(This essay was originally published in the exhibition catalogue “Fenduq”, published by Jap Sam Books in 2019 to accompany the exhibition of the same name at the Fries Museum in The Netherlands. https://www.japsambooks.nl/products/eric-van-hove-fenduq (ISBN 978-94-92852-11-3))

Motor skills

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker

This essay engages with Eric van Hove’s practice. Yet it engages with it by way of what you can call, appropriately, we assume, given the practice’s central concerns, a detour. Or you might even say displacement. That detour, this displacement, is culture. In what follows, we want to talk about art by not actually talking at all that much about art but rather culture. The purpose is not to reduce a specific art work to a mere expression of general cultural tendencies – we are very much aware of the long tradition of philosophers treating art as such, most recently someone like Slavoj Zizek, who, for all his qualities, often turns the films of Alfred Hitchcock into mouthpieces for the theories of Hegel or Lacan. Not at all. Our point here is that art is an expansion of culture. For if it, to compare art’s relation to culture to speech act theory for a moment, to the speaker’s relationship to a text; if it reiterates, it also in its reiteration re-evaluates, changing tempo, rhythm, emphasis, tone of voice, or even, indeed, wording; every reiteration, in other words, allows for the possibility of recreation, of anew creating. Philosophers have used different terms to describe processes like these – judo, performativity, the diagram, to name just a few – but let us here, in a homage to van Hove’s oeuvre, call it ‘motor skill’: the instantaneous relationship between a multiplicitous expression, an assemblage, and unthinking thought, a synchronic movement of various muscles and nerves and their pre-conscious conception.

All art is unique; no art is unique

All art is unique. Good art. Bad art. Mediocre art. Each is good, or bad, or indeed, as so much we and we are sure you, reader, have encountered in your life, mediocre, in its distinctly individual sense. Of course, there is art that relies wholly on other art. But even that art is reliant on that other art in its own logic and manner.

At the same time, of course, no art is unique. No art is one of its kind. That is not to say that all art is a mere copy of other art. A facsimile. A rip-off. Far from it. To say that no art is unique is not to say that no art is original. Or creative. Or expertly crafted or thought-through. A lot of art – or maybe not a lot but some art and certainly van Hove’s art – fulfills all of those criteria: it is original, creative, expertly crafted and thoroughly thought-through and thought-out.

What we mean when we suggest that no art is one of its kind, is that art, however special, however unlike anything you’ve ever witnessed, is not produced – and we use that word consciously, as art, too, is and has always been a profession, an industry – in a vacuum, in a spacetime devoid in its entirety of matter. Not a political-economic vacuum. Not a cultural vacuum. Not a material vacuum. Nor in any of the vacui in between.

Culture matters

On the contrary. Art is produced in spacetimes full of matter. It is produced in spaces of wealth or spaces of poverty or, as is the case in our current predicament, in Leeuwarden as much as in Marrakech and in Oslo as much as in Paris, spaces of wealth and poverty all at once, one, it appears, possible through its proximity or even contact with the other. Spaces where bread costs this much and wine that much. Art is produced, further, in times of political silence or political upheaval. It is produced in times of technological innovation and times of ecological devastation. Certainly, also, art is produced in spaces and times of distinct cultural matter, where some expressive forms are popular and others impopular, where there are patterns that you see seemingly everywhere and textures that no one appears interested in.

All art is individual, yes, since each work of art navigates the available matter in its own way. Yet no art is individual, for all works negotiate the same matter. If we turn this around, what this implies is also that there are limits to what art of a particular era of culture can express. Each matter, after all, at any moment *affords,* to use that concept so popular in design theory these days, a distinct range of possible uses; just as it precludes others. As it stands, granite affords other possible uses than wood, or moss, or goose feathers, or maple sirup (we write 'as it stands' since we can imagine another a future in which these affordance differences have been minimised by, say, technological invention or radical environmental change). Technological matter, or political-economic matter, or environmental matter, or cultural matter is no different. Each cultural paradigm or discourse affords and precludes its own cultural production, not to mention its own abnormalities and common sense, facts and falsehoods. If you find this difficult to imagine, just think of the controversy Paul McCarty's Santa Claus – a statue of a figure reminiscent of santa holding an object that may well represent a tree but is more often characterized as a dildo – caused over a decade ago when it was installed in Rotterdam; or, closer to Friesland and far, far more poignant, the recent outcry surrounding discussions about the racism inherent to the tradition of 'Black Pete'.

Do you feel it, too?

