

## **Interview with Klaas Kloosterboer: I am not in control**

After graduating from high school artist Klaas Kloosterboer (Schermer 1959) chose for an education to become an art teacher, but ended up attending the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten between 1979 and 1983. Together with Jim Shaw and Chris Martin, Klaas Kloosterboer participated in the exhibition "XXXL Painting" in the summer of 2013 at the Submarine wharf in Rotterdam.

**Your work is not easy to read. Now I always cherish the hope that one can ask the artist to give an explanation of his work. But are your creations clear to you as the creator, or is it even for you an enterprise of which the result and the meaning is not determined and even for you open for debate?**

Recently the photographer and artist Allan Sekula passed away. He once said: "To photograph is to think." I think that what he meant to say was that taking a photograph is more than just pushing a button. You have to think about it. Sekula's words imply that thinking and acting can go hand in hand. I would like to achieve such a thing, but I believe a paradoxical gap exists between thinking and acting. Often thinking means doubting about the act or postponing the act. On the other hand: thinking is necessary. You cannot act blindly. You have to think about what you are doing, but this obstructs the act at the same time. I cannot say that I know what I am doing and do what I am thinking. And I don't think that is desirable. I work as an artist in my studio in order to experience something unexpected and to discover something I had not thought of or realized before. If the result of my labor would coincide with the knowledge or expectations I had when I started working on it, I wouldn't consider it art.

**Your work is frequently connected to the tradition of abstract, modern art. This connection has been made based on the appearance of your work and also on the fact that you participated in the famous group exhibition *Dumb Painting* with, a.o. Ian Davenport and Steven Parrino at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht in 1992. The history of abstract modern art is extensive and complicated. Its origin can be traced back to the work of Russian constructivists and De Stijl at the beginning of the 20th century. In the 50s, 60s and 70s abstract painting evolved into Abstract Expressionism, Color Field Painting and Hard Edge, and later into Fundamental, Radical or Analytical Painting and Opaque Surfaces. You cannot generalize all these different art forms and movements into one denominator. But, to make things easier, let us assume that sensory perception plays an important role in a part of these art forms. These works seem to have no other purpose than to appeal to the sensory faculties of the viewer via artistic means such as color, shape and texture. This appears to be shallow and simple but, like Barbara Rose remarked about Minimal Art, it addresses the complex human senses and demands, historically speaking, a new kind of sensitivity of the viewer. Would you say that sensory perception is paramount to your work as well?**

No, it is a role, but in my work things are different. You could call my work abstract. It does not depict or resemble anything in particular. Instead of calling my work abstract, I'd rather refer to it as concrete. I certainly do consider the tradition of concrete painting of importance, but I did not simply apply this tradition to my practice. Already at an early stage of my career, I have been asking myself how I could employ the visual language of concrete art and avoid the audience interpreting my work as a purely formal, sensory and esthetical matter. My work is based on certain particular notions. These notions derive from my activities in the studio, from my thinking and acting as an artist. To me, these notions are determining realizations which I call 'laws'. One of these laws is: "To be does not coincide with to do" Other laws are: "Meaningful actions are acted actions", "The other knows more, sees more, feels more

than I do" and "The work does not matter". A more recent law is: "Everything can be anything." For a part my work consists of a programmatic executing of these axioms or laws.

**What do you mean by "Being and doing do not coincide"?**

Exactly what I said. For instance, as an artist you can create bad work, but as a bad artist you can still be a good person. Compare it to being ill. To be ill does not coincide with you being the illness.

**Does this realization help you?**

It guards you from making hasty and too definite conclusions. To be certain is a human trait but it limits the freedom in thinking and acting. This space to freely think and act is a necessity. Without it people will soon be cutting each other's throats.

**And what does that other law mean, " Everything can be anything "?**

It is the starting point of my work at the submarine wharf. A part of my work there was attached to a slowly moving rail. Most of the visitors do not immediately notice the movement. Yet the work is in a state of perpetual motion. The backgrounds and surroundings of the objects constantly change, and with these changing surroundings and context their form and meaning adapts. The work is unstable, mobile and dynamic. In my perception, this notion comes closer to reality than the idea that objects are more or less determinable and coincide with your perception at a certain moment in time.

