

To Curb One's Enthusiasm

Two (Uneven) Thoughts Occasioned by Eleven Paintings

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1. The Bottom Line

It is tempting to imagine Koen Van den Broek, a painter of such earthly trifles as curbs, edges, gutters and sidewalks – paintings, it is important to note, that are based primarily on photographs made by the artist himself (a strategy that has become increasingly common among painters of the post-painterly era) – as a bit of an oddball character shuffling along the streets of deserted New World cities, perennially looking down, poring over the ground beneath his feet and never once looking up from the camera to take in, however furtively, the obvious marvels (trees! clouds! women!) that dot the landscape in which he finds his signature curbs, edges, gutters and sidewalks. He does not paint skies, nor does his work qualify as landscape painting proper – his gaze is fixed on a much ‘smaller’ (yet simultaneously also much more *real*) part of the world: the mundane reality of its physical base, its literal bottom line. Grounds, floors, bottoms, bases, and their linear structuring devices – streets, pavements, cracked surfaces. Both ‘earth’ and ‘world’, if I may be allowed to bring into play this arch-Heideggerian dyad: the world’s very earthy condition as that from which it rises to become *our* world. Many writers before me have expressed their baffled admiration for the rigorous single-mindedness and precision with which Van den Broek locks his painterly gaze in this relentless downward mode (“downcast eyes”), and I too admire the singular sense of purpose of his pictorial commitment and determination – in the same way, perhaps, as I have long admired Niele Toroni (unrelenting, uncompromising, still crazy after all these years) more than Daniel Buren (too frivolous at times, too accommodating). But what about the world that is thus left out of sight, *the world disregarded*? Does the downward gaze mean that the artist in some sense *refuses* the marvel of the world that surrounds, envelops and encounters him? Do the ubiquitous curbs in his canvasses help to embody the artist’s radically curbed enthusiasm before the world ‘ahead’ or in front of him, the hallowed destination of so many centuries of realist painting? Or, much more introspectively and self-reflexively, does his looking-down-not-up reflect the humbling, or

at the very least sobering experience of the artist's realization of the immense possibilities of painting – or the despair of standing before its many impossibilities instead? 'Where' does one look when one is looking down anyway? Mid-way between looking up (and away) and turning our gaze inward, we might say: looking at one's feet – "shoegazing" – is a gesture typical of the introvert. But van den Broek's paintings obviously say very little about the artist himself; for one, his shadow, let alone his *shoes* or *feet*, are never part of the picture. His paintings of street surfaces – a most literal rendition of the classical Greenbergian credo that truly modern (i.e. self-conscious and self-critical) pictorial art should devote itself exclusively to exploring the possibilities of its medium-specificity: the superficiality and depthlessness of the picture plane – even make a jarring show out of this denial of introspection precisely by their principled, programmatic nature, by the faint yet firmly discernible echo of the Warholian injunction to be more "like a machine". They resist psychologizing much in the same way like they 'refuse' any sense of horizon or avert their eyes so as to not meet (the eyes of) the world – or so it *seems*. Perhaps Koen Van den Broek's paintings are more 'about' the world as earth, home and hearth, than any other paintings I know of; it is precisely the epistemological devotion with which they take in their part of the world, however humble and 'pedestrian', that makes them uniquely embodied and *part* of the world.

Indeed, what does the ground beneath Van den Broek's feet disclose and reveal? The earth, precisely: that on which we stand and from which we emerge, the surface of which – the navigable world – carries us on. Much more than air or sky, the long-standing pictorial subjects of some of western art's finest triumphal moments, 'ground' effectively defines us as beings that partake and literally root in the palpable reality of our earthly home – a shared reality of bodies, of natural processes, of bearing and support. Above all, the ground reminds us of *gravity* as the single most significant force in the known universe – the reason for the very existence of the Earth, the Moon, the Sun, and most macroscopic objects in the known universe. Granted, air and water are important too – oh yes – but one may well ask oneself the following question: why, in fact, haven't there been more paintings of the "ground beneath our feet"? [This is a bit of rhetorical chicanery, of course, as Koen Van den Broek does not so much paint the ground *as earth* – he mostly paints its squalid, lifeless surface, its economic reduction to a means of transportation: the ground as a *road*.] Grounds provide 'grounding', or points of

anchorage. Rendered as painterly motifs, they help to remind us that the world is never just something that is “over there”, always positing itself in front of us, but rather something that is *around* us – *beneath* us even: the very thing on which we stand in the crowning glory of our human bipedalism.

In Van den Broek’s paintings, these grounds – represented mostly by straight or curving curbs, the matricial tools that help us maneuver the habitable earth – are no mere formal devices for demonstrating the artist’s effortless mastery of the modernist paradigm of the grid (inevitably, Henri Matisse and Barnett Newman comes to mind, followed by Elsworth Kelly, Franz Kline, Morris Louis, all undisputed masters of delineation and demarcation); they also provide guidance – above all to the viewer. Their spines are, quite literally, leads: lines of flight and sight, channelling and directing our gaze towards a world that veers away from us, yet also beckons us to explore it further. They are pathways, “lines made by walking” – a nod to the artful *flânerie* of Richard Long, another artist who has made good use of the ground beneath his feet – that help us navigate the world. Indeed, we do not merely *look* – through the eyes of the artist, to be sure – at the ground, we also *feel* it; as our gaze travels downwards and up again, along the slender column of a fissure in the road, we also feel our way out into the world beyond – a void, perhaps, or a realm of possibilities.

