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Jan Dibbets: Another Photography

Marcella Beccaria

"Reality is an abstraction", states Jan Dibbets, and after encountering one of his works it is not easy to look at the world around or any of its representations without asking questions. Rather than "what" we see, the works of the artist lead us to ask "how" we see, and it is precisely this fundamental question that give rise to his work. In dialogue with some of the most salient moments of Western art culture, from Dutch painting to Italian art, and the relating theories on form and perspective, Dibbets's inquisitive mind created an innovative, individual course that has contributed in turn to establishing new artistic languages. Among the pioneers of Conceptual Art, and part of the beginnings of Land Art as well as Arte Povera, from the late 1960s Dibbets has been one of the very first to single out a use for photography as a "thinking" tool, carrying out a revolution the consequences of which have been further amplified in the present digital age.

For the first time in an Italian museum, the exhibition *Jan Dibbets. Another Photography* presented an important selection of Dibbets's work. By giving preference to a non-chronological itinerary, the show aimed to linger upon salient moments in his long course as an artist, through almost five decades. Focusing on major series of works, the exhibition highlighted the artist's strong coherence, as well as his ability to conduct more than one level of original research at a time, probing into the hidden and unexplored properties of the two-dimension a level of photographic images and being one of the first to intuit the artistic qualities of color film and the idea of "appropriated" images, or even its potentials when juxtaposed to painting, or when its apparent structure is taken away.

From his first drawings and relating *Perspective Corrections*, 1967-1969, up to the very recent *New Colorstudies*, 1976-2012, the exhibition included rare works, many of which have been no longer on public display or have never been together from the time they were executed. With purpose, the selection also narrated the artist's intimate relationship with Italy, where since his debut he won the support of curators, gallerists and various private collectors, beginning right from Turin, the city where he created more than one work. Moreover, Dibbets was one of the artists Rudi Fuchs invited to *Ouverture*, the exhibition that inaugurated the Castello di Rivoli in 1984, and over the years, when Ida Gianelli was Director, other works by the artist have helped to enrich the Museum's permanent collection.¹ These, therefore are some of the many reasons that have led me to propose a show on Jan Dibbets, in conjunction with the celebration of the Castello's thirtieth anniversary. Following the ideas discussed with the artist while working on the project, the following text ideally accompanies readers through the exhibition itinerary, focusing on the series that have been selected, as well as on the juxtapositions presented in each gallery.

The horizon, a continuous line

Belonging to the real world though intangible, the horizon crosses Jan Dibbets's entire oeuvre. As the scholar Erik Verhagen explained well in his recent publication on the artist, "the horizon isn't a subject like others, it exists only in relation to our sense of sight".² Before Dibbets, generations of

Dutch artists analyzed its possible painterly connotations, turning it into a formal element on the basis of which their own paintings could be structured. Precisely due to his awareness of the rich artistic legacy that connotes it, since the late 1960s Dibbets has used the horizon on more than one occasion, as a sort of zero degree from which to develop a totally original research, with the energy of one who explores uncharted lands. On the occasion of the exhibition, the horizon line welcomed visitors right at the beginning of the exhibition's itinerary, showing the tight relation that runs through several works produced by the artists throughout his career.

One of the first works where the horizon enters Dibbets's artistic grammar was born from a trip, as part of a research that bears witness to the artist's initial dialogue with the language of the nascent Land Art movement. As programmatically described by the title, *Five Island Trip*, 1969, was made during a sojourn that lasted a few days, which from Amsterdam led him to some small Dutch islands (Texel, Vlieland, Terschelling, Ameland, and Schiermonnikoog), chosen by looking at a map. The work, which includes a transcription of the arrival and departure times for the transportation used to reach each location, presents six black and white photos. Already in this early work, rather than recording data on the places visited the artist seems more interested in using his own photo lens to develop a specific mode of vision. In each image, sea, sky, and the line that joins them compose the view of an autonomous, almost abstract space. Shortly afterwards, he executed *Horizon-Sea*, 1971; here Dibbets sanctioned his own independence with respect to the narration. A sequence of photos, one in color and one in black and white, plus a schematic diagram, reiterate the view of a changing horizon, which gradually structures the plane of the photographic image in a different way.

