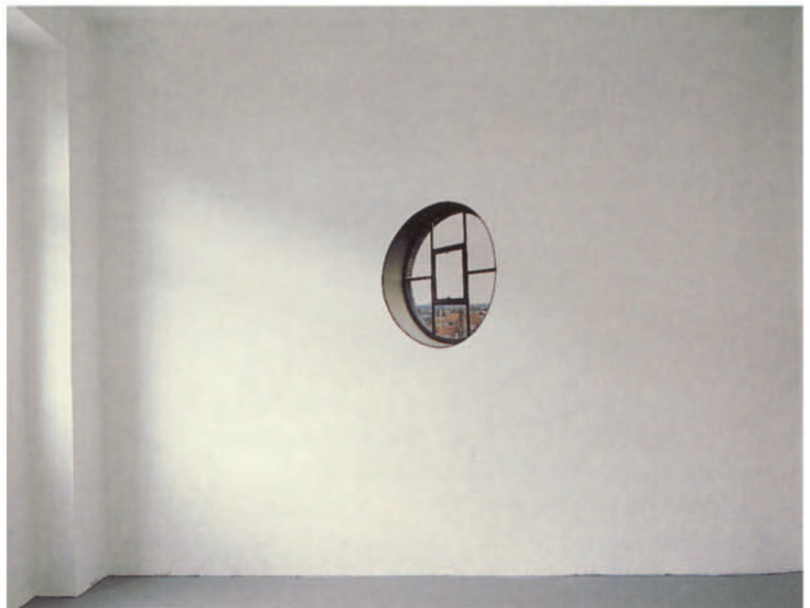
Reality and Art in the Work of Jan Dibbets and Johannes Vermeer

When the camera obscura was invented, the seventeenth-century poet Constantine Huygens thought that the art of painting was finished. In the nineteenth century the introduction of photography gave people the same idea. Today, with the advent of virtual reality, the same predictions are being made. Every new technique which seems to reproduce reality flawlessly apparently offers yet another opportunity to proclaim the end of art. But art survives because its own truth stands alongside everyday reality. Art, even the most abstract, taps a deep-seated layer in us as if, as Plato once said, everything around us is merely a shadow of the real world far removed from ourselves.

The misunderstanding that still generally exists between the general public on the one hand and art historians, critics and gallery owners on the



Jan Dibbets, *Amsterdam-Düsseldorf*, 1996. Photo pasted on wall. The artist's collection.

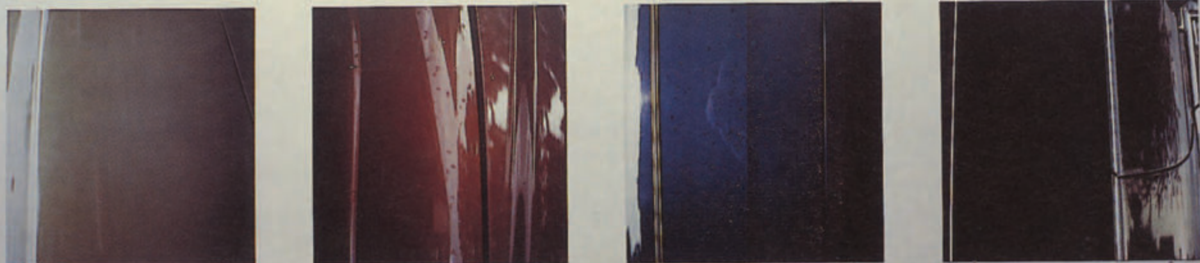
other is partly due to their different ways of judging a work of art. The professionals are involved with composition, colour and use of materials; they are only marginally interested in the story that a work of art tells. But the man in the street first looks for a story told by a painting. This impulse goes back a very long way, and is hardly surprising as the story is at the very root of Western art. For centuries the recognisability of the images gave a work of art both its didactic and its artistic right to exist. Although the story was often not realistic, the semblance of reality remained. For a long time the anecdote remained an important element in painting. It was only at the end of last century that some artists searching for a different reality began to work on two levels. To give an example: in 1896 the Dutch artist Johan Thorn Prikker drew in grease pencil a country lane in his Belgian vacation resort of Visé. Although it is a country lane, it is at the same time another composition: a work that we would now have no trouble calling abstract. In his 1968 standard work on the oeuvre of Piet Mondrian Cor Blok writes: '*But until various artists, virtually all at the same time in the period around 1910, began to paint non-representational art "the time was simply not ripe for it". That is to say, until then there were too many artists who felt that it just wasn't done (not to mention the attitude of the general public) for someone to venture that step alone. This does not mean that the world was impatiently waiting for abstract art around 1910, but that tolerance of unexpected changes – even if apparently fortuitous – had become an artistic habit. If someone made a discovery, he did not have to hide it in the attic for fear that the neighbours would see it.*'

