façade acquires a new and alluring character, appealing to both the worker and the passer-by who can perceive it just by driving by. Besides its being a functional, practical feature, the building's cladding becomes a new urban icon. It expresses the idea of inserting abstract structures within metropolitan spaces, using words that could become legible urban signs or urban décor. The discursive character that the façade acquires is once again testament to the building's ability, or that at least of its external part, to 'talk'. Traditionally the building would in fact be unable to express words or concepts. The artist gives the building this new ability.

Her artwork outside the building gives us further food for thought. It spurs reflection about the different dimensions of architecture and visual art. Architecture is a three-dimensional discipline, whereas visual art by means of videos and LED is normally a two-dimensional discipline that could aim at three-dimensional effects by means of representation. By using materials and lights in motion, three-dimensional spaces can be reproduced. The same applies to Vos's work. By reproducing the movement of the desert's sands with 1,3 million LEDs, *Travelling Sand* is a work that tries to achieve the illusion of three-dimensional space through two-dimensional representation. Furthermore, it is here, in an external space, that an estrangement takes place through the representation of a new environment, a kind of dream-state. The train station of Apeldoorn loses its merely

functional character and acquires, once again, an amazing dimension, let's call it the geographic quality of the 'other', the illusion of being geographically somewhere else, and, more importantly, being in the spatial dimension of the 'other'. The infrastructure acquires, thanks to Vos's work, a social dimension. The exterior space, by means of *Travelling Sand*, acquires borders that both define the architecture of the train station and of the shopping spaces around it, while also defining a new social exterior space. In the school in Utrecht, the people that use the building feel that the work of art is integrated in the construction and they can feel comfortable in their environment, perhaps even taking no notice of Vos's work, since the work of art is so deeply embedded in the structure. Instead, *Travelling Sand* is not integrated within the architecture; it is different from the station and other than the building. Nevertheless, the estrangement that it causes is neither shocking nor alienating. The foreign qualities of the work of art are immediately recognisable, and they ameliorate the space and add a further value.

If her work can be divided into three categories according to its spatial dimensions, on a temporal level her work can be described in only one way. What characterizes Vos's work from the very beginning is its capacity for mobility, which has already been discussed, and its transformation through time. If architecture can be considered as static in its primary sense, it is also basically ageless, or at least it is not ageing in a manner that is visible day-to-day.

Space-time is a mathematical model that combines space and time into a single continuum. The space-time model is usually interpreted with space being three-dimensional and time playing the role of a fourth dimension that acts on a different level. Giny Vos conceives of time in two different ways, with the objective of achieving two different effects.

On the one hand, although her work is kinetic, its motion is relative to a specific lapse of time; it does not age daily and does not change over the years. She designs performative works of art in which the 'performance' lasts a specific amount of time (some minutes or a few hours) repeating itself after the loop is finished.

On the other hand, however, the temporal dimension is also dilated. Vos's work gives time a fictive character detached from its actual duration; she expands time, slows it down and elsewhere increases its speed. The perception of time is also dilated, or frozen. In one of her first works, *Time and Time Again* (1993), two large digital clocks are placed on either side of the symmetrical façade of the Dollard College building in Winschoten. One of the clocks always shows the correct time, while the other one displays a mirror image of the

time. In a twenty-four hour period both clocks indicate the same time eight times a day, so that the mirror image clock momentarily shows the correct time, simultaneously with the other clock.

In *Solar Treasure*, a door is programmed according to an imaginary 24-minute day. It remains open only for the number of minutes that correspond to the daily number of hours, so that a 24-hour day lasts only 24 minutes. Whether or not the door stays open or closed is dependent upon the time of year. Real time becomes a narrative time. Lost in its contemplation, a new estrangement takes place: the building loses its identity through the work of art. The visitor is no longer inside an office but suspended in an imaginary dimension.

Furthermore, here, a huge door is much more than what it seems. The spatial qualities belonging to architecture, which normally do not characterize art, are here appropriated and reversed. In the entrance hall, Vos added a huge copper door that opens at irregular time intervals, allowing light into the space. The opening of the door interrupts the linear geometry of the wall, adding new perspectives. The unframed door deconstructs an office space from which one normally would expect no surprises. The space is unfolded, and the cubical geometry of the room modified by the opening of the door.

