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The Eye Framed and Unframed

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When Jan Dibbets was ten years old, his father took him to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam to see the national art treasures, an obligatory visit for all good Dutch boys, sweetened after by a boat trip around the city's canals. Dibbets remembers how his father explained Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, telling him it was the greatest Dutch painting. It certainly was impressive to a small boy, but Jan preferred the cool, transparent church interiors of Pieter Janszoon Saenredam. His father, as a father should do, was introducing him to Dutch culture; he however started to look at paintings, at *individual* paintings, as an artist does. Eight years later when he went to art school, by then convinced that Piet Mondrian was the greatest painter of the twentieth century, he was shocked to learn that in art school, his view was not generally held, and he was taught to draw in the traditional manner, after casts of antique sculpture. The daily practice of learning the skills of art, the orientation toward craft, made him almost forget Mondrian. From the point of view of the crafts he was learning, other artists seemed more exciting, artists such as Francis Bacon, Max Beckmann, and Pablo Picasso, because they are, on the level of craft, more accessible and more useful than Mondrian. Beckmann or Picasso can teach you how to make an interesting painting; one can imitate them with slight variations. But to imitate Mondrian is ridiculous. Mondrian requires a different frame of mind. For Mondrian you must give up what you always thought was beautiful.

One September afternoon in 1967, Dibbets cut a rough trapezoid in the thick turf of his sister's lawn. He then made a photograph from an optical angle that made the original shape appear to be a rectangle, lifting itself from the ground and aligning itself, flat and parallel, to the picture plane. The published version of this first *Perspective Correction* is a dry diagrammatic drawing of how the illusion was constructed, carrying the original small photograph only as a visual footnote. This conceptual form of presentation may have taken something away from the fresh beauty of the idea. But Dibbets was a young artist, fresh out of school, just finding his voice.

As a form, the *Perspective Corrections* reflected the aesthetic concerns of the period - the taste for simple structures and undramatic, almost documentary forms of presentation. Many young artists were looking for new ways to make art, or for new aspects of traditional forms to develop. The problem for a young artist in a context of competitive experimentation is not so much to hit on a super-new trick but, and this Dibbets knew from the beginning, to develop a basic line or form capable of sustaining expansion and variation over time.

In 1966-1967, Dibbets was making objects constructed upon shifts between two forms (one real, one suggested) or between two materials. He began with paintings, or rather pictorial objects. Small canvases, painted a monochrome pink and pale blue (colors that made them lose material weight), were stacked upon each other to form a sculpture or painting; or, rectangular canvases were laid out on the floor to form another shape, for example, a lozenge made of rectangles. The essence of these works, in a structural sense, was that with equal elements of one particular shape one could construct other shapes. Though perhaps not spectacular, this discovery provided an orientation

previously lacking in Dibbets's work. At art school he had made paintings, but each painting had not suggested the next one. In making a construction with small canvases he had found a structural element, tentative, but consistent in itself.

In the same period he made other objects: a table with a grass top; a bunch of dead tree branches, including among them one artificial branch of blue neon; and two conic forms whose points are connected by a thin line of neon, one form borrowing from the other. These objects were experimental. They proposed a direction, but no precise form. Yet Dibbets realized that these were no longer isolated paintings. They sprang from coherent drifts of thought and intuition.

He spent the first part of 1967 in London where he had a scholarship for St. Martin's School of Art. Contacts with other young artists there, such as Barry Flanagan and Richard Long, enforced his instinctual working method. He started to work directly on the ground. He cut out a square of lawn and from one corner rolled up a strip of turf halfway toward the center. A square produced a cylinder. Or, repeating a principle previously used in the constructed paintings, he cut a square of turf in a lawn and subdivided that square into four equal smaller squares. He placed two squares on top of two others. Looked at from a certain angle, the square becomes a lozenge, and the work a construction of lozenges of optically different sizes.

Although Dibbets came to photography almost by chance, he quickly realized the powerful subtlety of the medium. When photographing one form he observed how that shape could optically metamorphose into another. And photographing his grass works gave him the idea for the *Perspective Corrections* in which a change of viewpoint resulted in an optical change of shape. The earlier accidental forms (dependent on the movement of the viewer) became inescapably fixed in the still photograph. Instead of leaving the optical transformation of shape to chance, Dibbets now chose to make that transformation less gradual and more arresting and, as a visual experience, more abstract. In fact, he reversed the previous method, making a formal construction and controlling what would be seen by the viewer.

The first *Perspective Corrections* transformed his work from experimental and spontaneous to controlled and analytical. After deciding the type of shape or construction that should appear in a photograph, or rather *on the surface* of a photograph, Dibbets then designed the formal setup needed to produce that shape, thus making not a photograph but a photographic construction. What one sees on the photograph is, in the optical sense, not what has been photographed: an illusion becomes an abstraction; or an illusionistic form is abstracted into a different shape. The illusion is cancelled out by the appearance of the abstract shape.

