

Animals More True to Life than Humans

Marten Toonder

2 May 2012 will see the centenary of Marten Toonder, the greatest of Dutch cartoonists, whose literary approach places him more fittingly alongside masters such as Jean de La Fontaine or Lewis Carroll than the strip cartoonist Walt Disney, but who nonetheless owed a lot to the latter indirectly.

It all started early. Toonder's father, who was also called Marten, was captain of the SS Alcyone and decided that his son really deserved an outing as a reward for passing his secondary school leaving examination in 1931. Why don't you come with me to South America, he asked, and Marten was over the moon at the idea.



In Montevideo he met Jim Davis, an American cartoonist who had been involved in working on *Felix the Cat* and who introduced him, in turn, to the Argentinian Dante Quintero, a man with his own studio and a pupil of Walt Disney. "Drawing strips is a vocation", Quintero confided to Toonder, "and you don't know if that is what you're cut out for until you've tried it." Father Toonder, who had introduced his son at the age

of five already to American cartoons featuring Mutt and Jeff and Barney Google in the newspapers he brought home from his travels, immediately had faith in his son and gave him a year to discover his talents.

After an unsuccessful passage through the art school in Rotterdam, where he became so disillusioned in three months that he gave up, Marten Toonder had no trouble in getting his first strips published, both in book and newspaper form. Two years later he began work as a draughtsman for existing cartoon series, while in his spare time also developing his own characters, such as Don Sombrero, who was successful in Argentina and Czechoslovakia at the end of the thirties, and Tom Puss, an adorable little white cat that was rejected by the Dutch public as too childish.

Nonetheless this clever cat made a comeback, and in 1941 at that, when the German occupation obliged the popular newspaper *De Telegraaf* to scrap Disney's Mickey Mouse. With his *Adventures of Tom Puss*, Marten Toonder provided a worthy alternative and his career took off. Tom Puss, who meanwhile had gained the company of the bear Sir Oliver B. Bumble at his side, became so popular that all kinds of spin-off products, such as calendars and jigsaws, came onto the market and Toonder had to take on a couple of assistants.

Eventually the German occupation confronted Toonder, like everyone else, with the choice between collaboration and resistance, and being both a convinced liberal and artistic individualist he opted resolutely for resistance. By mid-1943 more than a hundred people were employed by Toonder Studios, many of them in hiding and engaged in producing false papers. When the editorship-in-chief of *De Telegraaf* was taken over by the SS at the end of that year Toonder stopped his Tom Puss strip and had himself certified as manic-depressive, after which he began to draw secretly for the underground newsheet *Metro*.

Toonder did not really make a proper breakthrough until after the war. Sir Ollie and Tom

Puss were published in 22 languages and the work - and cartoon series - increased rapidly, to the point where in 1965 Toonder realised that he had become a business director and was no longer a cartoon artist. At that point he left the Netherlands and went to live in Greystones, in County Wicklow in Ireland, and devoted himself completely to his two most famous creatures, who seemed to live in a parallel, but also clearly recognisable, universe in *Rommeldam* (Rumbeldon).

After 47 years, 177 stories, 12,000 instalments, 35,000 pictures and 13 million words Marten Toonder drew a line under the adventures of Sir Ollie and Tom Puss on 20 January 1986. Toonder was then 73 and he lived for a further twenty years, just sufficient time to complete his three volume autobiography.

What made Toonder's work so unique, and particularly the adventures of *Bommel and co*, is that it not only provided a gentle criticism of society, based as much on popular phenomena such as astrology and fashion as on the cold war and the threat of the atomic bomb, but that in so doing he created animals so like people that, as with Jean de La Fontaine, they were even more true to life than human characters could ever have been. Moreover, Toonder also used highly original language that reminds us of the best work of Lewis Carroll.

