

HOLLAND

HORIZON

QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF THE NETHERLANDS

NUMBER 2 - 1991



JAZZ ON
THE SEASHORE

ROTTERDAM:
THE GATEWAY
AND BEYOND

WHAT'S ON
IN SUMMER

THE POWER AND THE GLORY:
the sea and the arts in perspective

I N T R O D U C T I O N



A 19th-century visitor to the Netherlands, the French painter and writer Eugène Fromentin, argued that "Dutch painting was not and could not be anything but the portrait of Holland, its external image, faithful, exact, complete, life-like, without any adornment." He added, "We live in the picture, we walk about in it, we look into its depths, we are tempted to raise our heads to look at its sky."

Through the centuries Dutch artists have produced a portrait of their country which has made the landscape of the Netherlands familiar the world over. And it is the 'living painting' of Holland, the man-made landscape with its horizontal and vertical lines, the enormous sky, the extraordinary light, the expanses of water, which never fails to impress the first-time visitor. Flying over the quiltwork of rectangular fields, interwoven by canals and straight roads, one is reminded of both the landscape paintings of an earlier age and the geometric patterns on the canvases of Mondrian, at the same time marvelling at the inventiveness and skill of a nation to so sculpture the geography of their country.

In this issue of Holland Horizon we focus on both the physical and cultural landscape of the Netherlands, which as one of our contributors writes "has always lived under the threat from the water which surrounds and permeates it - though ironically its greatest adversary is also one of its closest allies". Water has shaped the history and geography of Holland. The nation's culture is inseparably tied to this landscape.

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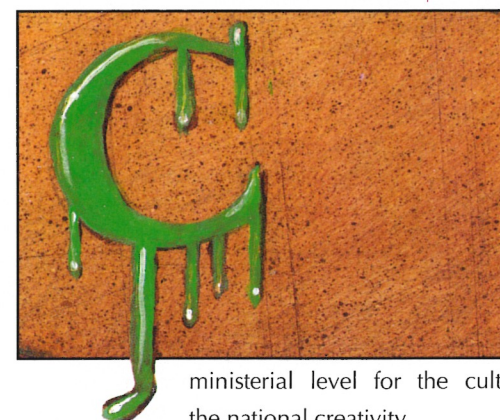
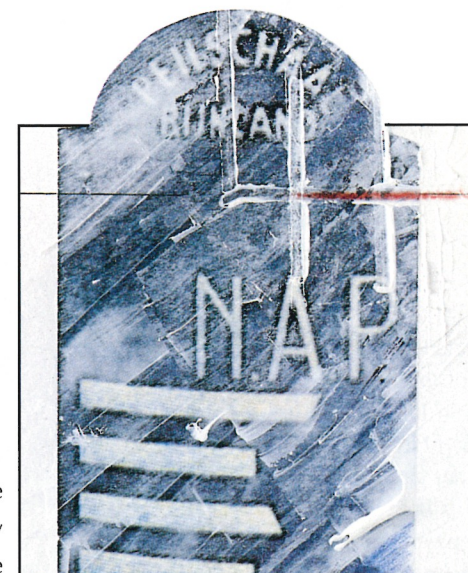


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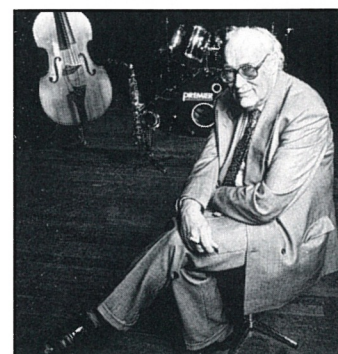
WATER WAYS

Forty per cent of The Netherlands is below mean sea level. Since the 13th century 600,000 hectares of land have been reclaimed from the sea. This country is built on the shifting sands of its own making



CULTURE COUNTS

A complex system of funding lies behind the success of the Dutch arts. Full support at ministerial level for the cultural infrastructure backs the national creativity



ALL THAT JAZZ

Festival fever comes to The Hague each July with luminaries from the world of jazz taking the stage. The world's top indoor jazz event has gone from strength to strength since the first event in 1976

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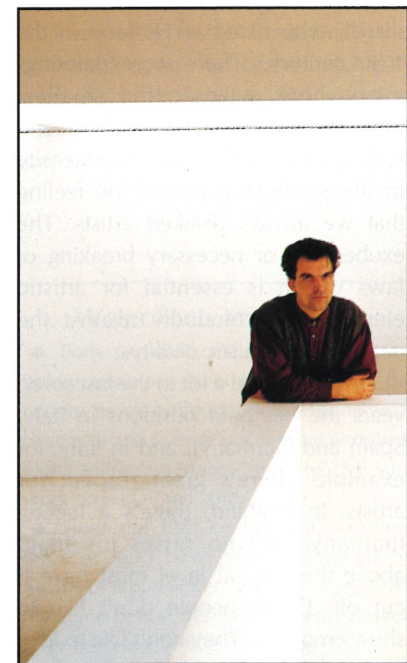
DOUBLE VISION

IJsbrand van Veelen talks to two influential figures in the Dutch art world in an attempt to answer the question: is the art of painting dead?