In other words, the single greatest achievement of this haptic effect of painting / looking as ‘grounding’, this concerted effort at attending to the ground beneath our feet – as opposed to the sky above or worldly future ahead – is a sense of *embodiment*, of partaking in the bodily real, that no amount of withering colours and fading contours can help to undermine, and Van den Broek’s persistent preference for a close-range view of the ground stretching right from under his/our feet to encompass the immediate proximity of the micro-world in front of him/us, recalls the relatively little-known work of a nineteenth century German artist that the great American critic Michael Fried has called the quintessence of embodiment – Adolph Menzel.

In his “Menzel’s Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin”, published by Yale University Press in 2002, Fried devotes a whole chapter to *Rear Courtyard and House*, a painting made by Menzel in 1844 (now in the collection of Berlin’s Alte Nationalgalerie) depicting a seemingly unprepossessing scene: “a stretch of bare ground crossed by wooden fences and littered with signs of construction as well as of neglect, viewed from an upper story of the rear of a

house.” By the sound of this description, this is of course a much more highly elevated vantage point than the ones used in Van den Broek’s decisively anthropometric paintings, but the relevance of my comparison lies in both artists’ attention to ‘detail’ in the ground immediately below, forcing us to look down rather than ahead or up, and in the way this perspective forces us to engage with the painting in a manner that foregrounds spectatorial *embodiment* in ways that were (and remain) quite foreign to standard modernist pictorial practice. Like Menzel, Van den Broek paints a world of spectatorial implication – intimacy almost – as opposed to distancing. In said chapter, Fried goes on to stress the bewildering oddity of Menzel’s compositional genius at a time when ‘modern’ European painting was wholly dominated by the various French schools of landscape painting, and compares his *Rear Courtyard* with works by various “core” Impressionists. It is well worth quoting Fried at length: “French painting throughout the nineteenth century remained essentially classical in its mode of constructing an illusion of spatial depth, by which I mean that in the work of generations of major painters from David and Ingres through Corot, Monet, Cézanne, and Seurat (and beyond), this was done by delineating a succession of planes all of which ran parallel to the picture plane and were stepped back into the distance by measurable degrees.” It was by thus positing the primacy of planar organization, following a scheme inherited from Poussin and Claude, that French painting succeeded in setting the agenda of twentieth-century modernism as an art of the picture plane – a visual paradigm in which the viewer stands *opposite* the world (of which the painting is a fragment, or a window looking out across and into the world) instead of *in* it. Instead, “nothing could be further from a modernist emphasis on the picture plane than the dispersive, multi-angled, and kineasthetically charged syntax of *Rear Courtyard* and *House*: a viewer occupying an unusually elevated point of view looks out and down, not straight ahead, at a world fundamentally skewed relative to his or her implied orientation, a world comprising a multiplicity of relationships that defy geometrical ordering, indeed that defy totalization or unification of any kind (...), and therefore can be made out, apprehended *as* relationships, only by a combination of extremely close looking and projective imagination.” It is precisely in this emphasis on bodily implication and relationality – an intentionality that weds the viewer to the world, and the painter to the earth – that I want to connect Fried’s Menzel to my phenomenological reading of Koen Van den Broek’s paintings: they are both, in irreducibly dif-

ferent ways of course, painters of *embodiment* – of the experience of inhabitancy and being-grounded in the world. [Incidentally, in a defiant gesture meant to celebrate rather than conceal embodiment and embodied spectatorship, Adolph Menzel, whose work very often employs the downward gaze that equally characterizes so many of Van den Broek’s paintings, *did* paint a picture of his foot.] Looking down is what the archaeologist does, or the detective – and all the other mortals, to get their bearings or find their keys.

2. “Mise-en-abîme”

Whereas Koen Van den Broek’s earlier paintings were ‘simply’ based on photographs (taken by the artist himself), the newer works that are documented in this book are primarily based upon *paintings* (made by the artist himself) of photographs (taken by the artist himself). Of things.

They are *paintings of paintings of photographs* of grounds – in the process of which the grounds themselves have effectively been set free, floating and hovering in mid-air, loosing all sense of what we just came to describe as actual ‘grounding’. What may once have been a curving, distant curb, has now become – for this beholder at least, in the case of *Display*, *Display Disc* and the appositely named *Rhythm* – a couple of boomerangs. Or two birds of prey falling from the sky – in any case, something that seems suspended rather than sunk, grounded or floored: it is odd to see how the loss of dimension in these disorienting, literally un-settling paintings has in fact erased all memories of what originally lay at the basis of these images – a road, a path, ‘earth’. But more about this dialectic in a moment or two.

