



# **REINIER VRANCKEN** In Obliques

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## *Up and Down to Earth*

*I have a soft spot for Reinier Vrancken's habits of speaking on his work. Asking him about his intentions with any particular piece is often responded to by not circling around a central artistic premise, but leaping from one act of interpretation to the next, often the first not more or less important and informative than the second or third, as if performing a continuous game of Chinese whispers without winner or ending. It had struck me before that instead of insisting on coherent and complete critical self-consciousness, pointing at as many directions possible itself seems to become the point. In my understanding of Vrancken's practice, this making and unmaking of meaning forms a slippery slope that slides from a critique of meaning-making in art at large down towards the artist's particular affinity with art's poetic dimension—only for the slope to then unexpectedly inverse its course of action, again and again, so that neither points are ever reached but instead held in a weird kind of suspense, bringing equivocal obscurity and cryptic intent in an uneasy balance.*

*As mentioned elsewhere, the panels hanging from the ceiling of Willem Twee Kunstruimte are intended to improve the acoustic conditions of the space, accommodating either art viewers or agile laptop workers, seated at the flex workplaces (free of charge) flanking the art normally placed centre. As such the panels appear to mark both the institution's various functions as a hybrid cultural*

*centre that caters to various activities, disciplines and audiences, and, I would argue, more generally the place of art in society at large today, where it is increasingly forced into registers of efficiency, consumerist decor and fragmentary work ethics. This immediate condition is taken up by Vrancken as the subject for his architectural intervention. The tilting of the acoustic panels that makes up In Obliques undoubtedly sets out to place particular emphasis. If italics in typography connote acute meaning within an overarching body of meaning, what exactly is the body In Obliques forms part of, and what is it meaning to emphasise? How do site-specific artistic strategies cut through the many layers of context that are always already present – architectural design, history, geographical location, social function, larger cultural frameworks – so as to encourage interpretation? Is meaning contained and concealed inside a work, to be hinted at through formal acuity, or is meaning attributed by peripheral actors outside of the artwork proper?*

*The acoustic panels are upholstered in the same industrial greyish green that adorns the former cigar factory's characteristic steel structure (which is also adopted into the institution's branding), and while associations with minimalism, serial repetition and even painting traditions are readily projected onto Vrancken's architectural intervention, neither the panels nor the artist's adjustments give*

away any immediate artistry. Their tilted hanging could hold both a functional and decorative quality when not pointed out as being part of the artwork proper. However, the act of looking at the work still reflects some sense of embodied viewing: focus on any particular panel and as you try to adjust your orientation to untilt the panel back to its imagined horizontality, you will find that now not the panel is tilted, but your head, neck and the perspective of the world around you. As the horizontality of our everyday purview makes the head and the world seemingly run parallel, looking at *In Obliques* seems to issue a warning: mind your head. It is tempting to unpick the political resonance of the tilted panels' formal resemblance to a guillotine's blade—in the day of Robespierre arguably the most resolute device of institutional critique, albeit in individualised execution. But the artistic tropes to be taken into account, joined with the work's ghostly stillness and Vrancken's repeated use of strategies for textual composition perhaps asks for an analysis that does not typically break up the artwork into fragments, separating head from body and delineating text from context, but instead enacts a whimsical chain of personal associations which allows for some kind of unsteady misreading and illogical interpretation, in an attempt to see both the artwork and one's own spectatorship obliquely.

*In Obliques* reminds me of Michael Asher's 1996 work for Kunstraum Wien, which was situated in a baroque architecture with late-modernist insertions of steel beam structures, cutting across the exhibition space horizontally and supporting the Kunstraum's office mezzanine in the adjacent room. The work involved removing the vertical supports from the space as to bring down the horizontal beams that had also supported the platform on top, which came to block the floor. In his text on Asher for *Afterall Journal*, Allan Sekula interpreted the work as an anti-bureaucratic sentiment that levelled hierarchies (extended with allusions to anti-aristocratic and anti-militarist histories embedded in the site) but also points out that the

work forms a practical gesture that hastens the dismantling process of Kunstraum Wien, as this was the last exhibition before closing down the space.<sup>1</sup> If Asher's use of physical support structures points to Austrian modernism's implicit hostility to worker organisation, deploying weighty faux-minimalist form to comment on its supposed neutrality, Vrancken's work in turn quietly cuts across Willem Twee's organisational support structures and art's internalised conditions of acculturation to neoliberal working conditions. The panels in *Willem Twee Kunstruimte* drop down only hesitantly and don't quite come down to earth all the way, but if one imagines the artist working with the necessary temp assistants in the flex work spaces to extend the wire suspension of one side of each of the panels, the work is definitely coming down with something.

