D-Light + MM2 = Dutch Experimental Film

by Dirk de Bruyn

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Art is the communication of emotion to matter.

– Harry Hooton

One of the most encouraging projects to come out of the 2004 Rotterdam International Film Festival was the launch of the book, MM2: Experimental Film in the Netherlands since 1960, coupled with a program of historical and contemporary experimental work by Dutch practitioners titled D-Light. The book and the program were organised by the Filmbank in Amsterdam. This project brings together and re-examines the area of experimental/avant-garde film in the Netherlands since 1960 and highlights the growing interest in such work in Europe on the back of the short film explosion brought about by the accessibility and low cost of digital film production technologies. D-Light consisted of 10 separate screenings of short films compiled by Anna Abrahams, Erwin van't Hart and Peter van Hoof under the titles: "Almost Silent", "Encounter", "Female Attention", "In and Out", "Material Worlds", "The Mind's Eye", "Moving", "Resistance", "Screen Presence" and "Travelling Shots". The book, MM2, was also edited by these same three with the addition of Mariska Graveland, and opens with essays by Edwin Carels, Nelly Voorhuis and Dick Tuinder/Aryan Kaganof (Ian Kerkhof). It also contains 16 interviews with film artists, an extended filmography section on numerous artists and an accompanying DVD Cadavre Exquis produced by Anna Abrahams. The development of the book and the program is covered in the accompanying interview with Anna Abrahams and Erwin van't Hart.

The temptation is to play further with the markers given the two faces of this project of re-presenting the legacy of the Dutch avant-garde: D – Light + MM2 = how MIMmm – tasty, DeLIGHTful, delicacies and so on. But I will refrain. It is too trivialising, too much eye candy territory to go too far down that road. There is some of that kind of pitch surrounding this project. This may be the spin needed to catch a young contemporary audience's attention in a competitive market but it is something more intrinsic that holds me. This is about a serious and relevant art's practice. It is the trace of an ongoing interrogation of the moving image, the presentation of a Cinema Regained. This is the title given by Simon Field, in his final year as Director of the Festival, to the program in which the D-Light screenings appeared, alongside the work of Ken Jacobs, Dietmar Brehm, Peter Kubelka, James Benning and Santiago Alvarez – recognisable names on an international stage of challenging film innovation, in short, good company.

Revisiting Alvarez's 79 Springs of Ho Chi Minh (Cuba, 1968) in the context of Travis Wilkerson's didactic low-budget documentary Accelerated Under-Development: In the Idiom of Santiago Alvarez (USA, 1999–2003) refocused the point that modes of presentation explored by the avant-garde can resonate with the political. The use of a marginalised and low-budget aesthetic is often the most direct way to communicate a commitment to an outsider idea/view/ideal: a way of being, a desperation, economic reality, a political struggle. In 79 Springs U.S. soldiers are scratched out of the frame of
recycled newsreel footage by Alvarez. This low-budget personal voodoo response to the Vietnam War was galvanised by the personal shattering of being caught in an American bombing raid on Hanoi with his newsreel crew and experiencing directly its aftermath.

Within the D-Light program Fred Pelon's *Mantelfraude, Mentalfreude* (2004, 25 min) uses the low budget necessities of frayed images and scrambled statements to let four workshop participants talk about and reveal their struggles with spirituality, art and psychosis, respond to each other's parallel worlds and in the process take ownership of their stories. What evolves is a language that talks from the outside, the outsider. This can offer up as much political clout in the First World as Alvarez's work offers the Third. Pelon's other showcased work *Mold Boat* (2003) highlighted that his aesthetic has come out of a self-reliant Super-8 practice. Here, some discarded holiday home movies shot whilst in the Far East were left in food and fungus to decay. This is reminiscent of Australian filmmaker Graeme Cutts' strategies, who has left film emulsion to break down in his garden in the Dandenongs, and also connects with the recent work coming out of Sixpack in Vienna, which focuses on the materiality of film, like the recent *The Bathers* by Joannes Hammel (2003, 5 minutes). It also has traces of attitude and aesthetic of the work produced by the Melbourne Super-8 Group in the early '90s, especially some of the work by Steven Ball and Nick Ostrovskis. A work like *Mold Boat* is now finished digitally, possible because of screening options but Pelon has resisted the temptation to enhance its aesthetic in the process. It remains for us to find a pleasure within the density of that familiar emulsion dance.