New perspectives and alternative variations in space and time are also added in *Le Poème Electronique 2*, where poems and sections of texts are transmitted in a loop. In order to get a sense of the work, it is necessary to sit at the desk for a couple of minutes. If you wait an hour (it would require ninety minutes to read all the writing) it will tell you a different story. Full-size mirrors distort the space, changing perspectives and creating new visions. The mirror doubles the space, suspending the visitor for a time. It modifies three-dimensional space as we normally conceive it in order to reach a fourth dimension of time, of timelessness, or of no-time, as if the temporal condition were frozen, lost in the play of texts and words transmitted through the mirror. Her work allows and repeatedly creates a sense of estrangement in a timeless experience, an experience independent from the time it is in.

Vos's stories may last a few minutes or an entire day. Her work tells new stories as well as reporting the results of existing scientific research about what is going on inside and outside the building. The narrative is continuous: 'There is no beginning and no end, just a centre, from which movement originates', she explains. The contemplation of her work is similar to what Walter Benjamin refers to as a state of distraction. The work of art is

present and we do not necessarily have to pay attention to it, but we could unconsciously enjoy it. We can get pleasure from her art by paying attention to it or simply by letting it amuse us. The main aim is to create delight, adding new conceptual and visual perspectives to the built environment.

If architecture represents space in its three dimensions, the artwork of Giny Vos adds the fourth dimension: time, confirming once again the indissoluble liaison between art and architecture.

A Mirror Image in Language

Ilse van Rijn

Suppose: it's morning. You are in a cubicle in the Zuiderbad swimming bath in Amsterdam and have put on your swimming trunks or bikini. Just before you leave the cubicle, you glance at the mirror to see if your cap really does cover your hair completely. You're ready to do your weekly lengths, and then letters light up in the mirror. They combine to form a word: 'darling', 'kisses', 'L.H.O.O.Q.'. Or a phrase: 'it's good to see you', 'this is not a pipe', 'elvis is alive'.

The messages contrast with the early morning and the swimmer's surroundings. They are witty, even poetic: yet if the arrangement of the terms seems illogical, they *do* tell a story. And at the same time the rules intervene: they formulate an answer to secret thoughts, fill in lacunae and slips in memories and dreams. The words are applied like slogans in bus shelters or beneath viaducts, a name on a toilet door or carved in a tree trunk. Others refer to art: to the painting *The Treachery of Images* by René Magritte (1929) and the famous essay 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' that Michel Foucault wrote about it.¹ And to the rectified readymade *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) by Marcel Duchamp: he added not just the moustache and goatee beard, but also the letters to which the work owes its title, to that art historical icon, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (c. 1502). The various provenances of the words in the cubicle mirrors in the Zuiderbad facilitate an interpretation that is equally varied and multiple. And at the same time: just by looking at the phrases as they appear and disappear again, the swimmer feels caught. Because through them and their interpretation she is still looking at herself: a mirror image in language.

The memorable installation described in the preceding paragraph, *Killroy Was Here* (1995) by Giny Vos, shows her fascination with language and the way in which the viewer is inevitably bound up with language. Vos uses language to investigate the specific location in which an installation is

embedded and comments on that situation as well, often by means of language. An implicit consequence of her artistic quest is the question of how you can use language to talk about language. What is the difference between the language of the location and the language of the artist? Or is a separation between the two entities impossible and, what is more, a fiction? *Killroy Was Here* implies that a distinction will have to be made. After all, the intriguing aspect and poetic strength of the installation were determined to a large extent by the miraculous distance between language and the location, the language of the location and the language of the artist. A similar phenomenon occurred in the early work *Work to Do* (1985). The words 'work to do' were left open in the black plastic that covered the windows of three tower blocks in Rotterdam. They were office blocks: when the light inside the buildings shone through the letters at night, they illuminated the busy city centre. Here too the words were not entirely confined to the buildings on which they could be seen, nor did the terms refer solely to the passers-by: by midnight the rush of employees going home was past. According to the philosopher Jean Baudrillard, their poetry lies in their irreducibility to a single, fixed, clearly identifiable meaning. Where the linguistic discourse always tries to match a directly perceptible value and meaning to a term, poetry evades that linguistic effort, he explains. In her installations, Vos seems to be rebelling *in language* against the prevailing rules that are equally defined in and by language. In other words, 'Le poétique, c'est l'insurrection du langage contre ses propres lois.'²

