

Staining the interface – on Line Boogaerts’ window dressing strategies

The art of Line Boogaerts essentially concentrates on painting on windows using tinted oil or soap and some brushes, window wipers and some more cleaning materials. The work is presented either as a performance, as a maquette or as an animated video shot in stop motion. At its core, there is thus always an element of time. The oil keeps the pigment from drying up, always ready to be erased, by the hands of the artist, or nature’s elements. Boogaerts depicts daily scenes and ordinary objects, familiar landscapes and cityscapes, using the entire windowpane or covering only just enough to add one element to the background scene, as framed by the window.

In a way, Line Boogaerts seems to revive the tradition of the window painter, invited by shopkeepers to decorate their vitrines with large painted texts and visuals, a tradition from the era when neon signage, large plotted stickers or flatscreen monitors were not yet cheap and readily available. Yet Boogaerts is also at odds with this genealogy (in a sense a profane commodification of the century old tradition of stained glass windows in churches and official buildings). Also, Boogaerts does not produce objects, there is little there to sell as an artwork. Her vitrines are empty and quickly disappear, migrating into her video recordings of the performative process of drawing and the ensuing visual transformations.

With her painted drawings Boogaerts does not intend to lure the curious gaze of the ‘customer’ inside a commercial space. Rather she arrests or even obstructs the gaze, as her evocations do not signal any evident message or decorative ambition. Another possible lineage is therefore that of graffiti art. Yet contestation or an anarchic sense of selfpromotion is not what Line Boogaerts is after either. She doesn’t even leave her name on a finished drawing, let alone a tag. And she always requests permission, most often even creating her work on invitation. She is a visual artist who, with unusual materials, masterfully evokes contemporary drawings in an architectural context.

Boogaerts’ graphic universe contains no colours. She restrains herself by using black pigment only, and incidentally some cut out white paper to highlight certain sections of the drawing. There are no colours to seduce the viewer, her vocabulary is akin to that of the woodcut, with its straightforward contrasts. She also ties in with the tradition of the monotype, drawing directly on smooth, nonabsorbent surfaces. Yet there is never a unique print made from her ephemeral ‘original.’

In photography and cinema, the frame is most commonly understood as a window, an opening towards another, external world. In animation film on the contrary, the premise is that there is no objective reality, or at least no real time. Animated time is always constructed, manipulated, subjective. In her video’s, Line Boogaerts conflates these two regimes. The images she evokes are always temporary, always ready to be removed from the glass pane. And in the videos they are in constant evolution, leaving the window more or less translucent to focus on the scene behind the glass.

The most specific lineage in which to inscribe Boogaerts’ work, is that of the lightning

sketch. 19th century vaudeville artists drew pictures on blackboard or large sheets of paper and, while also entertaining the audience verbally, kept on adding or transforming their quick-draw graphics, making a constant development of the scene seem to occur. Film pioneers such as Stuart Blackton and Winsor McCay have filmed such acts, eventually leaving out the hand of the artist, so the drawings seem to lead an autonomous life.* The major distinction with Boogaerts' video recordings is that she does not only want to create an illusion of continuity between different stages of a drawing, she also compresses real time by the way the daylight changes in the background.

Boogaerts' videos also distinguish themselves from these prototypes of drawn animation by the specific use of glass. In animation, such a combination of different layers of glass with graphic elements on each level is defined as the multiplane technique, introduced end of the thirties by the Disney studio. Yet, instead of aiming at a seamless illusionism and a sense of perspective, in Boogaerts' work the inherent dialectic between opaque drawings and the transparent surface is radically foregrounded. Problematizing the illusory character of a constructed images has of course been a staple throughout the history of modernism, beginning with Marcel Duchamp and his *Fresh Widow*, his *Large Glass* and smaller 'retards en verre' such as *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour (1918)*.

Boogaerts however avoids such modernist abstractions, and always situates her works firmly in the here and now. Her most ambitious works, Boogaerts creates in situ, responding to the context she is invited to work in. For a window drawing in Colchester, she stylistically referred back to the campus' history, built in 1964, and in 1968 the first to see serious student riots erupting. The bars and stripes on the gallery's window at once evoke the generic architecture of the surrounding buildings, as well as provoking a sense unrest, as if the window was barricaded. Confronted with the graphic obstruction on the window, our eye experiences a strong sense of instability. Her ambition is less to shock, than to disorient, and makes us wonder about the multiple layers and frameworks at play in our perception of the world. More than an anarchic pose, it is certain media-archeological approach that emanates through Boogaerts' work. Her main concern is not so much to emulate foregone cultural practices and technologies, but rather to excavate anew our field of vision.

Precisely the anachronisms in her technique make Boogaerts a very contemporary artist. In an era where neoliberal spindoctors promote buzzwords such as transparency, flexibility and flow, and consumers crave for the smoothest interfaces and fastest connections, this artisan-artist cultivates a slow and messy process. Instead of cleaning windows, she smudges them. To those glossy, sparkling clean surfaces Boogaerts does all the things that are absolutely not done among adepts of good clean, haptic fun (smartphones, Ipad, laptops and various other devices with track pads or touch screen.) Coincidentally, this is also the era when "Window Dressing" became a term describing the unique strategy many investors employ around year ends and quarter ends to sugar-coat their investment portfolios.

Against such virtual manoeuvres and intangible flows of information, Boogaerts prefers to foreground the interface, the glass shield that is commonly supposed to remain unnoticed. When distorting, transforming or in a sense falsifying the 'normal' view from a window, it is always blatantly clear that these obstructions are Boogaerts' deliberate constructions. Even when the maker is no longer performing, her presence and manipulations are still felt. Her films and installations make the viewer aware of how the experience of vision is a construct and a concept, and still largely derivative of the linear perspective, introduced together with the camera obscura and other monocular drawing devices. A recurring title of some of Boogaerts projects is *Point of View*. Boogaerts poetically reminds us of the configurations that compose and to a large extent determine our viewing habits. With her overpaintings, she turns not only windows, but also video monitors, bus shelters, even entire cars into optical devices, *dispositifs* that remind us of the disciplining effect of our habitual modes of perception.

Line Boogaerts produces her liminal works on the verge of inside and outside, and this in an era of total privatization of public sphere, where overall optimum visibility has become the norm, and Bentham's panopticon has been turned into an information society based on a world wide network of inescapable tracking devices that monitor their users. With her recent car-project *Autofocus* she refers to both Google Streetview imagery and to car wash rituals, to the cinematic framing of reality by the panoramic front window, and the fragmentation of experience through the segmented side windows. Viewers are to sit in the back of the car, and succumb to the (filmed) actions of the Line Boogaerts as a performer, alternating between painting and cleaning, between aggressive obstructions and long distance views.

Line Boogaerts includes herself in her work as a living seismograph of both inner responses and outward impulses. Her works are both conversations with particular motifs and with herself. Her calligraphic tracings are premeditated (often well documented) and yet spontaneous ; the resulting videos are automatic and automated writing combined. At first glance, the generic pose of a young woman cleaning windows evokes a humble presence, one that usually only surfaces after hours: the silhouet of an anonymous person doing the maintenance. Her quite choreographies of lightning sketches reminds us not only of half forgotten graphic techniques, but also of the very contemporary visual regimes that shield us from direct experience.

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* For some background on the lightning sketches phenomenon, see for instance: Crafton, Donald: *Before Mickey – the animated film 1898-1928* (University of Chicago Press, London, 1993) and Sobchack, Vivian (ed.): *Meta-Morphing – visual transformation iand the culture of the quick-change* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000).