Low Fixed Media Show: A Conversation with Artist Bart Stolle

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‘There’s an inflation of imagery’; Bart Stolle opens the conversation in his Ghent apartment. Society has entered an era of abundance, where its constituents are subject to a continuous overload of external stimuli, perpetuated through technological development, including social media. The result, he adds: ‘people no longer look and sense’. Though Stolle witnesses similar trends in other media, such as music, imagery is his medium. Yet, in Stolle’s world, an image is not only defined by its immediate appearance: ‘My intention is not to show the image. I aim to reveal what is behind the image, where one is confronted with ‘basic’ concepts, such as time and space.’ Fueled by feelings of apprehension and disempowerment during his teenage years, Stolle set out to ‘show as much as [he] could, with the smallest means possible.’ To generate and capture maximum empathy through barren visuals, Stolle explains, his characters would need to consist of a maximum of two circles and a square: a ‘Low Fixed Media Show’. The characters would have no eyes and no mouth: the spectator should be given the necessary time and space to interpret and process the image.

In 1997 Stolle officially revealed the Low Fixed Media concept. Over the years however, this framework has not solely been a means to present his artwork, but a tool to help him ponder on and cope with his surroundings. Since growing up in the Western eighties Stolle saw and sees himself confronted with the complexities of a hyper mediated society - dating back to commercial television and the beginnings of digitalization -, ongoing globalization and yuppie culture, ecological challenges,... as well as the minutiae of the everyday. He distillates the exponents of this environment into a coherent body of meticulously composed and abstract work, ranging from comput-

er animations, pencil drawings, paintings and mixed media installations.

At first glance, his works appear to be visualizations of technology, circuitry and automated procedures. Indeed, it’s quite easy to see similarities to topographic maps, decision-trees, cluster patterns, seismograms, fractals, etc. Representations that seem very recognizable, yet would require training to actually understand. Upon closer scrutiny however, it becomes clear every brush of paint or pencil mark is ‘hand-put’. By stripping his subjects to their bare essentials he creates ample room for his audience to use its imagination and project meaning into his work. Stolle is fascinated with time, space and movement - but likes to slow down what’s going on around him. These commitments translate to the technical side of this *modus operandi* as well. In his drawings we often see stacks of layered ultra-thin pencil lines and pixelated color separation.

As evidenced by the presence of a Nasa Apollo Saturn V Lego construction kit in his living room, Stolle embodies scientific passion. Though working as a solo artist, Stolle nevertheless shows great admiration for the technical, seeking and enjoying the interaction of those who shape it, as he recalls his conversations with *amongst others* Harold Cohen, Frieder Nake, Georg Nees and Manfred Mohr, pioneers of computer art. ‘A computer could generate an image in a split-second. I wanted to capture a part of that process.’ By focusing on that brief moment in time and space, Stolle seeks to humanise a process that is often thought of as only ‘artificially’ human. At the same time, Stolle, through his work, tries to reconstitute the aspirations of those spearheading the computer art movement, and their lack of recognition. Whereas historically, the hard sciences and technology were not considered art proper, Stolle serves the ‘detoxification of the computer’, a restoration of negative perception. Not dissimilar to his own approach, Stolle notes, ‘they also tried to embed human sensitivity into the machine.’ Stolle reverse engineers the computer process, in which ‘lines and dots’, as a form of expression, never lost their relevance. This ‘humane’ interpretation offers dissonance in an environment where art and media often accentuate rapid technological developments - currently artificial intelligence - as disruptive and dystopian. Yet, indicated by Stolle’s metaphor of ‘image inflation’, the artist does not remain indifferent towards increasing digitalization. Rather his works are multi-dimensional. Indeed, he

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wishes to present the viewer an island of tranquility. Therein lies the paradoxical nature of Stolle's work. Whereas the artist aims to make more human the machine, by reducing an image through its human harmonious essence, he equally offers the audience an antidote to the hasty nature of the every-day, which is not rarely perpetuated by the same technology he aims to humanise. Through his art, he not only offers a detoxification of the computer, but also the digital detoxification of the spectator. For both dimensions to accord, Stolle's recording of time and space are the necessary condition. Like a machine learning process, he looks for the patterns that allow him to unravel reality to its bare essentials. *Low Fixed Media Show* therefore also refers to a means to view the connected world, and to disentangle current-day complexities: 'an endeavor, which has become increasingly difficult in a society characterised by overspecialisation.'

Despite his technological savvy, Stolle's focus on harmony explains his skeptical stance towards technology as an enabler and active art mediator: 'Mondrian used only three colours. He succeeded to create harmony through simplicity. 20th century art might appear antiquated, yet on an emotional level, technology did not yet succeed in capturing this harmony.' In addition, society's relationship with technology has shifted: 'nowadays technology seems to dictate what I can do, not the other way around. I wonder daily how I could collaborate with scientists. However, such a collaboration would ultimately require a sacrifice to one's own human harmony.' Even when Stolle uses more 'modern' media, his urge for handicraft oozes through: with his computer animations, although they could be rendered significantly quicker if completed inside the machine, he prefers to create each frame by hand, drawing the 25 needed for one second of footage. This preference for craftsmanship adds human flavor - it allows Stolle to find a curious balance, one that gives the artificial impression a natural touch.

Yet, the artificial never seems fully absent. In his paintings for example, Stolle is known for his use of bright, harsh colors, such as cobalt blue and cadmium orange. Though they fit perfectly in the harmonious nature and intent of Stolle's oeuvre, these colours are not 'random' – not a coincidental term for Stolle. 'During the industrial revolution, they were among the first artificial paint pigments made', he notes. Chemical and toxic in nature, for Stolle they form, as purely industrial artefacts fabricated by the sciences, an appropriate means to approach society's relationship with technology and new media. Symbolizing the industrial blue-collar working class, and their struggle against automation, perhaps his use of blue also functions allegorically for society's detachment during modern times. 'Add radioactive green', Stolle adds, 'and you might have found my 'Mondrian' colours.' All aimed towards essence and harmony, but with an aptitude for the contemporary. Even so, upon viewing, his work is evidence that the core of, and need for, Stolle's art is inherently and exclusively human.

Born in Eeklo (1974), Bart Stolle¹ lives and works in Ghent. In the more than 20 years Stolle has been active, his work has been shown at the SMAK in Ghent and the STUK museum in Leuven, amongst others. In 2008 he joined Zeno-X, the blue chip gallery led by Frank Demaegd that also represents Luc Tuymans, Michael Borremans and Marlene Dumas. In 2018 the gallery had a focus on his work at the Art Brussels fair and at the turn of the year it hosted, for the fourth time, a Low Fixed Media Show solo at their Antwerp home base.

1 The full biography bio of the artist, as well as selected works, are available at: <http://www.zeno-x.com/artists/BS/bart_stolle.html>