The more recent works *Call/The Painted Chat* (2005) and *Le Poème Electronique* (2002) are equally non-affirmative; Vos explores the mutual relations between the linguistic nature of people and their context. One of the questions that she also tackles in these works is: How do people relate to their surroundings? How do they communicate? For *Call/The Painted Chat*, for instance, she had several discussions with the employees of the Amsterdam municipal department on the Westpoort industrial estate, where the work was to be installed. What language did these men and women speak? What are the rules and unwritten regulations that are implicit in their organisation? What

is the architectural, physical and explicit structure of 'their' place of work? What is the actual system, if there is one, on which the situation is based? The information she collected resulted in *Call/The Painted Chat*, as in *Killroy Was Here*, in a combination of terms and expressions found on the spot with words chosen and often made up by the artist whose rhythm and semantics she takes to correspond to the situation. It is striking, you will say, that the new terminology created in the installation is never incomprehensible to outsiders. An apparently simple and logical but nevertheless confusing linguistic phenomenon occurs: you recognise the letters 'g-r-a-s-w-e-e-r' in *Call/The Painted Chat*, you read the word, you may get the gist of it, but the exact meaning escapes you.³ Yet the terms are not meaningless either. Call it poetry. Language is an agreement, a code that enables us to understand one another. Language is a system that differs in a significant way from the world to which it refers, proceeds in parallel with it, and only rarely displays correspondences with it. There is a gap between language and the world. It is in this gap ('faille') or in being placed in a system (the structure that Vos discovers during her initial inquiry of which the discussions with the employees in Westpoort for *Call/The Painted Chat* were a part at the time) that the meaningful moments occur that Vos communicates. In *Killroy Was Here*, *Work to Do* or *Call/The Painted Chat*: what previously did not exist, or only latently, in the situation she investigated is given a name again or is given a new name: '10 gram nat' [10 grams wet], 'grasweer' [grass-weather], 'vriendinnen' [girl friends], 'kusjes' [kisses], 'wild west', 'L.H.O.O.Q.'. The words formed part of a jargon tied to a context, perhaps to a person. The French poet Francis Ponge allegorically formulates this property of language that Vos uses in her installations in his prose poem *Le Lézard*. The lizard emerges from the cracks and crevices of an old stone wall. Or it rests on a rock illuminated and warmed by the sun and takes on its colour. And a gap ('faille') in that surface, that enables communication with prehistory (to put it briefly), also inevitably leads to the invention of a new word: 'From which the lizard *s'alcive* (obliged to invent this word)'.⁴

New moments (words: 's'alcive') are born from the same imperfections in the surface (cracks and crevices) that embellish and make possible the lizard's

surroundings. Beneath the seemingly smooth surface of a blank, spotless white page or the continuous structure of an organisation lies a history that has already gradually broken, repaired and restored the surface. Every page bears traces and is already written, thus Ponge, like a palimpsest. It is precisely the imperfections in the world, that system, a 'failure' that is equally immanent in the language with which the world is inextricably connected, that makes creation possible. You just have to bring the potential to life and make it visible, or see it.

