

Introduction

Leafing through collected works of Bert Schierbeek (1918–1996), one will come across countless poems that have a relation to the visual arts. Out of sheer admiration or personal affection, the poet was inspired by the works of diverse artists like Shinkichi Tajiri, Pierre van Soest and Frank Lodeizen, as well as Loes van der Horst, Jan Sierhuis and Guillaume Leroy; in other words: by images, abstract graphics, large installations in public spaces, colorful canvases by mainly Dutch artists who crossed his path.

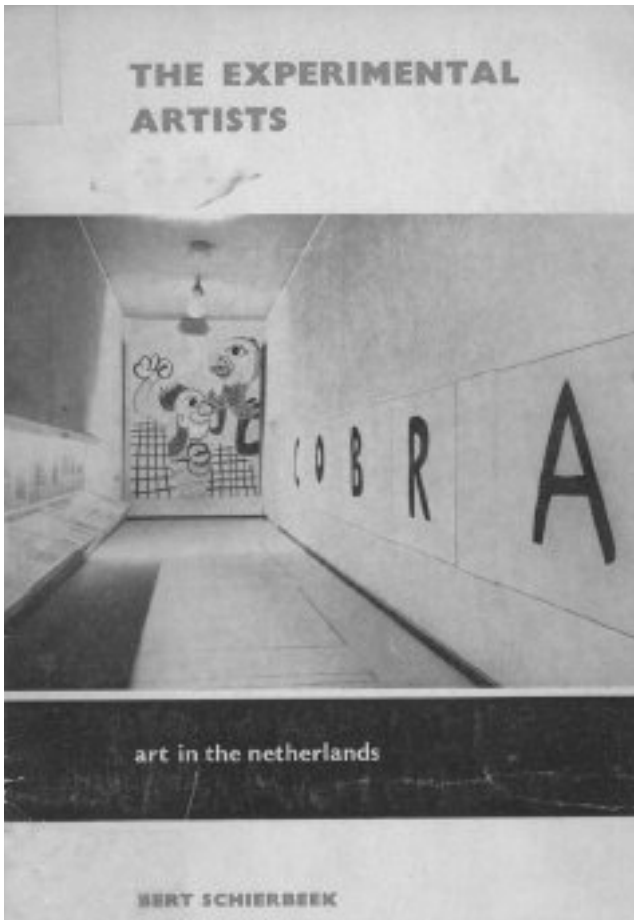
But often the reverse also happened: many painters, sculptors, photographers and filmmakers took Schierbeek's poems as a starting point for their creations. The most remarkable example of this is the painter Jef Diederer, who was so totally impressed by Schierbeek's poem *Ezel mijn bewoner* (Donkey my inhabitant) that he was hard to stop: a series of 85 drawings and gouaches was the result.

That mutual influence has resulted in a beautiful collection of collaborations, starting in 1954 with *Het bloed stroomt door* (The Blood keeps flowing), a text edition by Bert Schierbeek, accompanied by ten black and white drawings by Karel Appel. Their friendship dated from the early fifties, when Bert Schierbeek on his Parisian scouting trips, visited Appel's studio at Rue Santeuil. In later years he would also work together with Lotti van der Gaag and Corneille, whom he also met there.

It is perhaps less known that Schierbeek showed his affinity to the visual arts not only in his poetry, but also in his prose texts. He opened exhibitions, did interviews with artists, and wrote introductions to catalogs. For those activities he was widely praised. For example, reviewing the catalog *De kleur van Leo Schatz* (Leo Schatz' Color, 1989) in his 'Journaille-column' in Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool*, Jan Vrijman paid him a compliment. 'See, that's the way to do it,' asserted Jan Vrijman pointedly. 'His story and the beautiful reproductions drove me irresistibly towards the exhibition.' Vrijman thought that Schierbeek was 'the' person to write about art. And he was not alone in that. The question remains how that came about. An often-heard answer was: Schierbeek was such an excellent observer. 'You could hear him looking at things,' Diederer explained. 'When driving through the countryside, he would take in everything. Like a child looking at things for the first time. He would loudly read slogans from billboards or trucks. Look, there goes International Movers, he would shout enthusiastically.'

