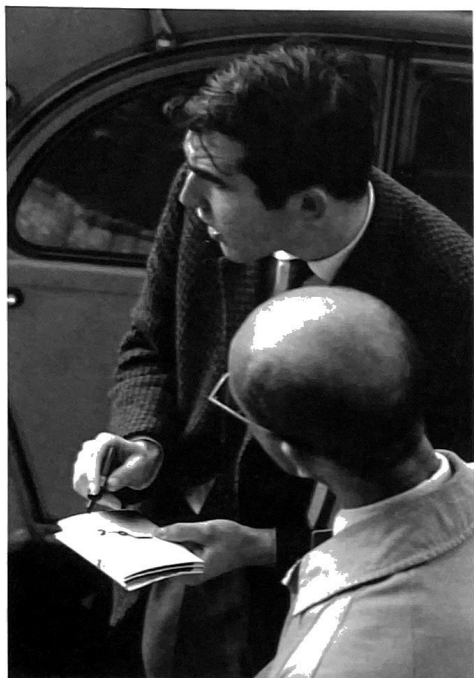


THE DISTANCE BETWEEN STANLEY BROUWN AND YOURSELF

Sven Lütticken on "stanley brouwn" at Jan Mot, Brussels; "Stanley Brouwn: This Way Brouwn" at EENWERK, Amsterdam; and "stanley brouwn: mens loopt of planet aarde," Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, the Netherlands



Stanley Brouwn, photo by Igno Cuypers

In the months after Stanley Brouwn's death last May, a number of public and private institutions in the Netherlands and Belgium mounted larger and smaller exhibitions of the artist's work. The galleries Jan Mot in Brussels and EENWERK in Amsterdam showed beautiful small ensembles of mostly works on paper, with some metal objects also featured at EENWERK. On a more ambitious scale, the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam showcased a single private collection whose scope was impressive enough to turn the exhibition into a compact retrospective.¹ Indeed, in some ways the

Schiedam exhibition gives one a better sense of the work's motivations and overall development than the 2005 Van Abbemuseum retrospective, which was marked by the artist's rigorous editing of his own (early) work.

Titled "mens loopt op planet aarde" (humans walk on planet earth), the Schiedam exhibition contained numerous examples or documentation of work from the 1960s, a period from which little more than the "This Way Brouwn" project – in which the artist famously asked passersby to draw the way to his supposed destination on a piece of paper for him – was officially acknowledged by Brouwn later in life. Here, it was possible to see the extent to which Brouwn not only participated in Dutch and European Fluxus-related activities – publishing an endearing avant-garde manifesto in the catalogue of the "Bloomsday 64" exhibition, for instance – but also the extent to which his practice was informed by broader countercultural tendencies. With techno-esoteric overtones that were far from uncommon in the early space age, the 1964 manifesto envisions a year, "4000 A.D.," "when science and art are entirely melted together into something new," "when the people will have lost their remembrance and thus will have no past, only future," meaning they will experience the world anew every moment, as pure sensations without the frame of "art."

The title of the Schiedam show was inspired by Brouwn's 1970 exhibition in the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, which consisted of empty spaces with the instruction "gehen sie sehr bewusst durch die kosmischen strahlen in den museumsräumen." One wonders if the piece was meant as a response to Sigmar Polke's contribution to René Block's series of installations

titled "Blockade '69": Polke had turned an empty white gallery space into a podium in which he could "imagine that a particle (*ein Teilchen*) circulates around this space."² Developments in nuclear physics informed such practices as much as the "Whole Earth" ethos through which the counterculture sought to appropriate space-age technoscience; both strands come together in the notion of invisible "cosmic rays." In its own homage to the deceased artist, the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin showed a video produced by Block in 1969, "Bildnis Stanley Brouwn," which combines footage of a walk through Berlin with a voice-over that announces that space missions had shown the Earth sitting "like an object in space" at a distance of 400,000 kilometers. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that "we can now move on Earth in a very spatially conscious manner," becoming aware "what space is: i.e., time."³

