

## A FLAT STONE OR A PATCH OF SUNLIGHT

The distinction between illusion and perception in Anke Kuypers' work.

"Entre l'illusion et la perception la différence est intrinsèque et la vérité de la perception ne peut se lire qu'en elle-même. Si, dans un chemin creux, je crois voir au loin une large pierre plate sur sol, qui est en réalité une tache de soleil, je ne peux pas dire que je vois jamais la pierre plate au sens où je verrai en approchant la tache de soleil."

Merleau Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*

When a flat stone at the end of a concave road finally turns out to be a patch of sunlight, then the shape of a stone is what one in the first instance has perceived. It is possible to compare two assumptions by imagining them together. Nobody, however, can see two things at once. Even when several interpretations seem to present themselves simultaneously, one interpretation will always completely supplant the other. But this does not impair the other interpretation's right to exist. On closer inspection, the patch of sunlight may also appear to be an illusion. Perception is, after all, by definition a process of interpretation; in other words, 'a belief in the world'. That process can hardly be said to be the infallible registration of reality by an all-seeing eye. Seeing is in the first place a dialectic game of truth and error on the basis of ever-changing perspectives. That constant distinction between illusion and perception is by nature intrinsic, as Merleau Ponty maintains. In his opinion, the truth about perception lies enclosed in perception itself. These words can be used well as the overture to the theme that has long been expressed in Anke Kuypers' work.

The essence of this work is the friction between the perceived shape and the actual figure. That friction may be caused by making the perception of the work of art dependent on the position of the viewer. Especially in her early work, she investigates the spatial illusions of shapes in this way. For example, there is a monumental piece of applied art dating from 1986 in a schoolyard; a lightblue square of tiles on the ground which presents itself either as a diamond or as a trapezium shape according to the position of the viewer. There are diamond and trapezium shaped panels on the walls, however, and the shape of these panels is

determined by projecting the distortion made by the square on the ground seen from four different angles. There is a constant interaction between the physical and the mental image in this three-dimensional production. In this way, the viewer becomes aware of the dialectic game of perception and error on the basis of different perspectives.

In her more recent work there is usually one point of view. The friction is brought about by positioning or connecting the shapes in such a way that incongruity arises in the figure itself. For example, two spatial illusions, evoked by one complete shape, are not able to be united in one figure. Occasionally, one single spatial illusion is only reinforced by an unusual connection. Or now and again two planes suggest a volume that is only present in the imagination. Whatever the case, the interpretation is never straightforward but always ambiguous.

The final figure can be quite amorphous as far as meaning goes; in other words, it evokes no recognition in visible reality. What is suggested, however, is a rudimentary form of association or potential meaning. Occasionally they are sunken pictograms, figures that swim fleetingly in one's consciousness just below the surface of a recognizable sign system. Whether it is recognizable or not, the shape looks as if it has been chosen so as to get the most out of ambiguity with a minimum of means. The point that one is unable to see several images at once is driven home time and again in these connections.

Even when this game of perception and illusion is limited to the figure itself, the connected shapes still appear to relate to their surroundings. In 1992 Anke Kuypers made a large mural in which a pattern of shapes is tested for its monumental value. This results in an intriguing sequence of fifty connected shapes. As every connecting method has been used, the sequence is intrinsically confined and yet the illusion that the pattern as a whole can be extended endlessly in all directions is definitely present. The eye seems to see more here than the figure itself reveals.

Although the fifty shapes are closely related, they also clearly differ. They are what could be called "semi-isomorphous". Together they evoke a broad range of associations. The complete figure could be a lexicon for a figurative language or rather a list of all possible conjugations of a number of basic geometrical shapes.

The complete figure does more than evoke grammatical associations. Imprisoned in a pattern of seeming redundancy, these shapes look as if they oscillate with each other in a sort of 'Brown's movement'. More importantly, the whole figure displays an aesthetic quality of a type that is unemphatic and almost decoratively rhythmical. This explains why the stark geometry of each form on its own is softened into an almost organic whole, as if Malewicz for once sat down to cut shapes with the aging Matisse.

The shapes in this mural are purely autonomous and the guessing game of meaning takes place on another level of reality, namely in grammar, physics and biological rhythm. There are, however, also pieces whose concrete appearance evoke direct associations with visible reality. The figure made for the courtyard at the Tonder Museum in Denmark is a fine example. The contours of this figure are the result of connected parts but the eye can no longer discern the exact dividing lines. This internal ambiguity makes it hard to define the figure as a whole. One glance is not enough yet there is a shock of recognition when one notices all sorts of correlations between the shape of the figure and the grave steles standing nearby. In this way there is both a formal and a semantic ambiguity that is determined by the context of the figure.

This recognizability of shape is expressed more emphatically in her latest work. Her initial principles may be less strict, but the rules of the game are now more subtle. Previously, colour was as good as absent from her work. At present, colour is applied in a layered fashion; she sands down two layers of acrylic paint or fills in a shape in the drawing with soft pencil shading in different colours. The separate colours remain visible yet combine to form a new and therefore different visual effect. The connected figures grow an almost transparent skin that softens the unaccessibility of the shape but does not remove the elusive nature of the contour line. This allows for a more subjective experience and seems to increase the lamination of the figure.

Anke Kuypers started out as a jewellery designer but has now been making three-dimensional as well as flat surface work for years. Moreover, she has done a series of monumental pieces related to architecture. Recently, however, in 1993, she retraced her footsteps for a while and produced a series of gold and silver ornaments in which she applied the principles of ambiguously connected shapes

in a very original manner. An unruly form, worn by the human body, seems to be indicative for all her work. The shape is unemphatic but manifest; an ambiguity that again is characteristic for all her work. Is it a flat stone or a patch of sunlight? The difference between illusion and perception does not only determine the way we experience the world, it is also at the bottom of the consistent point of view which is recognizable throughout in the evolution of her work. There is always the doubt between truth and error. One mental picture stands in the way of the other. The aesthetic experience and a slight feeling of wonder become interwoven, not so much because of the shapes themselves but more because something is slipping in the process of perception. For a moment, one's beliefs are up in the air again.

Text: Huub Mous 1994

Translation: Mieke van der Ley