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Colin Huizing and Tijs Visser in conversation with Herman de Vries

Vacuity Squared

You joined the Nul group for a short time, you took part in the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1962 and until 1964 you were an editor for the journal *revue nul = 0*.

Revue nul = 0 was Henk Peeters and me: the idea came from Peeters, the name from me. My idea was that we didn't need critics anymore, or art historians to describe and comment on everything – we could do it ourselves. The first two issues I produced with Henk Peeters include short texts I wrote. One of them is a statement about Nul that says Nul is not a starting point but a level of existence. I would nuance that today, but anyway: it is a starting point to which you can return over and over and from which you shouldn't stray too far. The second article was about 'random objectivation', the use of chance as I've exercised it in my work since 1962. I thought it was important to take a position about my work and set it in writing.

You did write articles, but *revue nul = 0* was also a platform for contributions by other artists. It was clearly a platform for a particular group, the way the journal *ZERO* was in Germany.

Absolutely. There wasn't anything like that in the Netherlands yet, so something had to be done, and a little publication like this was very useful indeed. It documented our ideas and our activities at the same time. Many of the contributions were supplied through Peeters – he just had more contacts. But his role was also to challenge the public, and this created publicity. I think the first Nul exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam generated 54 mentions in the press.

Did you set out to irritate or provoke?

We wanted to take a stand, and we felt it was vital that it be expressed seriously and clearly. The provocative element was primarily expressed by Peeters. I did feel it was useful to provoke, in order to generate more attention for Nul. But for me this wasn't the main preoccupation; above all I wanted to explain my position, lay a foundation for a certain point of view. I realized, of course, that a white canvas on which there was nothing to see was a form a provocation, an irritant. Indeed I recall some wonderful negative reactions to my work. I had submitted a white painting to a provincial prize competition for painting in the Province of Gelderland. There were 37 entries, I think, which were exhibited at the provincial government building. Mine was a white painting, and a critic from the local newspaper in Wageningen came along. He wrote: Participants from the local area in this competition include the young artist Jannes Bakker, with his winter view of the river near Renkum, while H. de Vries from Wageningen has submitted a painting entitled 'White Painting'. The latter consists of a canvas onto which white paint has simply been smeared. This is really vacuity squared. That is all we are willing to is that he is incompetent. I enjoyed that. Especially the formulation 'this squared'. Because it related beautifully to the void, which are vital to my work.

How did you get involved with the Nul group?

At the time, around 1961, I was working at the

Field Research in Arnhem and on the bus to work I would pass Henk Peeters' house almost every day. One day I got off the bus to pay him a visit and exchange information with him. Peeters was a great source of information for me. He had different music, too, quite a lot of jazz, which I didn't have because I just didn't have any money to buy it. Every once in a while I would borrow some of his records and bring them back a few weeks later. I had very little money in those days. I had a family and a modest income. Sometimes I had to wait for my pay check to come in before I could buy a pot of paint. I had about 60 guilders a month to spend, and I had to make do with that. I would buy remnants from the wood merchant and take scraps home from the lab. And household items, things from my own home, as well. They were cheap and I could work on them. This is why the works from that period are in more or less random formats. I would make them in the evenings and during the weekends. They were Informal paintings, and later white-painted panels and objects. My earliest collages were different. Those were things I had found.

My first collage is from 1955 or 1956; I found it on a wall in Paris. It's made up of little pieces of flaking paper. I took a few fragments with me and it became a *collage trouvée*. Actually, I've stayed true to this way of working. In my current work I still use things I find.

You visited Paris several times during the 1950s. At the same time your work, in terms of form, was evolving towards white monochrome objects and panels. Did you see the work of Yves Klein when you were in Paris?

Not at the time. That came later, during the Nul period. But the monochromes he was making, he interpreted those with moods and with representations of ideas. For me it was actually a sort of impressionism. It was a monochrome surface, but a very specific meaning was assigned to that monochrome surface, and to me that was something that didn't belong there at all.

Were you familiar with the monochrome white works of Piero Manzoni? Did you see his work when he had exhibitions in Rotterdam or The Hague? No, but I did meet Manzoni in person when we were setting up the exhibition Nul62. Henk Peeters had barely any time to set up then.

He had to teach, so I was there the whole time. And I served a vital function there, because the staff at the Stedelijk Museum didn't speak German, French, English or Italian. I spoke a bit of French and I spoke German, so I could help out my fellow artists when they wanted to ask the staff something. Manzoni and I had similar ideas about what we could make. For example: a cube 2 x 2 x 2 m, white inside and out, into which you could peer through a tiny hole. When you look inside you see light, but you can't see the light source. So you're staring into an empty white space and there is nothing to see. We also talked about our function as artists, and we agreed that it consisted of 'deconditioning'. The deconditioning of the spectator was our common link.

