ARTIST INTERVIEW
WITH HENK PEEETERS

When the essence of a work is that it has no meaning, as with the NUL movement, what then is the meaning of physical artworks and their preservation for the future? In the interview with one of the founders of the NUL movement, visual artist Henk Peeters, these questions and other specific issues in the conservation practice are addressed in a relaxed, yet purposeful way.

The meaninglessness of art is the key to Peeters’ work. The superficial, the trivial has been elevated to art, but that does not mean that the physical works from the NUL period, from 1960 to 1965, have not acquired meaning. On the contrary, these works, and the materials used in their creation, get more meaning over time also as reference and research material. Viewed from this perspective, it is valuable to leave the artwork in its original state as long as possible, although the creation process, of which the work of art is the accidental result, is central to the original intentions of the NUL movement. The option that the same artist would at a later stage remake the work is entirely in accordance with the ideas and the ideology of the NUL movement. It also seems to be the most appropriate solution. Yet, in this interview, Peeters says that work from the NUL movement should be preserved for as long as possible. With this statement the artist sketches the same dilemmas that the conservator is confronted with. With an important difference, which is that when Peeters actually becomes the conservator of his own work, as is apparent from the interview, he lets the authenticity of the creation process prevail and proceeds to remaking the work.

THE ARTIST
Together with artists Armando, Jan Schoonhoven and Jan Henderikse, Henk Peeters (The Hague, 1925) founded the NUL group, a movement that was opposed to CoBrA and aimed at objective art. Art had to be stripped from all emotional value or meaning. Peeters implements this principle to a great extent in his pyrographies in which he ‘paint’s’ with fire by burning holes in synthetics or plastic foil, in his canvases with cotton wool strips, with rows of black and white down feathers, in his grass paintings and his cow canvases. He remains an important representative of NUL and the person who due to his intensive contacts with Otto Piene, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Yves Klein, established a connection between the Dutch NUL movement and international Zero artists.

THE INTERVIEW
The interview took place on December 12, 2003, in the artist’s studio. It is an oeuvre interview with an elderly artist. The works discussed all date from the NUL period and are made out of simple materials. Themes in the article are the creation process, the artist’s role and the possibilities of re-execution.

THE INTERVIEWER
Lydia Beerkens, senior conservator of Modern Art at SRAL, Maastricht.
Henk Peeters on the Making and Remaking of his Work

LYDIA BEERKENS

Introduction

The interview with Henk Peeters (The Hague, 1925) about his oeuvre took place at the artist’s home in the winter of 2003. At the time, Peeters lives in a historical dwelling in the woods near Brummen together with his wife and photographer Truus Nienhuis. His studio is on the top floor. Henk Peeters’ artworks from the collections of the Groninger Museum, Van Abbe Museum, Rijksmuseum Twente, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Kröller-Müller Museum, Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the RCE have been studied during the preparatory research and were the point of departure for the interview. The use of materials during the creation as well as the re-creation of his works is a recurring theme during the interview.

Peeters is a leading exponent of the Dutch NUL group, which included Jan Schoonhoven, Armando and Jan Henderikse, and he used to be the movement’s spokesman. The NUL movement existed from 1960 to 1965, but the artists continued working in the same tradition for a long time and kept in touch with one another. The NUL group was the radical continuation of the ‘informal’ period, in which Peeters, initially influenced by CoBrA, still painted virtually monochrome panels and canvases with a lot of impasto and paint. The NUL group believed that art should not have any meaning and not acquire it either; patina was fundamentally forbidden. NUL took reality as a point of departure. No personal, unique art or high art with layered meanings, but art that was superficial and trivial. The material and the surface had to be made in an easy and simple way, reproducible by anybody and devoid of any deeper meaning. The colour, or rather the absence of colour – many works were entirely white – underlines this philosophy.

Peeters’ most important works were created in the 1960s. He applies new materials such as white and transparent plastic foil, next to cotton, scrim and nylon that he stretches on a stretcher as ‘canvas’ or support. He glues cotton wool on it, systematically sticks feathers in it, or burns holes in the material with a candle, allowing the smoke to create a ‘drawing’ around the holes. He continues working in the style from this period, stretching cowhides, artificial grass, or red and pink fake fur on stretchers. To date, he still reproduces artworks dating from the NUL period.

Interview Approach

The study group that prepared the interview not only focused on the formulation of questions about artworks, the creation process and the problems of preserving synthetic materials. They also discussed a fact that appeared to be well-known within the seclusion of the museum world, namely that Peeters frequently remakes his works, sometimes by way of a ‘restoration’ if the plastic foil had ripped, at other times as an entirely new execution of an earlier lost work. In earlier interviews, he says that he remade works from the NUL period during the seventies. At the time, he had thrown away these works resolutely and stopped making art for some time. The aspect of remaking would therefore become an important subject in the interview.