Edy de Wilde, former director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, noticed Schierbeek's keen eye by chance. In 1939, during mobilization prior to World War II, they had gotten to know each other. They would talk for hours and dream along the Hoornse Hop, an inlet from the IJsselmeer lake. De Wilde recalled later: 'The way Bert used to look at the light on the clouds, or a little ship sailing, struck me immediately. I felt a certain kinship in that.'

Willem Sandberg, Edy de Wilde's predecessor in the Stedelijk Museum, also saw Schierbeek's qualities early



Schierbeek's introduction to the thinking and acting of the Dutch Cobra-painters (1964)

on. Instigated by him, Schierbeek wrote *De Experimentelen* (The Experimentalists) in 1964. This was an introduction to the thinking and acting of the Dutch Cobra-painters, whose short biographies were included. The book was translated into English, French, Spanish and German, and was published by the publishing house Meulenhoff in their series 'Arts in the Netherlands'. Publications by different authors appeared in that series, about for instance Wessel Couzijn, De Stijl, J.B. Jongkind, neo-realism and Van Dongen. They must have liked Schierbeek's approach, because a request was made by Bloemena of Meulenhoff for another book in the series. Did he want to go to New York to portray painter Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)?

King De Kooning

When Schierbeek received this request, Willem de Kooning was already world famous. Many critics called him the greatest painter in contemporary America. In fact, at new exhibitions the question had shifted to whether De Kooning was already past his prime. That can be gathered from the survived folder with reviews and articles that Schierbeek was reading prior to his visit to De Kooning. There are essays by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, two critics who probably contributed the most to the propagation of the movement described by them as 'abstract expressionism' and 'action painting'. This movement emerged at the end of the forties and flourished in the fifties. Besides Willem de Kooning, it includes Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell. Schierbeek

also had pieces by Thomas Hess, who, when writing about abstract-expressionists, was especially focused on Willem de Kooning.

Initially there was a strong rivalry between Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, which was not limited to their artistic skills, but also involved women and alcohol. After Pollock died in a car accident in 1956, De Kooning was regarded as the most prominent painter of abstract expressionism.

It was obvious to refer to the meaning of his regal name: 'koning' and 'king'. Lee Hall even used the metaphor of the coronation, the happenings in the kingdom and the death of the king as base for the structure of her book *Elaine and Bill, Portrait of a Marriage: the Lives of Willem and Elaine De Kooning* (1993). 'Queen' Elaine Fried, with whom Willem de Kooning lived together for a long time, made great efforts to enlarge the fame of the painter. One of the intrigues at the court was that Elaine had an affair with Thomas Hess and wrote about De Kooning in the art magazine of which Hess was the editor.

At the time that Schierbeek wants to visit De Kooning, much has changed in the painter's life. Movements and hypes in the art world rapidly follow each other. The attention moves from abstract expressionism to pop art, and the abstract-expressionists are going their own way. De Kooning has replaced the busy city of New York for rural Long Island, where many things remind him in a number of ways of the country of his birth, as Schierbeek reports extensively. Although even now the repeating themes in his works and his handicraft provide for

continuity in his work, his new direction brings many changes.

From 1955 onwards, De Kooning started a number of highly abstracted urban landscapes that became more and more rural in character, and also had the sea as subject, the longer he stayed in the Hamptons on Long Island. In the sixties, however, he again made a series of paintings of women. When Schierbeek comes to visit, female and other figures, abstracted landscapes and sea views dominate.

Whether De Kooning was directly involved in his own public relations, or whether he preferred to leave this to people in his direct surroundings, it is obvious that he above all preferred to paint. That was already the case during the wild years in Manhattan with friends and alcohol. Since his departure to Long Island, he often worked seven days a week, which at first hindered Schierbeek, but could be nicely observed by him later.

