

Gerard Caris and the Nature of Art

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It is said that the philosopher and satirist Salomo Friedlaender (1871-1946) always carried a prism about him so that he would be ready to prove the correctness of Goethe's Colour Theory to followers of Newton when and wheresoever he could.¹ Similarly (and not surprisingly) the Dutch artist Gerard Caris always carries a small pentagonal dodecahedron made up of twelve regular pentagons with him, so that he is always prepared to demonstrate the potentially infinite symmetrical mega-structures which can be made by combining regular pentagons and the solids constructed from them.²

It is certainly not common knowledge that this kind of surface-filling or space-filling reproduction of regular five-sided elements is regarded as extremely complicated.³ Although there are naturally occurring complex structures based on other regular polygons (the hexagon, which forms the basis for honeycombs, crystals forming triangular pyramids or the cubic crystals formed by common salt), those rare occurrences of natural objects with pentagonal surfaces (pyrite, for example) show marked structural discontinuity and lack of regularity. They do not occur in symmetrical groupings, and even less as megastructures.⁴

When in 1984 crystallographers were amazed to learn that a team of scientists had succeeded in producing crystalline complexes based on regular pentagons in a rapidly cooled manganese-aluminium alloy it was decided that these should be known as "pseudo-" or "quasi-crystals"; as the discovery was the result of a technically contrived process, it would have been scientifically incorrect to use the term "crystal" as if it were referring to a naturally occurring formation.⁵

With artistic intuition Gerard Caris had anticipated such structures from the beginning of the '70's.

It must not be thought that "artistic intuition" implies any kind of unconditional subjectivism on Caris' part. On the contrary, his *Pentagonal Form Language* lends itself to a fuller interpretation only when one realizes that this artist from Maastricht has succeeded in combining two (at first sight very different) aspects of Dutch art of this century in a unique blend. The most obvious parallels are with the group "de Stijl" on one hand and with the work of the graphic artist M. C. Escher on the other.⁶

Let us take "de Stijl" first. In the sphere of modern art, the work of artists like Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg represents the desire for a new order in contrast to

the decadence of society at the turn of the century and the chaos of the First World War. The basis of their work was intended to be fundamental and rational and its relevance was meant to reach past the almost sacred symbolism of pure painting and sculpture into the overall pattern of everyday living and to find concrete expression as a comprehensive synthesis, a harmonious and consciously arranged society.

One might, in more pointed terms, say that the pentagon serves the same basic function for Gerard Caris as did the rectangle for Mondrian. It is the foundation for everything, both symbolic and practical. It is the rational pattern available for pure and applied design. And because it is not a naturally occurring module for complex structures it is an intellectual construct from the outset. "*Der Geist ist etwas unendlich Höheres als die Natur*" (Intellect is infinitely superior to Nature), runs a line from Hegel's *Ästhetik*, quoted by no means coincidentally in the periodical "De Stijl".

In comparison with a rectangle a pentagon is a considerably more complicated basic form, and the contrast is even greater between a pentagonal dodecahedron and a cube or a rectangular parallelepiped. Working with such forms requires significantly greater geometric or stereometric effort. An overview of the pentagon-based work of the Dutchman Caris, spanning more than the last two decades, will reveal a desire for knowledge bordering on obsession, a probing and puzzling (in no way dilettantist) which differs widely from Mondrian's well-nigh Messianic awareness of the already discovered. The visible results as well as the approach place any comparison with Caris closer to Escher than to Mondrian.

From time to time experts demonstrate the connection between the dreamlike complexity of M. C. Escher's images and problems of higher mathematics, but neither this, nor the apparent visual discrepancies which occupied this artist throughout his life, should be allowed to obscure the fact that in the final analysis his logical pursuit of rational ways of stating questions and their apparently manneristic translation into the absurd is a sculptural symbolization of transcendental philosophical speculation.⁷ It strikes one as almost moving when one of these images appears -often accompanied by moralistic messages⁸ - in a public place, perhaps as a mural decoration in a post office, or in the sphere of applied graphics, as a postage stamp design, for example. Anyhow, even if the step towards the restructuring of everyday life had a less programmatic character for Escher than it had for the artists of the "de Stijl" group, it is still reasonable to maintain that a vague similarity between Escher's ethical foundation and that of the Dutch Constructivists cannot be denied.⁹ It is debatable how far this observation can be stretched to include Gerard Caris; what follows should be read with a sidelong glance at Caris!

First of all one should be cautious about making Dutch Protestantism the *terium comparationis* with Escher and "de Stijl". It would be more to the point to assume that the Dutch culture area is distinguished by a precociously mediatised, not to say detached, relationship with Nature. The protracted struggle to reclaim land in the North had already had its effect before the cities took up the overseas trade connections in the seventeenth century which brought out the matter-of-fact common sense which is such a characteristic of Dutch culture. In the southern Netherlands (including those

parts of Flanders which now belong to Belgium) the towns had risen to prominence earlier. There were close trade relations with Italy as early as the fifteenth century, and the humanism which came flowing in left clear traces of a far from naive worldliness in even the most impressive examples of sacred conviction - as witness the Ghent altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers! Even if the reasons for this down-to-earth view of reality vary logically and chronologically between the north and the south of the Netherlands, they have a common result; a consciousness of the "obverse of Nature". At the same time, the gradual incorporation of the catholic church (increasingly baroque since the sixteenth century, but not fanatically counter reformatory) in the middle-class society in the south, and the triumph of Protestantism in the north (rounded off by the expulsion of the Spaniards) offered respectively protection and encouragement to a spirituality which has lasted until the present day, managing to combine appreciation of facts with a kind of intensely pantheistic temperament.¹⁰

If one relates these characteristics of Dutch cultural history to Gerard Caris it leads to the assumption that to dismiss his long-term preoccupation with the pentagon as a merely formalistic affair would be to fall short of the mark.