The method and technique of the *Perspective Corrections* are extremely simple, but at the same time they are complete, as complete and beautiful as a clear circle. The series gave Dibbets a whole range of formal and aesthetic possibilities; it also cleared up the relationship of his work to older art as well as to the art of his contemporaries. The constructed paintings, the grass "sculptures" or the ambiguous objects moved in the aesthetic context of optical abstract art, touching on Minimalism, then emerging. As a practical use of an aesthetic those works are adequate but they are also ambivalent. The *Perspective Corrections* began while he was making other optical abstractions. The first one dates from September 1967 but the two cones with the neon line between them was made in early 1968. His experiments were overlapping. Of course those diverse experiments were coherent in their structural premise (shifts between forms and materials) but they still produced highly diverse images - images with quite divergent potential for development. Somehow Dibbets decided that the *type* of image in the *Perspective Corrections* (not, I must emphasize, their construction) was more important to him than the image of the more object like work. That is to say, in the still image of the *Perspective Corrections* (a shape going through a sudden but invisible transformation and then coming to rest) Dibbets's memory of Mondrian, and even of Saenredam,

came alive again. He came back to what he had always felt art should be. That dream had been interrupted by other "inventions" at a time when he was not yet able to make the perfect choice.

The rediscovery of Mondrian, and a more active understanding of his paintings, pointed the way and made Dibbets realize that the object like works, when pursued as a form, might in the end become too bizarre or too maverick. To go on with them would mean to move quickly from invention to invention. That was their character, they wanted to be surprising. But Dibbets (we now know, twenty years later) prefers to think and formulate in long lines that are sometimes parallel, then cross over, and then perhaps are parallel again. That is how his oeuvre developed - controlled and unhurried.

The theme of the *Perspective Corrections* proved to be effective and fruitful. Between September 1967 and late 1969 Dibbets made about forty versions. Some of them brought him close to what he admired most in the paintings of the late Mondrian: flexibility of shape in a composition as clear and firm as a window. The series was carried through in a methodical manner. Most of these works were made on grass, using white rope to lay out the forms in horizontal, vertical or diagonal lines, rectangular or diagonal crosses, and in circles. A large number of them existed in two forms: as a drawing or description of the construction, with small photographs almost as illustrations, and as enlarged photographic transfers on canvas. In the large, purely visual versions, the resulting image is dissociated from its construction. The step of enlarging the image and eliminating the construction may now seem almost insignificant. At the time, however, it was a major step, not at all easy to take, toward an image that would be independently visual as opposed to an image that is the translation of a conceptual construction.

At issue: does art need a palpable expression, or can it be completely conceptual? Dibbets wanted to take a clear position. He did not want to be a photographer of clever optical tricks, he had somehow to separate the image as the visual result of a technical process from the technique itself. The drawings - the constructions formulated on paper - could show their "photographic" origin because that is what drawings traditionally do. They show the outline of an image, its skeleton form. But after the drawing, the "full" work completes and, in a sense, supersedes the drawing. It took a while, however, to come to grips with the problem of enlargement. For instance, in some of the large works, especially those with ropes on grass, the material distinction between the two elements tends to become heavy through too much articulation. The grass, which in the small size photographs on the drawings, appears as an even gray, in the large version becomes highly accented and thus a bit heavy; and the rope is not quite just a white line. Probably the last versions are therefore the most successful, made not on a lawn but in the interior of Dibbets's studio. The best of these is a square on the wall of the studio. It is a small square penciled on a white wall, so light that it seems to float. The square on the studio wall is mysterious, abstract to the point that the photographic aspect is completely forgotten. It is, in a way, miraculous.

In constructing the *Perspective Corrections* something happened to the spatial structure of the resulting image. In the photograph, the geometrical form laid out on the lawn or drawn on the wall changed into a different shape on the *surface* of the photographic image. The ground supporting the original shape was carried along, it seems, in the process of visual transformation and became frontal too, like the "corrected" shape. The illusionistic space, which is the natural space of photography, is thus eliminated: it is as if space is being pushed forward, almost out of the image. This happens especially in the *Perspective Corrections* on grass, when the white lines of rope touch the edge of the picture itself and when the first and second images overlap. The later works, in the studio, leave an illusionistic photographic space intact, which is then confronted with the "corrected" shape coming forward to the picture's ambiguous surface (defined by the small transparent square) and the illusionistic "interior" of the photograph.

In this type of picture, in which the abstract form, flat on the surface, merges with the unavoidable illusionism of photography, Dibbets's work, for the first time, comes close to certain qualities in Mondrian's painting. For Dibbets articulates his work within a network of other art. He is a contemporary artist inventing new visual forms and expressions, but at the same time he is aware of the fact that he is also continuing great traditions in Western art. When, in the *Perspective Corrections*, he brings a form to the surface of the picture plane, making abstract what was illusionistic, he quite consciously brings to a conclusion a long line of development in Western painting, most clearly in still-life painting. Compare, for instance, a seventeenth-century Dutch still life with a still life by Cézanne, and then continue that comparison up to Mondrian. The seventeenth-century still life presents a corner of a table with objects on it in illusionistic and, more importantly, atmospheric space. In such a picture, the light (coming from an outside source) articulates various objects (a glass, a fish, fruit, bread, lemon, and so on) by touching their surfaces, making colors, textures and shapes visible - but more significantly, making visible the *differences* in colors, textures and shapes.

In these early paintings, one sees a symphony of objects in light and shade, and because the light is always soft and gentle, the image is always intimate. It is hidden, discreetly curled up in the interior space of the picture almost like a pearl in its shell. As the objects in a seventeenth-century still life are hardly ever parallel with the picture plane, they detach themselves from the picture's surface. A Cézanne still life is more frontal. He emphasizes, in the position of the objects, the actual rectangle of the picture: most lines (or directions) run parallel to the horizontal and vertical edges of the picture. The composition, therefore, tends to move forward toward the surface of the painting. This effect is heightened by the way the paint is applied. Contrary to the seventeenth-century picture, in Cézanne there is almost no attention to texture because there is no independent light that reflects differently on a shining glass than on the dull surface of a piece of bread. In a Cézanne painting a lemon is an oval yellow shape, and an apple is a slightly flattened red shape. Visually they have the same impact. They are equal because they do not have the texture of their species, rather, they have the texture of paint.