Vos sees it and makes it visible. She brings about a momentary dazzle: the single astonishing moment, however ephemeral, in which the system temporarily demonstrates its minimal failure. The wink that, like Duchamp's additions to Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, is immortalised in Vos' works can be read as a friendly, rather iconoclastic gesture.⁵ At the same time homage is paid, deliberately or not, to the hand of the master (Da Vinci or art history in the case of Duchamp, an architect or the users of a building, a place or a situation in the case of Vos) who has left his mark on the system. This paradoxically charged moment that briefly coincides with the gap ('faille') in what is normally a seamless system is constantly shifting: from the letters and words formed by light to the façade or glass wall from which they emerge (*Call/The Painted Chat, Le Poème Electronique*), or the actual situation in which and on which the words reflect (the Westpoort industrial estate, the head office of Philips in Amsterdam), to the reflected image of the spectator who looks at the words (*Le Poème Electronique*, but also *Killroy Was Here*). Transported to the spectator's imagination, they form a sequence of dreams, emotions and ideas that is temporarily disturbed by the almost chemical reaction provoked by reading that one word: 's'alcive', 'schatje', 'kusjes', 'L.H.O.O.Q.'.

You recognise the letters automatically, but also the materials with which they are written in the artist's installations: LED lights, neon, electric light. On and off. In other contexts they are used to advertise special offers, present weather reports or display opening hours. This materialisation of the tags and titles is imperceptibly incorporated in the life of the passer-by and silently underlines the casualness of the statements. Not only a latent meaning that appears and disappears again, but also a complex technological ability and a long process

of preparation are concealed behind the literally sparkling installations of Giny Vos. Her vocabulary extends beyond the purely linguistic dimension of language and implies its phenomenal form. To cite Francis Ponge again,⁶ in her works the U of the word ‘cruche’ (pitcher) is filled with water. There is a rapprochement between word and world, language, technology and thing until the moment when they are almost fused, or gaps are filled and holes are mended, if only for a moment.

1 Michel Foucault, ‘This is Not a Pipe’, in: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, London: Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 187-203. First published in *Les Cahiers du chemin* 2 (15 January 1968), pp. 79-105.

2 Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976, p. 289. English translation: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London: Sage, 1993.

3 ‘Grasweer’ is literally ‘grass-weather’ in English.

4 ‘Le Lézard suppose donc un ouvrage de maçonnerie, ou quelque rocher par sa blancheur qui s’en rapproche. Fort éclairé et chaud. Et une faille de cette surface, par où elle communique avec la (parlons bref) préhistoire... D’où le lézard s’alcive (obligé d’inventer ce mot).’ From: ‘Le Lézard’ (1945–47), in: Francis Ponge, *Pièces*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1961 (2007), pp. 83-87.

5 In an interview with Herbert Crehan, Duchamp called the gesture iconoclastic, but he also regarded the Dadaists as pacifists. In: Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, p. 670. This ‘pacifist iconoclasm’ seems to apply to Vos as well, whose statements are never caustic comments and maintain a friendly tone.

6 ‘Pas d’autre mot qui sonne comme cruche. Grâce à cet U qui s’ouvre en on milieu, cruche est plus creux que creux et l’est à sa façon. C’est un creux entouré d’une terre fragile: rugueuse et fêlable à merci.’ Thus the first lines of ‘La cruche’ (1947), Ponge (see note 3) pp. 92-94.

Christophe Van Gerrewey

Some Splash of Real

The Work of Giny Vos as a Solo Exhibition in the Netherlands

The social significance of art lies in interrupting normal experience and the ensuing enrichment.

Robert Musil

Giny Vos has implemented art in public spaces all over the Netherlands in such cities as Amsterdam, Nijmegen, Utrecht, Leiden, Groningen and Apeldoorn. So these works are in the open air, on seemingly ordinary locations that lack any magic, that can be entered free of charge, and where there is no guide who has to be followed. Is it possible to visit this Netherlands as one big open air museum, to regard these cities as stopping places in a retrospective dedicated to the work of a single artist scattered over a single country? If an oeuvre is scattered over public locations, can it still be viewed, considered and described as a whole without the attention and concentration that are specific to the museum? Why not?