No one is unaware of the mastery of Dutch painters of the 17th century. Major artists have certainly put in an appearance since, but what's the record nowadays? It is frequently said by the non-Dutch that Holland is a land of painters, but are they referring to the past or the present? Or do they perhaps mean the visual characteristics of the countryside – seen from the air this land does indeed resemble a green-toned Mondrian painting?

Time and again this century we have heard the art of painting pronounced dead, but it has revived just as often and returned with even greater energy and stronger enthusiasm. The latest wave of painting enthusiasm was to be felt around 1980 in Europe and the USA. Sjarel Ex, director of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht since 1988, was studying Art History at the time. He was 23 years old and the painting wave of those days has left its mark on him. So much so that he plans to hold a retrospective on the art of the 1980s.

"Holland," says Ex without hesitation, "is the best country in the world for painting, and I regard painting as the highest form of art. It is the artistic medium with the richest history, which makes it very difficult for someone who has aspirations to be a painter to contribute anything worthwhile to such wealth. 'Apart from the burden of tradition, a painter has to face other,



Sjarel Ex

L.J.A.D. CREIGHTON

very demanding, requirements. Painters must be well organized in order to exercise the necessary command over their materials and the surface they are painting. They must have a knowledge of the traditions of their profession while remaining as close as possible to themselves. And, most important, it is almost impossible to hide things in painting – technical imperfections and mistaken actions show immediately. It is because of the great difficulties involved in painting that there are so few artists who are *always* good."

Over the years Ex has organized various exhibitions, always devoting a



Evert van Straaten

L.J.A.D. CREIGHTON

prominent place to the art of painting. One of his first projects, entitled *Grafted onto Bosch*, developed literally out of a painting: Ex invited several contemporary artists to produce what they thought most appropriate for the lost central panel of Jeroen Bosch's triptych depicting the Flood. Two years later, during the Amsterdam cultural festival, Century '87, which presented contemporary art against a background of historic inner city sites, Ex contrived – although the festival was admirably suited to installations and sculptures – to present a fair measure of paintings. Just what you'd expect, he says, because a painting is in fact "a movable installation." Museum director for three years now, Ex has already presented two major shows of works by Dutch painters – Jan van den Dobbelaer and Kees Smits.

When asked to name the outstanding young painters in Holland today Ex responded with Marlene Dumas, Rene Daniëls, Emo Verkerk, Bettie van Haaster and the somewhat older Reinier Lucassen, adding swiftly that this is by no means a complete list.

Evert van Straaten (who previously worked at the Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst) is the new director of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, often described as the loveliest museum in the world, both because of its setting, architecture and its collection. He takes a different approach to art than Ex, but also finds the statement that art is dead absurd. "An artist should 'charge' his



Composition number 7, (1985) by Rudi de Wint

RIJKSDIENST BEELDENDE KUNST

materials so that his meaning becomes apparent, but it makes little difference in what way or with what medium he does this," says Van Straaten. He believes that every artistic expression, including painting, requires a certain spirituality in order to make it compelling. Art, he says, can be considered a visual philosophy. His decision to become director of the Kröller-Müller was a very conscious one. From the beginning the collection was characterised by an idealistic, somewhat metaphysical approach. Such features are also prominent when Van Straaten lists some of his favourite contemporary painters: Rudi van de Wint, J.C.J. van der Heijden, Daan van Golden, Gerard Polhuis and Martin Rous. Different although their works may be, these painters all have certain things in common. They all probe to the limits of their medium. What these

artists try to do is unite extremes like form and idea and bring them into a kind of balance. At its best, their work offers new approaches to contemporary art without becoming limited to a certain period and thus likely to devalue in the future. This feature, the striving for both contemporary meaning and eternal significance, is what Evert van Straaten terms essential and on this he and Sjarel Ex agree; trendy followers of fashion and twenty-four-hour wonders are not what's wanted.

Right now Sjarel Ex is putting together an exhibition to be entitled *Old Painters Never Die*, though if he and Van Straaten had their way, the 'old' would be omitted. ■

Translated by Wendie Shaffer



Marlene Dumas' Snow white and the next generation, (1988)