This "system" of stabilizing a composition of shapes upon the surface of a painting, within the concrete boundaries of its rectangular edge, was carried further by Mondrian to the point where he made the image spatially more ambiguous. Because Mondrian used, as visual elements, simple rectangular shapes and strongly contrasting colors within grids of black lines on white grounds, his pictures are extremely transparent. The different shapes and colors suggest various positions in an abstract space whose "parameters" are defined by the white of the ground and the black of the lines. The surface of a Mondrian painting does not close, it is transparent; the surface of a Cézanne still life, on the other hand, is dense with paint. Thus, on the surface, a Mondrian picture is absolutely stable, even static but spatially it is tense and nervous. It was, I believe this quality in Mondrian that Dibbets had in mind, as an artistic point of reference, when he began the *Perspective Corrections*. In the interior versions, most of all, he was able to shape the tension between frontal surface and spatial depth, because photography enabled him to make the spatial background seem to be more real.

We see a realistic photograph of Dibbets's studio, complete with floor, wall and windows; and in that interior a square appears on the surface of the image that, it seems, should not be there. The "corrected" shape, which gives focus to the image, is real as surface, whereas the background interior is paradoxically real as illusion. In the *Perspective Corrections* photography is used in a very simple way, almost as a record of the moment in which the eye, in the right position, would see the transformation. But the photograph intensifies that moment, gives it greater urgency. It effectively eliminates perceptual digression, cutting out the visual surroundings. Unlike the eye,

which is never completely at rest, the photograph does not move. Thus the photographic *Perspective Correction* is also a perceptual fragment, and as such it is used as an element in the construction and reconstruction of perceptual processes.

It was in this general direction that Dibbets, after the *Perspective Corrections*, continued his work. He started to use single photographs, for instance, as documentary moments, moments of acute perception, in order to reconstruct a certain process in time. In these works photography was used to give a rhythm to time, or to make time stand still. In 1969 Dibbets made a work called *The Shadows in My Studio*, for which he set up the camera in a fixed position in front of a window and the open door of his studio. Then from 8:40 am to 2:10 pm he took a photograph every ten minutes, documenting the movement of light and shadow on the studio floor, how they moved with the sun, describing the day. The work, thirty-four photographs mounted on white board, is a linear condensation of time. It makes time visible as moving light. It gives form, or rather imposes a rhythmical form of equal repetitive movements, to a process that would otherwise never be visible with such a degree of concentration. There are several versions of this work made in different locations - as there are several versions of a related work *The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum*, 1970. For the latter, he set up the camera in front of a window in order to photograph the movement of daylight every ten minutes from dawn to sunset, producing a portrait of a day in terms of light. In other constructions, done one year later in 1971, he used a related but more abstract idea. One could say that the *Sunrise-Sunset* or the *Shadow Pieces* are documentary and naturalistic. They use real time (up to an entire day), then come to a concentrated image (or visual record) of that real time.

In 1971 Dibbets used the mechanical properties of the camera, systemic photographic time, to change the amount of light. In the so-called *Shutterspeed Pieces* he photographed a half-closed venetian blind twelve times, each time cutting the shutter speed by half, from four seconds, producing an almost white photograph, to 1/500 second, producing a black photograph. I have the impression, however, that these works, using the time controlling mechanism of the camera itself, were an *intermezzo*, because they paradoxically were too abstract: they were pure constructions, lacking the ambiguity of other work in which there is a contrast between real and photographic time.

The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum was first made as a slide projection. The eighty slides, taken at ten minute intervals covering the entire day, were to be projected at ten second intervals upon the wall opposite the window through which they were originally taken. Thus the work, which is a formalized structure recording the progression of real time, visible as the light of dawn and the fading evening light, was to be seen by the viewer in equivalent real time. The work was presented as process.

At the time Dibbets was interested in the structure itself, in the structural realization rather than the form of presentation. He had enlarged *Perspective Corrections*, transferring them onto canvases as though they were paintings. These remained enlargements; the image itself did not change, although it changed in visual impact. A series of small photographs, recording the shadows in his studio, were mounted in horizontal lines on paper, to be read like words on a page. But what was Dibbets's essential idea? Around 1970, his work became structurally and physically more complex, and the definition of what these works were, how they should behave visually, became more and more problematic. The *Perspective Corrections*, up to 1969, and later works surveying interior space (such as *Numbers on a Wall*) and works measuring and reconstructing geographical distances, using photographs as points of reference, were all characterized by the particular analytic approach to visual phenomena that was the framework of Conceptual Art.

Conceptual Art was a specific development and transformation of Minimal Art. When Frank Stella made his *Black Stripe* paintings he gave them an image that precisely articulated the shape and

surface of the paintings themselves. He did not create, as previous artists had done, an image that separated itself from the rectangular shape of the painting. After that, conceptual artists avoided that modernist pictorial problem (which Cézanne and Mondrian and others had begun to recognize); they concentrated instead on internal structure and the rules of image making, or more generally on transferring visual and linguistic content. They soon found other means to present their work: language, photography, diagrammatic drawing. Thus, it can be shown that the visual "strategies" Jan Dibbets used for his first photographic work ultimately derive from the context of Conceptual Art. Initially they were borrowed techniques (or techniques simply present in the practice of the period). As a discipline these methods gave his early work strong formal support. At the same time, because of his background and traditions, Dibbets's instincts drew him to an image with a more pictorial quality.