The study group realised that perhaps the question about meaning, a core component of the oeuvre interview, had to be replaced by a question about ‘the absence of meaning’ (according to the NUL philosophy). This was possible by asking questions about the meaning of the work at the time when it was created, with NUL as the most important period in Peeters’ oeuvre. Other leading questions concern the influence of ‘patina’ and the ageing of materials on the original works: does authenticity have a meaning after all for Peeters’
original work and does this differ from the remade artworks? Even though Peeters continues to work as he did in the NUL period, the works that actually date from that period are nonetheless deemed more important and perhaps more authentic than his later work. Remakes dating from the middle of the 1970s are now, almost forty years later, ‘old enough’ to be authentic by themselves; at least it appears so from the high auction prices for works from that period. Purchase figures from the 1970s and ‘80s do not even indicate whether the artworks actually date from the NUL period or whether they were new remakes from those years. The fact that the plastic materials age relatively quickly makes it rather difficult to determine the exact age. The underlying question, of course, is whether this issue is important: Peeters finds this discussion very arbitrary. After all, he is the artist and he simply makes his own work, then and now.

The first component consisted of a chronological discussion of the groups of works and their intended appearance and meaning as well as a systematic oral investigation into the creation process and the choice and origin of materials in a number of selected ‘example artworks’. The second component in the interview was to fathom Peeters’ vision on authenticity, re-execution and the replacement of materials, and his opinion on patina or the definition thereof.

Peeters himself also plays a part in the conservation about his work. The fragility of a number of works is irreversible: if a stretched plastic foil with burn holes gets ripped, there is practically no other restoration possible than reconstruction. The question is whether this concerns the original material or the original execution by the artist. Peeters’ vision on this is important, because to him restoration through re-execution is entirely in line with his ideas and the NUL ideology.

Earlier Experiment with Re-Execution
In an earlier interview about his artwork 59-18, a pyrography in polyurethane foam from 1959 in a rather bad condition (coll. RCE), Peeters proposed an alternative for restoration, ‘You could of course simply make a new one’. Willing to go along with theoretical questions such as whether it is at all possible for an artist to remake his own work, and if this work is then still the same work, and what the artist thinks about the authenticity issue, he accepted the challenge to make the same work again. The result of the reconstruction was rather disappointing; due to legally compulsory additions of fire retardants, the PUR foam currently available does not burn and singe as satisfactorily as the old material and the right colour of foam is not available anymore. On the other hand, there were no treatment options for the restoration of the work. The conclusion was that the work of art as such no longer existed. It is stored as a reference and remains available for research.

The Interview
The atmosphere during the interview is informal. Since the interview takes place in Peeters’ studio, first a relevant selection of artworks to be discussed is made from the works present. One of the selection criteria concerned the parallels with artworks in museum collections. The spacious roof dormer provides maximum access of daylight in the completely white studio, with works standing against the wall and materials lying on a large table in the middle of the room.

Peeters is in his element in his studio. The first fifteen minutes of the interview – the camera is running – Peeters talks about work he is currently making and he picks up pink and blue dyed rabbit fur. To him, the skin and the structure of the material are potentially the surface and appearance of a new work. This actually applies to all of Peeters’ work. Starting with a question about recent work provides a nice way of opening the interview and facilitates the transition to older work.
Cotton Wool and Organza
The first work that is placed on the easel dates from 1961 and consists of a square of pale yellow cotton wool balls on stretched plastic foil underneath a transparent fabric, ‘organza’. At closer inspection, Peeters appears to have applied a new background over the first original mount. He explains that he put the old cotton wool balls back and stretched a new piece of organza over it, which has already become dirty and lends an ‘authentic impression’ to the work. The intervention took place in 1975, according to the note at the back, ‘nieuwe achtergrond 1975’ (new background 1975). Then he tells us an anecdote about a seriously dirtied work that he was to restore for a heavy smoker. Cleaning was not an option, so he had to replace it. When it later appeared that the work was a little bigger, visible by the outlines on the wall, he told the owner that this should be interpreted as ‘inflation correction’. Today, he takes down the measurements when he uses a new stretcher. He describes his vision on intervention and replacement as follows,

‘It should look the way I intended it to look. So I don’t hold the view of a conservator who wants to keep it as it has become over time.’

Later in the interview, it appears that he feels some appreciation for patina or natural ageing after all, perhaps partially because of his own advanced age.

‘The work dates from the past; those days are over’ and
‘It has to make sense, though; too new is not right’.

Pyrographies as Accidental Works
We discuss the group of pyrographic works using pyrography 60-14 from the studio. Peeters calls the work entirely authentic, using the argument that it still has the old foil that is no longer obtainable. About the creation process, he says,

‘First, you stretch the PVC foil over a canvas stretcher, then you put it horizontally, face-down, on two stretched cords, so that you can make burn holes and a ‘drawing’ from underneath by using a candle. Hence: pyro-graphics.’

Sometimes he had to extinguish the flames – PVC foil ignites quickly – to prevent his studio from catching fire. A lot went wrong as well; he had to make ten or so pyrographies to end up with one successful work. Peeters regards each pyrography as an accidental work that is unique and cannot be remade. Interesting about Peeters’ explicit explanation is that the spectator may easily imagine burning holes in plastic but not that this is best done by holding the flame vertically under the horizontally stretched PVC foil. In the case of the first pyrography, he ‘drew’ with a candle from underneath on paper and unprocessed canvas and later on worked in plastic foil and soft polyurethane foam as in the case of the artwork 59-18. He got the idea from the Italian artist Alberto Burri, who included burnt plastic as a component in his collage paintings. When asked, Peeters does not consider himself a painter, or a sculptor; he is just an artist.