Dibbets was also among the pioneers regarding the possibilities of the image in motion. On the occasion of the show, the curatorial selection included *12 Hours Tide Object with Correction of Perspective*, 1969 and *Horizon-Sea III*, 1971, two works that, for different reasons, are particularly relevant on this regard. Conceived so that each person, from home, could own an original artwork the moment it is aired on TV, in *12 Hours Tide Object with Correction of Perspective* Dibbets used the video camera to record the creation of a project on sand - illusorily transferred to the bidimensional image plane in the shape of a square - and its subsequent erasure caused by the rising tide. The project was made for the show *Land Art* by Gerry Schum, and initially broadcasted on German TV on April 15, 1969.

In the exhibition project, quite meaningful to the Italian context, was the inclusion of *Horizon-Sea III* and related studies, with *Study for Horizon I, II, III, IV*, 1971-1972, in homage to the Dutch Pavilion that, responding to the invitation of Edy de Wilde (at the time director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam) a very young Dibbets made on the occasion of the 1972 Venice Biennale. With a radical gesture, for the Pavilion the artist presented bold film works, one being *Horizon-Sea III*.³ By dynamically rotating his film camera, in the resulting double projection, the horizon that divides the sea and sky becomes a diagonal line, making an image whose strong abstraction testifies to Dibbets's informed rapport with the geometries of Piet Mondrian's abstract painting.

Perspective Corrections and further horizons

From the end of the 1960s, Dibbets organized his work into series, repeatedly applying himself to the same theme with almost scientific rigor. Among the first series, the *Perspective Corrections*, which interest him above all between 1967 and 1969, represent a major body of work through which the artist firmly established his interest in defining an autonomous photographic space, regulated by formal and spatial principles that are different with respect to reality seen by the naked eye. As a testimony to this crucial moment in the artist's career, the exhibition included a selection of rare versions of the *Perspective Corrections* on paper, presenting the detailed researches that are

at the basis of the series. In each work, Dibbets precisely recorded the phases of his own artistic research: from the geometric form outlined with tape in three-dimensional space (for example a trapezoid, an ellipsis, etc.) to the angle adopted to obtain through the snapshot the intended "perspective correction" (and therefore the illusion of a square or rather a circle on the photo image plane), also including a copy of the photo. In the versions printed on canvas - the show included *Circle of Poles without Rape*, 1969, a work never exhibited in public since the time of its making - the work is the resulting photography. A recognized milestone in the history of contemporary art, the series *Perspective Corrections* witnesses Dibbets's revolutionary use of the photographic medium with respect to many of his peers. In fact, if, especially for Land Art artists, photography was the passive document of otherwise ephemeral interventions upon the environment, for Dibbets from his *Perspective Corrections* onwards, it became an active tool, through which to question the processes of perception or the intellectual constructions regarding the interpretation of three-dimensional space and its two-dimensional translation which dominated Western art ever since the Renaissance, to map out totally new fields.

By further analyzing Dibbets's ability to face a topic always from different, unique angles, treating it with unbridled intellectual curiosity even after many years, the exposition put in dialogue the above series with further works related to the theme of the horizon, or better yet, from the visual ideas it generated through the long investigation engaged by Dibbets over several years. If in *Flood Tide*, 1969, Dibbets used photography to focus the eye of the observer on a perceptive experience that in nature implies the passage of time, in *Sea-Horizon 0°-135°*, 1972, the artist gradually rotated his camera, creating a highly abstract sequence the viewer may experience by following, in turn, the sequence of the photographs, according to a type of dynamic perception.

In the *Comets* series, which includes *Comet land/sky/land 6°-72°*, 1973, Dibbets developed a further investigation on the optical and perceptive possibilities that may be unleashed by observing the horizon. By mounting the camera on a tripod and gradually rotating it a few degrees at each shot, the work consists of twelve photos, each of which is obtained by joining two images, so that in each the sky is developed like an abstract band placed diagonally at the center and the ground seems like a field of view arranged symmetrically along both sides. The proportions and the slant of the first image mathematically establish the sequence of the following ones, thus creating an unexpected visual architecture, almost a "carnet" that impresses acceleration upon the surrounding three-dimensional space. Another principle is investigated in *Horizon-Land-Sea*, 2007, belonging to a more recent series. In the work, the horizon becomes a single taut line the artist obtains by juxtaposing an image of the sea and one of the land, thus bringing glimpses of panorama onto the same plane of perception, which in reality the viewer could perceive only if he/she could look in front and behind, at the same time.