In the dry, diagrammatic character of the first *Perspective Corrections* Dibbets had not found his mature artistic nature, and he soon started to enlarge the images to see whether these autonomous constructions would hold up without a constructionist "explanation". The enlarged photographic constructions made around 1970 convinced him that a work could be conceptually acceptable and at the same time have a strong image. And what is more, the single photograph was, in terms of the construction to which it belonged, an abstract, flexible element, and simultaneously a naturalistic fragment. He sensed that the paradoxical relationship between abstract form and structure and naturalistic fragment presented a wide and exciting range of possibilities for construction of wonderful and intriguing images. Because of that strange, ambiguous opposition, these images would still be acceptable within the contemporary, conceptualist aesthetic. Dibbets also decided that there was no reason why his photography should not be in color.

In *The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum*, his first work in color, Dibbets decided to mount the photographs in horizontal rows on a single panel, as he had done in other instances, because he was fully aware that the development of his work would run into trouble if it did not take into account the visual power and beauty of the single image. Therefore, the earlier projection was dismantled and the eighty photographs were mounted on a panel, thus creating a much stronger work. The change of color, for instance, bluish light in the morning going toward red in the afternoon, was invisible in the projection as the intervals between the slides were rather long. On the panel the work is more concentrated; it has the compressed perceptual form that has become a major characteristic of Dibbets's art. In such works, his art is about perception itself; and in his hands the photograph is the logical means with which to articulate forms and modes of perception. *The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum* is an extended perception of light transformed and compressed into a perception of a completely different duration. But the measured structure of that perception remains intact. Its serial and analytic character are articulated more forcefully in the photographic panel, which is synthetic, than in the projection which is, in the end, too naturalistic in its imitation of time. This work shapes perception, making it an autonomous, concrete object of artistic research, just as Frank Stella's structure of stripes shapes a painting. The shape of perception gives Dibbets's work its singular form.

The *Sunrise-Sunset Pieces* reconstruct a precise duration of time in equal photographic moments. Reading a line of photographs, one can reconstruct a day. In 1970 Dibbets applied the same principle to the photographic reconstruction of space. These works, titled *Numbers on a Wall*, are few, but they were seminal, because in the end they led to the first panoramic pieces and thus to the most significant structural principle in Dibbets's work. The *Numbers on a Wall Pieces* were made by setting up the camera at a distance of roughly two meters from a wall in the gallery in which the piece was made. On the wall the artist drew two vertical lines defining, left and right, the expanse of wall that was visible in the camera's viewfinder. Centered between the two lines he put the number

1. He took the photograph, then moved the camera to the right, keeping the same distance from the wall (in order not to destroy the unity of scale) until the right line of the first photograph became the left edge of the second photograph. At the right edge of the new area seen through the viewfinder, he drew a new line; between the lines he placed the number 2. In that precise, methodical way he photographed all four walls of the room and then mounted the photographs in sequence around the periphery of the gallery. The concept of these works - to make visible in a single constructed image a space that the human eye cannot take in without moving around - was fascinating and effective. Also, the experiment helped to define and clarify other questions about the use of photography. Dibbets found that photographic space is more complex to handle than photographic time, which in the end is always a momentary fragment of real time. Photographic space is a synthetic of something else: real space.

These first works about space were simple and direct, but possibly too close to architectural documentation. Dibbets then decided to vary his approach in a panoramic survey of his studio, setting up the camera on a fixed point and turning it around 360 degrees horizontally, photographing walls, doors, windows, moving 30 degrees for each photograph. He then put the photographs together, maintaining their visual continuity and producing a curving line. On paper the complete panorama became strangely fragmentary, visually completely different from the rectangular shape of the actual room.

These works introduced the notion of the unexpected into Dibbets's work, the difference between the method and its calculated result. In his recent constructions the final shape that the photograph will take is largely unknown. Experience has given Dibbets a sense of what is to come, but the surprise at the end is more important than the calculation of it. That surprise occurred for the first time in *Panorama, My Studio*, 1971. Previously the result had been almost completely known beforehand; the *Perspective Corrections* were based on total visual control, starting with a geometric shape on the floor or wall, designed to become another shape by way of precisely placed photographic interventions. From that work one could draw a direct line to the 1977 *Panoramas* and to the more complex *Saenredam Constructions*.

One wonders hypothetically why Dibbets did not move ahead with greater speed in 1971. To move ahead the artist must be able to see ahead. The irregular shape of *Panorama, My Studio* was a surprise, and possibly not quite what he wanted at that time. In 1971, Dibbets was still testing photography as a means to achieve complete confidence and control. Typical of his quiet, unhurried way was the decision to ignore the surprise for the time being, and to employ other methods to construct a panorama.

