

On Duality and on Painting as Sculpture (and Sculpture as Painting)

The Visual Work of Lili Dujourie

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[J O R I S D ' H O O G H E]

In 2015, ten years after the retrospective of the work of artist Lili Dujourie organised by the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels (BOZAR), her work was again celebrated in Belgium in a new retrospective, *Folds in Time* – a diptych, in fact, held in parallel in Ostend (Mu.ZEE) and Ghent (S.M.A.K.). Together, the exhibitions covered the period from her debut in the 1960s to the present, providing insights into her oeuvre – one that, significantly, is determined as much by its formal character as by the critical development with which Dujourie relates as an artist to the art world around her.

At the end of the 1950s, after attending the *Kunsthumaniora* (School of Art) in Bruges, Lili Dujourie (b. Roeselare, 1941) registered at the Royal Academy of Arts in Brussels. The monumental works of the American abstract expressionists had made a great impression on her during the Expo 58 world exhibition, and she decided to enrol in sculpture as well as painting, finding it impossible to choose between the two. When she began to show her own art several years later, she exhibited a series of works relating to minimal art. Her first exhibition, in 1970 at the X-One Gallery in Antwerp, comprised steel sheets placed on the floor or leaning against a wall, in an exploration of the laws of equilibrium and gravity. The realisations explore the boundaries of sculpture. In these first works, there is already a sense of the problems that she was to explore in her later oeuvre. The steel sheet placed against the wall of the exhibition room had the form of a sculpture but, through the specific way in which it was presented, it simultaneously explored the boundary with painting. Whereas sculpture traditionally occupies space, Dujourie carefully placed this work at the margin, seeking a position between the ground and the wall. It is as if the sheet is a painting waiting to be hung.

Playing with time

Dujourie's art is an unceasing exploration of the artistic medium. In the 1970s, she experimented with slide projections, for example in *Ostend* (1974). In this work, she used slide projectors placed alongside each other to display a series of images of the beach and the sea. Although the projection of the images sug-



gests movement, and thus appears to indicate continuity, the analogy with the principles of photography mainly evokes the past. In this sense, *Ostend* shows how Dujourie plays with the concept of time and how she intensifies it as a series of moments that are by definition transient. From 1972 onwards, she returned to the medium of video, which appealed to her because of the immediacy made possible by instant playback. The work *Effen spiegel van een stille stroom* (Mirror of a Quiet Stream, 1976) depicts Dujourie herself. She wanders in and out of the picture and poses in front of a mirror. In this way, she appears to be interrupting the perception of the viewer who, seeing both artist and mirror image can no longer be sure which of the silhouettes reflects reality – in the knowledge that the image recorded on video is itself already a reproduction, and not reality either. In this work, Dujourie therefore addresses the relationship between 'time and space'. Between 1972 and 1975, she also created the five-part series *Hommage à...*, in which she watches herself while her naked

Lili Dujourie, *Folds in Time*,
Exposition, S.M.A.K.,
Ghent



Lili Dujourie, *Oostende*, 1974

body moves slowly on a bed. Her poses are suggestive as well as intimate, and allude intuitively to images from the history of art. According to critic Wim Van Mulders, it is as if Dujourie's work enables us to 'discover the relative meaning of video as a medium in terms of formulating thoughts.' 'The departure from a linear progression – there is no beginning or end – suggests that time is an elusive, fluid perception.' She frames the work herself through her relationship to the surrounding reality. Because, whereas she 'has always lived in the now', and whereas her work has always been a reaction to the times in which she lives, it was an entirely new medium that enabled her to realise this 'female nude that is both sculpture and painting'. Painting and sculpture brought together by a video recording.

