

Interview with Geert Mul
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It all really started at art school, in Arnhem. After I'd first painted and then worked with video, I started working with computers in the final year. There weren't any computers at the academy and so I worked with my own equipment. I didn't exactly get a lot of response. Some people thought it was pretty good, but I'd also be told that I might be better off working at Philips. I graduated from art school on computer animations and, what fascinated me more, programmed works. I wrote those works in *basic*, a very simple computer language. One of them was called *life, death and bingo*, which was kind of a slot machine with the three little screens displaying life, death and bingo. If you got three of the same, you'd have bingo. Another work I made at the time was called *then and now*, a monitor off of which the word "now" ran until, at a certain point, it changed into "then". Finally, the entire screen would be taken up by "then", whereupon the row would shift and then, like the timepiece on a digital clock, change into a new image. Since this computer language only allowed you to work with very simple fields and I was hungry for images, I went on to work with video and put the programming aside for a while.

The question of who or what I made the work for, hardly concerned me. Neither did I think too much about creating work for any specific place. All I wanted - badly - was to make and show the work. I just didn't know where that should happen. The work didn't fill any niche; there also never was much interest. After art school I travelled: to the United States, Mexico and Japan. I lived in Tokyo for almost a year and there I made a lot of audio recordings. Later, in the Netherlands, I used those recordings for my first videos.

Back in the Netherlands, I worked closely with Leon Dekker, a real painter who I knew from the academy. We made virtual exhibitions. We built a space in a 3D programme on the computer and there we'd have joint exhibitions. I'd hang video stills on the wall and among those he'd put up his paintings. In themselves, they were quite good - or at least they were for a collaboration. It's old hat now, but at the time it was still pretty fresh. In all, we made something like fifteen exhibitions. We went around the entire alternative scene: the Archipel, all kinds of galleries, and artists' initiatives. We sold the prints, too. The whole idea was that it was a product that should do the rounds. We made multiples, which cost 100 or 150 guilders.

After eighteen months I came to the conclusion that it wasn't really going anywhere. I could have spent the rest of my life making those things, but there still wasn't any real response. I could get rid of my work, it was selling, and I was allowed to put it up - although that usually cost money; but after a while I felt as if I was giving away sweets. You could spend your life doing that if you want to. It wouldn't upset anyone. But, every single time, it'd be your sweets and you wouldn't get anything back. Things may have changed by now, but at the time the alternative scene was still very closed. There was a network, but it was definitely a closed one.

After reaching a dead end with the prints I took a part-time job with a video studio in Hilversum. That job gave me access to video equipment. I'd do some odd jobs during the day and then I could work in the studio at night. Because of that studio I got some idea of the possibilities of video and also learnt to mix. It was in the beginning of house, in 1994. I came up with the idea of mixing videos live. At the Rotterdam club *Nighttown* they were organising 'nights' called *the Future*. I rang them up and asked if they'd be interested in a visual interpretation for the club. I told them I could do a light show with TV screens: light and pictures at the same time. Well, there wasn't any other way to express it. I started doing that in collaboration with Titus van Eck. The work was great fun and it made me financially independent. It also was very exciting to get close to music again. There was such a lot of new stuff going on: House, Techno, Jungle, Trip-Hop, Gabber. Perhaps the most important thing for me personally was that I could drop the idea that I had to have exhibitions in a certain scene and so build a career. I stopped looking for places to exhibit. I didn't have to bend over backwards anymore, trying to write up what I was doing within a certain jargon in order to get money.

One year later the work that was by then called V.J. had become hip. In the space of one year we made three television appearances and as a result we were being asked for festivals. After a couple of years the visual arts, too, started showing an interest. Micha Klein became popular. It all started to take off. After a year or so I started running into people involved in the same things, in the same club, or the same magazine. We didn't really have predecessors. Sure, there'd sometimes be a projector in a club. But the idea of doing something with live mixing and music just suddenly popped up in my head - and I think that that happened more or less at the same time in Amsterdam. It had to do with developments in technology: at some point a video-mixer becomes smaller and more affordable and then it stands to reason to throw it in the back of the car and take it somewhere. Of course, everybody does something different. Ebo-man opted for making actual sets and is building a career as a performer and musician. Mischa Klein went for the museum. Gerard van der Kaap is a different story. As a designer and an artist he's been using video and computers from the outset. I think he's one of the most inspiring artists because he handles his medium in a truly innovative way. In my own work, the collaboration with Gerard Koot has been very important. Koot combines a lot of know-how with a feel for technology.