Thus, after *Panorama, My Studio* he applied the same formal principle, fixing the camera's view on the horizon of a park landscape and of the sea. But this time he mounted the photographs in a straight, horizontal line. These images seem to be undulating: you see the trees, or the sea, coming toward you and then receding. They are images of deep, illusionistic space, yet also undeniably flat, as they are constructions of equal, flat elements. At the same time he worked on a film loop about the horizon of the sea. By moving the camera up and down; the image showed the horizon as a line moving up and down. Sometimes the sea would fill the screen completely, sometimes there would only be sky; most of the time, however, sea and sky would be visible together, introducing an illusionistic sense of space.

In another film loop he tilted the camera forty-five degrees; consequently, the horizon moved diagonally across the screen. The project (conceived for the 1972 Venice Biennale) was designed to have two or three adjacent screens, with projectors moving at different speeds, in order to create a complex spectacle. Yet in this work too, the shape and movement of the images are strictly controlled. As in the early *Panoramas*, and in the *Perspective Corrections*, natural perception is

molded into a specific, unavoidable form. In this way the artist controls the eye of the viewer who knows that what he sees is not real. Some of these images went beyond normal, natural vision. Movement and different positions of the camera constructed forms that could exist as logical abstract constructions, or as photographic images, but not in real vision.

Natural perception is continuous and not governed by abstract external rules but by what is happening in front of one's eyes. Reacting to visual incidents and movement we follow the sequence of those incidents - changes of pattern, color, and so on - and we linger, concentrate, pass over. In itself, human vision is without predefined form. Photography usually does not interfere with this. In general, a photographer selects moments from a natural perceptual sequence because he considers them significant. Such photographs do not interrupt the sequence itself. Dibbets's use of photography is abstract (or rather, non-realistic) because it does interrupt the usual process of perception by imposing precise forms. He does not select an image from an existing sequence. The image he makes has not been seen before. It exists only as image and has no model in the real world.

In Dibbets's series of panoramic works called *Dutch Mountains*, he changed the position of the camera in relation to the horizon. In the earlier *Panoramas* the horizon remained the straight horizontal line we expect it to be. For the *Dutch Mountains* he set up the camera in such a way that, while completing a circle for a part of a circle, it also moved up and down. Consequently, when the photographs were mounted in line, the horizon was curved instead of straight. The resulting image 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.

But there is another more intimate way of reading Jan Dibbets's art. One can describe in objective terms the various forms and constructions he has used over the years. They are simple, clear forms that, in the course of their development, establish their own clarity. The achievement of this clarity - probably their final aesthetic goal - depends on an extremely subtle balance between the elements that make up an image. It cannot be established by method. In Dibbets's work method is only a basis for the order or logic of the construction. The final decisions are in the artist's eye. The logic of a construction may be perfect, but there remains the question of whether an image is right, whether its color is appropriate, whether it is too heavy, whether there is a sense of air and light. When an artist judges an image he has made, that image enters the artist's memory along with other art he has seen that echoes in his mind and makes up his personal awareness of quality in art. The sense of quality that largely determines the course of an oeuvre is like a continuous interior monologue, accepting and rejecting, or like a subterranean reservoir giving fertility to the soil above it. That sense of quality is accumulative and selective at the same time. It is not just historical knowledge of art. It is not that Mondrian made certain paintings that the artist must avoid because they exist already, but that Mondrian and other artists have demonstrated certain properties and qualities in their work that the living artist cannot forget. They are compelling - not like obstacles that bar every passage, but like beacons inviting the artist to go on.

These memories are often fragmentary, often incidental. They are not always logical or obvious. For example, I believe that Dibbets is impressed by Mondrian for a number of reasons. One of them surely is the extreme fragility of Mondrian's works as formal constructions, an aspect that perhaps only artists appreciate, because it is a quality not of theory but of craft. In this Mondrian differs profoundly from his contemporaries, Kasimir Malevich and Kurt Schwitters. The latter artists had something *within the picture*, a sort of hold, which gave real substance to their compositions. Malevich came from the tradition of icon painting that is non-illusionistic. The icon offers a sacred image fixed upon a flat ground of gold. Malevich too created a flat ground. His surface is thick as

wood, and on that dense strong surface he constructed abstract compositions that came to rest upon that surface. The forms are stable because the surface is stable. Schwitters, being a Gothic artist by inspiration, worked with a system of accumulation. He accumulated fragments, letting them overlap and stacking them, until the work became dense and heavy, in a sense constructed, like architecture. But Mondrian had to design his transparent compositions within the airy, illusionistic space characteristic of the Dutch pictorial tradition. The black lines and the colored rectangles hang there, without anchor or weight, trembling like leaves in the breeze, in the silvery, atmospheric space of Van Goyen or Ruisdael.

That is the quality Dibbets has in mind when he thinks of Mondrian. When he remembers a painting by Piero della Francesca or Cézanne, it is not a heavy figure standing firmly on the ground, or two apples heavy in a bowl he thinks of, but something else: the slight suggestion of imbalance between the figures, the wavering of space, that almost unnoticeable irregularity of structure that introduces pictorial tension. It is impossible for a Dutch artist to establish a completely static form or a form that is completely at rest within its own compositional context. That makes Dibbets profoundly different from the contemporaries he admires most, from Sol LeWitt and Carl Andre whose forms have an inherent stillness, to Robert Ryman who creates a certain stability on the surface of his rather "nervous" paintings, so that within the confines of their surfaces, his works begin and end like completed melodies. Almost all of Dibbets's work, however, involves *states* of shapes between other shapes. The images are inherently mobile and changing.

