LUC PEIRE’S ENVIRONMENT

Jean Mil · Marc Peire
Luc Peire (Bruges 1916 – 1994 Paris) began his artistic career as an expressionist painter in the wake of Constant Permeke. During the 1950s he began to reduce and stylize his human figures until they end up as spiritual beings, symbolised as vertical movement delicately balanced within space. In so doing Peire became the international master of abstract verticalism.

Crucial to this development was his artistic dialogue with Eduardo Westerdahl, Alberto Sartoris, Josep Maria Subirachs, Michel Seuphor, Leo Breuer and similar figures. Luc Peire attained the quintessence of his advanced verticalism with his trademark black and white ‘graphie’, applying this rhythmic ‘optical art’ in his three mirror environments (1967, 1968 and 1973) to attain the ultimate consequence and climax of his artistic quest: the infinite and space.

Keen to cooperate with other artists, architects and urban planners, Peire undertook a number of joint projects in Belgium and France.

Peire’s international artistic career is traced out in the diary entries of his wife, Jenny Peire-Verbruggen, published posthumously in 2001 by Ludion (Ghent-Amsterdam) as De ateliers van Luc Peire.

In July 2003 the Atelier Luc Peire – Stichting/Fondation Jenny & Luc Peire opened the artist’s studio in Knokke to the general public.
The interior graphic walls on formica differ in each of the three Environments. They are each therefore one-off realizations. In Ambiente Mexico 68, Luc Peire also introduced blue along with black and white.

Luc Peire describes his Environnement I as follows:

‘(…) You will have understood that for me expressing the idea of space has been a cause of great concern, and I therefore looked for a way of expressing it to the maximum. This was in 1965… – I sought to produce a work which would highlight the two basic elements of my painting (and of my thinking and my overall approach). – This led to what is known as ‘ENVIRONNEMENT I’. The first studies and mock-ups date back therefore to 1965, during my first journey to New York, where I stayed 6 months. – This work was actually produced in early 1967, and exhibited in May-June 1967 at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Paris. – What are we talking about? – It is a sort of prefabricated chamber with an interior volume, based on the Le Corbusier modulor, of 3.39m by 3.39m on the sides and 2.26m high. – On the outside it presents itself as a white formica cube. – The inside walls are entirely in white formica, painted with a composition in black and white. – Both the floor and the ceiling are mirrors. – The black and white graphics are multiplied infinitely, both upwards and downwards. – In this way I not only obtained absolute verti- cality, successfully showing its strength and its (human) significance, but at the same time I created (artificially, of course) real space (…). With this work I sought to accentuate the two essential elements of my approach: space and verticality. Even if in my ENVIRON- NEMENT, the treatment is pretty spectacular, my hope was that the spectator would there- after pay greater attention and make an effort to better understand my painting in general. Upward vision reassures spectators, downward vision frequently scares and frightens them, and that’s human.

To define my research I wrote a text, which has accompanied the Environnement where- ver it has been exhibited. Here it is:


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man stands upright
for me verticality is life
for many years it has been
integant part of my work

space is my research
space: non limitation
exceeding the size of the picture
vertically
to reach the infinite vertical
the limitless space

for he who receives my message
let him see my work
let him enter into it
let him be environed by it

let him be alone
without any presence without any world
but mine
empty of everything except himself
floating, without support or limit

verticalism – space
let him be himself in the world that I create
elevation for the one abyss for the other
but alone in my environment

nothing moves—neither game nor spectacle
silence withdrawal
in the confrontation or the communion
of the ascending vacuum
Exhibitions of Environnement I

5 December 1967 – 7 January 1968, Environnement, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille
22 June – 20 October 1968, XXXIV Biennale di Venezia, Belgian Pavilion (Padiglioni delle Nazioni), Venice
5 December 1967–7 January 1968, Environnement, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille
22 June – 20 October 1968, XXXIV Biennale di Venezia, Belgian Pavilion (Padiglioni delle Nazioni), Venice
4 December 1969 – 18 January 1970, Luc Peire, Centrum voor Kunstambachten, Sint-Pietersabdij, Ghent
13 October – 14 November 1970, Kunst aus Flandern, Luc Peire, Galerie im Hause Behr, Stuttgart
5 March – 4 April 1971, Luc Peire. Environnement und Gemälde, Belgisches Haus, Cologne
September – December 1971, Environnement, Royal Museums of Fine Arts (Regentschapstraat), Brussels
26 June – 13 September 1976, Aspecten Luc Peire, Cultureel Centrum Scharpoord, Knokke-Heist
22 June – 26 August 1979, De jaren ’60. Kunst in België, Centrum voor Kunst en Cultuur / Sint-Pietersabdij, Ghent
1985–1991, Permanent exhibition of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts (Regentschapstraat), Brussels
27 May – 13 September 1992, Luc Peire, de mens en de ruimte, Stedelijk Groeningemuseum, Bruges
6 May – 5 December 1999, De Opening, Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent
6 April – 27 May 2001, De ateliers van Luc Peire, Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent
7 July – 16 September 2007, Luc Peire. Environnement & Graphie, Atelier Luc Peire - Stichting Jenny & Luc Peire, Knokke-Dorp
In January 1969 Jean Mil completed his film *Luc Peire's Environment* with electronic music by Yagodic Davorin. The shooting took place inside and around *Environnement I*. The film was premiered on Saturday 17 May at the preview of *Environnement I*, that went on show at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam from 17 May to 29 June 1969.