Of the earlier Dutch work it was helpful to catch up or revisit the films by Frans Zwartjes – *Spare Bedroom* (1970, 15 mins), *Living* (1971, 15 mins), *Birds* (1968, 6 mins) and also the 1955 film by Shinkini Tajiri, the one time Cobra group Sculptor, *The Vipers* (9 mins).

Shot in Paris and touted as documenting the emergence of the counter culture, Tajiri's *The Vipers* is reminiscent in subject and editing of those early Brakhage psychodramas, sometimes referred to as suicide films, which have a surrealist spin particularly inspired by Maya Deren's work, and which can also be read as mapping out a psychic collapse.

Zwartjes' numerous, often erotically charged, performances on film with his life partner Trix and others are subtle and considered permutations of the space, gesture and posture that constitutes their film-based personas. This relationship, in which the camera takes on a crucial role, focuses on the power relations between the two. It is a relationship that often oscillates between a contract of mutual exploration and the dynamic of performer and voyeur. The way the bodies/the characters are presented in front of the camera bring to mind Cindy Sherman's strategy of photographing herself whilst performing various cinematic poses. At times Zwartjes captures non-verbal moments, primal glimmers of what it means to be human. As well as shooting these films on low budgets, with fellow artists as actors, he did his own sound camerawork and also his own processing. Zwartjes, through his teaching at the Free Academie in The Hague and his artistic profile, has had a generational impact on Dutch experimental film. The D-Light program presents clues. Paul de Nooijer's performance based work in which he often places himself or his family in playful communication with technology has a relationship to the more austere Zwartjes source, specifically in its direct dialogue with the camera and with its placing of actors within that space. In *Transformation by Holding Time* (1976, 4 minutes) he sets up a polaroid-film dialogue and in *How To Make a New York Cake* (1978, 5 minutes) places his family in the frame. Wim Jongedijk's *Holidays* (1997, 9 minutes) directly imitates the male/female set-up of Frans and Trix, but within the next generation the power dynamic has shifted. Here the female persona, though less encultured, initiates as often as she postures and the dialogue of gesture and facial expressions by both personas are more playful and explanatory.
A number of films in the program lie at the border of surveillance/nee observational documentary. Two short straightforward works stand out. *17th of March* by Nathalie Alonso Casale (1993, 6 minutes), filmed at some safe distance, is an observation of a bearded, homeless drunk sitting on a cold street in Vilnius. He is ignored by a rush hour of passers by and after being forced up falls back down and dies. It sounds all too simple and predictable but the way it all unravels evokes a strange incidental, macabre stench.

Dick Tuinder's *Rimbaud in Amsterdam* (2003, 5 minutes) filmed clandestinely from a second storey window catches a street scene of a group of young men apparently at odds. Our inadequately formed impressions are teased through various readings of assault, bullying, drugs, booze and/or having fun and finally escape in a puff of smoke as the group moves haphazardly on from the camera's scrutiny. This simple film delivers on many levels. Not only are these young men at play but so are we also being teased by our own preconceptions forged, I suspect, by pre-digested news and entertainment storylines of violence, panic and fear on the streets so important to surveillance TV shows like *Cops, America's Most Wanted*, or *World's Worst Drivers*.

Bas-Jan Ader's short stunt performances in such films as *Fall 1 / Val 1 – Los Angeles* (1970, 34'') and *Fall 2 / Val 2 – Amsterdam* (1970, 13'') shows the artist falling off a roof in the first film and off his bike into the canal in the other. These are short unexpected events, concentrated and distilled that retain something of that performance element activated by Zwartjes but also touch terrain later investigated by Tuinder and Casale. There is the spectre of self-mutilation: the suicidal exhibitionist, the matchstick persona is placed centre stage of the catastrophe. In California, from 1963, Ader established himself in the conceptual and minimalist community. There is a sad core to this conceptually strong and focused work. In his film *I'm Too Sad To Tell You* (1971) he sat in front of the camera, took a sip of tea and began to cry uncontrollably. He disappeared in 1975 at the age of 33, in a small sailboat off the coast of Cape Cod trying to cross the Atlantic to Holland as part of his trilogy “In Search of the Miraculous”. He never arrived.