Breaking Away from Painting
With his pyrographies, Peeters definitely breaks away from traditional painting with paint. When during the interview we go back to his earliest work, made when he had just finished the art academy, we even see still lifes and portraits. From 1957, Peeters lived in Arnhem. He worked with a lot of impasto, like CoBrA did, and Antonio Tapiés and his Dutch colleague Jaap Wagemaker. These are the ‘informal’ works, thickly painted, more or less monochrome, abstract paintings. Peeters explains that he first applied a layer to obtain body and volume and then applied the oil paint on top of it. He also made works on paper:
monotypes, whereby printer’s ink is applied to a sheet of glass and then transferred to a sheet of paper, colour on top of colour, with the top layer being the last print.

During the NUL period, Peeters started using plastics and other materials, while his colleague Armando continued to paint and added more matter to the paint to obtain more impasto. Peeters says,

‘Adding stuff to the paint meant that they accused you of betraying the old trade and this in turn drove you to work even more contrarily, look for other materials, which I found at the HEMA’. ‘You didn’t go to a shop for artist materials, no, you just went to the HEMA, not real paint but fake materials, something everybody thought reprehensible ...’

NUL
According to Peeters, this ideology was matched by a parallel trend in the poetry of those days, which had to be as simple as possible and devoid of meaning; no beautiful language or wonderful sentences, no deep thoughts, but far removed from the official ‘high’ art.

The NUL ideology also rings through in the way Peeters talks about his work: very practical and without specifying any meanings. He puts cotton or flannel behind a pyrography or a sheet of foil, because light can shine through it, thus referring to Fontana who puts black paper behind his sliced canvases. The composition is ‘totally unimportant’; it should look ‘a little silly’ (simple), so Peeters made a strip in the middle, or distributed elements across the surface in regular patterns. Later, in 1976, Peeters participated in an exhibition about kinetic art with a once-only ‘kinetic’ work. He constructed a cabinet behind an existing canvas with white feathers (1961) and placed the electric motor from an old spin-dryer in it. Rotating slowly, the metal bar attached to the motor briefly moves the feathers. The effect is very subtle; each time, a (another) feather starts moving among the ones that are motionless. In terms of materials (cotton and feathers), a work like this could be restored easily, provided that the motor keeps working.

Reconstruction and Conservation
The question as to what might be replaced in each artwork is a recurring theme in the interview, although replacing old material by new material is not automatically a first option in restoration. Stretched synthetic foil, perforated with feathers or burn holes, can hardly be conserved, but taking Peeters’ own practice of reconstruction and remaking into account, it still seems to be an acceptable option for restoration. Sometimes, Peeters stretches transparent foil over an old pyrography in order to protect the vulnerable edges of the burnt plastic. When the foil yellows or gets ripped, replacing it with new foil is legitimate as far as Peeters is concerned. He sees the pyrography itself as the real work of art. He is all in favour of remaking the whole work, particularly if this enables a work to be displayed or sold again. However, practice shows that this is easier said than done.

The obsolete transparent foil sticks to the burnt edges, which makes removing the foil risky. Peeters never actually wanted to clean or conserve his works, because it is difficult to do and does not produce satisfying results. He opted for the effective solution of integrally replacing components, the result of which was an intact whole. He had to take into the bargain that the cotton wool balls from the HEMA had changed over time, that the same foil was no longer obtainable, that feathers came from another batch of down, or that a supplier no longer existed. However, when during the interview an attempt is made to list works and components that would or would not be allowed to be replaced, Peeters does not go along with it after all. He sticks to the viewpoint that his work should preferably be kept in its original state. This opinion is supported by the fact that he himself frequently fixed tears with self-adhesive tape and smoothed away stains with watercolour or acrylic paint.
‘It is authentic because I made it’

Discussing the remaking of the artwork 59-18 reveals a contradiction: as a NUL artist, Peeters can remake his work although he also states that the pyrographies are unique because they do have to be made by him. Of course, he himself decides what he makes, but even so a ‘re-creation’ appears not to be a substitute; the work is different every time. Authenticity does not mean much to him: since he is the creator, the work is authentic. The idea behind the work has remained the same but the execution differs. To him, there is no difference between the idea carried out in 1960 and the same idea re-used in 2000. During the interview, we discussed the making and the reconstruction of the artworks, as this was Peeters’ own method of preserving them. However, in the end the only option for conservation will be preserving the transient work as long as possible.

NOTES

2 HEMA is a dutch department store.
3 Ibid.
4 Lydia Beerkens, ‘Nothing but the real Thing: Considerations on Copies, Remakes and Replicas in Modern Art’, Tate papers, Tate’s online research Journal 8 (2007), www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/07autumn/beerkens.htm.