I don't know whether the joining of music, space and people in those clubs in itself produces any that fantastic an experience. I also had a problem with the launch of the term V.J. In a club or at a pop festival it's all about the music, so in principle, as a V.J., you play second fiddle. It's not all that high-flown, you never drop off your chair in amazement at those gorgeous images. You're not supposed to, because you're there for the music - and the lights, decor and images all serve the music. I'd basically stand next to the lighting technician, who served more or less the same purpose. We work on a grander scale now, but in the beginning we just had 3 vhs-players, a video projector and a mixer with which you could make all kinds of effects and stills and could synchronize to the beat. We weren't too

bothered, especially not at first, about which tape was in the player because there'd be so many layers with a twist added on that we'd end up with very abstract images, and as far as we were concerned it was all about rhythm and colour. You get fed up with that after a while. The V.J. always has to wait and see what the D.J.'ll play and then select the images to go along with that. In fact, that kind of work is only interesting when you get to do the whole production: settings, light, the design of the house, video set-up and video work. We did that at the Lowlands festival, where we controlled the entire production of imagery and music. The same goes for my performance in Chicago (2000). I'd performed before, with Koot and D.J. Alien, but this was the first time that I had received the invitation - and so I more or less controlled the art direction. I was in charge, I could come up with the concept. I suggested not to work with a D.J., but with a musician: the human beatbox 'Thor'. Koot had met him in a dance production. Koot and I aren't musicians. We don't think in terms of music, but in terms of sound and lyrics. Thor made music out of our performance, simply by superimposing rhythm on our video sound. A human beatbox is incredible: a singer whose voice produces drum, songline and bass; you see it, and yet you can't believe what you're hearing.

Working in clubs has influenced my thinking on space. The space is different every single time, and so are the people and the music. You wonder what on earth those people are doing there. What have they come for? You try to figure that out and have your imagery respond. In our collaboration Koot and I have come up with a different visual solution for each space - one that was specifically grafted on to that space. In the video scene everything is standardised. In principle, everything is three by four metres and hangs flat on the wall. If you want to diverge from that, you have to have a pretty good idea of what you're doing. Now that I've made my first interactive works, I realise that I've learnt a great deal from responding to spaces and people in clubs. Therein lies the core of the work and that truly is something I hadn't realised before.

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If you were to ask me where the most interesting developments are now taking place as regards content, I'd say: in the game industry. That's where the newest, the most recent developments are in the visual, the interactive, language. You wonder why the visual arts, at a certain point, move to a more abstract level? To put it bombastically: I think there's a major change taking place. Evidently, all kinds of processes are crying out for a new language, new descriptions of our reality. That language shouldn't just be dynamic, but also be able to generate intelligent change. Before such a language can even begin to develop, you have to be capable of deciding what you want and be able to organise it. The cultural worth of technological changes underlying such processes is greatly underestimated, especially in the visual arts. That reveals itself in the Dutch art collections, which are limited to a very specific western European vocabulary that rejects all kinds of things: technology, sexuality, symmetry, and monumentalism. The chosen path is that of an absolutely individual expression and a highly abstract notion of purity - at the expense of contemporary complexity.

I think it's important for a museum of modern art to reflect the language being spoken at its time. And that's something modern art museums definitely do not do. They're happiest referring to a highpoint in Golden Age painting, whereas, at the time, they *did* paint and work in the language being spoken.

The greengrocers sign was not too far removed from the painting by the artist who used the same vocabulary and the same medium - in a different way.

There's no reason why a museum of modern art shouldn't have 75% of its focus on the new media either or not combined with rediscovered older media. To me, such a situation would be self-evident as it would be a reflection of contemporary cultural developments.

Of course I could present my work elsewhere, but museums are important because of their funds and their power. That's why I challenge them. The museums have the rooms, the money and the support for projects. Recently, during the Rotterdam film festival, I saw some works at the Boijmans museum which I thought were very nicely produced. Good space, good sound, very minimal means. It doesn't cost shit. When you talk about music venues in the Netherlands, you're referring to Paradiso, Nighttown and a couple of other places. When you talk about the visual arts, then there's Boijmans, the Stedelijk and probably a few more. That's where the facilities are, that's where state funding goes, that's where it's possible to show things. Why can't we then go there on Friday nights to see films, watch videos and attend concerts and performances? You can in the Museum for Contemporary Art in Chicago.

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Gradually, my own work and the work I do on commission have grown closer to each other. Partly because I got back into music and through the things I discovered whilst mixing live in those clubs. The sets lasted something like six hours, and so it's in no way about absolute beginnings and endings in images anymore and, so too, your concept of time changes. They're *streams* of images, really long sessions in which you discover stuff through imagery, develop a feeling for rhythm, for colour. At a certain point you'd start getting an interaction. I'd use things I'd discovered in the studio in the club, and apply stuff from the club to my videos. The programmes I made after art school were really a kind of dynamic works with fixed, repetitive patterns you'd switch on and which would then started running. At the time, I abandoned it because I wanted to do more with images and couldn't achieve, technically, what I was after. Eight years later, when the programming and the work with video converged again, it was possible. That was thanks to a new generation of computers on which I developed a method to programme or script videos images rather than edit them. This new technology enabled me to make *La Derive*. In *La Derive* I edited the images asynchronously to the beat of Speedy J's music. The sound is made up of a number of layers that, because they have different lengths, shift in relation to each other. Every now and then they run into each other, then run asynchronously - to then meet again. The imagery has become one of those five loops. It has its own rhythm, but because it consists of repetitive elements, it's also part of the music. And so the imagery has a strong connection to the music, without it being readily apparent what, exactly, constitutes that relationship.