The ornamental effect, for instance, created by combining pentagons, is one which we recognize from Escher and indeed from early Mondrian; it is reminiscent of Dutch Art Nouveau with its liberal sprinkling of colonial influences, but could also be seen as a later echo of Moorish influence which amazed patrons of the Arts in the Netherlands, particularly under the Habsburgs.

Caris is widely traveled and lived for many years in the US. Where the ground of many of his works is tailored to the motifs in question and not merely left as a quadratic or rectangular shape with empty spaces, one might describe the congruity of motif and format as "shaped canvas", following an American practice of the '60's. Caris does so. When the pentagons are so interconnected that they almost overlap the edges of the picture one might be tempted to use another American term in use since Jackson Pollock - "all over". Caris does this as well.

If one considers these methods as European departures from the *European* tradition of painting however, there seems to be something inherently baroque about them. They are overstatements, exaggerations; they exceed the previously accepted norm in an attempt to convey a message. At the same time they get their momentum from experience, talent and an unrestrained joy of discovery. Finally the "all over" can be interpreted as an intellectual play on the idea of infinity. In the text "de docta ignorantia" by Nikolaus Cusanus (1401-1464) this kind of exercise became an attempt to prove the existence of God; with Leibniz (1646-1716) it ended up in infinitesimal calculus.

Gerard Caris is well aware of his European cultural historical roots, and he nurtures them. But he is also contemporary enough not to identify the utilitarian extension of his idea of form exclusively with an ethical or even a moral concept, as seemed objectively unavoidable to Mondrian and was, to all appearances, dear to Escher's heart. His message is modern (contrary to a widespread misunderstanding of what "modern" means) insofar as it uses the past as the fruitful basis for an attempted synthesis of Art and Life; and it is "postmodern" insofar as the synthesis is based on modern conditions.

These range from the existence of the market to the epistemological perspective of the concept of transcendence which has placed science and technology in the place of theology (perhaps even of God) and given rise to thoughts of mediation as a realistic alternative to assumed immediacy.

Both the pentagonal dodecahedron and the works of Gerard Caris are works of Art (not of nature). The works of Caris, placed between us and Nature, allow us a valuable insight. We stand face-to-face with Nature and have possibly a better chance than ever before to relate to *her* and to understand *ourselves*.

Notes and References

- 1 Hans Blüher, Mynona. In: catalogue for the exhibition "Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona 1871-1946". Berlin 1972 p. 7.
- 2 cl: Nico Wittebrood, Het verboden kristal. In: Kijk, January 1988 p. 58.
- 3 This statement, which refers as much to geometry as to aesthetic ornament, was made by Frederik van der Blij in his paper "Strukturen im Werk von Gerard Caris" ~ In: Ders./Wouter Kotte (Hrsg.), Gerard Caris und das Fünfeck. Utrecht/Ratingen 1988 p. 36. (This book was published in Dutch with a German translation as Volume 5 of the German/Dutch Museum series on the occasion of the Caris exhibitions in Utrecht and Ratingen).
- 4 cl various articles in the book mentioned in note 3.
- 5 cl note 2, *ibid*; and Franz W. Saris, Woher wissen die Atome das? In: cl Note 3. p.55.
- 6 Comparisons between Caris and Escher and between Caris and "de Stijl" have, of course, already been made (cl Bibliography); any attempt to use Caris' work as the basis for the quest for a tertium comparationis between "de Stijl" and Escher and thus to create a more lively picture of specifically Dutch cultural history has, as far as I am aware, not yet been undertaken. The sporadic references in this text are certainly in no way intended to replace such an undertaking.
- 7 For the cultural and historical background to the study of the number five cl Wouter Kotte, Der Paradigmenwechsel von der Vier zur Fünf bei Gerard Caris in cf Note 3, p. 7 onwards; Escher's relationship with mathematics has been explored by Bruno Ernst, Der Zauberspiegel des M. C. Escher, Munich 1978.
- 8 Not least the titles of Escher's pictures and his many more or less explicit memento mori references, together with his mannerisms and his mathematical and geometric projects, encourage a fruitful comparison with typical aspects of the Baroque period. cf. J. L. Locher (ed) De werelden van M. C. Escher. Amsterdam 1971.
- 9 It would certainly be fascinating to investigate the idea of a historical parallel between the Revolution and "Classicism" of the "de Stijl" group on one hand and an analogy of middleclass consolidation and Dutch baroque as the active background to Escher on the other; not necessarily with the result that Protestantism is the common third factor. Interestingly enough, Egon Friedell at the end of the 1920's cautioned against using denominational factors in this part of Europe as the sole explanation for

cultural characteristics: “The northern part of Belgium is inhabited by the Flemings, who are almost indistinguishable from the Dutch in language, descent, character and outlook on life. Indeed, what is ‘un-Dutch’ about the Belgians Jordaens, Brouwer, Teniers or Snyders? Only in one way is the north of Belgium very different from Holland; it is Catholic through and through.” (In: Egon Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit* Vol. 11, Munich 1931, p. 33). I point this out not least because the work of Caris, who lives in (Catholic) Maastricht on the Belgian border is equally not satisfactorily explained by his religious allegiance; it would also make the comparison with Mondrian and Escher more remote than it actually is.

- 10 It is thus presumably not coincidental that there is a clear line from Spinoza via Goethe down to Steiner and the anthroposophists and from there up to Mondrian and the other “de Stijl” artists, marked equally by a thirst for knowledge and a generally pantheistic outlook.

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