Brouwn's later reduction of his 1960s work to "This Way Brouwn" and the related series of footprints on paper has led to an impoverished view of his practice, severing the ties between that crucial decade and the "mature" work from the 1970s on. This later work is both beautifully precise and elegantly understated, often taking the form of graphic notations of either (Brouwn's own) steps, of distances measured in the metric system or feet, or combinations of the two. These notations measure different degrees of abstraction from the body, from an individual's steps to measurements anchored to the human body, such as the foot, to the meter and its derivatives as manifestations of the French Revolution's Enlightenment rationalism and universalism. While distances in Brouwn's work sometimes get reduced in scale – a distance of 500 meters being shown on a 1:500 scale, for instance – the artist long resisted photo-

graphic documentation as a mode of representation in which any sense of physicality and scale are ultimately lost.

The question of what exactly one is permitted to show of – or even say and write about – Brouwn's work is one that will not go away easily. One can only hope that an open debate and a serious art-historical assessment will be possible. There seem to be two significant problems in this respect. The first is the aforementioned issue of "early Brouwn," about which Ludo van Halem published a substantial article in Dutch in 1991; the second issue is that Brouwn was one of very few artists of color in European neo-avant-garde/Conceptual art circles but did nothing to thematize or foreground this in his work, which puts him at odds with some younger practitioners.⁴ One surmises that the artist would have agreed with Adrian Piper's attack on what she termed "the confused but earnest Anglo-American devotion to obsolete racial categories that no thinking person has taken seriously for more than half a century."⁵

The latter problem is aptly encapsulated by two events at the Van Abbemuseum. The first took place on May 19 of last year when, during a day discussing "the experiences and cultural contexts of black emancipation struggles in the Netherlands," convened by the painter Iris Kensmil as part of the "Becoming More" caucus, fellow black Dutch artist Charl Landvreugd announced the news of Brouwn's death from the audience. It was clearly a "moment," not just because a great artist had passed, but a great artist from an ethnic and cultural group historically vying for recognition and visibility in the land of the colonizer. Then, on December 8, a panel discussion convened by the museum as part of a symposium on Black



modernism and Conceptualism became something of a farce because Brouwn's widow allegedly intervened beforehand, leading the participants to abandon previously prepared talks and largely skirt the issue of Brouwn's identity as an artist of color.⁶ Strangely enough, the EENWERK presentation itself was actually part of a three-part exhibition parcours organized by the Prince Claus Fund, "Three Crossings," which also included presentations of work by Ibrahim El-Salahi and David Hammons, where Brouwn was explicitly presented as "a Dutch black artist of Surinamese origin."

Light years seem to separate the younger artists and activists from the Brouwn who in 1964 wrote that he had "turned all roads into my slaves," having ample proof of "their betrayal of space." The roads were now "slaves of my moving in space, my presence in space, infused with the most primary capacity of our being: the ability to move."⁷ For a contemporary reader, it is extraordinary to see a descendent of Africans enslaved by the Dutch write like this. What kind of displacement is at work here? Shunning the psychobiographical register, one could analyze such displacement in terms of aesthetic decisions and formal strategies. At the 2005 Van Abbemuseum retrospective, it was striking to see how the

show's immaculate white spaces were, in effect, footnoted by the fact that visitors could visit an old-school hardware store to buy cable measured in the ancient local *Eindhovense voet* (Eindhoven foot) rather than by the meter. The shop's window was like a messy *Nouveau Réalisme* assemblage that functioned like the show's optical unconscious.

Ten years ago, Melvin Moti made an elegant attempt to address the unmentionable by focusing on the role of whiteness in Brouwn's work, invoking Mallarmé and discussing the insistent whiteness of "This Way Brouwn" sheets that do not contain drawings – the Jan Mot show contained one such "empty" "This Way Brouwn" – or of the catalogue pages for which Brouwn refused to provide biographical information or photos. Brouwn invoked the right to remain silent, Moti notes, and his negative presence produces a whiteness that is reflexive (a critical whiteness?), that is meaningful as potentiality rather than as identity.⁸ At a moment when the reexamination of blackness by some of the most incisive theorists of the day informs radical practices that at times collapse into essentialist identitarianism, this seems worth pursuing further.

