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Obstinacy (Jan Dibbets)

Rudi H. Fuchs

"Moy qui fais profession des choses muettes".

Ni colas Poussin

After I first saw some of the new pictures, *Land-Sea: Horizon*, by Jan Dibbets they stayed in my mind ever since like a persistent tune or an echo you cannot get out of your head. That was of course because I could not quite figure out what I was looking at. Yet the pictures seemed simple and straightforward enough: two photographic images, one showing a horizontal division of land and sky, the other a division of sea and sky. They are fitted together in such a way that the horizon runs across the two panels as a continuous straight line. Once square the images were tilted and thus became lozenges. When mounted on the wall the horizon has to be parallel with the floor of the room. The sea is quiet and grey; the vegetation on the land is brownish green; the cloudless sky is pale blue. The optical behaviour of the elements is very ambiguous.

Dibbets' early reputation was established, in the early seventies, with a group of works called *Dutch Mountains*: photographic constructions in which the straight horizon was transformed into a gently sloping mountain. Looking at the new pieces, such works came to my mind. An unavoidable connection, if only because in the new pictures Dibbets has re-employed photographic material from those early days. We see the same stark images of land sea and sky but the new versions they look much more severe and solemn. In the *Dutch Mountains*, I then realized, one saw the spectacle of the horizon transforming itself, in a lateral sequence of images (each time the horizon photographed in a different angle) as an undulating movement - as of a wave slowly swelling and falling. In traditional landscape painting we normally see a foreground (of fields, trees, water, buildings) leading up to the horizon - and then, from that horizon, the sky is vaulting upward and forward with often a spectacle of cloud. The sky spreads light in the landscape. The *Dutch Mountains*, however, are singular manipulations of the horizon as a straight line. Foreground and sky are only narrow strips, not very spacious at all, just allowing enough space for a horizon to be there. When we look at a landscape our eye is invited in, so to speak, to wander around. To the horizon in a *Dutch Mountain* we can, logically, only look laterally - from left to right, following its suggestive movement and the amazing metamorphosis into a mountain. Exactly what in an ordinary landscape is still and stable, the horizon, is here volatile and unstable.

In *Land-Sea Horizon* the horizon is as straight as it can be. So straight that it seems programmatic. My first instinct is also to read it laterally - as a line indicating the wideness of space and also simply dividing under and above in the picture. That is how basic the horizon is. But then, as I already suggested, when you look at these works on the wall with the line of the horizon just above eye level, it is their angular and sharp overall shape that captivates the eye - the almost elusive shape of two lozenges fitted together. As I tried to describe, it is a construction of two originally

symmetrical square images of land and sea so combined that they present the single horizon as an utterly straight line. This produces at the same time the puzzling overall shape of two equally tilted equilateral lozenges fitted together - hanging there, very ambiguously, holding up those bare fragments of seascape and landscape. Because sea and land are optically heavier than the light blue sky, the image seems to hang down, like drops of water slowly swelling before they fall. But stranger still is this: given the nature of the construction and when the horizon line is perfectly level with the floor of the gallery as it should be, one would expect the two lower corner-points of the picture to be at the same distance from the floor. Yet this is not the case and I cannot explain why. It is a phenomenon of optical ambiguity one can for instance observe in certain lozenge-shaped paintings of Mondrian, in particular the great *Lozenge Composition with Four Yellow Lines* of 1933. Just off the corners of the white lozenge four yellow lines evoke, or suggest, a white square in the centre of the picture. But because each of the yellow lines are of slightly different width, every individual shape within the picture becomes elusive and unstable. It is a painting full of wonderful indescribable shifts, optical evasions, and never really in repose.

The pictures from the *Land-Sea Horizon* series have a similar ambiguous quality - except for the unambiguous straightness of the still horizon which is the essence of their impressive gravitas. It may well be that Dibbets, in plotting his new pictures, was thinking of the paintings of Mondrian, about how taut they are and also unconstrained. The stillness and solemnity of *Land-Sea Horizon* is also, I believe, a significant step towards Dibbets' private dream of how his pictures should look like. In the mid-seventies he made a work called *Monet's Dream*. It was a tightly constructed photographic image of quivering light sparkling on rippling water. The message of its title is clear: in the artistic circumstances of his time, Monet could only paint light on water (what he did extremely well) when that water was part of a scene - with little boats, with ladies with parasols, with water-lilies and the quiet reflections of trees in the water. But the inventions and concentration of abstract art, of Mondrian, had given Dibbets the strategy to portray only water, as a visual spectacle in itself. The tightness of the image, in *Monet's Dream*, is also Dibbets' dream. One could, slowly and attentively, follow the course of his work after that small beautiful and very satisfying picture - from the intriguing *Colour Studies* to the majestic *Windows*. His dream is a sublime picture that rests reposeful in itself. In the *Land-Sea Horizon* pictures, still and grave, he has become closer again.

In this development, from the curving horizon to the unrelenting straight one, one senses also an extraordinary obstinacy of purpose. I borrow that word and what it means from a poem by Seamus Heaney titled *An Artist* - who is obviously Cézanne because Heaney writes: "I love the thought of his anger / His obstinacy against the rock, his coercion / of the substance from green apples." Whenever a real artist comes to the completion of a particular work, that is as far as he at that moment can go. But once it is finished there is the apprehension that he could have gone further but how to get there?

Maybe when he had come to the few very last of twenty-two or so *Mont Sainte-Victoire* paintings (the rock, in the poem) could Cézanne begin to realize how he all those years had struggled obstinately to get a grasp on the mountain's outline - and how to get that line in just that place where it works as a connecting agent between sky and land. Somewhere the master had noticed how traditionally the sky and clouds function as an atmospheric back ground (or backdrop) to the heavy land. If one could give the sky more presence and make the land more discreet one could maybe arrive at a picture of unimaginable tightness and flatness. But then the artist must give things up such as, in Cézanne's case, flourishing brushwork or lightly floating colours. Mountain after mountain the brushwork became tougher. Finally he made the last one, hard as a rock - sober and moving at

the same time. I have followed the work of Jan Dibbets over many years and, yes, I recognize the obstinacy not to be easily satisfied but to pursue, with the risk of failure, the quest for the ultimate and unbelievable horizon, so to speak. We will see it when he gets there.

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