Jan Dibbets, *Colour Study, H 1, 2, 3, 4*. 1976-1985. Photograph on board, 175 x 175 cm. Private collection.

The artist's eye

After a short but intensive scrutiny of the avenues open to him as a painter the Dutch artist Jan Dibbets (1941- ; see *The Low Countries* 1993-94: 311-312) opted for reality. But through his composition he transforms reality. Dibbets' photo collages, or photo fragments sometimes combined with pencil outlines or colour, are a reality that can only exist as a work of art. His art is determined by his view of reality as recorded by a camera. Memories of other works of art, sometimes fragments, sometimes compilations, but perhaps more often than not associations, are equally important components. The actual origin of each work is obvious as Dibbets names the places where the photos were taken. This adds an extra dimension to the artistic value of the work. Often familiar sites such as Soissons Cathedral, the Guggenheim Museum, or the Vondel Church in Amsterdam henceforth lead double lives as works of art and as churches or museums.

Dibbets' work is often said to have the clarity of Saenredam (see *The Low Countries* 1993-94: 231-238) and Mondrian (see *The Low Countries* 1993-94: 75-82) and the colours of Monet. But the work with which he may have the closest tie may be that of Johannes Vermeer (see *The Low Countries* 1994-95: 175-180). At all events, when I visited the major exhibition of Vermeer's work in the Mauritshuis in The Hague in the spring of 1996 Dibbets' work frequently sprang to mind. As the catalogue indicates, Vermeer's pictures, like Dibbets', are the product of an extremely painstaking and often time-consuming method of painting. In addition, the catalogue presents us with evidence that Vermeer's much vaunted 'reality' never in fact existed. If it is indeed the case that Johannes Vermeer's 'reality' is an artifice, then there is scant difference between his work of the seventeenth century and Dibbets' work of today.



Stage-set interiors

Vermeer's early works were biblical or mythological in character; later he specialised in genre paintings, mainly interiors with one or two persons, or even only one woman. Street scenes and townscapes were both popular subjects for the Delft painters of the period. But in Vermeer's *Little Street* and *View of Delft* something transcendental has taken place: a moment has been frozen in time. It was long thought that he used a camera obscura. Research undertaken both in the United States and the Netherlands while the Vermeer exhibition was being organised has called this into question.

There is a difference of opinion on this point between Arthur Wheelock, curator of the Washington National Gallery, and Ben Broos and Jørgen Wadum of the Mauritshuis; it was thus not without significance that a camera obscura was on show at the exhibition in Washington, while in The Hague the pin-and-threads technique for studying the laws of perspective was graphically demonstrated by a photo of a painting with threads stretched out in front of it.

During the restoration of a number of the canvasses prior to the exhibition it became known that fifteen of the twenty-two paintings were shown to have a tiny hole where Vermeer had placed the pin to which a thread was attached to assist him with the foreshortening. But however carefully he built up his compositions according to the most up-to-date and complex rules of perspective, painting itself was always foremost in his mind, thus rebutting Huygens' claim that it was dead. Within a solid framework Vermeer took liberties: a chair catches the light despite being behind a curtain; the daylight that falls through two windows set in the same side wall throws different shadows; the reflection in the *View of Delft* of the city gates in the water of the River Schie has been enlarged so that it touches the other shore, where the viewer stands, to mention but a few examples.