The short film was subsequently presented on 2 February 1971 at Tours during the Cinq Journées du XVe Festival de Court-Métrage. The press was full of praise. Another projection followed on 8 February 1971 at Loche (in the Touraine).

On 15 October 1971 Jean Mil and Luc Peire were awarded the Diplôme de Participation at the Festival international du film d’expression française Dinard, with the congratulations of the selection committee.

Other showings include the international film festivals of Rimini (International Cinema, 1971), Montreal (Festival International – Cinéma en 16 mm, 1972), Los Angeles (The Second Los Angeles International Film Exposition, 1972), Brussels (Festival international du Film d’Art de Bruxelles, 1986).

The short film was also repeatedly shown (during lectures) at exhibitions of Luc Peire’s works.
Jean Mil about his short film *Luc Peire’s Environment*:

‘An experimental short film?’

Not an experiment, not a try-out, but a short film dealing with art, in a different way to many documentaries and educational films about art. Why not talk of an art-fiction-movie?

My fantasy was awakened on entering Peire’s ‘chamber’.

Like any other artistic work, *Luc Peire’s Environnement* also works strongly on the spectator’s imagination. I have recorded and expressed my imaginative fascination for Peire’s *Environnement* using cinematographic means.

In this way *Luc Peire’s Environment* becomes a personal visualization of an artistic confrontation. Using cinematographic means I gave my view, my personal review.

I visualized: vertical … graphic rhythm … architecture … stereo … parallelepiped … Brasilia … magic … vertigo … endless … gnosis … .

Peire’s *Environnement* presented for me the particular ‘optical’ challenge of transposing the limited space of the chamber, mirrored above and below to give an endless parallelepiped, onto the film screen as an endless tower.

For this we used wide angle and fish eye lenses. Given the mirror effect the shooting points had to be very carefully chosen to produce a maximum perspectival and spatial effect.

*How did the turbulent vertigo effects come into being? It was really very simple, and a question of practical inventiveness. The camera stands upright and revolves on a gramophone turntable, with the cinematographic recording speeds (6, 12 or 24 images a second) determining the various turbulence speeds.’* (Ostend, 31 March 2007)

In this way Luc Peire’s work of art itself offers a forum for a new work of art.

Yagodic Davorin’s electronic sound world reinforces the viewer’s sense of endlessness and alienation. For the musician this became a quest for a ‘unitive art’ in which sound, colour, light, movement and shape are no longer separate elements or parts, but merge into each other.
In 1967 Luc Peire asked Flemish composer Louis De Meester (1904-1987), former artistic director of the Institute of Psychoacoustics and Electronic Music (I.P.E.M.) in Ghent, to compose appropriate music as a sound environment for his Environnement. With his opus 297 Louis De Meester created a suggestive world of electronic sound to increase the illusionist experience of visitors to Peire’s Environnement. Opus 297 comes in two parts: various sinus-tone glissandi, rising both simultaneously and not (vertical), and continuous sinus tones of varying pitch and length (horizontal). The glissandi refer to the unending dynamic manifested by the verticals and the reflection. The part with the successive sinus tones (of unpredictable pitch and length) ‘reflects’ audibly the sober, linear purity of the black-and-white wall graphies. The ‘imaging’ parallelism between Peire’s graphies and the graphic representation of the sinus tone vibrations is no accident.

The electronic music clearly supports the alienation effect within the work of art. Or in the words of Pol Hardy, writing in La Voix du Nord (Lille) of 27 December 1967: ‘A strange music plunges you into an unaccustomed world, with vertical ‘glissandi’ and horizontal ‘sinus tones’ complementing the optical illusion and placing you at the paroxysm of verticality and space’.

