

The art of remembering: the works of Frank JMA Castelyns

This essay is about encounters and memories, an encounter with the art of Frank JMA Castelyns. Memories have the tendency to fade away slowly, but a word, an image or an association can stir up these memories. Maybe Castelyns' images are primarily 'reminders', symbols with a great sentimental value which go beyond the automatic process of observation and understanding. Castelyns' art originates from the sensitive intellect and stimulates on an intellectual level. In each image a mental plan unfolds which entails rich art and social historical stories, traditions, images or characters. The observer is invited to remember and look for a story or a meaning himself. Understanding Castelyns' images is exerting one's own memory and starting to comprehend the oeuvre because each image refers to another, each image stimulates another. The oeuvre is linked to itself. Sometimes meaning is exciting, sometimes even shocking, funny or open but it is always sensitive.

The triangular *Walking stick for Ahasverus* and the two *Nordic sticks for Ahasverus* (2009), constructions in wenge wood, steel and Aramith billiard balls or gold pomegranates are the right metaphor for an exploratory walk through Castelyns' oeuvre. The Wandering Jew turned away the cross-bearing Jesus from his doorstep. As a punishment he would wander around aimlessly forever. The legend is one of those myths in which history has had several layers of meaning. In 1906 August Vermeylen wrote his novel 'The Wandering Jew', based on the legend. To Vermeylen Ahasverus became the incarnation of the truth-seeking man, who solitarily rebels against despair, pointless suffering and inequality. Castelyns and Ahasverus have a lot in common. As an artist he walks the world in search of a philosophy. Significant events or symbols stimulate his sensory perception and his empathy, resulting in images with sensitizing qualities and beauty. The aesthetic layer always comes first, then the deeper layer of meaning which is supported by the memory functions of Castelyns' images. The observer resembles Ahasverus as well. He walks around the works of art, experiences aesthetically, but looks for contemplation of images and insight. Image awareness originates from the inherent 'memory functions'.

HISTORY AND SYMBOL

History recycles symbols and constantly gives different interpretations to these symbols. History repeats itself and reminds us of itself. The art intervention on a page of a newspaper 'Remember Mark Twain – King Leopold's soliloquy – 1905' (2010) manipulates this process. It is part of the international nomadic exhibition 'Bolero', a growing collection of international artists who manipulate a page of a newspaper into works of art. Frank Castelyns chose a page from *De Standaard* of March 19, 2010. It is a photograph of the Tibetan Dalai Lama leaving the White House in Washington through the back door. China puts a lot of diplomatic pressure on the rest of the world not to meet the spiritual leader Dalai Lama. America didn't want to offend the Chinese authorities. Tibet still is a thorn in China's side because it keeps chasing its dream of freedom. The tense history between China and Tibet is a history of guns and blood, repression, restriction of the freedom of movement and manipulation of the public opinion. The art intervention was rejected at the Bolero exhibition in Peking (China). Castelyns manipulated the image. Three text blocks are blackened. The image has a new headline and bridges the equally dubious history of King Leopold II and his Congolese private colony, which was criticized by the anti-imperialist Mark Twain. The black could represent the twilight zone between two temporal and ideologically entirely different historical

episodes, which have a lot in common in regard to (in)humanity, morality and mysteriousness. History shifts constantly, the work of art changes simultaneously and marks common ground. Then there are the round holes representing the directions of the wind, North, East and the unspoken South, a 'travelling' motive in Castelyns' oeuvre. The symbolism of the wind directions could refer to the inspiring powers which stimulate the image and steers the (un)conscious thought towards... knowledge and memory. Everyone comes up with a story or a connection to the subtle intervention of the artist.

Castelyns' art creates common ground between symbols from different worlds, creating compound signs and shifting meanings. A photograph of Yevgheni Khaldei, photographer of the Red Army, for example, led to the creation of new 'signs'. That particular photo from May 1945 shows how the flag is being put up above the Berlin Reichstag. East conquers West. Juicy detail, the original photo is manipulated. Initially one of the two flagmen wore two watches. The communist was a profit-seeking vulture and that had to be censored. East meets West. Castelyns mixes the hammer and the sickle, symbols of communism, the Soviet Union, the worker or the farmer with the euro symbol and the dollar sign, trademarks of western capitalism and the financial economy. In the series Cibachromes, titled *Vestis Vanitatis*, which basically means 'cloak of emptiness' – this mixed sign is shaved in fur coats in sharp and fine cut out lines which cross each other, touch or run parallel with each other. The lines could be a metaphor for the grey areas between different worlds. The sign connects, but it also creates a clash. The sign can also stir up memories from World War II or the cold war, but it can also cast critical reflection on general concepts and aspects such as the relation between man and his social environment, human motives such as power and the urge to control or the cultural and economic world. A fur coat represents wealth, luxury and power, but also death and mutilation. The 'carved' sign is a scar on the fur coat and the coat itself is the result of a skinned cadaver. The fur coat is emblematic of the human urge to control nature (in this case the animal kingdom) and to exercise power. The shaved sign represents the wound and at the same time it could broaden our perception. Euros, dollars, east and west, man has created virtual (financial) worlds around him, artificial and empty without a coat. In times of a worldwide bank crisis maybe mankind will realize that he has created an uncontrollable emptiness. Is that the seed of an inevitable decline? Or the great lesson in life of unstoppable progress? Castelyns' fur coats stay topical.