Outside light / inside light

From the ancient Greek *photos-grapho*, the term "photography" denotes the idea of drawing with light, reminding the mechanical process on the basis of which a surface is impressed by emanations of light. In dialogue with such a principle, Dibbets has created works focused on the variations of light as recordable over time, a day for example, analyzing the relating transformations the camera is able to capture. In *The Shortest Day at My House in Amsterdam*, 1970, Dibbets presented in sequence the result of a day's work, from dawn to dusk. The work consists of eighty photos arranged on eight registers. Shot at intervals of a few minutes, the images portray the variations of light as observed on December 21, the winter solstice, from inside the artist's home in Amsterdam, by keeping the lens of his camera fixed upon a window. An analogous process can be found in *The Shortest Day of 1970 Photographed from Sunrise to Sunset*, The Salomon R. Guggenheim Museum,

New York, 1971, produced by photographing from inside a window on the ground floor of the American museum (the project was originally presented at the Guggenheim as an installation that included a sequence of slides shown next to the same photographed window). In *Daylight-Flashlight / Outside Light - Inside Light*, 1971, the artist put together a sequence alternating the use of natural lighting with a flash, thus echoing, through the chosen window, Marcel Duchamp's well-known *Fresh Widow*. Displayed at the 1972 Venice Biennale, the work was originally made in Turin, by using one of the windows of the building that housed the Galleria Sperone, which was the first gallery to present Dibbets's work in Italy. Also executed in Turin, and more precisely in the rooms of the gallery, was *Shadows on the Floor of the Sperone Gallery*, 1971, where Dibbets rendered his own artistic gesture even more radical, lingering upon the forms drawn on the floor by changes of light and shadow over time projected through a large window. In one of the few interviews made at the beginning of the 1970s, while discussing about the works concerned with light and shadows, Dibbets said: "I would like my work to have about it the quality of a clock that runs all the time. I would like to make it so simple that you hardly think about art any more, so that, translated from reality, the pieces would become another reality themselves".⁴

As tools meant to channel light, or rather, *oculi* whose form or function is similar to that of the eye, and screens placed between the outside and the inside, windows are a subject that interests the artist various times over the following years as well. In *Tollebeek Spring II*, 2000, one of the works in the Castello's collection, the starting point was a window from the Dutch village by the same name. As also in the case of *Santa Creus*, 1994, and *Tillburg III (Green)*, 1999, chosen for the exhibition, the point of view which Dibbets adopted makes the initially round opening elliptical, outlining an autonomous plane of view, whose independence with respect to reality is accentuated by juxtaposing the photo with the painting's surface.

The New Colorstudies series, on investigation beyond structure

Over the course of his career, Dibbets has always continued to experiment, without ever stopping in the face of what he has attained. Dominated by strong internal coherence, his research is developed into many series created contemporaneously, just as some ideas of his may shift from a group and create, even after much time, another. Installed at the center of the exhibition itinerary, the *New Colorstudies* represent one of his most recent series that, in many ways, may be considered one of the most important in his oeuvre. These works derive from negatives taken between 1975 and 1976, when Dibbets decided to focus his camera lens on details of car frames, photographing up-close many hoods of different colors and the reflections of the surrounding landscape. As the artist himself said, the study began from the following question: "What would happen if I took the image's structure away? I then had - he explains - the idea of photographing something as flat and shiny as photo paper".

In the 2012 version, the possibility of using more advanced technical resources and photo paper of larger dimensions - unavailable in the 1970s - allow Dibbets to show in the best way possible the effects of extreme close-ups he sought with his subjects. Concentrated on the color, and thus on the effects the light creates on the studied surface, each image creates an abstraction of reality of striking ambiguity that powerfully stands in front of the observer's field of view. It should come as no surprise if the boldness of the first versions in the 1970s, at the time, left some critics a bit dumbfounded.