When recently visiting the Research Centre at Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI) in Rotterdam, which houses the national collection for Dutch architecture and urban planning, I noticed a formal symmetry to Willem Twee *Kunstruimte*'s spatial logic of centre and frame, and their relation to the labouring body. The HNI Research Centre features an elevated mezzanine level typical for libraries that wraps around the space's perimeter, furnished with bookshelves on both levels, not unlike the placement of the acoustic ceiling panels of *In Obliques*. But the function of space is upended: where at Willem Twee *Kunstruimte*, content (art) normally is placed central and is flanked by workplaces, desk work at HNI takes place in the centre and content (books) is confined to the outside. Both spaces imply quietness; whereas Vrancken's intervention at Willem Twee does not alter this prescribed silence, if the same procedure were to be enacted in the HNI Research Centre and the bookshelves were to be turned at an angle of 14°, probably the books would tumble out.

A display in the Research Centre showed an image of Theo van Doesburg's spatial design for the ciné-dancing at Café de l'Aubette in Strasbourg.<sup>2</sup> In this project, Van Does-

burg's antagonistic introduction of the diagonal line into *De Stijl*'s principles of horizontal and vertical composition finds some kind of epitome, applying tilted fields of colour across the Aubette's walls and ceiling, rejecting a static concept of space. On the HNI website, Van Doesburg is quoted stating: "This oblique dimension not only destroys the earlier means of rectangular expression, but also provides new optics and phonetics." It is said that the split between Van Doesburg and Mondrian came down to a disagreement on the use of diagonals; curiously, art historian Carel Blotkamp suggests that Mondrian created his lozenge paintings first as diagonals in a square composition, finally rotating the support so the reoriented lines become vertical and horizontal again.

It is argued that the guillotine's diagonal blade would be more 'humane' for its condemned victims than the straight blade, which chops rather than slices and thus proves less efficient in beheading. Whether humane or not, the diagonal repositioning of *In Obliques* introduces a hostile dimension to geometrical composition, similar to Cady Noland's use of circular cut-outs that resemble a pillory with holes for heads and hands. But where the pillory is designed to prevent movement, the guillotine intends to make heads roll. Without head or hands the body is devoid of its ability to reason or labour, but in *Café l'Aubette*'s ciné-dancing the headless-handless body can at least still dance. In her text reviewing the group show *Blue Moon in Heerlen* in 2021, Linda Köke described Vrancken's work as "a complex dance in which [the artist] challenges us to look for meanings in all layers of the work." I would argue that the work's meaning-making processes are much more evasive, not layered like a cake or a riddle-driven escape room, but chopped, screwed, and blended into a smoothie, the goal of which is not to solve puzzles but to slow down, decentralise and disorient. What this might mean for Köke's curating of Vrancken's work at *Willem Twee Kunstruimte* is up to each headed and handed spectator's own capacity. In my reading, *In Obliques*' primary tenet is

to resist clear-cut commentary, as a poetic device of sorts, in defense of open-endedness and finding meaning at the margins. Dutch Dada poet I.K. Bonset (pseudonym of Van Doesburg, in turn a pseudonym of Christian Emil Marie Küpper) writes: "Art ends where it is understood."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Allan Sekula, "Michael Asher, Down to Earth," *Afterall Journal* 1 (Autumn/Winter 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Strasbourg is one of two institutional locations where the elected body of the European Parliament meets, next to the more frequented Brussels. For a body that is made up of many parts, it seems impossible to find coherence in only one location; it gravitates towards a more dispersed whole. Before Vrancken's own temporary departure to Brussels, where he participated in the artist-in-residence program at Wiels, he worked as a clerk at the HNI Research Centre.

<sup>3</sup> I.K. Bonset, "Over het nieuwe vers en het aaneengeknoopte touw", in: *De Stijl* vol. 3, no. 8 (June 1920).