

COMMISSIONED TEXT BY STEVEN TEN THIJE

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“A basic insight of the information age is that information, tied theoretically to decision theory and to thermodynamics, is not simply “the facts,” but particularly in its current usage, carries on implicit coercive force. As Barry Glassner writes of the fitness-movement, so too with body-management (which subsumes fitness):...”

Dear Alex,

Through your gallerist, I've received a request to write a text on your recent works. Works we discussed once, with remarkable intensity, while more or less lounging on a couch in the Eindhoven art space Onomatopée, during the buzzing Dutch Design Week. It took me some time to respond to this request, as I was recently completely absorbed by the kind of stress, for which the 'body-management-movement', mentioned in the quote at the top of this letter, proposes a utopian resolution. I took the quote above from one of your 'umble prints. The 'body-management'-movement promises what we all desire. What if, due to some fantastic method, we could discipline ourselves into total control of our destiny? What if by scanning our bodies, we could counter all those bad habits of this age, of which I'm also so much an example. What if we could learn to respond timely to e-mails, deliver on deadlines, create an appropriate work-private balance, be a good worker, good father, good brother, good husband, good neighbour, good friend, good citizen, good everything. Yet it also scares me. Because perhaps it is this very suggestion of 'perfection within reach,' which is the true curse of this age for the so-called “developed world”.

These are the thoughts that cross my mind, when I browse through your PDF-portfolio to refresh my memory. What strikes me now is the sense of relief I get from their combined simplicity and complexity of the works. They are complex as they are layered and filled with references. What is that woman doing printed over (or under) the pages of texts? What are those Rorschach like stains referring too? Where and who are the absent bodies, whose sweat created the image on the paintings? And which tree stood as a model for your small wood of tree trunks? Each work poses questions, but at the same time, there is a kind of silence to the work that is relaxing. The works don't seem to bother too much about the answers. I can take from them what I want and this puts me in a quite simple relationship with them. I can follow my instincts.

If there is any thematic that reappears in the works, it is perhaps “instinct.” Even if it does so in a very nuanced manner, which is quite at odds with the whole directness of instinct. In a way you turn instinct against itself, or recover another sense of instinct obscured by the understanding of which appears dominant. Mostly instinct appears as a piece of hidden code, programmed into our being, which decides our path. Just like the 'body-management-movement' in which controlling instincts is the ultimate achievement, not by suppressing them, but by out-smarting them through technique. Instincts are automatic responses based on triggers, so in their autonomism they are unsurmountable. Therefore the million dollar question is knowing the trigger. Because if we know what preceded an automatic action, it allows us to manipulate in advance that which will control us later. Only then we will be true sovereign subjects.

Yet, I sense that you, just as myself, share a skepticism to this desire to know and control. It even seems that this is the vanity of our information age, which pushes us constantly to focus on knowing the “not-now,” constantly obsessed with our agenda's and tasks-lists, which pushes us to imagine our

lives from now to end, pressuring our awareness to be always somewhere lost at sea, never really here, never really there.

What then does it mean, that I can follow my instinct with your work? It means a reversal of the notion of instinct as “programmed.” Not because instincts are not immediate and automatic, but because I don’t have any agenda in what I want to get out of them and it is this openness that interests me. When engaging with the works, there is no ‘desired outcome.’ Even if there is certainly a moment of transformation, as I start to wonder about the images and what they do to me, in me. Instinct in this sense is not so much response, but more a sense of creation. What is produced is not a sense of resolution, but a perpetual conflict of different experiences and thoughts that bump into one another, allowing for a playful reconfiguration of oneself, allowing one discover new insights.

The ‘umble prints are a nice example. Copying segments of texts that for one reason or another sparked your interest, they are then ‘addressed’ by you, or so it seems to me, with a kind of visual subconscious that you have printed over the text. In this they respond to the content of the text, not so much by illustrating it, but more by performing the content of the text in an artistic form. I don’t think anyone will ever know why each shape added to the text is where it is, but you can reflect on the content of the text more or less endlessly, by reflecting again and again on the dialogue between image and text. This dialogue is not set to produce a resolution, but invite you to surf the wave of thinking openly on the many meanings a text can have.