Jeroen Eisinga's conceptual work intersects with Ader's but moves to somewhere else by denying catastrophe, erasing the unpalatable out of the presented equation. *Kano (rood)* (1993, 4 minutes) and *Sehnsucht* (2002, 9 min) were both part of the D-Light program. His first film *40-44-PG* (1993, 3 minutes) is a performance with his Volkswagen Beetle documented in the countryside. There was no audience. The steering wheel is tied so that the car moves in a small circle without a driver. Eisinga stands in the centre of the circle blindfolded and moves around getting bumped by the car: A continuous road movie without distance, offering the possibility of an Ader moment. Eisinga has said that he appreciates the Dutch countryside as an abstracted terrain: a premium location to enact pared down performance. In *Kano (rood)* Eisinga is sitting in a red canoe in a green field. He is in an unconnected pool of water; he looks back, the canoe cannot/does not move. It has nowhere to go. This film is not about distance but about duration: a particularly enticing statement to make in a spatially challenged European state with a significant history. *Sehnsucht* is a stop motion palimpsest of a decomposing zebra on an abstracted black and white checked carpet, a backdrop that suggests Muybridge's turn of the century experiments. Varying climatic conditions during the day and night cause the corpse to rise and fall as if it is breathing. There is also the relentless ongoing emptying of the starving anorexic cadaver to skin and bone, to becoming carpet, to becoming background, to becoming abstract. This is a more sanitised decomposition than presented in Peter Greenaway's *Zed and Two Noughts* (1986, aka *ZOO*) where the decay of a series of animals, including a zebra, was allowed to take place on the outside in full view. Eisinga has placed a small hole in the stage underneath his animal like a tap for the decay and stench to pour out of the body. What is interesting in Eisinga's work is that in his presentation of the essential, something clearly remains hidden. Was there really no-one watching a blindfolded
Eisinga bumping into his car?

Eisinga in one of the artists, along with Henri Plaat, Lonnie van Brumellen, Joost Rekveld and Gerard Holthuis showcased in Anna Abrahams' effective documentary sampling Dutch experimental film, Cadavre Exquis (2004, 35 minutes), which opened the D-Light screening program. Lonnie van Brumellen's reflexive, conceptual yet physical work is also initiated at an intersection with Ader. Her first film Wegrenfilms (trans. Runawayfilms) (1992, 3 minutes) has the filmmaker running away from the camera at three separate locations. Route Sedentaire (2001, 270 minutes) documents van Brumellen dragging a sculpture of Hermes along the road for three months from Amsterdam to Lascaux in South France, the site where the first cave paintings of human beings were discovered, a kind of point of origin, ground zero for European visual art. The sculpture wears away in the dragging, leaving a white trail across the landscape. Only part of the torso remained. There is only one copy of this film and it is wearing away like the sculpture itself. This is the idea.

Joost Rekveld is presented in D-Light with #11 (Marey <-> Moiré) (1999, 21 minutes). He titles his films with primary numbers and constructs his abstractions from the interference patterns of light itself. His work manifests the materiality of light through highly technologised means and an intricate understanding of the filmic process. This is visual music. Rekveld came to experimental film from electronic music and his work reflects a similar enmeshing of creativity and technology. The scripts for these films are as precise as a musical score. #11 is a joyous and uplifting activity in its viewing, its detailed dance of line, rhythm and colour shed off this cocoon of mathematical certainty that brought it to life. This work is experimental in the classic and scientific senses of the word. It demonstrates a primal dynamic from the history of moving image art and sets up a bridge to the digital through the technical emphasis and virtuosity of its construction.

It is a construction of technology as much as an image that is celebrated. In 1882, Parisian innovator and physiologist Etienne-Jules Marey, referred to in the title of Rekfeld's film, constructed his own camera shaped like a gun that could shoot multiple exposures onto a single frame. This is also part of Rekfeld's technique. Instead of shooting multiple images of animals onto the film plate he is layering beams of light onto the emulsion. This is an Imploding Cinema rather than an expanding one. It is a cinema that shrinks past the molecular to the other side of the quantum and surreal world of particle/wave physics. This practice addresses Maholy Nagy's pure design of light and goes some way to answering Artaud's invocation:

> You will look in vain for a film which is based on purely visual situations whose actions spring from stimuli addressed to the eye and is founded in the essential qualities of eyesight, untramelled by psychological or irrelevant complications or by a verbal story expressed in visual terms (1).

Perhaps it is the cyborg that will answer Artaud's dream.