MARNIX VERPLANCKE

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

Artistic Experience Knows No Bounds

Visual Arts Flanders 2012

In 2012, the year of the British cultural event Festival - Finale of the Cultural Olympiad", on the occasion of the Olympic Games in London, and the year of dOKUMENTA 13 in the German town of Kassel, five interesting exhibitions are also being organized in Belgium. The people involved have joined forces for the publicity in Visual Arts Flanders 2012, a joint project with the Flemish Institute for Visual, Audiovisual and Media Art, the Arts and Heritage branch of the Flemish government and the participating institutions and organizations. It is the first time that a cluster of people like this has been formed in Flanders "to co-operate in strengthening their cultural impact abroad". At the invitation of Tate Modern, they put forward their plans in London at the end of 2010 and had a public discussion about a co-operative venture of this kind that would cross traditional boundaries and also have international implications.

In Flanders there are five sensational events to be seen, spread across all the provinces. At various locations along the Belgian coast, during the fourth edition of *Beaufort* (from 31 March to 9 September), there are exhibitions of works of contemporary artists from every member state of the European Union. In Ghent the tradition of the sensational exhibitions *Chambres d'Amis* (1986) and *Over the Edges* (2000) continues with *Track* (12 May to 16 September), in which more than thirty international artists are developing projects reflecting the social, cultural and economic context of the six districts of the inner city of Ghent. For its ninth edition *Manifesta* (2 June to 30 September), the European Biennale of Modern Art, is descending on a former mine site in Genk (in Belgian Limburg), with work from up-and-coming international artists. *Newtopia: the State of Human Rights* (1 September to 10 December), with works by fifty artists in various historical locations in Mechelen, is the first large in-



Jan Fabre, *Searching for Utopia*, first edition of Beaufort, 2003, Nieuwpoort.

ternational exhibition to look at the relationship between art and human rights. This year, too, the Middelheim sculpture park in Antwerp is undergoing a thorough metamorphosis with the opening of a half-open pavilion by the architect Paul Robbrecht, with an exhibition of Thomas Schütte and monumental creations by Ai Weiwei, among others, (from 26 May).

It is striking how in almost all the initiatives a lot of attention is paid to public space. In Mechelen it is about a sort of forum for human rights, in the former mining town of Genk about "the repositioning of a post-industrial community", along the North Sea about "the incorporation of art in the unique biotope of the dynamic coastal towns", in Antwerp about the art of sculpture in public spaces - including the city centre - and in Ghent about "the urban fabric and claiming a permanent place for modern art in the various districts of the inner city".

The first sentence of the *Track Manifesto*, which has been circulated in ten languages throughout the city by the Ghent Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art, emphasizes that a city has no boundaries. Director Philippe Van Caueren and co-compiler Mirjam Varadinis say that the mu-

seum is aiming at interaction between the city and its inhabitants. For *Track* an imaginary line, a path for visitors, has been drawn between the two main railway stations in Ghent, a trajectory in a diagonal across the city centre, through six districts, six different realities and histories. The participating artists (who include the Dutchman Erik van Lieshout, the Fleming Michaël Borremans, Teresa Margolles from Mexico, the Swiss duo Fischli & Weiss, the Danish-Norwegian duo Elmgreen & Dragset and Ahmet Ögüt from Turkey) are interested in such variations, in the social context and in utopia. They are searching for the multi-faceted identity of a place and expose unexpected, surprising, forgotten and fresh approaches to, insights into and perspectives on art and the times in which we live.

The curator of *Manifesta* and *Newtopia*, the Greek Katerina Gregos, deals in a similar way with the history of a mining region or Belgium's wartime past, with genocide and human rights, and with the steadfast belief in Utopia. The work of the participating artists is embedded in society. Indeed, *Manifesta* is always closely connected to the political and social history of the region where the biennale takes place.

Paul Robbrecht, mentioned above, and Philip Van Den Bossche, curator of Beaufort 2012, reflect on how images, installations and monumental works are given a place in public space, both in parks and along the Belgian coast. How these images are positioned and exhibited is also a history of how exhibitions are organized. It leaves a clear trail.

At the end of the day the people behind the five events want to leave such a trail behind, works of art as beacons, witnesses, monuments and inspirational resting places. After four editions of *Beaufort* a vast and lasting sculpture park is gradually being established; following city exhibitions such as *Chambres d'Amis*, *Over the Edges* and now *Track*, the artistic intervention and the works of art themselves are forming "memory trails" in the image of the city. *Track*, as is stated in the exhibition manifesto, agitates, plays, reads, listens, looks, sees and provides an experience of art that is without boundaries.