The interiors Vermeer painted probably never existed in quite that form either. Research has shown that objects, even persons, have been moved

Johannes Vermeer, *Young Lady with a Water Pitcher*. c.1664. Canvas. 45.7 x 40.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Marquand Collection, gift of Henry G. Marquand).

about in compositions that now look particularly solid and true to life. Nowadays ingenious technical devices like infra-red cameras and computers can make these changes visible to us. For hundreds of years we thought that the woman in the *Young Lady with a Water Pitcher* from the Metropolitan Museum in New York had always stood against a white-washed wall with a large map hanging on her right. An infra-red reflectogram has now clearly shown that the map was once further to the left, behind the woman's head. Furthermore, a chair with lion-head terminals, like the chair that is still partly to be seen, once stood between the woman and the window. Both elements disturbed the classic tranquillity of the scene; the large monochrome background gives the painting its serenity.

Perfect compositions

An examination of inventories of household effects carried out by the Leiden historian Thera Wijsenbeek-Olthuis and published at the time of the Vermeer exhibition in *Kunstschrift* (no. 1, 1996) indicated that the combination of valuable objects and relatively modest interiors was at best unlikely. She concludes: '*Summing up it may be said that Vermeer brought together an odd jumble of typical status symbols... which created an atmosphere that never existed in a Dutch interior...*'

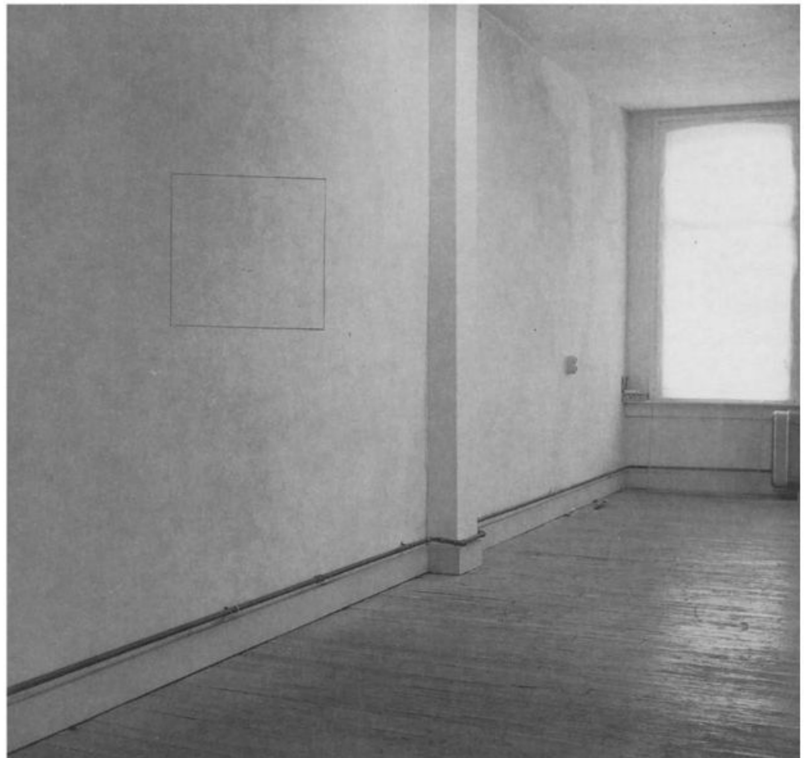
Vermeer combined elements that would never have been seen together in

his own environment. Moreover, he changed the position of objects as he worked, moving things around until his compositions were perfect. *Young Lady with a Water Pitcher* is not the only painting to be changed; the *View of Delft* does not give an exact picture of Delft either. This way of working resembles that of Jan Dibbets more than three hundred years later. By around 1910 when the artist no longer '*had to hide in the attic*' (Blok) reality can still be the subject of a work of art, but for the avant-garde the difference between reality and art has become important. So while Vermeer's reality is in fact semblance, Dibbets' reality is legitimate as a work of art.