A book or no book

Interviewing De Kooning was not as easy as initially thought. In a letter to Jan Gerhard Toonder in January 1967, Margreetje, Schierbeek's wife at the time, writes: 'Bert has gone to Willem de Kooning for a few days – at first he sounded more like William the Silent – impossible to get him on the phone or to make an appointment with him. After a lot of modest and respectful waiting, Bert finally got so angry that he demanded over the phone (and fortunately he got the boss himself on the line) a definitive answer: a book or no book. And the poor man, who kept postponing because his painting



*Stedelijk Museum 1968, left to right: Willem de Kooning,
Jan Heyligers, Nono Reinhold, Edy de Wilde,
Bert Schierbeek*

“bugged” him so much, seemed hardly aware of what it was all about. Now everything is beautiful and wonderful. Bert is enormously excited. They talk days and nights and surely wash down a glass or two in between. In short, it promises to be a beautiful book.’

However, a book never materialized. There was a typescript, entitled *Willem de Kooning: a portrait* that was ready for the typesetter. This text was entirely in English, but a previous incomplete version, which was found in Schierbeek’s estate, consists of a mixture of English and Dutch. It is very likely that Schierbeek’s American friend Charles McGeehan, who translated much of Schierbeek’s works, translated the Dutch and corrected the English. The strange thing is that this apparently happened after the first retrospective of De Kooning, organized in the Stedelijk Museum in 1968. A few fragments from Schierbeek’s text had been included in the catalog, while the complete book was announced for 1969. In the mainly English text, a few Dutch lines pop up occasionally: ‘En vergenoegd lachend voegt hij eraan toe: “Humor sneaks in.”’

The catalog also has an introduction by Thomas Hess, who, like Schierbeek, was one of the speakers at the opening of the exhibition, organized by the then director Edy de Wilde. De Kooning himself was also there, back in the Netherlands for the first time since his departure for America. At that moment there did not seem to be a problem, but when Schierbeek continued to work on the manuscript and a translation was made, some frustration emerged. The story goes that De Kooning, who could behave other-worldly and absent minded, had not completely realized that Schierbeek had come

for a serious publication. Thomas Hess didn't seem to be impressed by Schierbeek's approach. Edy de Wilde believes that Hess thought it to be superficial, and that Schierbeek had made it too easy for himself. Schierbeek thought that Hess was afraid that he would turn De Kooning too much into a 'Dutch painter'. Similarly, abstract expressionism had been branded as a typical American movement, the first one that could measure up to European schools in painting, and the first one that would indicate that New York had become the center of the art world, succeeding Paris.

Besides Hess, also Fourcade, the gallery owner of De Koonings at the time, was active in guarding the image of the American master. He prevented the publication of a monograph about De Kooning, because he thought that the painter deserved a better-known author.

It remains unclear what happened at the editors' desk, but it is a fact that publisher Meulenhoff abandoned the project entirely. Since then, the typescript, as well as Schierbeek's copy, had been lost. Until two years after his death, in 1998, the long lost manuscript was found among the author's papers. The 2005 Willem de Kooning retrospective at the Kunsthall in Rotterdam, his birthplace, seems the perfect occasion to finally publish Schierbeek's text.

Karin Evers
Guido Walraven

Willems de Kooning:

A portrait ~~of~~

by Bert Schierbeek

Nothing is positive about art except
that it is a word.

The artist takes art as he finds it.

Art begins a way to avoid a way.

Paint might have the quality of a
concrete experience. For instance:
I am very happy that grass is green.

These statements were made by Willem de Kooning, the American painter, born in Rotterdam, now 64 years of age. He has ~~been~~ been living in and around New York for over forty years. For the last ten years he has been one of the most illustrious of American painters, "the grey-headed sage of abstract expressionism".

His influence on American painting between the two world wars and thereafter is in many respects comparable with that of Pablo Picasso on the European scene. His ~~personality~~ personality and skill exerted a catalyzing effect on his surroundings and his artist friends.

First page of the typescript of Bert Schierbeek

*Nothing is positive about art except that it is a word.
The artist takes art as he finds it.
Art becomes a way to avoid a way.
Forms ought to have the emotion of a concrete experience. For instance: I am very happy that grass is green.*

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De Kooning was twenty-two when he sailed to America. For ten years he had attended the night-courses of de *Academie voor Beeldende Kunsten en Techniese Wetenschappen* (The Academy for Applied Arts and Design) in Rotterdam. He did that upon the advice of Jan and Jaap Gidding, 'painters and decorators', with whom he had taken up employment after elementary school.