These are meaningless questions to anyone who is genuinely receptive to art. The condition that art must be placed in a museum or (eventually) be destined for a museum is futile. As Bart Verschaffel wrote in 'Niet voor het museum. Over kunst en openbaarheid' [Not for the museum. On art and public space], the public space is not literally a place where everything is visible and as 'accessible' as possible; it is what he calls 'an operation'.¹ In the last resort, the notion that the museum space satisfies the condition of art more and better is an illusion, for it is quite possible for art in a museum to remain really sterile, unviewed, and unchallenged, but simply blindly accepted and venerated. Vice versa, it often happens that art in the 'genuine' public space forms an obstruction and blocks daily life, so that it is only viewed with aggression or irritation. The distinction between the way art is taken for granted in the

museum, on the one hand, and its unexpected quality in a street or square, on the other, is too subtle to stand generalisation, and thus not really usable.

Wherever art is situated, to cite from the same essay, it ‘inhales the surrounding culture and, almost imperceptibly, breathes something into the general culture’.

So art absorbs something from its surroundings, be they a house, a museum or a street. In his book *Public Projects or The Spirit of a Place*, Ilya Kabakov has used that insight to launch an attack on what he calls the ‘Modernist approach’: just as the historical avant-garde saw it as its task to attack and criticise the museum, so a lot of public art has been made that has confronted the public domain with *faits accomplis* and abstract, monumental or sculptural elements.² In this case it is about Art that is clearly signed by an Author, and which pays little or no heed to its surroundings. Kabakov does not give any names, but we can consider the work of artists like Richard Serra or Sol LeWitt as representing that of his opponents.

Kabakov thus constructs a strict opposition between autonomous and applied art, between a narrative approach to history and a formal negation of any presence. It is a tempting rhetorical argument, but it is not entirely convincing. The *genius loci* too is a relative, in fact Romantic notion that is not by definition ignored if it does not meet with a narrative response, but only a formal reaction.

It is precisely between those two extremes – abstract, artistic, signed form and narrative, responsive, anonymous installation – that the work of Giny Vos can be situated. It listens carefully to what the location has to say, but records the findings of that listening session in its own agenda. If these works did not stand outdoors in Amsterdam, Nijmegen, Leiden or one of the other cities, but in their museums, we would be able to say the same thing with different words: this work is thankful to the museum setting to which it has been invited, but after that it does – within those respectful limits – what it would do at home.

The work that Giny Vos made for the RAI exhibition and conference centre in Amsterdam is the best example of such an approach. It consists of a cube formed by 256 thin aluminium tubes, each fitted with sixteen white LED lights. Alternating abstract constructions and identifiable objects appear in the resulting three-dimensional field. As in a PowerPoint presentation, a chair is followed by a whirling horizontal surface... a box automatically opens like a gift... a sphere emerges from the centre, growing larger and larger before it disappears... a coffee pot rotates and falls over...

The work, entitled *Crystal Palace*, hangs at the entrance of the new RAI building designed by Benthem Crouwel Architecten. Like a digital mirage, it presents itself to all the visitors to the RAI who are temporarily united by a single objective: buying and selling. Every passer-by is an archetypal present-day consumer, for whom the RAI and its surroundings offer an intense experience of what Western life is about, at least according to the wishes of a large part of the Western world. *Crystal Palace* has the aesthetic abstraction of a light sculpture by, say, Dan Flavin, but is also permeated by the childlike realism of the videos of Fischli/Weiss, for example. It is thus an example of dazzling glorification and of critical distance.

The gigantic Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, designed by John Paxton for the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, was the first trade fair building to be constructed entirely of glass. It also marked the start, as Peter Sloterdijk describes in his book *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*, of a genuinely global capitalism. The *Crystal Palace* of Giny Vos presents both the positive and the negative sides of this situation too, but the work also shows the phantasmagorical character of what goes on in the RAI. Neither the geometric shapes nor the beautiful objects that appear in the shifting constellations of LED lights are real – they are simply energy made visible but always elusive. The same is true of everything that goes in the world of buying and selling that surrounds it, of electronic payment and the acquisition of property and possessions.