Open meeting and discussions

It is easy to interpret a series such as *Hommage à...* as an exponent of feminism in the art of the twentieth century, a tendency that, in keeping with her video work, is characterised by her use of her own body as a subject. In 2007, for example, her work was included in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, the exhibition organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles to show how the feminist movement 'fundamentally changed' the structures and methods of contemporary art practice in the 1960s and 1970s. The artist herself is well aware of the uniqueness of her position as a woman in the world of art. Several years ago, she observed that at the time of her debut it was 'not usual for women to operate in the art world'. But there is another reason why Dujourie occupies a prominent place in recent art history, namely her critical approach to the way she as an artist relates to the local and international art

scene. In 1975, together with Jacques Charlier and Guy Mees, she organised an event in a building in Antwerp's Raapstraat at which Jan Vercruysse – among others – was 'introduced' to the public as an artist – a statement indicating that those involved either wished to define themselves as such or not.

In September 1977, Dujourie held an 'open meeting' – also with Mees and Vercruysse – at Antwerp's Noorderterras to discuss the state of art, an initiative reminiscent of the inauguration of Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne* nine years before (Broodthaers opened 'his' museum).

The critical approach that was characteristic of Dujourie during that period was also grounded in her disapproval of the American dominance of the art world. This is the context in which we should place her involvement in actions relating to 'American art in Belgian collections'. Before this exhibition – also held in 1977 – Dujourie, Charlier, Mees, Vercruysse and Panamarenko wrote a letter to a number of Belgian collectors asking them not to loan works to the exhibition. Although she was convinced that there was 'no room' for non-American artists at that time, she acknowledged that her relationship to American art was double-edged. On the one hand, she was involved in writing the letter to the Belgian collectors, but at the same time, through Galerie MTL (established by her husband Fernand Spillemaeckers) she encountered the work of American artists such as Robert Barry, Dan Graham and Sol LeWitt. She nevertheless perceived a lack of poetry in their minimal and concept art, which led in particular to the work *Amerikaans Imperialisme* (American Imperialism), created in 1972 and first exhibited in 1979. A formal reference to contemporary American art, it consists of a sheet of steel leaning against a painted wall. The work also contains an underlying criticism, however, drawing the spectator's attention to what is hidden behind the sheet and thereby attributing a poetic dimension to the work. *Amerikaans Imperialisme* may further allude to Dujourie's decision to study two art disciplines at the Royal Academy since this work, too, explores the equilibrium between sculpture and painting.

Lili Dujourie,
Hommage à ..., 1972



Lili Dujourie,
American Imperialism,
1972



Velvet sculptures

In the 1980s, with works including *Pandora* (1983), *Opus 8* (1984), *In mijn nacht nadert niemand* (In My Night No-One Approaches, 1985) and *Jeu des Dames* (1987), Dujourie realised a series of depictions using velvet, in which her characteristic rendering of painterly folds stands out. Ornament and decoration are accorded a central role in these works, and the artist toys with the sensuality of the velvet material. This is the period in which the influence of the Flemish Primitives became apparent in Dujourie's work, where it is evident not only in the use of drapery as a material. The photograph *Untitled (red nude)* (1980) depicts a nude model posing against a background of carefully draped material. However, it is precisely this background that dominates the image, with an iconographic allusion to the aforementioned tradition. Whereas the velvet sculptures create a tangible imitation of the drapery, the two-dimensionality of the photograph relates to the flat surfaces of the paintings of Primitives such as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden. At the same time, Dujourie remained critical in her relationship to her immediate context. In 1986, she took part in *Initiatief 86*, an exhibition at St. Peter's Abbey in Ghent presented by international curators including Kasper König. Ulrich Loock, the then director of the Kunsthalle in Bern remembers the exhibition as 'a smart move' on the part of the Flemish artists who had taken the initiative themselves in order to raise their international profile. That same year, Loock's experience of the exhibition prompted him to invite Dujourie, together with Vercruyssen, Guillaume Bijl and

Raoul De Keyser, to stage a joint exhibition in Bern. In the exhibition catalogue, Saskia Bos describes Dujourie's velvet works, again referring to the art-history tradition, as 'Botticelli's Venus without the figures'. They are works that leave the spectator free to experience personal emotions, thereby opening up the path to the 'doors of perception'.

