

Throughout his career, Dutch artist Willem De Rooij (1969, Beverwijk) has produced artworks that manifest an aversion to and at the same time dependence upon visual references. This contradiction is illustrated already in the early film *Mandarin Ducks*, produced for the Dutch pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale by De Rooij and Jeroen de Rijke, his collaborative partner at that time. The film probed the possibilities of ‘referentiality’ by testing out how many references could actually be inserted into a single work. De Rooij: ‘We wanted to do this because we were struck by the fact that around us we saw so many works that seemed to lean very heavily on references and seemed to legitimize themselves by referring to other interesting stuff, be these artworks or any other reference in the cultural field. 1

In this respect it may be relevant to refer to the transcript of Tom Holert’s unpublished 2008 lecture “I was interested in ...”: Interest and Intuition in Art Discourse, which identifies the early stages in critical reception in which the “interesting stuff” referred to in a work of art takes over completely. Using a historic dispute (i.e, the one which took place in the late-1960s between Modernist art critic Michael Fried and the Minimalist artists) as an example, Holert explores the significance of ‘artist interest’ as a critical turn against conventional Modernist ideology. Taking the proliferation of artist’s interviews as a case in point, Holert illustrates the rise of the artist’s personality and interest as the qualifying force which drives the aesthetic valuation of the work of art, thereby subverting the understanding of the Modernist critics according to which a work of art should be utterly “convincing” by and through itself and should therefore not elicit any outward-pointing “interest”.

Since art production today enjoys a newfound freedom to unconditionally redistribute the endless visual references which are available, the question arises whether the before mentioned quote by Willem De Rooij identifies a development that is still consistent with the critical strategies of the antimodernist movements of the late 1960s as discussed by Holert. According to the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, a key producer of Conceptual images, art production today could hardly be more removed from its source. In a conversation with Willem de Rooij at Witte de With in 2009, he states: ‘What has been happening in the last ten or fifteen years is that the referentiality issue has shifted and it has moved very decisively towards popular culture or mass culture [...] I see fatigue and unfreedom in it. 2 To legitimize a work of art today solely on the basis of its references jeopardises the ‘polemical referentiality’ that Wall originally aimed to establish with his references: ‘...In the seventies, when I began to make the kind of pictures I’m making now, I really did believe that [a] kind of internal mirroring of other accomplishments must inevitably take place. 3 For Wall, this is currently taken for granted.

According to De Rooij’s explanation, *Mandarin Ducks* can be seen in relation to the historical

development rendered by Holert, i.e. when it acknowledges the significance of the interests that guided him and Jeroen de Rijke during the work's development. At the same time, it also responds to Wall's critique in the sense that the artists subsequently pushed these interests to a point of total exhaustion. What stands out is De Rooij's conviction that when the influence of 'referentiality' on art's value is investigated, one should not turn its critical perception to a generational conflict. Each producer or consumer of visual production (whether young or established) needs to turn today's availability of art- historical or cultural sources into a personal or cultural experience on a daily basis. 'We're all in the same boat', said De Rooij in 2010 in a conversation with his fellow artist Christopher Williams. 4

With his exhibition *Untitled*, de Rooij continues to investigate the programmatic concerns first raised in *Mandarin Ducks*, but now approaches the notion of 'referentiality' from another angle. The works featured in *Untitled* enable an endless stream of associations without emphasizing one in particular. The weavings selected for this exhibition were produced by De Rooij between 2009 and 2012 as parts of an internal referential system, interlinking exhibitions, installations or even the construction of their titles (often anagrams of each other: 'Silver to Gold' becomes 'Vertigo's Doll'). For the first time in an institutional exhibition, the weavings are presented as one body of work and their sole focus directed to the basic texture of their fabric – as a repetitive crossing of threads from two different directions. Where *Mandarin Ducks* referred to a myriad of external sources, these works depict what could be read as purely abstract concepts such as opposition, change, extremes, and middle ground.

And yet to judge these objects as representing a sentimental return to Modernist ideology – i.e. by virtue of their being utterly "convincing" in their own right – would miss the mark. As the sum of its parts this exhibition investigates the value and the effects of a 'referential impasse'. And this because, according to De Rooij, 'saying no is one of the most important weapons that you have as an artist. 5

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1 Total Visibility (a conversation between Jeff Wall and Willem de Rooij as part of the seminar *Rotterdam Dialogues: The Artists*, April, 2009), in: 'Rotterdam Dialogues: The Critics, The Curators, The Artists', Witte de With Center for Contemporary art Rotterdam, Rotterdam, 2012, p.156

2 Ibid., p.161

3 Ibid., p.157

4 As We Speak, a conversation between Christopher Wool, Willem de Rooij and Jörg Heiser, in:
Frieze Magazine (October, Issue 139), 2010. Link: <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/as-we-speak/>
5 Ibid.

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