PAUL DEPONDY

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

www.visualartsflanders2012.be

The Story of De Stijl.

From Mondrian to Van Doesburg

Two artists and an artistic movement belong to the canon of Dutch history: Rembrandt, Van Gogh and De Stijl. In order to raise the profile of De Stijl as a journal, an artistic movement and an idea in modern Dutch museums, the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag has decided to dedicate a wing of the museum to Mondrian and De Stijl in an exhibition lasting until 1 January 2014. The image that the museum is seeking to create of this group with the exhibition and the accompanying publication is one that is lively, joyful and free: "Although art historians, particularly in the 20th century, have described De Stijl above all as a coolly rational, structured, almost cold style, the intention of the De Stijl artists themselves was to make a work of art that was both dynamic and at the same time lively, free and joyful, just like the future itself. It is no coincidence that they were also involved with dance halls, advertising and fashion." The exhibition includes models, plans, paintings, sculptures, furniture, printed work, typography and fashion and presents them as an eclectic mix, with no hierarchy. The multitude of objects is not brought together to form a clear overall picture, but demands attention for the progressive, multidisciplinary character. Another aim of the exhibition is to reinforce a dynamic image of De Stijl. Starting from Mondrian's 1927 article on neo-plasticism 'in the home, on the streets and in the city' ('Neo-plasticisme: De Woning - De Straat - De Stad'), the exhibition builds on the theme of home/street/city: the presentation is staged "from the inside to the outside, from the small to the large". For the staging of the works, this implies among other things the inclusion of models of Mondrian's studio (which show an evolution from a traditional layout in 1909 to the experimental studio in New York in 1943). The artist Krijn de Koning and the architect Anne Holtrop have created an installation specially for the exhibition (*163 spaces for a work / 163 ruimten voor een werk*), inspired by

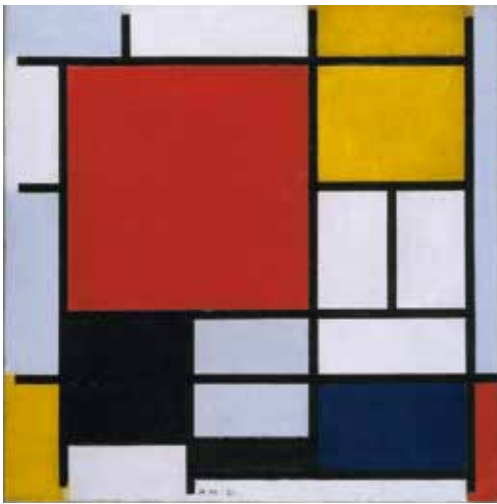


Exhibition view of *Mondrian & De Stijl* © Gerrit Schreurs.

Mondrian's 1927 article. Their design simultaneously forms the architecture of the exhibition space and is elaborately presented as a series of intimate domestic rooms which lead the visitor via a street-like route to another series of more open work rooms. The parallel is clear, if perhaps a little too literal, and has the effect of enclosing the exhibition within several relatively small rooms. Even the biggest rooms are themselves subdivisions of a museum wing which would only be able to convey a true impression of an urban space if it were presented as the open space that it really is.

By contrast, the publication accompanying the exhibition succeeds in its aim of projecting a lively image. After opening the cover which, with its detail of Mondrian's 1921 *Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray* deliberately plays on the familiarity of rectangular relationships and primary colours, the reader is surprised by two photos which set the tone for the rest of the publication: 'Cheerful group near the shop selling artists' requisites in the alleyway behind Café du Dôme, after closing time. Mondrian second from the right, photographed in August 1926' and 'The germ of the Dada movement is released from a rubbish bin at the Conference of Constructivists and Dadaists in Wei-