Paintings of paintings of photographs then. This inevitably and immediately prompts a series of questions which have been the primary concern of many a painter (if not *all* painters) “after Warhol” – questions that concern the pertinence of originality and authenticity in contemporary culture, and the uneasy cohabitation of aura (the ‘unique’ hieratic character of the man-made art object) and mass-scale reproducibility. Does a painting of a painting of a photograph move us one step further *away* from any idealized concept of origin or (imaginary) source – the image that was initially captured by the artist’s camera, yet as a photograph never entered the public consciousness – or does it in fact bring us *back* to

this origin, simply by virtue of its denial of a technology of reproduction on the one hand, and its ardent commitment to the manual labour of painstaking painterly reconstruction on the other? Of all art forms, painting still stands out as that which is closest to the classical notion of the work of art as an entity of quasi-divine uniqueness and originality; the palpable presence of the artist's hand across the painting's surface and in the uneven patchwork of dots, daubs, strands and stripes, secures the work's claim to unquestionable 'authenticity', so that the painting, through its sheer physicality and indisputable worldliness, in some sense returns us to the physical reality of the world from which the photograph (to name but one example of a form of technological mediation that does *not* involve the human hand) has estranged us.

In the beginning, there is the curb – say, in Morro Bay, as pictured in *Morro Bay Border*, a painting from 2004. It is a curb I imagine knowing well, 'located' in a Californian seaside town which I have been fortunate enough to pass through myself on a roadtrip from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Then there comes the photograph, transforming the material, factual curb into an immaterial image, a process of 'virtualization' that has become all the more radical with the advent of digital reproduction technologies: we have now lost the curb's ordinary worldliness – its image is no longer part of the world we inhabit, navigate and, more to the point, walk upon. But then there is the painting – both a "return of the real" and a "return to the real": though we may no longer possess (or look at) the original curb, at least we have been brought back into the primary orbit of its world – that of everyday matter and materiality, that of the physical experience of its world, that of *labour* and *work*: the labour that went into laying down the pavement, and its immediate reflection, the work that went into making a painting of that pavement. We may rest assured: not everything has gone up in the eerie smoke of dematerialization.

But what happens when that painting – the step that brought us back to earth, both literally and metaphorically – is then again treated as a stand-in for the image of the thing it 'represents', and so goes on to inspire yet another painting, one in which the contours of the 'original' image (object, thing) become yet further dissolved in a haze of distant memories? Surely a painting of a painting of a photograph of an object does not return us to the object in the same way as a painting of a photograph of an object does. Yet it is still undeniably more 'real' than the photograph that is both logically and chronologically closer to the object – it is

a painting, after all, and through its very work-like and bodily nature cannot help but laying claim to this worldliness.

The curb in Morro Bay is the real thing: it is a curb (in Morro Bay). The ‘original’ photograph of that curb may already be said to be two things: a curb in Morro Bay and an *image* of a curb – and to the many who may never see this curb in Morro Bay, it could just as well represent a hundred other things, and not just curbs either: a photograph of object A may easily be misread to represent an unknown object B (say, a gutter). The first painting after the original photograph further obfuscates the question of precise identification and location: here we inevitably tread on the well-worn path of figural analysis that has sought out a comparison between Koen Van den Broek’s (mostly vertical) paintings of sidewalks and gutters, and the famed ‘zips’ of Barnett Newman, who may or may not have looked at the sidewalks of his native New York for pictorial inspiration. A mundane object with a very precise (pedestrian) aim is thus transformed into a cipher of abstraction – a “migration of form” that forever seals the curb’s triumphant entry into the realm of Art: it has become a *Gestalt*. But then, in the fourth stage of this laborious process, this inaugural move into abstraction is treated as just another source photograph: a second painting is made after the first, effectively diminishing the initial painting’s status as an imperious gesture of literal abstraction. This second painting is yet more abstract (it cannot be otherwise); the original curb in Morro Bay has become nothing but a distant, useless memory – and perhaps this is exactly what should have happened. I imagine this is exactly *how* and *why* (and *when* and *where*) art is made – to both remember and forget about the world. ‘Abstraction’ is just another name for this forgetting, and in this new series of paintings Koen Van den Broek has shown himself to be a master of his chosen trade: he has made us forget both about the curbs and (much more poignantly, of course) his previous paintings of curbs – he is truly a free man, an artist.

What is left of anything in *Cut Out* and *Solution*? Who remembers the world that they once, in an earlier stage of the artistic process of forgetting, re-presented? Instead, they have become their own world, and in doing so drag our gaze into this singular instance of ‘worlding’. These works’ dizzying play with origins, removes, returns and withdrawals, has caused the images in the paintings – paintings, we should remember here, of very real things, of objects that are in fact all too real to warrant the attention of ‘art’ – to become even more detached from any

sense of anchorage in the real. They are being swept up in a maelstrom of questioning and repetition that make them seem more and more *groundless* – a truly beautiful irony, given the fact that the original images that lay at the root of these paintings are photographs of *grounds* the artist himself may once have walked upon.