Through working with music and computers in clubs I became ever more involved with the formal aspects of sound and image. This thinking about the role and meaning of technology is what sets me apart from the visual arts scene. The intrinsic position of technology as a given has been banished from art history. I'm often criticised by art-historical circles for not making any decisions; I think that's because, in my work, you make a different kind of decisions. I returned from Tokyo with an enormous amount of visual material. That city has had a great impact on me. It took me two years before I could make a work about it. When that finally resulted in *Tokyo fx*, one of my first generating works, I tried to model the structure of the image to the nature of the city. The outcome was dynamic imagery, with a lot of variety and strong visual effects, but without a specific direction or conclusion. That's the way I work. My focus is to generate structures that create the conditions for the content of the image. In creating those conditions, I make clear and concise decisions.

The undervaluation of differing decisions, new methods and possibilities is part of the history of technology. First a computer is built, and then it takes people twenty years to become aware of the consequences. When I first started art school the computer was still relatively new. The first experiments with interactive systems were very abstract, but a little later they were being incorporated into games like *text adventures* that didn't follow a set pattern, but would take unexpected turns as a result of the information users fed them. Then, later on, you had the first experiments with interactive film. But that wasn't going anywhere. The viewer was dished up a film and then you could select the plot, or at a certain point the image would be frozen and you'd be allowed to choose between a, b or c. These novelties were presented at technological events or audio-visual festivals. Everyone sensed it didn't amount to much. People didn't like the interactivity and so, for the next five or six years, the idea was dropped.

After the first, experimental, stage in the sixties and seventies, all attention was directed towards marketing the computer. Instead of further exploring its possibilities, the computer was attuned to the experience of the people who'd have to work with it. The computer was programmed in such a way that it could, for example, simulate an analogous editing system. It's called N.L.E., Non Linear Editing - only it just as linear as a tape, as the system uses a time line. You have to really overtax the computer in order to do that because if you let it go, it starts to generate, to mix, to make combinations and structures - that's what it's good at. We've now come back to the possibilities that were already recognised twenty years ago and have since been propagated by the underground computer nerd scene. Their influence is only just starting to manifest itself on a societal level, in the interest for interaction and the letting go of the linear narrative. Actually, in the public sphere you can see how this type of interactive patterns is constantly being used to spread information on billboards, in road marking, traffic signs and advertising. The public realm is a dynamic given. If you can let your flow of information communicate with the public sphere and the people in it, you have a 100% gain. At Eindhoven station they now have an information system that, if a train is delayed, can run a commercial for a florist within walking distance - where you can quickly buy a bunch of flowers. That is a new form of spreading information.

The skepticism about interaction often stems from delineations and definitions that no longer apply. This is about a language we hardly speak and that makes it incredibly difficult to communicate about it. Of course, you have interaction when you flick the switch and the light comes on, but there is no intrinsic relationship between the turning of the switch and light. It only becomes interesting when there is an intrinsic relationship between your actions as a user or as part of the work, and the experience you get in return. I thought the work *this land is man made* very effective because there was such a relationship. The physical positioning of the viewer affected his experience of the work. He became aware of his influence on that experience. You can tell from my examples how limited our language is - and this is maddeningly interesting to me: I notice how I have to search for words and that really makes me seethe.

I feel great affinity with the marked architecture of De Vleeshal and feel the need to respond to it. I want to generate images that on the one hand play with that architecture, by placing screens and spotlighting the space, but on the other hand withdraw from the language of architecture and create their own illusion. A dance of image and structure. The challenge is to generate a number of settings in which viewers can lose themselves. The settings are dynamic, they're created on the spot by a certain number of conditions. The concept of the programme is that each aspect of the installation - image, sound and light - runs according to a specific design. The designs come from the language of film. I've opted for opening scenes, denouements, and final scenes. At the beginning of a film all is possible. The first thing the opening scene does is to limit the entire range of narrative possibilities by showing a set of specific relationships, introducing a number of characters and clarifying the relationships between those characters. It starts with a shot of a city, a total shot, and then you zoom in and you enter a living room; you have two characters and they have a relationship; the phone rings; the third character is introduced. You move from an open situation to a specific image with all the elements crystallised out. The denouement has a different momentum: a multitude of elements coming together in a conclusion. In the final scene you let go of the illusion. One minute you see the image, the next the credits. The realization that you don't see reality, but a film, completes the limitation of possibilities. This abstract description of cinematic narrative structure forms the foundation of the lighting plan, the music and the imagery. What fascinates me is that you so have a story unfolding with a changing content, whilst at the same time it's very difficult to pinpoint how that story comes into being.