Besides the tension between integration and abstraction of the *genius loci*, that is what all the works of Giny Vos have in common: they use modern

technology and old-fashioned electrical current to show something that is not really there, but that we are nevertheless bound to regard as real. The illusionism of this art – what we see can disappear at the touch of a switch or in the event of a power cut – is scattered like fairy dust over the its location and surroundings so that this spot and the activities that take place there briefly lose their inevitability and a vista is offered of the rest of the world and human life. In and through the works, the artist and the spectator are looking for ‘what’s left of some splash of real’, as one of Don DeLillo’s characters put it.³

The same is true of *Lust for Life*, a work that hangs high up on the wall of the tower façade of the Museum Naturalis in Leiden. The title is only ironical from one point of view: there is little real life in this natural history museum; the collection comprises twelve million lifeless objects, such as insects preserved in aqua fortis, vertebrates and invertebrates, as well as stones, minerals and fossils. *Lust for Life* is an electronic blob, whirling and in motion. It is like looking through a gigantic microscope at an equally gigantic drop of water and seeing microbes, bacteria, powerful molecules and clashing atoms. The work is thus a literal reinforcement or enlargement of what goes on in the museum setting, but for ignorant passers-by or rail passengers it looks like a mildly ominous and inexplicable hitch in the façade of an office building. That is how it penetrates the retina of everyday reality: it gently disturbs the insipid and orderly anonymity of the area around Leiden station; and for the museum it is like a simulacrum, just as the museum collection is a simulacrum of nature. Inevitable and elusive, it has to position itself in the public space as a foretaste of an equally intense and lifeless concentration of mummified and scrutinised life within the semi-public space of the museum. *Lust for Life* raises the question: What connection is there between the contents of this museum and real life? And out of doors in the sky above Leiden that question revolves and changes into something general: what is ‘real life’ except an attempt to use every means to get it within one’s grip and view?

The work *Call/The Painted Chat* is an even stronger confrontation of a nondescript industrial zone on the outskirts of Amsterdam with the functional

and sterile organisation that prevails there. Bounded by a railway line, a cycle track and a motorway, the zone heralds the end of the urban civilisation; it is a zone into which you might cast a glance as you pass by, but that can never claim a relation with the city. One of the buildings here is the Westpoort district council building, where for instance the salt for icy roads in Amsterdam is stored and where municipal departments are accommodated. The city asked this public function to be made visible. Giny Vos applied 6,500 LEDs to the outside wall of the council building. On dark nights the wall emits light towards the three traffic routes like a strong storm lantern. Different words appear on the wall depending on which LEDs are on or off: 'op een oor' [taking a nap], 'wild west', 'zoutwerk' [salt work]. They are terms that are used every day by the users of the council office, but which come across as a nonsensical secret code to the passing traffic, and by extension for the rest of Amsterdam. *Call/The Painted Chat* becomes a huge but paradoxical electronic billboard that advertises a 'free' municipal service, but that at the same time is made visible as a part of Amsterdam that cannot be placed completely. *Reizend zand* [Travelling Sand] in Apeldoorn is comparable in terms of material and structure. Behind the tracks, in front of the station forecourt, a 100-metre wall has been built which is covered with 1.3 million LEDs. Like a moving mural, they present an extensive dune landscape that changes appearance and form subtly and gently at one moment, wildly and rapidly at another. The sand moves as though it is travelling, thereby presenting an exotic landscape that must be easy to reach even from Apeldoorn with today's transport possibilities. Like all the previous works, it creates a contrast: it shows something that is not 'real', but is only light, energy and image, in the 'real' public domain, thereby disrupting the naturalness and fixed nature of the public domain by openly referring to its constructed and relative character. The station forecourt of this provincial city becomes the archetypal everyday location: a place where one cannot and will not be able to stay, blasted forwards by thousands of visions of other locations.

In *White Noise* a similar intervention assumes cosmic dimensions. The work is located on the raised KPN tower, situated amid the new high-rise buildings

in the highly developed South Axis in Amsterdam. Once again thousands of LEDs create a broad wreath around the top of the telecommunications mast which reflects no less than the universe. Stars fall and rain, meteorites twinkle and disappear, flashes light up and disappear again for ever. The white noise of Dutch telephones and cable television is inhaled by this work and what is exhaled is of a far larger order. On the one hand, the work has an adaptive, natural and narrative character because it shows something that is already there on the plot, or that could be present there without any difficulty. But on the other hand there is little chance that it will become completely invisible, however much it fits in with the atmosphere of the KPN: through its consistent formal presence and deliberate ambiguity, it continues to get under the skin and to ask *more* of the setting and the passer-by.