mar in September 1922. In the centre are Nelly van Doesburg, Cornelis van Eesteren (with stick) and Theo van Doesburg'. Yet this does not imply a naive idea of a jolly and cohesive group: from the start, the book does not shy away from the confrontations and the frictions which were partly responsible for the innovative power that characterised De Stijl. The book characterises De Stijl as a lively discussion between artists, architects and designers, and begins with the request by the collector Helene Kröller-Müller in 1916 to Bart van der Leek to suggest a colour design for the furnished 'art room' ('Kunstkamer') designed by the architect H.P. Berlage on her Groot Haesebroeck estate in Wassenaar. The collaboration failed because of differing views, but the conflict did result a year later in a manifesto published by Van der Leek in the first issue of the journal *De Stijl*. The publication is a concatenation of these kinds of events: the text is made up of fragmented storylines strung together on a series of meetings between 1916 and 1939, the latter being the year of the Dutch contribution to the World Exhibition in New York. In this article, *De Stijl* is described as a high point of Dutch art in the modern period and as an element of the reforming tradition of community art which has meaning for the future. At the same



Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Grey and Blue*, 1921, oil on canvas, 59.5 x 59.5 cm. Collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag © 2007 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International, Warrenton (VA, USA).

time, the publication almost playfully contradicts the expectation of 'The story of De Stijl' which is evoked by the title, with its fragmentary structure reinforcing the affinity with Dadaism. The book enjoys this ambiguity and takes time to explore how Van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters felt about the relationship between Dadaism and Neo-plasticism.

While the book and its fragmentary narrative come to an end in 1939, the exhibition also highlights the influence of De Stijl on later artists, architects and designers. The final rooms contain work by Wim Sinemus, Constant, Donald Judd, Imi Knoebel and Piet Hein Eek. This is a limited selection which could have been very different, and precisely because of that it is a selection which, like the book, holds out the promise of more.

LUT PIL

Translated by Julian Ross

- *Mondrian & De Stijl*, until January 1st, 2014, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, www.gemeentemuseum.nl.
- HANS JANSSEN, MICHAEL WHITE, *The Story of De Stijl. Mondrian to Van Doesburg*, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag & Ludion, Antwerp, 2011, 267 p.

Closed yet Close By

The Royal Museum for Fine Arts in Antwerp

A number of large museums in the Low Countries are in scaffolding at present. In Amsterdam work has been going on for years on the *Rijksmuseum* and the *Stedelijk Museum*. Now the Royal Museum for Fine Arts in Antwerp has also closed its doors for extensive alterations. The three museums are housed in buildings that date from the end of the nineteenth century and urgently need to be modernised to the standards appropriate for a museum of the twenty-first century.

The renovation of the Museum for Fine Arts in Antwerp will take at least six years, and it is hoped that it will be able to reopen in 2017. That it will take so long is due, of course, to the far-reaching nature of the work needed, but also to the fact that the majority of the works of art will remain in storage in the museum, so that people will have to take care how they go about things.

However some six hundred works of art are being transferred to other locations. The museum management has devised a programme: "Closed yet close by", with which they wish to indicate that although the museum is closed at present, the collection is still accessible. The works of art are going to other locations where they will supplement other collections or where they will form part of temporary exhibitions.

A first batch of paintings left the museum as early as the end of 2009 to return to the place they were originally made for: Antwerp Cathedral. A great many altarpieces were taken from the cathedral during the period of the French Revolution and placed in various museums. Eight of these altarpieces, including work by Quinten Metsijs and Peter Paul Rubens, which currently form part of the collection of the Museum for Fine Arts, now hang again in the place where they hung until the end of the eighteenth century. The original intention was that the exhibition would be dismantled at the end of 2009, but because the museum was being closed anyway the canvasses will continue to hang there until 2017.

Important nineteenth and twentieth century works from the Royal Museum for Fine Arts are displayed in the exhibition "De Modernen. Topstukken uit het Koninklijk Museum" (The Moderns. Highlights from the Royal Museum). The museum has about 5,000 works from this period and some of them are exhibited in the restored Fabiolazaal in the centre of the city. Modigliani, Botero, Chagall, Degas, Magritte, these are just a few of the names the organizers can draw on for various exhibitions. A first exhibition closed its doors on 8 January this year, but there are still partial exhibitions to come dealing with art in the Netherlands, abstract art, Constant Permeke and further trends in contemporary art.

The Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), which is housed in a striking new building, opened its doors in Antwerp on 17 May 2011. Such a short time ago, yet already it has become the most visited museum in Belgium. For the opening exhibition MAS drew on key works from three important museums in Antwerp, including the Royal Museum for Fine Arts. Through the works the exhibition sketches the evolution of the culture of images from the Middle Ages to the present day. The Royal Museum for Fine Arts provided masterpieces by the Flemish Primitives, as well as genre paintings and works of art by Rubens and his contemporaries. This exhibition is open for visits until the end of 2012.

In Lier, a small town some twenty kilometres from Antwerp, the "Bruegelland" exhibition will be on show throughout the period that the Royal Museum is closed. Its main theme is the folk tradition in Flemish and Dutch art from the time of the sons of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Painters such as Adriaen van Ostade, David Teniers and Jan Steen interpreted the Bruegel-like fair and ale-house scenes in their own manner. In the 18th and 19th centuries artists such as Ferdinand De Braekeleer and Jan Josef Horemans followed in Bruegel's footsteps with folksy subjects, and at the beginning of the twentieth century the Flemish Expressionists in their turn discovered Bruegel all over again. Artists such as Constant



Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of a Man*, around 1619, oil on canvas, 119 x 126 cm. This painting is going on long loan to the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, USA. © Royal Museum for Fine Arts, Antwerp.

Permeke, Gustave De Smet and Gustave Van de Woestyne breathed new life into his rustic scenes. The Royal Museum for Fine Arts lent the City Museum of Lier a hundred or so works for this purpose. The focus of the exhibition changes every six months so that visitors can keep finding new emphases. "Bruegelland" will run to the end of 2017.

Thanks to a gift from a collector in Antwerp in 1989 the Royal Museum for Fine Arts came into possession of 13 paintings, 36 drawings and watercolours and 8 sculptures by Rik Wouters. The Antwerp Museum now has a total of 109 works by this talented painter and sculptor, who died in 1916 at the age of thirty three. During the alterations to the Royal Museum for Fine Arts this rich collection is going to Mechelen, where Rik Wouters was born. Until the end of 2017 the Schepenhuis Museum there is being transformed into a veritable Wouters museum, where the



Rik Wouters, *Rik with a Black Eye-Patch*, 1915, oil on canvas, 102 x 85 cm. This painting is part of the Wouters collection that is temporarily going to Mechelen, where the painter was born. © Lukas – Art in Flanders vzw / Sabam Belgium 2012.

under the best conditions. The old nineteenth-century building will have been restored to its full glory by then, but the interior will have been extended and adapted to suit the needs of a museum in the 21st century. It will be a new magnet to draw people to Antwerp.

DIRK VAN ASSCHE

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

<http://www.kmska.be/en/>

collection from the Royal Museum will be supplemented by works from the Mechelen City Museums. The intention is to put the spotlight on a different aspect of Wouters' work every year.

In addition to these lengthy exhibition projects some works are being lent by the museum for a specific period to museums both at home and abroad. For example, Anthony van Dyck's "Portrait of a Man" is going on long loan to the famous Worcester Art Museum in the American state of Massachusetts, where it will also undergo restoration. Works are going to Zürich and Mexico City too. Work by James Ensor, of which the Royal Museum for fine Arts has the largest collection in the world, is travelling to Silkeborg, in Denmark, among other places, but especially to Japan, where the exhibition "Ensor in Context", which was shown in Brussels in 2010, will be on display in five different museums from April 2012 to March 2013.

If everything goes according to plan, all of these works will come back in the course of 2017 to a fully renovated and enlarged museum, where they will be exhibited to the public at large

A Twenty-Year Long Success Story **Museum De Pont in Tilburg**

Whereas the city, regional and national museums in the Netherlands are going through hard times now that the government is carrying out large cuts to culture, the situation is different for museums that have resources of their own. Independent museums such as Beelden aan Zee in Scheveningen, De Buitenplaats in Eelde, in the province of Groningen, Singer in Laren (Noord-Holland), Panorama Mesdag in The Hague or Beeldengalerij Het Depot in Wageningen have been proving for years that they can put on an attractive show for their benefactor (often the person who founded the collection or provided the basis for it) with relatively small means.