Gerard Holthuis' Hong Kong (HKG) (1999, 13 minutes) captures passenger jets skimming at low level above an urban district on their way to Kai Tak Airport, like sharks floating by overhead. The high contrast stock gives an early cinema feel to the images. It helps the planes seem intrusive, out of place, out of time. After the screening, while the filmmaker talked about the process of capturing these images before the airport closed down, finding the places to shoot from websites and local knowledge, I was struck by the similarity of this process with a fishing expedition or a big game hunt. Holthuis ended up with his trophy on the cinema wall. Henri Plaat was represented by 2nd War Hats (1984, 3 minutes) and Fragments of Decay (1983, 12...
2nd War Hats shows a series of heads with absurd sumptuous covering peeping out of manhole covers. A number of questions emerge: prairie dogs sniffing, deciding whether or not to come out of their burrows? Men dressed up as women? Unsafe to come out from the man-hole? Fragments of Decay is another kettle of fish. Lit architectural shots of abandoned buildings, walls, the kind that appear in the nether landscapes of Cocteau's Orpheus (1949), but emptied, worn, eroded, silent, pensive and wise.

Ian Kerkhof's Dead Man 2: The Return of The Dead Man (1994, 26 minutes) moves us directly into the spotlight of the eroded, fraying human psyche. The title likely refers to the Georges Bataille short story, The Dead Man given Kerkhof's stated debt to Bataille and the physical, degrading nature of the work. It makes Nick Zedd and Lydia Lunch seem positively middle class. The stark opening hardcore scene sets the tone for the rest of the film's viewing and ups the ante on transgressive cinema. It takes place in a bar. We see two men strapped up in S & M gear, they verbally abuse and provoke one another until one spews into the other's mouth. This very real but perverse moment releases us into the rest of the film, into the mesmerising landscape of the bar. Lucas populates his bars within the Star Wars trilogy with weird looking alien types. Kerkhof opts for a circus of striking and debasing behaviours. A catatonic middle-aged man searches for something lost, through imparted golden showers and other despicable acts. Dead Man 2 plays both as metaphor and evidence for the decline of the west. Kerkhof's features Nice to meet you, please don't rape me (1994) and Naar de klote! / Wasted! (1996) have been similarly confronting. Naar de klote! / Wasted! follows two twenty-somethings into the drug and club scene in Amsterdam. It was originally shot on digital video and has been an audience hit in the Netherlands.

Naturally the films discussed are not all that were on view, only a sample of a sample. Kakaja Zemlja (1992, 20 minutes) by Jan Willem van Dam, Ten Past Six (1979, 10 minutes) and Marijheim (2004, 14 minutes) both by Edward Luyken, are discussed elsewhere as part of interviews with those filmmakers. The interviews place these pieces in relation to their other work. It is worth noting, again, that a lot of the work in this survey fits in neatly in reference to work produced elsewhere. The optical printer work in Van A tot R (2004, 14 minutes) by Marijn Maris connects back to the way images were combined graphically by filmmakers from the west coast of the United States during the '60s and beyond, the work of Pat O'Neill comes to mind but also, in terms of the images themselves, the sensibility of some of Gunvor Nelson's early work. Tourniquette (1992, 15 minutes) by Frederieke Jochems and Andras Hamelberg connects back to the landscape film so prominent in England through the work of Chris Welsby especially and some early Mike Legget or the work of John Dunkley-Smith in Australia. Souvenir uit Africa (2002, 7 minutes) in look and sensibility is reminiscent of the mixture of low-budget playfulness and deep-seated social comment also evident in the work of Melbourne filmmaker Chris Windmill.

It is always an interesting phenomenon how some ideas, and/or ways of talking emerge, re-emerge or develop in different places around the world. What is canon, what is not? Some work gains international attention, some not. And some national attention, as this survey has; however there will be some work that does not. What are the politics of these decisions? There was a healthy mix of artist-initiated "off festival" showcases that sprang up during the Rotterdam Film Festival to make this point. And there is, of course, this tension between the local and the international, the micro and the macro. For me, it is those fragile and marginalised works like those presented in D-Light and those filmmakers that emerge out of the local that remain the most engaging. Such work often displays an honesty and grounding, a self-referencing. It demonstrates a need to exist out of which emerges a language and way of speaking we can all recognise, and out of which we can learn to speak ourselves about our own
locations. The local is the place from which the independent voice and image arises, despite and because of the hurdles placed in its way. This survey of short Dutch films gives a snapshot of this process, at its committed, often low-budget, creative, opportunistic roots. It reclaims a history and context in which to place and create contemporary work whether that be as continuation or emphatic break.

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Endnotes