Art that is made for the museum must eventually withdraw from the local context, which ensures that art remains only Art, natural and safe. Art that is not made for the museum equally transcends its setting precisely to be able to demand temporary attention and to interrupt normal experience. In both cases that process, that questions the museum or public space, abandons it and subsequently finds it again, is essential for how the art is experienced. *White Noise* links the local data with larger, more existential issues, as all the works of Giny Vos do to a greater or lesser extent. The spectator – passer-by, resident, employee, art lover – is first absorbed in the particular narrative of the context. However, that relation is soon broken, the perspective broadens, and reality ripples. Art affirms and links us with everyday, real life – and like the flash of a falling star, briefly opens up a vision of what is beyond us.

1 Bart Verschaffel, 'Niet voor het museum. Over kunst en openbaarheid', in: Jan Baetens, Lut Pil (eds), *Kunst in de publieke ruimte*, Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 1998, pp. 107-117.

2 Ilya Kabakov, *Public Projects or The Spirit of a Place*, Milan: Edizione Charta, 2001.

3 Don DeLillo, *Valparaiso*, New York: Scribner, 1999.

Dirk van Weelden

Voice of the Metropolis

So to see, this zone, the western corner of the docklands area of the city, is a wilderness. In what sense? Not that there are so many wild and savage things to see, but the opposite. In the inner city of Amsterdam, say, the Nine Little Streets, there is almost nothing that catches our eye and attracts our attention that we cannot immediately place. A well-groomed, perhaps elegant woman with a cape who leans over to look at a shop window display and after a few minutes leisurely walks into the Mexican tableware shop. A tourist using her couple of days in Amsterdam to go fun shopping. The decoration, the design of the shop interiors and the bars, the signs with advertising and information, even the clothing of most of the passers-by is a clear message. Ah, there's the fashion-conscious, artistic gay, that must be a student of the hearty fellow type, and there are the shopping ladies from Hoorn. Here come the American backpackers and the somewhat older grumpy local with his dog, which he hates, but that his wife refuses to take for a walk.

Whereas the inner city is so rich in signs and people who are dressed and who behave in a recognisable way, here it is desolate and empty. The distances here are not calculated for pedestrian bodies but for cars – lorries, in fact. The roads and the torsos of the buildings have enormous surfaces. Only here and there can you find a sign or indication of the function of the buildings or what motivates the people who come and go here. On the whole you don't see many people here. Well, sometimes a Russian sailor walking to his vessel with the purchases that he has made in the city in a number of plastic bags. There's no longer any money for the taxi and the bus timetable is illegible. A lot of space, a lot of building volumes. Few signs, little publicly shared meaning, little communication.

This zone is empty and desolate, opaque to the eye searching for familiarity, understanding and recognition, to the human senses that receive and process signals from the communication between bodies, objects, sounds, words,

symbols. In short, there is not much city or public life here in Westpoort. It is a typical place where people and activities converge that are at odds with the law, order and security. The hooker zone here beside the Theemsweg with its bizarre mixture of regulations and chaos was an example of that. But urban nomads, shady businessmen, people smugglers and cannabis growers feel at home here. It is a zone between city and countryside. A twilight zone.

If you use the term 'Wild West', you immediately conjure up the picture of a wilderness that is disappearing, of a gradual bringing under cultivation and exploration, of subjugating and taming its wildness. Westpoortbeheer is a part of the increasing urbanisation of this zone. That is why it is so appropriate that a device has been applied to the side wall of the Westpoort building that offers the urban eye a point of reference in the wilderness in an exemplary fashion. Yes, I'm talking about the work of Giny Vos that is being unveiled here today. I wondered exactly how it works and what it is doing here in this cul-de-sac with a railway track in the distance, surrounded by the traces of a raw and depressing past.

