

Gerard Caris informs in an Aesthetic Format

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Whereas it may be said of other artists that they draw, paint or create sculptures, Gerard Caris should properly be called an investigator. More accurately, he investigates the plastic properties of the regular pentagon and the regular twelve faced complexes constructed out of pentagons: the dodecahedrons. Gerard Caris has done this for over 25 years. Thus the belief would seem justified that he must be thoroughly inquisitive and considerably obsessed¹. The question arises, though, whether in studying and interpreting this art form the focus should be on research and method or just on the outcome. After all, this art cannot but call forth the technician and puzzler in us all, even though this may not have been the artist's first intention. However that may be, Gerard Caris does not wish to be categorized as a student of applied mathematics, but as a visual artist and therefore be judged on the outcome of his work.

He has been presented as the master of the pentagon. However, pentagons rarely occur in classical constructivistic art and geometric abstraction². Perhaps then, for Gerard Caris, the pentagon has a significance other than that of an intriguing plastic element with inexhaustible formal properties. In 1968, at the beginning of his career as an artist, Gerard Caris painted abstract canvasses with titles such as *Voedster der Wording* ("Foster mother of Creation") and *Wording der Vormen* ("Birth of Forms"), followed, in 1970, by a screen print called *Creation of the pentagon*. In it we see an irregular pentagon, which seems to descend from heaven on a beam of light. This form can be seen as a regular pentagon represented in perspective. Form and title remind us irresistibly of the mysticism that has been woven, since time immemorial, around numbers and particular mathematical figures³. The pentagon is laden with profound meaning⁴. Whether that is also the case for the work of Gerard Caris remains an open question, although the screen print about the origin of the pentagon was also brought up at later exhibitions. It would appear that Caris considers this screen print as a manifesto. Still, he denies any "secret" meanings. His pentagons are what they are and his first concern is what can be done with them from an artistic point of view.

Nevertheless, the mystic view plays a role in some observers and certainly, too, in the history of the geometrical abstract art on which Caris elaborates. To legitimize early abstract art it was necessary to put up theories against the allegation that this art

form was only concerned with meaningless ornaments and that the makers were not to be called artists but artisans, at best. The old question of "what a work of art means without recognizable representation" is still very much alive among the public at large, even though it is no longer approached with the same degree of orthodoxy. Moreover, the appreciation of connoisseurs has changed with the passing of time. The ornament has lost its bad reputation in postmodern art. It is no longer the crime it was during the heydays of modernism.⁵ Considered in this light, there is nothing left to preclude an "ornamental" approach to and appreciation of the work of Gerard Caris. In doing so, laws that can be expressed in mathematical terms are an important aid, as much for the production as for the study of his work.

Through mathematics it was possible to offer a foundation for the theoretical justification of the geometrical abstract art, if only because mathematics had been studied in connection with plastic art since Renaissance times. At that time mathematics primarily served the development of the doctrine of the central perspective. Artists like Paolo Ucello, Piero della Francesca, Leonardo and Dürer were obsessed with this interrelationship. Still, mathematics were soon left aside and replaced by an interest in literature. In his classical study on the Italian theory of art, Anthony Blunt summarized this development as follows: "So mathematics, which had been to the early Humanist artist one of the chief weapons in the scientific study of the outside world, is in the Mannerist period nearly driven out of painting. The certainty of scientific observation has given place to a conviction directly inspired by God: reason has given way to faith".⁶ This is also conveyed by the criticism which mannerist artist and biographer Giorgio Vasari put forward in his biography of Ucello. Vasari started by observing that Ucello had spent too much time and effort on the problems of perspective, otherwise he would have been: "the most captivating and imaginative painter to have lived since Giotto." Vasari spoke severely when he observed, more generally, that: "Artists who devote more attention to perspective than to figures develop a dry and angular style because of their anxiety to examine things too minutely; and, moreover, they usually end up solitary, eccentric, melancholy, and poor, as indeed did Paolo Ucello himself" In addition, he quoted the sculptor Donatello, who is reported to have told Ucello: "Ah Paolo, this perspective of yours makes you neglect what we know for what we do not know. These things are no use except for marquetry - that is the kind of work where you need shavings with spirals and circles and squares and things like that."⁷ This reproach resembles in a way the argument put up against abstract art in later days. As a matter of fact, Donatello, in some of his reliefs, showed himself to be a master in the use of perspective.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century an effort was made to introduce a broad concept of science in which reason, faith, classical science and art would be equal in standing. In many cases this led to curious mixtures: theories in which mysticism was wrapped up in scientific terms. After all, the natural sciences had achieved great, spectacular successes and an unparalleled status. In comparison, the arts were lagging far behind. The bond between science and art, which had still been there in the early days of the Renaissance, had become lost. From those days onward, only faith and