The connecting trait between the two aforementioned Brouwnian "taboos" is the utopian

stanley brouwn: Man walks on planet earth," Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, Amsterdam, 2017/18, installation view

erasure of history – of history as origin, as *herkomst*. After all, by 4000 A.D., the people will have lost their remembrance and thus will have no past, only future. Nonetheless, here again we are in fact dealing with complex displacements rather than with total erasure. One could also take cues from Brouwn's own historicization of measurements: from the *Eindhovense voet* and other locally and historically specific units to the meter. What about the ambiguous implication of the French Revolution's metric universalism, of the desire to create a system that would be valid and useful "for all people for all time" (Condorcet) while at the same time in practice being particularly useful for France and other European nations that were actively mapping and colonizing the globe? To analyze Brouwn's decades-long *Vermessung der Welt* in such a framework should not be a determinist reduction of his work but rather a further opening, an examination of its overtones and implications.

A 1996 work from the collection of the Van Abbemuseum that was shown in the EENWERK show proved particularly resonant under present circumstances. It is not entirely clear where this piece begins and ends; the list of works mentions only aluminium and paper as materials, but the characteristic Brouwn-designed grey trestle table on which these materials are displayed is equally part of the work, as a critical mediator between the scale of the paper or metal object and the viewer's body. What this spindly table carries is a thin aluminium bar, presumably one foot long, that is accompanied by a piece of paper with the text "at this moment the distance between stanley brouwn and yourself is x feet." The distance between Stanley Brouwn and each of us is something we need to recalibrate from time

to time – and the present time would definitely appear to be one of those moments.

"stanley brouwn," Jan Mot, Brussels, September 8–November 3, 2017; "Stanley Brouwn: This Way Brouwn," EENWERK, Amsterdam, November 23, 2017–February 18, 2018; Stanley brouwn: mens loopt op planeet aarde, Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, the Netherlands, October 14, 2017–January 21, 2018.

Notes

- 1 See exhibition details above. The collection shown in Schiedam was assembled by Joke and Dick Veeze. The exhibitions' titles reflect the artist's exclusive use of lower-case letters, leading to the spelling of his name as stanley brouwn.
- 2 One key difference is that Polke's piece was about a mental exercise by the artist ("Polke stellt sich vor, dass ein Teilchen diesen Raum umkreist"), whereas Brouwn's exhibition is an invitation to the viewer to experience walking through cosmic rays.
- 3 The video was shown in a cabinet adjacent to the exhibition "Hanne Darboven: Korrespondenzen."
- 4 Ludo van Halem, "Elementaire belevissen: Het vroeger werk van Stanley Brouwn," in: *Jong Holland*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1991, pp. 10–25.
- 5 Adrian Piper, "As a Matter of Fact," in: *Artforum*, Summer 2017, p. 67.
- 6 This session of the symposium "Conceptualism – Intersectional Readings, International Framings: Black Artists and Modernism in Europe after 1968" was titled "How to talk about the work"; it was moderated by David Dibosa with contributions by Sophie Orlando, E. C. Feiss, and Charl Landvreugd. Unable to attend, I'm basing my account on firsthand reports from participants and audience members.
- 7 The 1964 statement in question is part of writer K. Schippers's manuscript for his opening speech for Brouwn's 1970 Schiedam exhibition; it was picked up by the press, with a text in the newspaper *De Tijd* from March 13, 1970 titled "Ik heb alle wegen tot mijn slaven gemaakt." Both documents were exhibited in the 2017 Schiedam exhibition.
- 8 Melvin Moti, "Brouwn is White, over Stanley Brouwn en Hans Faveray," http://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/31688_brouwn_is_white.