

Between end and beginning #64: Richard van der Aa

Essay by Bertus Pieters, Villa la Repubblica, June 8, 2024

Text translated from Dutch with the help of Deepl and Google Translate.



The work of Richard van der Aa (1963) is considered “concrete art”. Art with a geometric, abstract slant. Concrete art has a long history that starts with the coining of the term by Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931) in 1930, and even before that. As was usual at that time, this was accompanied by sharp-wittedness and some hostility. In the meantime, the dust has long since settled. The term “concrete art” now has a broad meaning and has mainly to do with the application of geometry in the work of art, whether it is based on rational geometry (as once intended by van Doesburg) or inspired by extra-geometric matters. The latter is also difficult to avoid, because geometry is not an isolated island in the world. Especially when the use of colour is not quasi-objectively based on the three unmixed primary colours (red, yellow and blue) in addition to black, white and grey, there is room for subjectivity, for the ‘colour of feeling’.

Van der Aa's work can be called hybrid. Certainly, it is always contained in geometric forms. In recent years, the basis has often been the rectangle, whereby the rectangle often coincides with the shape of the support, the ground. The corners of the rectangle may also be cut off or rounded. In the composition, parts may be missing or something may have been added. There is

also often an interplay of two colours, or of white and a colour. The circle appeared earlier in his work, but now circles do not seem to fit into his story, and the triangle appears at most as part of a rectangle. Whether this is all based on reasoned premises remains to be seen. It is quite possible that this way of composing simply suits van der Aa well and, within those constraints, he finds sufficient freedom to show what concerns and inspires him. The development of artistry leads to a certain narrowing of view, perhaps the only drawback of being an artist, but that ensures that within the given limits, the artist cannot let himself miss any opportunities, and that the work is recognisable to the viewer (which is a happy by-product). And further: restrictions can of course be lifted by an artist, as he or she has the utmost freedom in this.

Back to the hybrid aspect in van der Aa's work. Take, for instance, his work *A weekend in Prague*. The title suggests a memory, or the elaboration of a note from the time to which the title refers. Again, the composition is originally rectangular, even square. The two top corners are cut at an angle in the sense that there is no colour and they are partly painted white. However, the left corner extends a little further towards the right, so that the remaining white triangles become uneven. As a result, the composition becomes asymmetrical. The upper part of the composition, bounded by the cut corners, is brown, so that the composition as a whole resembles a building, the brown part being the roof. It may be a multi-storey building, it may also be a much smaller kiosk, but that doesn't tell the story. It is a work that is both suggestive and completely abstract, after all, the shape of a rectangular building with a sloping roof is itself a geometric form that refers to nothing other than itself. On the other hand, that abstract form is also immediately recognisable as a building. Whether van der Aa had a specific building in Prague in mind is not clear from the work or the title; so that cannot matter any further.

The idiom of concrete art seems to leave no room for doubt or nonchalance. Van der Aa, however, likes to display a certain nonchalance. This is clear at first glance from the rectangular part of the "building". It is painted rather roughly and in smooth strokes of grey. The stroke directions of the different gradations of white and grey overlap, and the whole area seems to be coated with a misty liquid white. There are also some places where the paint was partially repelled, 'holy days' in painting jargon. Within this roughly painted grey plane, then, there is also a compositional division. It is divided with the same emphatic nonchalance into a somewhat darker rectangular area, framed on the left and above by a somewhat lighter piece, as if a shadow from another building falls across the façade of the depicted building.

When you then take a closer look at the "roof", which at first glance is completely uniform in colour, it turns out that it is not free from irregularities. The same goes for the hard edges of the geometric shapes. Hard edges seem to emphasise a certain absoluteness in concrete art, but a closer look reveals that absoluteness is relative in van der Aa's case. On the left side of the boundary between the grey-grey and the brown, there is some doubt about where that boundary ends: where the left roof point ends at the edge of the plane, it is partly painted over by the grey of the façade, and it is impossible to determine which of the two planes maintains the correct straightness. You could dismiss it as a mistake, a slip of the brush, on the part of the artist, but that does not seem plausible with van der Aa, who has so much experience in applying geometric shapes and sharp divisions. Perhaps it is based on a mistake, but it seems more like a staged mistake, built in for the scrupulous viewer.

Also striking are the sloping parts of the roof, which are defiantly asymmetrical; white paint seems to have eliminated sloppiness there. The white paint even slightly covers the brown on the right side.

Those casual touches in A weekend in Prague generally push against the limits of the absoluteness of the intentions of concrete art. They give van der Aa leeway to show other qualities of visual art. You can dismiss the sloppy paint strokes in the grey-grey section as such. Within the concrete idiom, however, they are also a representation of uncertainty. The rational wants one thing, but the materials, the pigments, the brushes, the diluents want something else, and there is no escaping that. This creates a subtle game of gnawing at reason. It is as if van der Aa is undermining his own idiom. You could then see it as a form of subversion, but then there is the title. Van der Aa refers to an event. It is not clear whether it concerns an event he experienced himself, or an event experienced "spiritually", whether it was a short city trip, attending an exhibition opening in Prague, or reading about it, and that doesn't matter much either. Ultimately it is about the memory of that event.

Memory is both beautiful and deceptive. Much of our thinking life - or our spiritual life, if you will - is based on memory, even if you think you are only thinking about the future. It is tempting to get stuck in memory because it has its own compulsions: it can be beautiful, moving or horrifying, and this often causes the needle of thought to get stuck in memory. Memory itself is deceptive because we tend to remember specific details and forget others, according to convenience. Remembering and forgetting at the same time is a nonchalance, a subversion of our own memory and of our own thinking. It is this subversion that characterises A Weekend in Prague. The sharp concrete seems to be a pinned down certainty within the memory, the subversion of the concrete seems to be the filling in of what is no longer remembered, or it is the fleetingness of memory, or it is the feeling of the memory that mystifies concrete memory. The subversion of the nonchalance provides the added value of the work that is difficult to put into words - and that is just as well, because if it had been put into words, A Weekend in Prague would not exist. After all, in the beginning is always the image.

Bertus Pieters

<https://villalarepubblica.wordpress.com/2024/06/08/tussen-einde-en-begin-64-richard-van-der-aa/>

Image: A weekend in Prague: Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 50 x 50 cm. Richard van der Aa, 2023.