A concept that we have long found useful in thinking about these cultural affordances and art is that of the "structure of feeling". Developed, in fits and starts, over a period of thirty odd years, by the cultural theorist Raymond Williams, the notion of the structure of feeling suggests that culture is affective, is a shared feeling, as well as an ideology, an epistemology and so forth; indeed, it suggests that what is and can be felt *structures* what and how we know (cf. 1954, 1977). Each culture has what one of Williams' later interpreters, the critical theorist Fredric

Jameson, has called a “ground tone” (1992); or, in the words of philosopher Noel Carroll, a “mood” (2003): a feeling that filters every single one of our encounters, even those encounters that appear diametrically opposed. As Carroll writes: “when I am irritable, in an irritable mood, there is no one in particular who irritates me. Everyone and everything that falls into my pathway is likely to become the locus of my foul mood” (526). Culture feels for us as much as that it is felt by us.

Over the course of the past century, there have been by and large three dominant structures of feelings in the west: modernism, postmodernism, and, currently, and of interest to the practice of van Hove, metamodernism. If the first, as the philosopher Jos de Mul (2003) once put it, tends to be characterised by a sense of enthusiasm always already evolving into utopianism and/or devolving into fanaticism and/or fascism and the latter is often (stereo)typified as irony bordering on cynicism, metamodernism is not so much a balance of the two as an oscillation between them and ultimately beyond them. It is at once enthusiastic and ironic; and because one cannot be both simultaneously, neither. Among the labels we have used to describe such contemporary processes of oscillation are ‘informed naivety’, describing a feeling of trying in spite of better judgment, an “I know, but still”, and ‘pragmatic utopianism’, which designates an adhoc idealism; but also ‘relativist absolutism’, the populist opportunism of especially many contemporary conservative and (il)liberal politics.

To be sure, our point here is not that in the heyday of modernism all art is enthusiasm, or that postmodernism is a catch-all term exclusively for cynical art. Not at all. As anyone who has ever been or is depressed knows all too well: there are plenty of moments of levity. It is just that the ground tone, the tone that you start out from and return to, the tone that circumscribes even your moments of pure pleasure, is one of depression.

Motor skills

Van Hove’s practice, and nowhere more than the artistic project resulting in the V12 Laraki, a Mercedes motor block re-assembled from parts crafted by dozens of Moroccan craftsmen, each with his or her idiosyncratic techniques and materials, sets out from and returns to the contemporary metamodern ground tone. It uses the craftiness of many, many artisans to make a product whose history is tied up precisely with the disappearance of craft and its social structures: The motor (and its associated modes of mass production and capitalist expansion across the globe). Yet it doesn’t long nostalgically for a lost past. This is not a work of mourning or a form of remembrance. Van Hove’s practice – and the broader artisanal turn in our current metamodern moment – has, as the cultural philosopher Sjoerd van Tuinen (2017) argued,

> less to do with the idolisation of pre-industrial handicrafts by John Ruskin or the anti-industrial Arts and Crafts movement founded by William Morris than with Bauhaus. For Ruskin and Morris, the basic idea had been that craftsmanship guarantees workers control over the means and relations of production and thus enables them to retain their traditional form of life. Bauhaus, by contrast, was probably the first major attempt to (…) conceptualise craft vis-à-vis the historically specific social situation of labour.

Not unlike ‘Bauhaus’, yet, of course, with a different context, aesthetic and sensibility, Van Hove’s practice turns to craft to confront a historically specific social situation; a situation, in this case, that is characterised by post-colonial and capitalist forms of exploitation as much as cultural homogenization and mass tourism. And, also not unlike Bauhaus, it not only exposes these systemic forms of violence but attempts to use the skills of the craftsman, in a collective utopian gesture, to demonstrate the impossible possibility of alternative social-economic structures and other ways of life.

In this sense, Van Hove’s practice sets out from and returns to a metamodern ground tone that can perhaps be best described, paraphrasing Gramsci, as *pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will*. Today we observe, across the arts, a willed – self-imposed - optimism in the light of dire conditions that have become so clear and are so present they cannot but be known (rather than simply lived). It is this optimism of the will that can be traced in every other aspect of Van Hove’s work. It emanates from the highly skilled manner in which the artisans crafted each individual part of the motor - with all of its specific materiality and intricate patterning – in order to revitalise traditions nearly lost to the forces of modernization. It emanates from the successful attempt to deconstruct and re-assemble a historical narrative overwritten by the discourses of colonization. It emanates from the dogged insistence that collaborative, artisanal, and sustainable ways of working do have a place in - and can reconfigure from within – a capitalist system geared towards extractivism, desingularization, and immaterialisation (with its global flows of capital, commodities, waste, and data). And, finally, it can be traced in the convincing manner in which other modes of doing and thinking are reclaimed so as to reinvigorate our ability to imagine, and stake out, future alternatives to today’s impasse. If anything, then, Van Hove’s practice enables us to practice the motor skills – i.e. our learned abilities to skilfully and purposefully act in a given social situation – that are so badly needed in a historical moment that requires a different mode of existence, and requires it now.

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