

de Volkskrant

Like before, the sea levels everything

By our reporter Rutger Pontzen

(Posted 8th February 2009 22:16, up-dated 22:18)



Maasvlakte¹ - Forty years on, Jan Dibbets does his beach project again. "They want to know where it comes from."

"Bugger me, what are they doing there?" Arms waving like a madman, Jan Dibbets races off towards the three quads arriving on the beach. A quarter of an hour before, the 67-year-old artist had laid out a large trapezium on the smooth sand using four big wooden stakes, a reel of string and a potato peeler. Tyre tracks would have destroyed all the preparations for his artwork in one go. "Bloody idiots."

Sunday morning, 7:45. Sun's up. A harsh wind is blowing from the west and there's a nasty-looking storm on the horizon. Standing on Maasvlakte beach is a small group: besides Dibbets himself, there's cameraman Fijko van Leeuwen, JCB-driver Jan Vader and Jan-Willem Stoof with his platform hoist. Without doubt, it's going to be a day to remember.

Exactly forty years ago, Dibbets did the same project on the coast near Scheveningen. Then, too, the same wooden stakes and string for stretching between, a JCB to "draw" the shape of a trapezium in the sand and, high up, a camera converting the trapezoid shape into a rectangle on film by "correction of perspective". The eye of the camera then revealed how the rising tide washed away the entire drawing on the sand in the space of half a day.

The artwork, *12 Hours Tide Object with Correction of Perspective*², is considered one of the major contributions to Dutch Land Art. Last year, the Art and Public Space Foundation³ approached Dibbets to do a new version. This is the starting point for a number of projects the foundation wants to conduct over the next few years to mark the occasion of the construction of Maasvlakte 2.

Why did Dibbets accept to do the project again today? "Seemed a nice idea. Last time, there was nobody there. This time, they've even organised a VIP-coach."

But Dibbets is quite firm as to whether the "remaking of" is part of today's standard *re-enactments*⁴ of old projects: "No." For him, it's more a question of renewed interest in conceptual and minimalist art.

"You see it everywhere in art. Everyone wants to know where it comes from. That's why I'm doing exactly the same today as I did forty years ago. No more, no less. Still no frills."

Dibbets refers to the original shots he made at the time with the German Gerry Schum. "There were the two of us. In the sixties, Schum was working as cameraman for German TV and he got so excited about video as medium that he switched profession to run his *Fernsehgalerie* (Television gallery) full-time."

Today, Schum is absent from Maasvlakte. "He put a bullet through his head in 1973", said Dibbets. "What a tragedy. In the early seventies he was getting frustrated by the lack of attention he was

¹ The Maasvlakte is part of the harbour and industrial area of the city of Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It was created in the 1960s by reclaiming land from the North Sea (source: Wikipedia).

² *Sic*.

³ *Stichting Kunst en Openbare Ruimte* (SKOR).

⁴ In English in the original.

getting. Not many people realise that he was the first to try and do something with video art. Didn't exist at all in those days. People poked fun at it afterwards, but he was sticking his neck out, even if he didn't sell anything... He ended up living in a minibus filled to the roof with video tapes."

Like in 1969, producing the artwork is not without its setbacks. Dibbets still remembers quite clearly the moment when he was filming with Schum from the top of his VW Kombi on Scheveningen beach. The incoming tide threatened not only to cover the beach but also wash the van away. "The waves were lapping on the wheels."

This time, it's the platform hoist that's late, the JCB isn't making the lines exactly as the string, and the artwork just manages to miss a shower by a hair's breadth. And the passengers in the VIP coach, shivering in their fashionable rather than functional overcoats, step out for a very quick half-hour. Later, they drive past on the road looking over the dune, without getting out. "Chickens", mumbles Dibbets.

But, around noon, when the tide starts to get to grips with his work, the artist looks on satisfied. "Beautiful, huh? The way the sea smoothes everything over."

Rutger Pontzen

*Translated from the French by Simon Hamilton and Marc de Verneuil
(Observatoire du Land Art / www.obsart.org)*