Of this experiment the composer writes: ‘I have attempted to illustrate Luc Peire’s intention with a sequence of electronic sounds. Peire wanted to convey an impression of unending verticality. I have sought to express this unendingness using electronic sounds. In fact there is a sort of professional trick here: you can give the impression that the sound is going higher and higher, even though in fact it cannot go on doing so.'
Together with French phonetic poet Henri Chopin and Swiss filmmaker Tjerk Wicky, Luc Peire presented the experimental short-length phonetic film *Pêche de Nuit* at a world premiere showing at Knokke in August 1963. The film was subsequently shown in Antwerp on 23 September 1963 during the Benelux Experimental and Poetic Film Festival, winning the ‘Sinjaal’ prize for experimental film.

The film was then shown across the world: on Belgian and Spanish television, and at international film and poetry festivals, readings and exhibitions. In October 1982, for example, it was again projected at the Centre Pompidou in Paris as part of the ‘Thirty years experimental film in France’ festival. In 2001 the short-length film could be seen at the City Museum of Contemporary Art (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent during the exhibition *Luc Peire’s studios* (6 April to 27 May).

Henri Chopin on the origin and production of *Pêche de Nuit*:

‘(...) Peire wanted to get to know my work. In 1961 he heard my first audio-poem *Pêche de Nuit* on magnetic tape, the score of which had been published in 1958 in Cinquième Saison. I visited him and we were in deep agreement as soon as he heard the work. For the future *Pêche de Nuit* film, Luc Peire drew in his own way, drew the scenery on sheets of cardboard which, from 1962 onwards, were filmed by a Swiss filmmaker named Tjerk Wicky. Apart from the cardboard sheets, Wicky used a pyrex dish filled with water and which we stirred with a finger during the shoots.

It is Wicky and Peire who came up with the idea of using animations based on Peire’s drawings, also staying close to the rhythms of the audio-poem recorded from 1957 onwards at Saint-Martin-de-Ré.'
Here I often used to hunting fish, with a lantern and curved knife, in the ‘cluses’ (locks) at low tide. This explains the words you can hear in the first audio-poem, which is now 25 years old. In it you hear almost onomatopoeic words, like muge (mullet) (from the word ‘mugil’, giving the word mugissement (mooing or lowing)), also calmard (squid), bar (sea bass), and tacaud (pout) and torpille (torpedo fish). All these I transformed with electronic superpositions in the tempo of the diction, adding the screeching of curlews (‘courlis’), a wading bird whose very name mimics its cry. It was impossible to render all these elements in writing, only electronic manipulation enabled us to produce this audio-poem.

For the past quarter century we have realized that sound poetry is not born out of a desire or a fad: simply it exists because it creates an orchestra and a multitude of voices, and also a multitude of words, something that Luc Peire clearly understood for this film.

Also when Peire had the great idea of not producing figurative anecdotes from the audio-poem, and Tjerk Wicky had the great idea of following the rhythms of the audio-poem, and not stopping to recount a narrative story (fine for Disneylands), the film was there. Which explains why Pêche de Nuit won the Benelux experimental film prize in 1963.5

For Luc Peire, Pêche de Nuit remained an important example of the integration of various art forms:

‘(…) I from my side conceived the graphics and images. – Starting from the principle that a film is made not with the material you place in front of the camera, but in the eye of the producer behind the camera, we adopted my way of seeing things as regards the images and chose those that were the least cinematographic, that is compositions of black and white verticals. – In other words we were attempting to integrate an art discipline having a basic time dimension (phonetic poetry) with an art discipline having a basic spatial dimension (painting). – This is a totally abstract film in terms of both sound and image. – It is truly what is commonly known as an experimental film (…).’6

5 Fragment from Notesur Luc Peire, 2 October 1982, typescript in the archives of the Atelier Luc Peire – Stichting Jenny & Luc Peire, Knokke.

Atelier Luc Peire – Stichting/Fondation Jenny & Luc Peire

Atelier Luc Peire – Stichting/Fondation Jenny & Luc Peire, founded by the artist in his will, sets out to make Luc Peire’s work accessible to as wide an audience as possible and to conserve his living and working environment. The Foundation is located at Knokke, Belgium, and contains Luc Peire’s studio, house and garden. A new functional building, designed by architects De Bruycker-De Brock, has also been erected there as a ‘safe’ for Luc Peire’s works, with a small exhibition space. The archive of the Foundation has gathered and conserves all the data and material concerning Luc Peire, his work and his artistic and family environment.

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