The *Perspective Corrections* depict a shape that, by way of transformation, forms another shape. Tension exists because the second shape can, at any moment, fall back into the first shape. Similarly, the Dutch Mountains are literally constructions organized by the mobile camera. They are works based on a formal intervention (the still photograph), moving into a state of motion (the moving camera). Just as in the paintings of Mondrian, the configuration of forms seems to be as changeable as the clouds in the Dutch sky.

The *Dutch Mountains* have an intriguing melodious quality, a movement that is like music. They suggest a specific length of time of perception that is different from the time of perception in other works. The *Perspective Corrections*, for instance, are almost instantaneous transformations, quick and abrupt. The *Shutterspeed* works have an even, measured quality, but they do not move as beautifully as the *Dutch Mountains*. The dance-like movement of some of the *Dutch Mountains* (some are slow, others quick, some seem to jump) can be judged when they are compared with works such as *0°-135° Horizontal*, 1972, which shows, in a highly abstracted, almost theoretical form, the essential principle of camera movement that is used more freely in the *Dutch Mountains*. For this work Dibbets drew a horizontal line on the wall and then photographed it ten times, moving the camera in a frontal, circular way, fifteen degrees for each shot. In the photographs, the line seems to move. The movement is crisp, precise, rhythmically dry.

The true subject of Dibbets's art is the shaping of modes of perception, and part of the shape is speed. Differences in speed are decisive elements in the way one sees and experiences Dibbets's work, and are consciously employed factors in making works. In the period in which he made the *Dutch Mountains* he also produced a series of pieces showing vases. For example, he put a small black vase on a table. He photographed this arrangement with a movie camera, in a slow horizontal pan (in other versions a vertical pan), starting and ending on white. In between, the vase appears and disappears, slowly and fractionally.

The film was then printed on photographic paper and mounted on a panel. To me, this exquisite still life is, in feeling and visual intention, the abstract opposite of the *Dutch Mountains*. The appearance and disappearance of the vase is so unbearably slow (much slower than the movement from image to image in *The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum*, to which it is structurally related) that the

vase seems not to move at all. The work is the image of stillness, yet the vase moves, moved by the slow camera. And then one year later, in a complete swing of the pendulum, he constructed (following and refining the precise principle of works like *0°-135° Horizontal*) a series of *Comets* that are images of absolute swiftness, the sea surging upwards.

The brilliant *Comet* series concluded, for the time being, Dibbets's preoccupation with beautiful, fantastically curving and leaping images of land and sea. The structural principle of these works had run its course, from the quiet early *Panoramas* to the dynamically constructed *Comets*. Instead of using the sharp line of the horizontal between land or sea and the sky that gave those works a strong formal backbone, he began to turn his attention to the texture of surfaces, and eventually to color.

Sometimes, in the course of his work, an artist risks a fundamental change, or at least a change that takes him far away from what he has been doing. Maybe this is simply a sense of adventure, for we expect occasional surprises from artists. But there are other, more serious motives for change; an artist changes course when the work threatens to go astray, or when it starts drifting on the flow of its own beauty. Jan Dibbets is very sensitive to that danger because his work, like the work of all good artists in the abstract-geometrical tradition, is formally extremely fragile. Works such as the *Dutch Mountains* balance, especially in their formal construction, on the edge. They can easily become self-indulgent; the images are beautiful and mysterious, sometimes dangerously elegant. When they pass that thin line beyond which formal control is lost, they fail.

Before that happens, the artist moves away to another, completely different area, to gain another point of view from which to look back on previous production with fresh eyes. Formal change thus becomes an important element in the judgment of one's own work, a critical activity an artist cannot do without, and therefore also an element in the development of the work, in choosing new themes and new formal strategies. A change of focus is not random or speculative, but a step consciously taken within the context of an artist's work. Work evolves along a central line and around certain central ideas that are sacred to the artist, in which he hears his own voice. Sometimes a group of works moves too far from those fundamental convictions, and then it is time to change.

I want to return, for a moment, to one of the last of the *Perspective Corrections*, *My Studio 1, 1: Square on Wall*, 1969, and also to *Panorama, My Studio*. At some point in his early career an artist makes a work that touches the core of his sensibility. Though not always the best of his works (although *My Studio 1, 7: Square on Wall* is one of the best), it may be (like *Panorama, My Studio*) less refined than later versions in the same vein, but these works are very honest; they are a self-discovery, an idea the artist wishes to cherish and defend. They are points of no return, and at the same time they indicate and open the way ahead. In my view, the central line of Dibbets's art lies between those two works, or rather between the formal and aesthetic arguments they represent. The *Perspective Correction* is an image that comes forward and then, in one swift transformation, settles on the surface. It holds the surface and provides an almost stable focus of vision (not quite stable because it is off-center). *Panorama, My Studio* is a mobile image; scanning space, it has no center; it moves with its irregular form falling away to the right. Between these two kinds of imagery, Jan Dibbets's general idea of how an image should behave moves to and fro. From that point of view, which is critical because it represents a standard, one can see that the *Comet Pieces* are the ultimate form of the movable image.

Even if all the single elements of the *Comet Pieces* are strictly formal (diagonal divisions of sea and sky), their construction gives them an accelerating movement; from a firm base touching the floor they curve upwards to the point where the image literally disappears.

