Some splash of real
The work of Giny Vos as a solo exhibition in the Netherlands

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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?

They 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. 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 it 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 mumified 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 *Lokroep/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. *Lokroep/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.