This was followed, several years later, by a solo exhibition at the Bonner Kunstverein in Bonn, Germany. Bart Cassiman, its curator, aimed to take the spectator beyond the cliché of Dujourie as 'the artist who uses velvet and refers to art history' in order to explore the stratification of her practice, primarily by presenting an ensemble of her works that provides a more comprehensive picture, stretched over two decades, of her development as an artist. For Cassiman, this development was largely characterised by a high degree of subtlety, the themes of illusion and 'window-dressing', the opposition of presence and absence, and the idea of duality. The layered nature of Dujourie's work is also reflected in the titles of the video *Sonnet* (1974) and of series such as *Roman* (1979), the collages comprising cuttings from newspapers and advertising material sparsely attached to large sheets of paper. These are titles that give her work a literary dimension and emphasise the importance of the written word in the development of the visual arts. This is also where her work connects with the oeuvre of Broodthaers, who, in the footsteps of René Magritte, embarked on a study of the relationship between word and image.



Above
Lili Dujourie,
Novel, 1979

Right
Lili Dujourie,
Red Nude, 1983



Trompe l'oeil

After the period in which she expressed her ideas in velvet, Dujourie explored new techniques using materials such as marble, lead and ceramics. This tendency can be illustrated with, respectively, the modular marble work *Echo* (1989), which is presented on the wall as well as the floor, the lead work *Substantia* (1999) – a subtle allusion to an altar cloth – and the five-piece ceramic work *Sonate* from 2007, the year in which she was the only Belgian artist to take part in the *documenta* in Kassel. In these experiments, too, Dujourie continues to position painting and sculpture in confrontation with each other, for example in the installation *De ochtend die avond zal zijn* (The Morning that Will Be the Evening, 1993) a work that appears to consist of a white cloth spread over two long tables. On closer inspection, however, the cloth and the subtle drapery are merely an imitation of the real thing. At first, the cloth appears to be a soft, classical piece of material, but is in fact hardened plaster. It is as if Dujourie wishes to expose the deception of our visual perception, and she seems to be telling us that nothing is what it seems. She does this by using one of the most traditional artistic strategies: with this work she has created a sculptural *trompe-l'oeil*. But although she borrows references from cultural tradition and art history, she applies these apparently classical forms of expression in a way that is atypical and 'against the rules'. Clay is sculpted not only by hand, but also with a knife. And Dujourie invents techniques that have 'never been used before'. Today she still relates her work to the reality around her. Maelstrom (2009-2010), a series of tactile paper sculptures made – not by coincidence – from pages of the *Financial Times*, expresses her views on the flood of information that is engulfing modern society. She states that this flood is 'so overwhelming,' 'no-one can comprehend it.'



Lili Dujourie, *The Morning that Will Be the Evening*, 1993



Lili Dujourie, *Places Devoted to the Night Remote from Tumults and from Noise*, 1983

In-between space

With *Folds in Time* it became clear that, after fifty years of production, Dujourie has assembled an oeuvre of 'sculptural interventions that fight a battle between painting and sculpture, between balance and gravity', and she has done this in a way that remains entirely consistent with her original artistic principles. It is therefore no surprise that she did not interpret the double overview in Ostend and Ghent in 2015 as a chronological retrospective, but rather as a sample of works from a meaningful whole made up of two different parts, since anyone who wanted to visit *Folds in Time* as an exhibition had to go to both places. This strategy was in line with the duality that is inherent in the exhibited works, which also oscillates between sculpture and painting without choosing one over the other. The title of the exhibition was therefore a reference to folds as the locus of the creative origin, the 'in-between space' from which Dujourie creates her work without making a clear choice in favour of either aspect. Moreover, the works were exhibited in Ostend and Ghent in a carefully considered way in the appropriate rooms, with the artist taking account of the architecture of the museums. The place of Dujourie's oeuvre in recent Flemish and Belgian art history is therefore due to her unique focus on the world and the reality that surrounds her, and on the art world of which she is a part. It is an oeuvre that will certainly not become lost in the folds of time. ■

The sources for the remarks by Lili Dujourie quoted in this text are:
'A Conversation with Dirk Pültau and Koen Brams', *De Witte Raaf* art newspaper, November/December 2006.

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