beauty were left to legitimize the arts.⁸ This did not in any way preclude that scientists could very much be inspired by art, and that, vice versa, knowledgeable artists sought inspiration in science.

In the interpretation of the work of Gerard Caris the merging of science, pseudo-science and art still plays a role. This can be inferred, among other things, from the extensive article written by Johan Vanbergen for the catalogue of Caris's exhibition in Ludwigshafen (1991). Vanbergen appears to take up the nineteenth century point of view that the degree of truth in art must be estimated as high as that of the sciences. In both cases it would be a matter of *Wirklichkeitsbewältigung* (coming to grips with reality), a pretty term which is rather too vague and which offers little grip when, for example, we are dealing with the work of Gerard Caris.⁹

The criteria at the end of the twentieth century by which geometrical abstract art must be measured - after a history of 90 years - were developed during that history by taking this art form as a starting point. If one does not wish to resort to pseudo-scientific explanations and interpretations there is the psychology of perception to turn to, and the artistic precedents such as the doctrine of the ornament. The art historian Ernst Gombrich wrote a study on illusionistic representation, called *Art and Illusion*, next to a study on the ornament, under the title *The Sense of Order; A study in the psychology of decorative art*. If we do not recognize a representation, what do we see? Arrangements, the answer must be. What this comes down to in connection with Caris has been sufficiently clarified by Frans Boselie in his article *De Dodecaëder, Volmaakt veelzijdig voegzaam lichaam* (The Dodecahedron, Perfectly multilaterally adaptable body).¹⁰ An aesthetically attractive object cannot be void of form on the one hand, nor can it be too predictable, and thus boring, on the other hand. In other words, the image must be both complex and structured in an orderly manner, in order to captivate our attention and continue to do so. What is important is to find the right contrast between simplicity and complexity. Boselie explains that in this respect there is something wrong with the form of the regular pentagon. This form is aesthetically inferior to the equilateral triangle, the square and the circle. Those are fundamental forms "because they epitomize three irreducible forms of simplicity. They each meet the requirement that they define a plane with a minimum of unequal elements, i.e. with a maximum of "formedness." The pentagon is more complex and offers possibilities of visually creating other equality forms than those of equilateral triangle, cube or circle. This is more difficult and gives rise to intermediary forms. Those can in turn strengthen the impression of simplicity, even though the pentagon will remain less strong a form, visually, than either square or triangle. This explains why the pentagon was not popular in older geometric art and indicates at the same time how it could pose a challenge to later artists like Gerard Caris. Actually, the regular dodecahedron offers better visual possibilities than the pentagon. It has thus been subject to extensive experimenting.

After World War II a new aesthetics arose which created a framework for judging geometrical abstract art. The so-called *Informationsästhetik* (information aesthetics) of Max Bense, AA Moles and others was carefully studied at the Hochschule für Gestaltung

(academy of art and design) in *Ulm*, the successor of the Bauhaus, as much as in many other progressive academies in Europe and the United States. That is to say, for as long as artists and students could keep concentrated on the difficult lessons it taught. According to the objective doctrine, which attempted to achieve measurable results, any image must contain a mixture of known and unknown elements, which can be determined with precision, in order to be both informative and captivating. Information aesthetics can best be applied to art which makes use of elementary forms. This is self-evident. After all, lyrical splashes of paint are much harder to catch in formulae. It is probably no coincidence that Gerard Caris started his career right in the late sixties, when the cool approach was catching on and the new theoretical framework took form.