SUFFERING

Time and history seem to go by excruciatingly slow, especially when things aren't going so well in the world or in our personal lives. People's suffering is omnipresent, in the news, throughout history, in the streets or in our living rooms. It is part of the general 'condition humain'. Memories can suddenly and unexpectedly bring up this inextricable state of life. At the exhibition Plexus II (*Mémoire involontaire*) (2008 – Arnhem) suffering was remembered. The title Plexus hints at Castelyns' oeuvre as a network, in which the works result from each other organically. The Plexus II project took place at the same time as the international sculpture exhibition Sonsbeek 10, curated by Anna Tilroe under the motto 'Grandeur' and 'Parade'. Castelyns commented ironically and even sarcastically on this official circuit.

MORTIFICATIO (*Remember Rosa Luxemburg*) surprised the town Arnhem. The video (part of the Plexus exhibition) was projected on a wall in the city and shows only two images. The first image is of a (suffering) Christ impersonator from a passion play the artist came across. Agonizingly slow this

image shifts into another one. It almost looks like nothing changes at all. Nevertheless Christ's face turns into a photo image of Rosa Luxemburg's corpse in a state of decomposition. She was a German Marxist revolutionary, philosopher and politician who was murdered on January 15, 1919. Her body was dumped in the Landwehrkanal in Berlin. There is such a striking resemblance between the position of the head, the decomposing eyes, nose and mouth of the two images that the spectator almost has no choice but to see this resemblance between two completely different image impressions. *Regret*, one specific manipulated image of Castelyns shows the character portrait of Rosa Luxemburg with traces of Christ's crown of thorns. The tragedy of pain and (inevitable) suffering.

If there is one juncture in the history of the visual culture with a peculiar obsession about suffering, it is the period of the Middle Ages. Suffering had a predominant influence on art and was aestheticized into *Andachtsbild*, images for personal devotion. The Pietà, the Vera Icon or the blood-curdling *Johannesschüssel* are the main examples of images based on suffering. Castelyns was inspired by the legendary story of John the Baptist, whose head got chopped off on command and was served on a dish. 'Johannes in disco' became a very influential artistic genre with roots in the thirteenth century. *Schotwond I, II, III, IV* and *V* (Remember Sierra Leone) and *Disco I, II, III, IV, V* (2008) are prints with the round dish-shaped motive as the starting point. *Schotwond* shows five blurred images and in the middle of each image a black spot in various sizes with rosy grey and white streaks. It may remind us of a lunar landscape or the print-out of an ultrasound, but the only thing that is certain is the vagueness. *Schotwond*, Sierra Leone, these are the key elements for interpretation which remind the spectator of images from African civil wars or Arab springs. Castelyns printed video stills of a shocking film and shows them blurred. The original and invisible film shows the piercing image of a Sierra Leonean rattling in a pool of blood and sand after his chest got blown to bits. Degrading suffering, martyrdom, is of all time. Castelyns' empathy is susceptible to human suffering. He knows how to (make others) reflect on it through his art or how to mark it subtly and sometimes even unnoticed, through the aesthetics of simplicity.

Living is suffering. To Antonin Artaud, the French avant-garde playwright, theorist, actor, poet, ... life was a burden. Tormented by a pitiful health with various physical and psychological agony, he embraced the madness. During a sound intervention in the town Arnhem drumroll and Artaud's cynical phrase "L'homme est malade parce qu'il est mal construit" were booming endlessly through a megaphone at five different locations and at five different moments. Castelyns' Artaud vous adresse la parole is a very compelling artistic intervention, a provocation which always pushes itself to the forefront. The unsuspecting observer is forced to listen to a sentence full of envy at life. The relentless incitement to a disconcerting form of introspection can release emotions: rage, fear, frustration or ignorance, but laughter too. The play of sound and word is also fleeting and frivolous. Artaud wanted his plays to surprise people and affect them physically. Castelyns' work is subtle, as only parts are visible (audible), and affects in a lot of different ways with sound and word, suffering and laughter.