Beyond the disappearing image, there is nothing more. Thus Dibbets turned his attention to images that are almost motionless. In 1972, in Italy, he took the first photographs of the surface of water. He continued this more methodically in 1974 and 1975, adding works about the non-reflective

structure of grass and leaves on the ground. The form of perception in these works is crystal clear. In the previous pieces, from *Dutch Mountains* to the *Comets*, perception was precisely shaped and framed for the beholder. The *Structure* works of water or leaves are pure surface. They bring the eye close to the surface that is very alive. In my view they are somewhat related, in their curious stillness, to the descriptions of interior space in the works called *Numbers on a Wall*. But the segments of wall that make up the construction of those works are boundaries, they define space; in the *Structure Pieces*, the surface is just surface.

The *Structure Pieces* are rectangular constructions using a number of photographs of the same general surface, but each of the photographic elements is slightly different. The surface we see is therefore unified, as water or leaves, but also differentiated. Because of these slight differences, from element to element, the surface never really comes to rest. It keeps vibrating and therefore does not completely identify with the surface of the photographic image itself. The works look straight forward but in fact they are ambiguous. In the end they are as unreal as the *Dutch Mountains*. Constructing precise differentiations, they have, in fact, taken the perception of surface beyond natural vision.

In the next group of works, the *Colorstudies*, Dibbets used the artificial surfaces of car bodies. These are surfaces without movement and without texture. Because of that there was no point in joining a number of small photographs together in a single, differentiated image. The surface of the car bodies presented instead shining, textureless color.

The works he made consist of three or four panels, each panel showing a single, large photograph. Because the bodies of cars are usually convex, do not appear as even surfaces; they are touched by light and that make them uneven. The forms come close to the surface of the photograph but they do not stay there. This effect is somewhat the vibrating surfaces of the *Water Structures*. Because the surface varies, the color is not flat, it is strangely at odds with the flat surface and with the square shape of the photographs. It is as if the photograph tries to hold them steady, but the color shapes are restless within the photograph, pulsating within a tight frame.

With the *Colorstudies* Dibbets completed a wide circle of research into the potential of photography as an abstract medium. The search took him from dry transformations in the *Perspective Corrections*, through various effects that could be produced by manipulating the camera, to a concentration upon surface as structure and, finally, to pure color. The discovery of color was of fundamental importance for Dibbets, and for that reason alone I consider the *Colorstudies*, which have never been greatly appreciated (perhaps because they are formally not spectacular), to be among his major works. Previously he had manipulated perception by imposing formal structures. After *The Shortest Day Pieces*, color entered his work as simply another element, but hardly more than that. In the *Dutch Mountains*, but also in the *Structure Pieces*, the natural presence of color was primarily descriptive and illustrative. In the *Colorstudies*, however, color became the substance of the image itself; and thus the images suggested the use of color as an autonomous element in the construction of works. In fact, when Dibbets made the *Colorstudies* in 1976, for technical reasons he could not go beyond a certain size with each image. Since then, much larger photographic paper has become available, and recently he remade one of the *Colorstudies* on panels two meters square. That work demonstrates that the visual effect aimed at in the smaller *Colorstudies* can be even more powerful when enlarged, without losing its formal tightness.

Still, when they were made, the single photographs in the earliest *Colorstudies* were relatively large. Also they were the most purely visual works Dibbets had made up to that point. The structural component that in other works, for instance the *Comets*, was paramount, was almost non-existent in the *Colorstudies*, perhaps suggesting that the works could be larger. Because the formal structures used in previous works were relatively intricate, it would have been difficult to enlarge them

because in enlargement the coherence of the formal structure could easily disintegrate. Color, on the other hand, can hold large-size surfaces because it has no internal formal structure; it can be used as continuous substance.

After the *Colorstudies*, Dibbets slowly began to make larger work. He created structures that are a combination or a synthesis of several structures he had previously used separately. He began using them in combinations that reinforced them, as in a seminal work called *Structure Panorama 360°*, 1977. He picked up the "old" 1971 idea of the panoramic survey, combining it with that of the *Surface Structures*, articulated in the *Water Structures*. Only this time he chose not an infinitely undifferentiated surface, but a pavement with a distinct geometric pattern and a strong color. Hence the resulting curve, larger than he had made before, is also a strong shape, able to sustain its size. The shape is tight like a muscled arm. To give it more weight on the white ground he began to draw around it. He had done this previously but only occasionally when a shape that threatened to slide off the paper needed some structural reinforcement. From then on, drawing around the photographic shape became a strategy, also aimed at articulating the difference between abstract pattern and photographic shape.

From there he went on, arriving, in 1979, at a still larger and grander formulation of the panorama principle. In making works like *Structure Panorama 360°* he encountered two problems. Occasionally they tended to be slightly descriptive as surfaces, lacking the marvelous ambiguity of the *Colorstudies*, and there was the practical fact that in photographing pavements and floors, the height of the tripod imposed a limit, reducing flexibility.

In a major work of 1979, *Construction 330°*, he avoided these problems in the actual construction of the image. The "trick" was simple and effective: he turned the curved shape upside down, heightening its appearance as an abstract shape of color; and, in order to hold that shape he mounted it on a semicircular panel. The effect is one of a strange lightness. The eye, which in the earlier panoramas automatically centers on the surface, seeing it as pavement on which one can walk, no longer finds a point of reference or rest. This effect was new in Dibbets's work. In almost all of the previous work, the eye is framed by the formal power of the construction, forms of perception are imposed upon natural vision. In *Construction 330°* the eye is left to wander. It was with this change in perceptual mode that the later architectural panoramas began, those sometimes identified with the name of the Dutch painter Saenredam. Saenredam had, like Dibbets, looked at architecture as though it were a still life, and then painted the interior of churches like atmospheric landscapes. *Construction 330°* showed a pavement upside down, as if it were a ceiling. Next, because it liberated the camera from the height of the tripod, giving him more freedom of movement, Dibbets photographed the beamed ceiling of a room in a Tuscan farm and reconstructed it as a panorama. Doing that, a new problem made itself manifest, or rather an old problem reemerged. How does a photographic shape, a construction, fit on the paper or panel supporting it? To what extent must it appear as construction, to what extent as image from which the structural component fades away? Once again in his work Dibbets had to make that vital choice.