What is immediately marvellous and which makes your heart skip a beat is the way the installation of thousands of LED lamps on the surface of the wall of this boxlike building detonates its monotony and ponderousness. All of a sudden it is no longer a heavy, grim wall but a screen on which life and meaning can appear. This work sits like a self-assured, healthy bird on its branch in the wood and sings. In this case it is a visual song. Words and short phrases appear in the dusk or darkness of Westpoort.

Why do birds sing? To call to one another, to determine distance, to demarcate their territory, but also to pass on information about food, danger and the weather – and of course to attract partners and intimidate rivals in love. This light installation sings words into the Westpoort area that refer to this zone, but also to this building, to what the people who work here do, to everything you can associate with the themes and words that go with them. Like a bird that whistles and spreads the message: I'm a blackbird! A very good blackbird! I'm here! And I'm always here! Is there some other attractive blackbird around? To sing with or maybe to mate with?!

Like the blackbird, the light installation plays variations on a fixed theme. You might say it plays a refrain to the same song. And all three properties of the refrain can be found in the light installation. The first: the singing bird uses sound to draw a circle around itself, its own territory. He arranges his area with the tones and rhythms. The massive letters in the light installation of Giny Vos announce that this building stands there, but it also sings the message of what and who are inside it to passers-by near and far. So it literally sings the layout, design and maintenance of the area around the building, because that is what Westpoortbeheer does.

The second, exorcising element of the bird's refrain is there too. Think of singing against danger, like that of a child humming in a dark street. That is in this light installation as well. In this remote corner of the city, waiting for better times and the implementation of the redevelopment plans, it is rather sad and desolate as it shines its words into the void. I can imagine that someone passing it late at night in the train who sees a couple of enigmatic or witty words light up in the inhospitable night of Westpoort will see its melancholy side and be moved by the resoluteness that such a signal radiates. The refrain of a bird is also a call and a challenge to confrontation. It is a signal that breaks the circle of its own domain and appeals to the world outside, a signal that seduces through its striking and impressive tones and rhythms. The light installation of Giny Vos also calls out to friend and foe. It is a big and public signal in surroundings where there is very little public communication. It is a reminder of the city further on. But where does the seduction of this solitary bird lead to?

It does not seduce like an advertisement or a logo. Nor does it have any of the prosaic invitation of city signs that indicate: here is the library, this is the town hall. No, this light installation seduces the imagination to take a leap. Very literally, it tempts or compels you to imagine what the words might mean. What is 'ruwdienst' [rough service], what do you imagine 'zoutwerk' [salt work] to mean? It is a call that provokes activity. Graffiti work in the same way: they transform bare walls into the bearers of messages that are not directly functional or comprehensible. Instead, they refer to people, stories,

activities, moments that are invisible and absent. The graffiti are the trace they have left behind, the flag they have planted.

This light installation is municipal hypergraffiti. Like the uninvited and unwanted graffiti, this wanted and commissioned light installation refers to life in the city, to what goes on, what people do, what moves, what is ephemeral and temporary. It is a reminder of people who sit together and talk about what they do, crack jokes, invent strange words. The refrain that this light installation sings with the courage of desperation in this desolate darkness is also about the sober and bold attempt to bring some degree of public life and of the city to Westpoort. And the light installation changes and sets Westpoort in motion just as the bird in the wood does with its refrain of tones, rhythms and communicative enticement. This light installation does not refer to the city and not only talks about that work of bringing under cultivation and maintenance but actually does what it says, acts in according with what it sings.

I spend many hours each week running through Westpoort for its loneliness, the windmills and the luscious fields of grass. One blustery day with wind and drizzle, I was returning from a very long run as dusk was setting in when I saw this light installation from the Seinenweg. 'Grasweer' [grass weather], it said. And soon afterwards 'ruwdienst'. I understood as little of it as I do of the blackbird's song, but I knew what it did to me. I recognised this beacon as a friendly voice, a voice from the city of people. It was a sign that lorries, asphalt, blind walls, fences and gloom do not hold full sway here. I whistled back and stepped up my pace. This bird-image and its cheerful, courageous, sober refrain cheered me up.