**This sounds like your work is solely about ideas. But is that really so? One of your works consists of a table dressed in a yellow plaid covered with a pattern of black dots. On top of this plaid lies another yellow plaid covered with a pattern of black stars. Whether or not you would attach a certain concepts to this work is, according to me, not relevant to the viewer. The work has something mysterious about it and simply looks attractive to the eye. It stimulates the imagination. Don't you think that you are selling the visual or sensory aspects of your work short?**

The fact that I develop certain notions in my does not mean that I deny the appearance or the material aspects to be relevant. I am no opponent of beauty or enchantment. A yellow fabric with a certain pattern on another yellow fabric with a different pattern resulted in an interesting image. A beautiful discovery, nice to look at. It is one of the reasons why I kept this piece. Also, I am also attached to this particular work because pieces of fabric, like words are already made. Words are not yours. They are common property. You have no control over their meaning. At most you can give them a twist by placing them in a different context in your own way. The analogy between the fabric and words or language is highly interesting to me. But that is not the only thing. I am also attached to this image created by combining those two yellow fabrics with different patterns, because - however you want to look at it - it results into something enigmatic. The enigmatic character I find important, just as is the concealing part of it. Nowadays everything has to be clear and unconcealed but identity, in my eyes, consists partly of what we disguise. Denying the mystery, claiming you know all there is to know about something, is a way to determine it and deprive it of its vitality. As an artist, I am looking for a way to relate, a way to deal with reality that maintain things dynamic instead of lifeless. In search for such a relation ideas play an important part, but, I repeat, I don't want to deny the importance of matters as the finishing touch, appearance or visual quality. Another important aspect of the exhibition at the submarine wharf to me is the conditions of natural lighting in which the work is displayed. This is fairly unique nowadays. Almost

no museum, and a diminishing number of galleries, exhibit art in an environment of natural light. This ever changing, natural lighting of my work was a revelation to me. I too am sensitive to beauty. At the same time I think you should nuance beauty. What do we consider to be beautiful? I would say it is what we have learned to find beautiful. In my eyes art is more concerned with our notion of beauty and our understanding of beauty as an idea and experience, rather than with beauty itself. When it comes to beauty, art is often excelled by nature. To me, my work has something to do with beauty when I am able to say that during its conception in my studio I did what I had to do.

**Your work embodies all kind of acts and seems to not only refer to itself, but also to some former occurrence which took place somewhere else. It seems that you have cut out circles from the canvas and you recreated paintings into larger than life-size pants, coats and gloves. Those gloves look like they have entirely or partly been dipped in paint. Could you explain what it is that attracts you to subjugate paintings and canvas to a variety of acts?**

I am not always satisfied with the results of my labor. That is just a part of me I guess. The same applies when I spread a newspaper on the ground or with other aspects of my life. Isn't there another way of doing this? There are moments in my studio when I think: "this is really going into the right direction." But when you return on the following day, you think: "if this is going to make a difference in the world we live in, I will still have to do something to it." By the way I don't think doubt itself poses a problem. The real question is: how can we use doubt in a manner that does not paralyze or obstruct us, but helps us to move forward. The question how to make doubt into a productive force seems to me just as important as the question how to make a failure into a success. The act of subjugating paintings and canvas to certain processes does not only originate from my dissatisfaction. The processes which I execute are also some kind of rituals to me that give sense and meaning to life. Whilst acting you are giving it a moment's thought. By way of cutting a circle out of a canvas, you are shaping and destroying something. To sow the cut out part back to its former place, you try to heal its wound. Subjugating the canvas to certain processes is a programmatic matter as well. In 1990 I moved into a new studio. I then decided to more sharply differentiate between painting as a material pursuit and painting as a matter of notions and programs. I decided to thoroughly investigate my interests in painting. My findings were that I was predominantly attracted to its material filthiness, the muddiness of oil based paint. Based on these insights I started to highly discipline myself into smearing red, blue and yellow onto canvas on a daily basis.

**That doesn't sound like a panacea to success.**

It produced a series of muddy paintings. Whether something turns into a success doesn't really interest me. I don't think about my work in terms of good or bad. It is about the adventure and when you are looking for adventure, you need to have trust. During the smearing process questions may arise. How to smear better? The smearing consequently turned into different programs. The prop is an example. You can create space by wrinkling a surface, which could be either a piece of paper or a prepared canvas. If you would unfold the prop, you would get a drawing with specific qualities, because paper or prepared canvas do or do not bend depending on the angle, just as water would wobble in certain angles and shapes, which make waves recognizable as such. This as well is a program which could be developed in various ways.