Let us go back for a moment to *Structure Panorama 360°*. In that work the constructed, curved shape sits on the white ground as what it is, a pavement. The shape has a certain weight which is further articulated by the drawing around it. That drawing reiterates or echoes the structural character of the photographic shape. The weight of the shape also coincides with the camera's downward view; one's own view stops with the shape on the paper, but looking at a ceiling one looks upward. This changes completely the visual character of a work such as *San Casciano Ceiling*, 1979.

In all his previous work Dibbets had shaped perception, sometimes giving it ambiguous twists, but there had always been a precise and discrete relationship with the natural ways of seeing. There was

a fine difference between the two kinds of perception, but never a complete, illogical cut. But constructing a panorama of a ceiling, on a white ground was such a cut, because the constructed shape appeared as too heavy. In the "miniature" form of the preparatory study the construction was still acceptable. In making a larger version, however, Dibbets found that he had to introduce color. Embedding the constructed photographic shape in a soft field of color made it appear lighter. By relating that color to the color of the photographs he could make the sharp edges of the photographs disappear. But he did not apply color with a paintbrush. Using very liquid pigments, inks and watercolors, he washed the paper surface of the panel, time and time again, thus softening the surface of the paper itself. The paper became, instead of the support for color, a field of color, strong in hue but also transparent, like the sky. In this expanse of color the constructed form appears as a strange concentration, sometimes as a shape drawing the color toward itself, making the entire surface taut and tense. The photographic shape is like an apparition within the color field, the whole a blended image of great visual distinction and power.

In Dibbets's art there has always been a strong sense of logic. The artistic decisions he has made have always been reasonable interventions; that is, they were interventions into an ongoing process of artistic reasoning. Steps that were taken to slightly change the direction of his art did not interrupt its vital, internal continuity. The change, for instance, from the constructed paintings and the small earth constructions to the *Perspective Corrections* in 1967 was more a change in expression and concentration than a fundamental change in artistic reasoning. The *Perspective Corrections* - discovering photography as a means of formal articulation - were able to pinpoint a particular effect in the earlier works (optical change of shape by change of position) and to isolate that effect and develop its visual potential in isolation. Changes of "image" in Dibbets's work have always been logical; he takes elements or clues from previous work and carries them to their next stage in which they may change almost completely.

A photograph is an image isolated from reality, separated forever from the visual totality of which it was a part. It is working with such isolated fragments that gives Dibbets's art, at the same time, extraordinary tightness and flexibility. An isolated fragment may be handled or manipulated freely, because it has been taken out of its context and has become rootless: although "realistic" by nature, because of its linguistic isolation it is extremely abstract. Dibbets may then consider and contemplate these photographic elements that are at the center of his work, and he may give their appearance any possible twist he likes. There, however, his "Dutch" sense of precision comes in. The changes from "image" to "image" are always measured and they have a precise sense of purpose. Invention follows invention, each visual phase is clearly marked and recognizable, but an image is never exhausted in a dogmatic, conceptual way, because it is Dibbets's deepest conviction that it is the artist's business to keep images alive, to carry them through time.

Dibbets's concern is with images, images close to us, not those that are remote. Therefore, his relationships to historical art (Saenredam, Monet, Mondrian) come through his interest in images, of whatever era, that are still alive, waiting to be used again. His concern is not with theory but with forms of articulation of certain visual effects that remain open-ended, that could, so to speak, fit the next form. Dibbets makes works that keep alive his previous inventions, and he has developed certain very flexible strategic (linguistic) structures that he can follow separately (as in the *Perspective Corrections* or *Dutch Mountains* or *Colorstudies*) or use in combination (*Panoramas* or *Saenredam Pieces*) clearly and precisely.

Dibbets's greatest skill is his ability to arrange a miracle from which construction fades away. His first works originated within the general context of Minimal and so-called Conceptual Art; that aesthetic provided the general framework of his thinking and certainly alerted him to a particular kind of work. But his sensibility was always pictorial, and almost from the beginning he formulated

his works not as constructions or concepts but as images - even as paintings.

The detached image, floating in its field of hues and veils as deep as the sky, is immensely flexible; it can freely, imaginatively move in its space, as earlier photographic images could not. The *Perspective Corrections* came into being through a single, swift movement, and later works, notably the *Dutch Mountain* and the *Comet* series, rely on precisely measured movement, or movement brought to a specific halt. Their power as perceptual constructions lies in their gently controlled transformations; these images seem to be arrested in the course of their movement. Transformations between two states - namely the beginning and the end - make these constructions clear, precise and readable within their own terms. In the most recent works the image continues to move, turning around its structure, literally like a ship slowly drifting on a sea of hazy color. This gesture represents a significant move toward the pictorial in Dibbets's work, promising a whole new range of possibilities.

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