From the Dutch Mountains to "appropriated" photography

Created around 1971-1972, the *Dutch Mountains* represent an important series in the artist's output in so far as they lead his research concerning processes that transform reality and construct the

visual image towards new directions. Rarely displayed if not through single examples, and in the show gathered in a precise selection of particularly significant works like *Panorama (Dutch Mountain)*, 1971, *Double Dutch Mountain-Sea*, and *Double Dutch Mountain*, both from 1972, these works are characterized by the juxtaposition of many photos, taken by the artist as he moved his camera in a circle, across a given stretch of landscape, and gradually shifting it above and then below. Joined to make the respective horizons line up, always present though in varying ways, the photos thus taken create panoramas in the shape of curvy concatenations, which at times grow like illusory mountains. "The resulting image - as Rudi Fuchs wrote - is supremely ambiguous because the abstract construction used photographs of a real landscape in color, making the image much more than a skeleton construction - making it, however unreal, look like the reconstruction of real nature".⁵

Among the numerous research themes that place Dibbets at the forefront of artistic practice further analyzed by subsequent generations there is also the idea of "appropriated" photography, intended as found images, taken previously by other people and then recontextualized by the artist. The rare series *Voyage of Captain SEH*, 1976, for the first time presented in the exhibition uniting the majority of the very few examples available, was created by Dibbets with images originally taken by a sea captain during his journeys between 1910 and 1913, which the artist found in a photo-album from those years. Installed in the same gallery, *Spoletto Floor and Self-Portrait as Photographer*, both from 1981, bear witness to Dibbets's sapient ties with the history of art, including Italian art history, as well as the bright awareness of his own artistic project in relation to it through the specific use of photography as his elected medium.

Among the pioneers of Conceptual Art, in dialogue with the trends of Minimal Art and the processes of Arte Povera, Dibbets developed an original and independent research. Yet the artist always kept close relations with some colleagues, as can also be seen by the precise private collection he built up over the years that includes works by, among others, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Robert Mangold, Donald Judd, and Robert Ryman. In the series *Perspective Collection*, 2004, works from his own private collection became the topic of new investigations that renew the research on building the photo image and its illusory relationship with three-dimensional space begun with the *Perspective Corrections* in 1968. In 2007, the death of his friend Sol LeWitt was at the origin of *Omaggio a Sol LeWitt* (Homage to Sol LeWitt), made in Turin in Giorgio Persano's gallery, by painting upon a wall a geometric form. The intense red color used by the artist helps to create a clear photographic image of a triangle that seems to stand out against the image plane with surprising iconic force, in homage to LeWitt *Wall Drawings*.

San Casciano, painting and architecture

In the 1980s, Dibbets introduced the use of painting alongside photography. Even though painting was part of his vocabulary from his debut in the mid-1960s, the works made from 1980 developed the potentials of the medium in a totally new direction. It is interesting to note that the first works where Dibbets dedicated himself to this new course were done starting with architecture, drawing inspiration from the wooden beams that characterize his home in Italy, at San Casciano dei Bagni, in the province of Siena. In the works from the series, of which the show gathered some of the best examples, the artist reiterates the juxtaposition of photo images according to a circular motif that transforms the initial reality of the architecture into an autonomous form of vision. The "panorama" obtained not only captures the viewer's gaze, inviting him/her to decipher its compositional elements, but it seems to also allude to the very shape of the eye, with the roundness of the iris that embraces the pupil. In *San Casciano Ceiling*, 1980, for example, as well as in *San Casciano Triptych*, 1983-1984, the type of painting intervention shows Dibbets's intent to face fundamental

art questions like the relationship between image and support, and between background and foreground. The painting technique developed for these works includes a laborious process of overlapping and erasing, with him involved in applying layers of color to paper already mounted on a panel and then remove them with a dampened cloth, so as to eventually blend color and support into a single element, of exceptional lightness. As Dibbets explains, each piece is the result of a long "contemplative process" that can imply years of work.