To New York he brought along his giftedness, his skill, and his familiarity with European painting. From his mother, a headstrong, willful and domineering woman, he got his perseverance and the will to do something unique, without making any concessions to the outside world.

'I want to be the greatest artist, the greatest lover and the greatest drinker.'

These he succeeded in splendidly, though not exactly as his mother had foreseen or intended.

From his father he fell heir to unconcern, mobility, and the unflinching swagger to battle through the toughest of situations... and maybe a kind of diffidence and shyness as well.

His parents separated, so at an early age he was learning to look at life from two sides.

'The ambiguity of reality' has always played a great role in his work and his statements.

His grey head has something catlike about it and this is one cat you can't put into anyone's bag.

'What I see is a glimpse, a glimpse of reality, and that glimpse is the essence of my reality, and I'm that special part of it and all. So what I make out of it must be real.'

But sometimes months could slip by before he could get his 'glimpse' onto canvas, for nothing is easy. And after some such months he would throw the irksome canvas into a corner and despair and drink and drink too much. Then the confrontation could begin anew and be worked out in an hour and he could set it aside. He'd set it aside and say that it was finished, that is: finished forever... Yet it is said that, for those who possess works of his, it is not advisable, anymore, to lend him these paintings, because one can never be certain that he won't start to 'finish' them again.

'I'm not ready yet,' is proverbial of De Kooning. He has turned down several offers for exhibitions.

He has given a good deal of thought to the problems and possibilities of painting, and he doesn't stuff his thoughts under the sofa or the rug. That, in part, explains for the great influence he had on his artistic milieu.

The first contact I had with him was by telephone. We had made the appointment to meet at his place.

'Now listen,' he said, 'you take the 2:07 train of the Long Island Railroad this afternoon, leaving from Grand Central to Montauk. You take that train and you sit quiet, for people who know sit quiet on that train. There are many Hamptons... There's West Hampton, Hampton, Hampton's Bay, but you sit quiet, and when you see *East Hampton* you get off... and I'll be there...'

A youthful, sonorous voice from East Hampton, Long Island, three hours by train from New York. De Kooning had been living there for ten years.

As the train left New York progressively behind, I was coming right back into a Dutch landscape. Rivers, woods, lakes, dunes. Pollock had lived and worked there, so had Franz Kline; and Harold Rosenberg still lives there, as does Saul Steinberg.

Elaine de Kooning, herself a good painter, to whom De Kooning was married in 1943 and from whom he is now divorced, described *her* first meeting with him as follows:

'I met Bill in a bar in 1936. I thought he had seaman's eyes that seemed as if they were staring at very wide spaces all day. He had an inhuman look - vacant, limpid, angelic. I visited his studio several days later with a friend. It was the cleanest place I ever saw in my life. It had painted gray floors, white walls, one table, one bed, four chairs, one easel, one fantastically good phonograph that cost \$ 800 when he was only making twenty-two dollars a week, and one painting - a man - on the easel. The whole effect was that this man was great.'

Upon the platform at East Hampton stood De Kooning. A smallish, broad-shouldered man whose bearing reminded me of the Dutch architect, Gerrit Rietveld. He too had the same bright blue-grey eyes, which really seemed to be empty, at least to be a bit suggestive of expectancy with remoteness, but also of the confidence of being able to overcome this prospect. And yet there was also something vulnerable in his eyes. But then we shook hands; and his grip was firm, and his look was open. His grey forelock hung lank over his forehead. His large right hand stroked it back now and then.

'You know, last week I couldn't receive you,' he was saying in an apologetic tone, 'because there's a painting I'm working on now that's really bugging me - I mean it.'

The next day I could see that with my own eyes.

But first we went to a restaurant in West Hampton for dinner.

'D'you like wild duck?'

And without waiting for an answer :