Were there artists whose work you saw in the Netherlands that you liked?

The 1950s were an unbearably dull time in which everything had more or less ground to a halt, in which very few new things were happening and in which people fell back on the old things. Aside from exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam there was little or nothing going on in the Netherlands.

Did you see the work of Mondrian and Malevich at the Stedelijk Museum at the time? On the surface there are similar concepts, certainly in the use of space, from the two-dimensional plane to the three-dimensional plane, in which connections could be drawn with your work. You also started making three-dimensional work at one point.

Malevich's work was no great eye-opener for me. I didn't like the coldness in it. I don't think Malevich's work influenced me very much at the start of my artistic career. I did find it interesting later on, but more interesting than something I could draw upon for my work. Mondrian was mainly significant because of his social and societal ideas. But when he was working on his art, you would notice a number of incomplete things. You'd see double lines, and he'd make a note about it, something like 'this is overly dramatic'. And then he would shift that in order to avoid the dramatic element. He tried to harmonize the horizontal and the vertical. I did admire that a lot, the way those contradictions between the horizontal and vertical were actually

eliminated.

Speaking of contradictions: How did black come into your work? At some point shadow effects begin to appear in the reliefs, nuances in the white.

The shadows were an outside influence: the glow of the light, for example because of the sun, which made the work look different each time. That was a dynamic aspect of the work, the fact that the work could change according to the external light. This added multiple aspects to the way it could be perceived. That was very significant in the relief.

In a collage of white squares on black paper from 1965, for instance, the amount of black is, so to speak, no more than 50 per cent of the total; the work never becomes predominantly black.

White had a sense of openness about it, but also of totality, whereas black . . . Black locks light in. White reveals itself very clearly – I can't quite put it into words. At any rate black was not the colour I liked to work with. I could use black as a cover for a book or for a catalogue. A cover was not about the work; it was a black covering. There's an element of surprise when you open something black and there is something different inside. I also used black cardboard, which I would work over with a tracing wheel, during the transition from my Informal work, via Zen, to ZERO. White collages were difficult to reproduce, so I made them white on black.

There is a work of yours over which a checked tablecloth is stretched, rather brownish black paper . . .

That was an experiment with optics. It had a few black and a few yellowish-white checks. You could buy this in the shop as fabric. I stretched it over a canvas stretcher and that was it. I found it a beautiful gesture that had simply presented itself to me.

In this you were quite close to the work of Jan Henderikse, on the one hand, with his *objets trouvés*, and Henk Peeters, on the other, who buys cotton balls and sticks them onto canvas.

I think it's more somewhere between Nouveau Réalisme and Op Art, which was emerging at the time. I didn't like it all that much. There was also another work, a stretched canvas, in front of which I hung a glass plate with ridges that could move. It was an experiment with optics. And several self-reflecting panels of glass pearls have survived as well, in which the effect of light plays a role of its own.

Back to the things you did with the Nul group. After the second issue of *revue nul = 0* your collaboration with Peeters came to an end and you no longer took part in the exhibitions of the Nul group in the Netherlands.

Peeters and I had a disagreement about the title *revue nul = 0*. Lawyers were brought in, with the result that neither of us were allowed to use the title anymore. Peeters started the journal *de nieuwe stijl*, which I didn't consider a good publication, personally.

I felt the documentation in it was to some extent rather trite. It featured poetry that I really didn't find very interesting in the context of Nul, Vaandrager for example. I did not like the concept of 'the new style' at all. It alludes to a style, but there was no specified style. It was a little booklet put out by a big publisher. I started putting out publications under the title *revue integration*. The execution was simple: it was no longer printed in offset, just mimeographed; the writer would provide his own illustration material. Circulation increased; sometimes it was printed, sometimes handmade. But my interests kept broadening and extended beyond ZERO.

Nevertheless you have remained true to the principles of Nul in your visual work.

I have always operated from the idea of a zero point. In the Nul period I made white paintings. Later I did reliefs, homogeneous structures in which random structures defined the image. Through my work at the lab I came to the realization that research findings, including random structures as they are employed in scientific research, can also lead to objective visual results with no psychological element of any kind. Even now when I take objects from nature,

I leave them unaltered. I never make any intervention: I leave nothing out and I put nothing in. If I were to do that, I would be taking away something of the object's originality. ZERO is still an important point for me, to which I return again and again.

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