In the early twentieth century the work of art came to be accepted as its own reality. Jan Dibbets' work reflects this concept. Initially it was the conflict between the subject and its photographic image that interested him. Slowly but surely the parts of photos became nothing more than elements within the composition. At first Dibbets added a kind of clarification in pencil to the work. More recently, any lines there are, are on a par with the photos. Even more often colour plays just as important a role.

After an initial period of trial and error Jan Dibbets found his theme in 1969 when he photographed *Perspective Corrections*, first on the grass in Amsterdam's Vondel Park and later on his studio wall. In Vondel Park he laid a rope on the grass in an oval shape; when photographed this became a circle, while the trapezium on the studio wall became an almost free floating square on the photo. He tried out other possibilities in the series dealing with daylight and artificial light and the difference between them: *The Shadows in my Studio* (1969), *The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven* (1970) originally planned as a series of slides, *Louvredrape*,

Jan Dibbets, *Perspective Correction, My Studio I, I: Square on Wall*, 1969. 110 x 110 cm.



Jan Dibbets. *The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven*. 1970. Photographs on board, 177 x 171 cm. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

Horizontal (1971) and *Daylight, Flashlight, Outside Light, Inside Light* (1971). These works are at the root of all subsequent developments, which take the form of a more and more sophisticated demonstration of the principle: what is there is not what you see, the artist determines what is shown. Just as Vermeer continued to move objects around until he arrived at an ideal composition, so too Dibbets continues to turn his subject matter until the form is achieved that gives us his vision in a nutshell. Ceilings or floors, the low Dutch horizon or the rich colour of the paint on a highly polished car; the detail and the whole are both on the cutting edge in relation to each other. Jan Dibbets succeeds in making his work logical within what is in fact the impossible framework of a work of art. Anyone who has seen his ceilings, windows and floors accepts that this is also a way of looking at them, that this flat interpretation exists alongside their three-dimensional reality. While Cézanne abandoned perspective in order to give his objects weight, Jan Dibbets cuts a space open with his camera. His lines and colour add that other dimension which artists like Thorn Prikker and Mondrian were searching for a century ago.

The essence of the subject

Jan Dibbets regularly uses windows both as a frame for the outside world and as a separation from it. An interior is never visible through a Dibbets window, but an outside view always is, even if it is 'only' the sky. The photos are always taken from inside even if the internal shutters of the windows

sometimes seem to change into frivolous butterflies. The round windows have acquired the depth of their wall in the course of time because Dibbets now also photographs the stone dressing in which the window is set. The round window from Soissons, or Santes Creus or Vondel Church is photographed, enlarged, and cut cleanly from its surroundings. This circle is then glued to a square piece of paper which has been given a water-colour wash or otherwise painted in a single colour. To this background Dibbets sometimes adds lines in pencil or water-colour. Although through the windows the view into the distance remains permanently and compellingly present, at the same time these circles reflect the shape of the windows in the lines of their stone frames, or in the lines on the paper. The result is one of depth versus reflection, colour versus line, immobility versus movement. Johannes Vermeer painted the essence of his subjects with such fidelity that three hundred years later we are convinced that this is what Dutch interiors were like in Delft in the Golden Age. Even when conscientious scholars prove the reverse, Vermeer's vision is so strong that this recently gained knowledge does not affect our attitude towards his paintings. Dibbets' interpretation of striking architectural features is similar. In their endeavour to create compositions of great strength both Vermeer and Dibbets manipulate reality. The rules of their art defy reality, because their art exists independent of reality.

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Translated by Elizabeth Mollison.

Jan Dibbets, *Santes Creus Window*, 1990. Watercolour on paper and colour photograph, 73 x 73 cm, 68 x 68 cm, 73 x 73 cm. Private collection.