**The actions to which you refer to in your work are quite ordinary. They are about cutting, sewing, relocating, displacing and those kind of actions. You could define these acts as universal, yet banal and inartistic acts. Is that your intention?**

Earlier on I mentioned that, as a starting artist, my goal was to use the visual language of the concrete art in a way in which the audience would interpret this visual language not solely as something formal and esthetical. I want my work to elude the arts. Art is often too much a safe haven to me and too distant to life. That doesn't fit with me. Art has to be a means to live a better life.

### **What do you mean by "better life"?**

That is not so easy to describe. With "better" I mean "more generous". "Better" means to have an attitude in life that makes you cope with setbacks and problems in a productive manner. Life per se is fun and enervating. Even failures and setbacks provide opportunities. You have to mentally prepare yourself to capitalize on those opportunities. Art fulfills its purpose if art helps you to be a stronger and more confident person.

**Perhaps I connect this to something entirely unrelated, but by using dots and primary colors your work seems to refer to the modern art of the 60s of last century, or, more generally, to the period between 1945 and the start of the 70s when the ideals of Enlightenment, equality and freedom, appeared to be actually attainable. According to some artists, it would not be long before the shift between art and life had disappeared. Now, 50 years later, we can say that of all those expectations too few have been realized. Your work does not literally refer to this historical turn from optimism to sobering. But isn't your work dressed in a perfume of this turn, or do you find such historical references undesirable?**

I cannot deny that I am a child of my time. To me, dots and primary colors refer to optimism and the utopism of Modernism and the post-WWII era. Yet I do not use the visual language of Modernism or of concrete art for nostalgic reasons. To me, patterns of dots have more than just one meaning. A pattern of dots is in first instance something easy going and cheerful. The dot is decorative and frivolous, but the pattern simultaneously poses an interesting problem. How many dots are necessary to create a pattern? Three isn't enough, there have to be more. A pattern cannot be separated from infinity, because the principle of patterns is the endless continuity. Dots bring up more associations for me. Dots belong to textile and to the dress of your sister. When I was sixteen, I wanted to become a fashion designer. This is a factor in my work as well. Beside all the different meanings the dot embodies, it is equally true that I act a bit contrary my own principles by defining a pattern of dots as something frivolous. In the end, the dot is nothing more than a hull, a package or camouflage. The pattern of dots is not serious art. By the way, I have to explain that the use of a pattern of dots also derived from the smearing with paint of which I was talking before. If you are in a process of programmatic smearing, the opposite - programmatically placing dots with equal intervals - presents itself more or less naturally.

**The catalogue of the exhibition *Dumb Painting* published in 1992 mentions that you consider an empty canvas as something perfect. In your eyes every artistic act would by definition be a disturbance of that perfect condition: necessary to create art, but nonetheless a disturbance. Does that notion still apply to your work?**

Definitely. To do something automatically means that you are do not do something else and also can no longer do something else. Not only as an artist, but in general. It makes life difficult sometimes, but also interesting. And life itself is usually more interesting than art. The inevitability and necessity of choices

and actions, and the fact that that actions might open up new doors, yet they close some others, is a notion I want to transfer through my work upon others.

**What you are saying sounds rather protestant. You seem to attach a lot of value to formulating your own views, to propagate and debate those views, and to prove yourself and your justness by acting in the world.**

This could very well be true, because I do have an outspoken protestant background. I no longer believe, but my thinking has undoubtedly been influenced by it. Formulating notions on life and reality is important to me. To me, like I said before, it is all about the question how to live your life in a better way. But you have to accept that your notions regarding this 'better life' are assumptions whose tenability cannot be determined beforehand. You have to be prepared to subjugate your assumptions to the resistance that reality offers. To me, that also includes creating work in my studio. If the result is noteworthy, if a specific notion produces something 'good', the notion would be tenable. Such notions are the programs and laws of which I was talking earlier. I am the executer of my programs. I am not in control. I follow the work. The programs decide in which direction they will take me.

Interview: Peter Nijenhuis

[http://peternijenhuis.blogspot.nl/2013/08/klaas-kloosterboer-ik-ben-niet-de-baas\\_4467.html](http://peternijenhuis.blogspot.nl/2013/08/klaas-kloosterboer-ik-ben-niet-de-baas_4467.html)