In the same period, various architectural structures, some of which belong to the collective imaginary, are used by the artist to develop important series, as in the case of the Eiffel Tower, starting in 1981 and presented in this show with a version made in that same year. As noted by the scholar Erik Verhagen, both in the case of works that draw upon lesser known buildings as those that use major monuments, "the subject remained no more than an instrument, a pretext, and a way of achieving his ends. At the same time a single subject might undergo several different processes of reconstruction, being considered in term of its potential for the use of pigment or treated in an exclusively 'graphic' mode".⁶

Dibbets's intimate relationship with painting and its history is also evident in works concentrated on the dome motif, which also display his knowledge of Italian Baroque painting, and its multiple examples of illusory perspectives. In *Guggenheim I*, 1986, the artist approaches Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic architecture. Starting with a selection of few "fragments", Dibbets developed a composition where the center of vision seems to double, thus giving the image a quite peculiar dynamism, unlike the one innate to the original spiral of Wright's building. Together with Italian art, Dibbets also always cultivated his ties with 17th-century Dutch painting, with a particular attention to the painter Pieter Janszoon Saenredam, the author of memorable church interiors structured through a meticulous depiction of light and a sapient use of perspective. The last gallery of the exhibition featured the major diptych *Kröller Müller Saenredam II*, 1987, set in the eponymous museum in Amsterdam.

Through its tight selection of works, the exhibition *Jan Dibbets. Another Photography* was conceived in line with the artist's method - never forgetting that in almost fifty years of work Dibbets contact sheet's archive counts slightly less than eight hundred images. Far from conceiving photography as a rapid and omnivorous tool, Dibbets keeps on carrying on his dense work. Finally, I would like to end this text by quoting the artist's own clear description of his artistic project, as presented on the occasion of one of the rare recent public speeches:

"The fact that one can produce a likeness of an object with a certain degree of accuracy by means of photography is, seen from the process itself, a coincidence that is not accidental. A photograph does not produce an image, it registers gradations of light. That it has to be an object that is represented by this method of registration is due only to the fact that light reflected by material (the object) becomes indirectly visible. The sensitized plate, however, plays an entirely passive role. The relation between the light-images, which are fixed chemically, and the objects which reflect the light, is entirely casual. That is why the photograph is not only uninvolved in the image it shows us, it is also anonymous. No amount of refined lightning arrangements, compositions or blow-ups can possibly make the photograph transcend the tyrannical indifference of the procedure.

And then I realized that I did not want my use of photography in order to represent, but in order to express. Unlike painting, photography lacks its own space in which hand and imagination can grasp the external appearance of things, whatever precautions one may take. The photograph remains a fragment that cannot be understood by seeing alone. That is why the photograph as a mere representation does not play a major role in my work.

By questioning myself about all this I came to a sort of an almost zero point of departure from

which photography can on one hand escape that one-sided relation with the representation, and on the other express a pronounced form concept. After all, as an artist, I was always primarily an artist of form. The hardcore conceptualists had an entirely different view on art than I had: much colder and a disinterest to express imagination to represent, and strangely enough a disinterest in the classic arts. In that respect, as a European, I felt an outsider.

More over I always anchored the realization in an authentic use of the apparatus. So I was never concerned with the characteristics of a professional photograph. I was much more interested in the characteristics of the photography itself, the conditions under which it works and the way our perception is involved.

I started out by drawing the attention away from the object to be photographed to the camera making the photograph. Therefore the structure of my work and the build-up from with in, is not based on what is in front of the camera, but on a legitimate use of the camera itself".⁷

¹ As of today, the Castello di Rivoli's collections include the following works - in parenthesis is the acquisition year: *Carnet Land/Sky/Land* 6°-72°, 1973 (2008); *Spoletto Floor*, 1981 (1986); *Barcelona Window*, 1989 - 1990 (2008); *Tollebeek Spring II*, 2000 (2008); *Land-Sea*, 2007 (2008); *New Colorstudies - Silver*, 1976-2012 (2014).

² E. Verhagen, *Jan Dibbets. The Photographic Work*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2014, p. 72.

³ The rare publication *Jan Dibbets*, with texts by Edy de Wilde and Rudi Fuchs, documents the Dutch Pavilion of 1972.

⁴ Jan Dibbets in conversation with Charlotte Townsend, *artscanada*, August-September, 1971, p. 49.

⁵ R.H. Fuchs, "The Eye Framed and Unframed", in *Jan Dibbets*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1972, p. 58. In the present catalogue, the text is published for the first time also in Italian, with the title "L'occhio, in cornice e senza".

⁶ E. Verhagen, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁷ Jan Dibbets, conference at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 9 April 2002.