To the examples named above can be added the De Pont Museum in Tilburg. The museum is named after Jan de Pont, an entrepreneur who originally came from Brabant, who left part of his fortune to three worthy causes, one of which had to be art. De Pont has a small jubilee to celebrate: in 2012 it will have existed for twenty years. In itself a twentieth anniversary is not so exceptional, of course, especially as there are other much older private mu-

seums that have remained independent from the government. But De Pont is definitely a maverick in other ways. With its consistent choice of contemporary art, which until the 1980s was exhibited almost exclusively in the famous national museums (the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam and Van Abbe in Eindhoven), De Pont scores surprisingly well. The 65,000 or so visitors come not only from Tilburg and the surrounding area, but equally often from elsewhere in the country. Moreover, the museum also attracts visitors from abroad. These are nice figures, but the museum is even more pleased with the fact that its consistent acquisitions and exhibition policy stands it in good stead with internationally renowned artists; such good stead that they are more than willing to have their work displayed there.

Those who criticise that the museum is treading “well-worn paths” are overlooking the fact that in the 90s De Pont was the first Dutch museum to exhibit a number of names that have since become well-known. De Pont got in early with Luc Tuymans, for example, in 1995 – and not by Dutch standards alone. In the previous year the Belgian painter had been preceded by Jeff Wall and Roni Horn. The Tilburg museum was also the only place in the

Outside view of Museum De Pont in Tilburg © Peter Cox.





Exhibition view of Giuseppe Penone at De Pont © Peter Cox

Netherlands to manage to devote a large exhibition to Rosemarie Trockel. Moreover, it quickly established one of the largest museum collections of work by Thomas Schütte. Those are names with a reputation that is directly linked to shows like Documenta in Kassel and the international biennales.

De Pont's selection policy has been consistent now for twenty years and that is mainly down to its director, Hendrik Driessen. He was already director of the museum when the decision had to be made about premises, a former wool-spinning mill built on the edge of the city centre of Tilburg just before the Second World War. Over the years, when making his selection, Driessen has taken into account where the works of art would be hung. Although the location has been radically changed by Benthem Crouwel Architects (who are also renovating the Stedelijk Museum and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam) to bring it into line with all the requirements of a modern museum, the industrial character of the former textile factory has not been obliterated. Large installations do well here because they have space in the vast rooms, as was already evidenced in 2011 at the Mark Wallinger exhibition. At the opposite end of the scale, work by Thierry De Cordier, Richard Serra and Marien Schouten, is shown to advantage in the cabinet-like wool stores.

Yet the industrial setting was not the deciding factor in going for these names. From the beginning Driessen sought his strength in limitations: no more than three large exhibitions in a year. The museum works with a permanent group of artists

that is slowly growing. The group of artists whose work is included in the collection consists of sixty or so names at present. Among these are artists such as Sigmar Polke and Marlene Dumas, whose earlier purchased works would now be unaffordable for the museum. So De Pont seems to collect with an eye to the future. Moreover, Driessen focuses on three different types of artist. There are those who continue the tradition, the artists who present themselves as anarchists and those who operate primarily as soloists, who cannot readily be assigned to a style or trend or be placed within a movement. In this way a varied permanent collection is being built up in which, above all, there is plenty of room for contrasts. This means you can confront the cerebral approach of Gerhard Merz with the "romantic" Richard Long, who looks for the controlling factor in nature in his landscape art. But also the work of a soloist such as Thierry De Cordier is thrown into relief by the anarchist Luc Tuymans (who, one must admit, can also be included in the two other categories). "Contrariness", an attitude that can sometimes cause an uneasy feeling, may well be the guideline to the De Pont policy. There are not many museums like this.

CEES STRAUS

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

www.depont.nl. In 2012 there are exhibitions of Ai Weiwei and Berlinde De Bruyckere, among others.