

AZART

A-Z art

Guy Rombouts / Monica Droste
and the Arbitrary of the Linguistic Sign

For many years Rombouts worked as an editor and printer-typographer in the generations old small family printing business. He went to graphic design school, but never graduated. Back then he admired the work of Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman and Saul Steinberg because they played with characters bringing them further from their communicative function. Rombouts worked with his father until he was in his thirties, when he moved to Antwerp. There he developed a special taste for concrete poetry, beat poetry and plastic arts. He became good friends with French Denissen and Leon Van Essche, who was also busy with language and alphabets.

Rombouts published his first work with alphabets in 1977. A book of which each page had a letter written in a different way: with blood, carbon paper, with the elbow, using photocopies, without hands, with the pencil in the ear, with the little finger, under the rain...

In 1986, together with his wife Monica Droste, Guy Rombouts created a special alphabet called Azart. The name obviously refers to AZ-Art. But 'Azart' has an extra layer of meaning that gives us an important clue in the understanding of Rombouts and Monica Droste's work of art. It also stands for the old spelling of the French word 'hasard', which means coincidence.

"...all alphabets are random impositions on people and reality. They have nothing to do with reality. It's like projecting a political map onto a landscape." (Guy Rombouts)

In all the alphabets there is a paradoxical permutation in the reading operations an abnormal regression from meaning to form. The letters are not more than barely accurate phonetic representations of a certain spoken language. Their shapes are purely coincidental and have nothing to do with the meaning of the words they embody. When looked at as forms the words lose their meaning and the whole system of values contained in it: a history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a Literature, disappears. They become empty and impoverished, the history evaporates and only the letters remain. The form puts all this richness at a distance, and it's new acquired penury calls for a significance.

In the Azart the shape of a letter has a visual origin. The 'c' stands for curve and the 'h' stands for a hair pin bend, for example. The last letter of each word is connected with the first, creating word-polygons. And, by playing with its arrangement, it is possible to draw figures that occasionally do express the concept of the object in question. The word 'Tau' and 'Tau', for example, form a circle that looks like a sphere. They have an endless shape that is both complex and simple. Here, the form is enriched with significance and a meta-mythical-speech is established. The game of hide-and-seek between meaning and form is inverted and the meaning or literal translation of the form is revealed by its shape. As another example, when writing cancer with the Azart we can come out with something that looks like a monster, expressing the horribleness of the disease.

Any given signifier or symbol is dependent upon that which is intended, expressed or signified in a semiotic relationship of signification, meaning or import. Words are semantic containers, boxes that are filled with our personal history. Rombouts and Droste do not try to change this relation. Their attempt is to make the meaning of a word stand out in the conjuration of its symbolic form, making it possible to express the idea of a word also in a visual way, with the meaning being expressed by its shape. By decoding the form we get to the content. "We try to make our interpretation of a word

clearer, but, by the same token it also becomes more romantic, cowboy like and emotional". (Monica Droste)

As far as perception is concerned, writing and pictures, do not call upon the same type of consciousness, but pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for alexis. The Azart opens a dialogue between writing and image, it is not only a replacement of one alphabet by another, Azart is a meta-alphabet, in which by a process of analogies as well as differentiations the transformation and artistic invention is possible. For analogy is precisely the faculty of variation of images, in combinations that make the part of one coexist with the part of the other, making voluntarily or not the comprehension of its structures clearer.

Rombouts has extended the alphabet's visual aspect by providing each of the 26 letters with its own color (aquamarine, bordeaux red, etc.) and matching noise (aha, brbrr, sshsh, kdoink, etc.), so that Azart becomes a real language, that the artist named "Romboutese".

Besides the Azart Rombouts has an extensive body of work previous to Droste and that continues till now, after her death. But all his work revolves around language, dealing with the philosophical, semiotic, linguistic, and psychoanalytical problem of meaning and the way in which the sign signifies, questioning and trying to transform the arbitrary of the linguistic sign. His most representative work in this matter being his and Monica Droste alphabet, the Azart.

Links and sources:

Rombouts Works & Expositions

www.jahsonic.com/GuyRombouts.html

<http://www.deappel.nl/exhibitions/e/350/>

Interviews:

http://www.hanstheys.be/about_theys/essays/guy_rombouts_knights_1998_book.htm

<http://www.genetologisch-onderzoek.nl/index.php/70/beeldende-kunst/>

Azart:

<http://www.azart.be/azinfo04.html>

<http://www.skor.nl/artefact-1477-nl.html>

http://www.arts.kuleuven.be/cUIturAL_stUDieS/student/biennale/ned/artists/rombouts_bg.htm

Hendrik Werkman:

www.schrijversinfo.nl/werkmanhendrik.html

Saul Steinberg: Beat Poetry: Concrete Poetry: Leon Van Essche: Roland Barthes: Semiotics: Alphabet: Meaning: Sign: Symbol: Linguistics: Semantics: Pictograms: Writing Systems:



HENDRIK WERKMAN

GUY ROMBOUITS & MONICA DROSTE