In the drawings of the *Eutactic Star Series*, which were created since 1995, Caris plays sublimely with our "sense of order", our sensitivity for recognizing patterns and enjoying unexpected blendings, and with the suggestive blurring between plane and depth. On top of that, this series demonstrates a strong sense of rhythm.¹¹ The drawings, in black and coloured ink and crayon, have been made with utmost care. This care in craftsmanship adds something to the work that is so conceptual in origin. The production of works in series, too, gives rise to added aesthetic value, because various solutions can be presented to the ordering eye of the observer. It starts off simply enough with compositions of hatched hexagons which can be seen (but not obviously so) as images of cubes. The rather robust hatching works as an obtrusive pattern which opposes the three dimensional effect (fig.). In later variations strange black and white intermediary forms appear, which start to form patterns of their own and sometimes seem to engage in battle with the pattern of the "cubes" (fig.). Still later, some planes become grey and green patterns appear behind the two other patterns (fig.). In short, our eyes and brains are constantly occupied and we are confronted with aesthetic choices. The series' title has been composed of *eu* and *taxis*, of the Greek words for "good" and "order". It is a fitting title, not just for this series, in which regular pentagons and stars are intimately entangled without totally relinquishing their independence, but also for the work of Gerard Caris as a whole. His simplicity has become more complex and that means aesthetic gain.

Notes and References

- 1 Cf. *Gerard Caris en de Vijfhoek* (Engl.: Gerard Caris and the Pentagon), by Frederik van der Blij and Wouter Kotte, 005., Utrecht (Museum Hedendaagse Kunst - Museum of Contemporary Art) 1987 (published in Dutch and German).
- 2 Cf. e.g. The second, enlarged edition of Willy Rotzler's well illustrated survey *Constructive Concepts, A History of Constructive Art from Cubism to the Present*, Zurich, 1988 (1977). For the manifestoes, cf. *The Tradition of Constructivism*. Edited and with an introduction by Stephen Bann. London, 1974.
- 3 "It was not until I started to work exclusively according to abstract principles, which caused the dependence on life to disappear, that a world came into being in which I found peace of mind, a world. which acted as a kind of liberation," Gerard Caris wrote in the

catalogue to his solo-exhibition in the Culturele Centrum in Venlo (NL), 1972. The start was instinctive.

- 4 A great variety of literature can be found on mathematics and mysticism. Much of relevance can be found in the catalogue *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 - 1985*, an exhibition held in Los Angeles (County Museum of Art) and The Hague (Gemeentemuseum), 1986 - 1987. In theosophy, the number five and the pentagram are emblematic for the microcosmos. The direction of the pentagon, with one tip pointing downward or upward, determines the symbolic significance attached to it.
- 5 Cf. Adolf Loos: *Ornament und Verbrechen*, Wien 1908
- 6 Sir Anthony Blunt: *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450 -1600*. London, 1964 (1940), p.145.
- 7 Cited in Giorgio Vasaris, *Lives of the Artists*, Aselection translated by George Bull,Hannondsworth, 1965 (Penguin Classics), pp. 95-96.
- 8 “The basic notion that the five ‘major arts’ constitute an area all by themselves, clearly separated by common characteristics from crafts, the sciences and other human activities, has been taken for granted by most writers on aesthetics from Kant to the present day,” Paul O. Kristeller wrote in his famous article *The Modern System of the Arts*, reprinted in the collection *Renaissance Thought II, Papers on Humanism and the Arts*, New York, 1965.
- 9 Johan Vanbergen: *Gerard Caris of De meetbare oneindigheid* (Gerard Caris or MeasurableInfinity), in the catalogue under the same title, Ludwigshafen am Rhein (Wilhelm-HackMuseum), 1991 (German, Dutch and English versions).
- 10 In *Gerard Caris en de Vijfhoek* (Gerard Caris and the Pentagon), note 1.
- 11 Cf. *Gerard Caris*, SMA Cahiers 8, published on the occasion of his exhibition in the Prentenkabinet of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, 1997. Text (Dutch and English) by Jurrie Poot and Uli Bohnen.

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