In this, the works do not so much propose a full embrace of the critique set out in the quote I put at the top of my letter, but more suggest an alternative form of body-management that one could engage in: an artful body-management if you will. The difference being that, as far as I have experienced, that in opposition to a management tool that helps you to achieve goals one has to predefine, here new and unknown goals can start to appear. In opposition to prevailing management tools, here knowing one’s desires is not understood as something to do once. Engaging with one’s desires, dreams and hopes, is an ongoing endeavour that requires a very special performance, for which art can be extremely useful. The pleasure I experience in the ‘openness’ of the works, located in their indifference towards a ‘right’ interpretation, is what is helpful in creating a physical/mental environment in which one can encounter different aspects of oneself continually.

It is through this experience that I relate to the other works you have made, which add another aspect to this practice, strongly connected to the experience of ‘bodies in space/place’. The night sweat paintings, the intervention in the plaster decoration on the ceiling ‘prototype for a gestalt cornice’ and the small tree trunks in bronze, they all propose a play with the absence of something, by making an echo of the absence present. This is most obvious in the sweat paintings, whereby the old practice of painting to make something present through a virtual reflection, is here made physical, producing an image through a literal impression of someone’s porous physicality of which sweat is the material residue.

What I experience as specific in these works, is their devotion to the moment of physical encounter between one thing and another. Again it helps to return to the body-management-movement to understand what is at stake in this. As the page dealing with body-management makes clear, this technique deals with entering into your own body with your awareness to, in a sense, re-programme yourself. When confronting this technique with your work, one way to understand what happens, is that you go even a level ‘deeper.’ Your work in some sense is a more perfect form of body-management, as

it allows one to reach a core of one's desires, which previously one could not even verbalise. Yet, when taking into account all the works, it becomes clear, that this is not exactly what happens.

If there is a point in the work where one can find this creative moment, it is not by going 'deeper', even the contrary. The work does not point towards a presupposed creative 'subconscious', but much more to the creativity of the surface. There is not a hidden code that needs to be uncovered through some trick, but it is the surface itself that is simply made visible in all its productive energy. The sweat appears at the surface of the body, eats itself into the surface of the cotton, and then turns into an image. Just as it is the body in the 'prototype for a gestalt cornice' that stood as a model for the cornice, merging with the surface of a building, allowing body and building to blend. Even the tree trunk follows this logic, as it is the outline of the trunk, that filled the mold, which remains when the tree itself is burned; a surface which is then captured when the empty space is filled with bronze.

When viewing the exhibition like this, the works each appear to refer to a different and key moment in life. The sleeping, loving, working energy of the body, of which sweat is the most intimate testimony. The intellectual interaction with literature and texts, that one privately enjoys, and whereby the encounter between the printed letters, produce all kinds of wonderful (and horrible) images in one's mind. The cornice, that marks the outline of the space made by human bodies, occupied by them, so that they can enjoy shelter, yet also interaction. Especially the decorative quality of the cornice, refers to a space which exceeds pure utility, a space where one experiences the environment as inspiring and a proper stage to playfully encounter each other's strangeness and familiarity. The tree trunk, finally, marking the end of life and what remains. The artificially produced bronze fossil, which recalls, endlessly, the harsh interruption of life that the living tree into a dead trunk.

In each of these moments, it is not the goal set in advance, that marks their significance. It is the unforeseen productivity of the result of the interaction between surfaces, that define these moments of life. The moment when the fluid inside of our bodies formalises into a solid thing that touches the world, creating beautiful sparks that allow us to redefine ourselves. It is the inspiration that is literally the result of expiration. The fact that we don't create from without, nor even from within, but that we create through considerate, attentive interaction with the things and people we encounter and touch.

I hope these works, which have touched you and which you have touched, are now allowed to move on and touch others. These artworks, to me, are intimate works that one could live with. Things that can help remind oneself how important it is to turn one's attention not inward for the sake of control, as so many self-disciplining methods suggest us to do today, but keep riding the surface, being attentive for all the unpredictable movements that we run into when our sensing bodies touch the world and the world caresses us back.

My very best, dear Alex, or perhaps it is more appropriate to end this letter with a
Hug
Steven

Steven ten Thije is the collections curator for the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven.

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