AESTHETIC MEANING

Disco I, II, III, IV and *V*: five round objects, based on the dish shapes with *Johannesschüssel*, stand out in contrast to a set, black background. The aesthetics of this series looks modern and mysterious. The 'things' from a bird's-eye view have the same round form, vary in colour and outlook and are in

contrast with the black background. The outer images of the series have two round sides of a wooden disc, the front and the back of the serving tray, so to speak. The three other round images show the calyx of a pomegranate, an age-old symbol of fertility and death (because of the blood red colour), an antique stone grain mill and an old Egyptian sculptured phallus from above. Whoever looks closely will see two subtle white lines in the black, the tangent lines of the circular shape. The circle also symbolizes the solar cycle and the points of contact could mark the solstice (solsticia) and the tropics. For a long time the solstice was one of man's biggest fears around June 24 and Christmas. The birth of John the Baptist was always celebrated on June 24 and to stimulate the fertility of women, for example, the dishes were carried around ritually. From an iconological point of view we could presume that the artist consciously looks for that inspired combination of pure aesthetics and a complex intrinsic value (of signs).

This pattern also determines the series *Topography of the Invisible*, which could be seen as an original and summarizing catalogue of ideas and used (aesthetic) principles. There are recognizable motives on the manipulated photo's such as the pomegranate, the sculptured phallus or the picture of the Dalai Lama and the three balls representing the wind directions, in colour or not. The directions of the wind float around John the Baptist's head, painted by Dirk Bouts, move simultaneously with the splurges of power of a bullfight or mark the peculiar but never to be seen again image of the sun between the two missing Twin Towers on Ground Zero (New York). The warning function of the wind directions gestures that the well-chosen or recently discovered basic motive and the eventual – often manipulated - composition are preceded by a train of thought . This creates a new, modeled topography, a topography which points out the invisible or the inconspicuous and which creates a new (social) story.

One photograph may look insignificant at first sight. It is a fragment of an old, friable stone wall. It is the picture of an almost perfectly isosceles triangle crumbled off the wall as a result of ageing. The triangle caught the artist's all-seeing eye during a walk along the wall, probably because the triangle is an important symbol in Castelyns' work. But it wasn't just the odd coincidence of the worn triangle and the play of light and shade, even more so it was the location of the wall which inspired Castelyns' train of thought. It is the exterior wall of the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole institution in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence where Vincent Van Gogh underwent psychiatric treatment for a year. He died in Auvers-sur-Oise two months after he was discharged. Antonin Artaud, who as a mental patient himself, felt connected to Van Gogh, wrote 'Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société' in 1947. Because Van Gogh was mentally ill, Artaud wrote, he was an artist and therefore the guardian of truth and life. That is why he was suicided by society. According to Artaud Van Gogh's suicide was society's fault. Not because Van Gogh couldn't find his place in society or find his true self, but precisely because he had found his true self and as a result he had locked himself out of society. Society couldn't handle that and changed the story line by saying it was society that excluded him. According to Artaud's headstrong logic society used her greatest demon to do so: the diagnosing psychiatrist (1). Using something as trivial as a triangle in a wall as a starting point, led to a layered story, a work of art.

Everyone experiences social pressures, whether it is exerted, enforced or suppressed. Some experience it more than others. This specific and perhaps strange story of Van Gogh about society's role could lead us to the meaning of the presentation of the series *Topography of the Invisible*. Every photograph is presented within a classic framework, but the photo's themselves are folded several times and have clear folding lines just like a folded map (topography). A fold in a surface is created by

compressive stress which causes the surface to bulge in some places and therefore transform, even though there is no room for it. Society could be such a surface. There is often so much pressure, stress and tension that it causes forced alterations. Throughout history society has suffered under such compressive stress and nowadays perhaps more than ever before. The folding lines are a metaphor for society and represent the artist's sensitive view on this society.

TCHUKUDU FOR AHASVERUS

The arsenal of knowledge and memory grows with each encounter with a culture, a society, a story or an image. The artist consciously looks for new impulses, new workplaces. As he wanders around he can gain inspiration by the cartload. The tchukudu is the beast of burden at his service. A tchukudu is a wooden cargo bike invented in the Congolese Goma around 1910. For the locals it has become an indispensable means of transport for food, water and materials. The *tchukudu for Ahasverus* has a storage space in the front, filled with prints of works of art, a ladder and glue. Wherever the tchukudu stops the artistic intervention on a page of a newspaper about the Dalai Lama and the picture with the round representations of the wind directions around John's head painted by Bouts are stuck to the wall and subjected to impact of the outside world. With the tchukudu Ahasverus doesn't just walk, he works, he thinks. A lot of things in Castelyns' art are to be found beneath the surface. We can access each layer beneath that surface only through memory and knowledge. It almost looks like we are looking for 'higher things'. *Solus Altiore Labore*.

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(1) De Kesel, Marc, "Theater of dood: 'leven als toneel' en 'toneel als leven' bij Antonin Artaud", *De Witte Raaf*, 147 (2010), accessed October 6 2013.