

A TAMER OF SHAPES

One morning I met the artist Oey Tjeng Sit in a bar on Rembrandt Square. We turned out to be the first visitors. The chairs, tables, ashtrays, glasses and cups stood there, clean, but idle.

A group of nine sugar shakers was begging for our attention. They were identical specimens, with a pear-shaped, glass body, topped off with a chrome-plated metal, long, thin neck, cut obliquely.

They formed a straight line and all the oblique necks pointed in the same direction. Save one. It stood there, as an insubordinate soldier, disrupting the uniformity of this guard of honour of sugar shakers. It was the only one that was back-to-front. This anarchistic behaviour of the object in the empty café rendered an absurdist quality to the prosaic entourage.

Oey Tjeng Sit smiled like a phoenix and kept silent. Any comment on the sugar shakers would have been superfluous anyway. After all, their behaviour had tacitly proven Oey's proposition: 'Our utensils work in a way that does not always stick to the agreement. Some characteristics entice them to actions that tend to get out of hand.'

Thinking back at the sugar shakers, I realise that some of the shapes Sit applied in his collages and graphic art vaguely resemble an abstract sugar shaker. This shape can also be found in his comic 'Een Keizer? Neen, een Vlag' (An Emperor? No, a Flag). It could also be seen as an organ, a bladder for example, that discharges itself in an eccentric and neck-shaped extension or a hand with a peremptory finger.

Oey had a talent for manipulating abstract forms in a way that one could start ascribing autonomous qualities to them, such as stubbornness or humour. It's as if his shapes mock either themselves, or even (geometric) abstract art in general. When asked the question why he was occupied in making art, Oey Tjeng Sit once answered: 'Oh well, because otherwise life becomes too boring. Life is a fixed entity but there are exits. A talent is an exit. Other than that I don't value it that much.'

Oey considered the legendary story about Monkey by the Chinese writer Wu Ch'Eng-En and Dadaism as his most substantial sources of inspiration. He liked to narrate the passage from a Chinese folk tale in which Monkey bragged to Buddha that he could jump 20 miles with ease. Confirming his claim, Monkey takes a run-up, to land on a mountain where he leaves a scent mark. It turns

out he only urinated on Buddha's little finger. Seen from outer space, the tours de force of earthly beings are, by definition, somewhat absurd. What pleased Oey in Chinese philosophy and religion was the element of light-footedness and the feeling for the practical. The time he attended a Chinese school, where calligraphy was an examination subject, left him with a strong alliance to the form that would be contributory to the content of his art. He called Brancusi 'the greatest artist of perfection of form'. As a pharmacy student in the Netherlands he came into contact with Dadaism through literature. In Dadaism he saw his affection for the absurd confirmed once again, and at the same time it showed him the possibilities to give form to it through painting. The attitude towards life and art of artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Picabia and Max Ernst, were a perfect match to Oey's vision.

In the beginning of 1972, when I went to see Oey Tjeng Sit to talk about art for the first time, he proposed to me to descend down to the basement of his pharmacy where a certain object was located. He revealed that it had everything to do with his own preference and work. It turned out to be a bottle dryer, which the previous owner had left there, and that looked exactly like The Bottle Rack that Marcel Duchamp had presented in 1914 as a readymade work of art. Incidentally, Monkey nor Confucius nor Dada nor Brancusi can explain Oey Tjeng Sit's oeuvre that extends over image and language. At the very most they indicate the climatological circumstances in which the adventures of the artist occurred. Oey started out as a draftsman. What spoke to him was the directness and the light-footedness of this medium: 'The tool that the draftsman uses, possesses neither weight nor dimension.' From the hundreds of drawings, etches and scribbles he left behind, arises the image of someone for whom drawing became an organic activity. The hand is an extension of his eye. The draftsman registers the images left behind on his retina, originating from his immediate vicinity, with seemingly effortless ease. For that reason Oey would set his face against the laziness that occurs when an artist 'gets the hang of it'; a phenomenon that he called 'the imperialism of the hand'. Also the predicament of the artist having to wait and see if external sensory stimuli would be so kind as to manifest themselves on the retina started to annoy him. Now that he complied with internal stimuli he produced surrealistic drawings in which animals, feet and fingers occurred. Oey liked to compare the beauty of a rose to the beauty of a toe, stating that the beauty of the rose tended to bore him more quickly.

Oey's artistic offensive against boredom and repetition drove him to taking on ever new challenges. He allowed himself to be inspired by the possibilities of the medium he was working with at any given moment. In his colour linocuts, printed on rice paper, he revealed himself as being a subtle colourist. His black linocuts, emphasising solely the shape and its place in the composition, highlights Oey in his capacity as a tamer of shapes. Oey preferred the linocut over the etching because you can still 'tinker' with the latter, but 'one can't wrangle linocuts', as he used to put it. It is impossible to rectify failed shapes. Oey treated his fantasy shapes as Chinese characters, which should always be in equilibrium. It is amazing that he was able to present his hermetic shapes, which referred to nothing but themselves, as true characters. This is most striking if you compare all of these enigmatic, but distinct shapes. You will find agile, pedantic, razor-sharp, subtle, frenzied, pristine or even goofy types and some characters seem somewhat hydrophobic. Such interpretations are of course entirely up to the spectator, but at the same time Oey succeeded to incorporate the richness of nuance in his work. Inconsequential, a-pictorial materials, like a thumbled newspaper, but also bamboo sticks, paperclips and marbles appealed to Oey as well. He incorporated newsprint in collages, he made paintings with it and he used it as sculpting material for his 'Proppen-project' (Paper Wad Project). These works of art not only manifest Oey's infectious, somewhat confounded humour, but also his affection for the poetry of in itself meagre materials. The comparison with Merz-artist Kurt Schwitters urges itself upon us, still Oey was mainly fascinated by the specific properties of materials like impermeability, weight or weightlessness. During the aforementioned conversation Oey told us about an art work of a Japanese artist that he had just seen, and which made a profound impression on him. He described it to me as a cube, made of rice paper, which 'rustled as you passed by and on the bottom of this cube there was a heavy granite boulder'. Oey was also prompted to use newsprint because of his preference for the colour grey. Hence his frequent use of stock market financial pages, distinguishing between the beautiful grey pages of the *Algemeen Dagblad* and the, for his taste, too black financial pages of the *Volkskrant*. In Oey's collages the choice of the various kinds of paper serves mainly the colour. He forged the shape by putting scissors to paper or tearing it. Just like the linocuts, the collages are about the autonomy of the shapes, which have simply been created by different means. While painting, Oey cared less about the shape and gave his ideas free rein. His memory of the wire-netted message boards outside the provincial town hall incited him to creating paintings that look like shallow, rectangular cages with a

wire screen in which wads of paper are trapped. His comments on these works of art were: 'You can see it, but you can't reach it. You are wearing a mask, but you want to be recognised anyway.' The art of Oey Tjeng Sit could be referred to as a playful attack on linear thinking. His slightly dislocating artistic interventions kept the element of surprise going and inspired queries about so-called tried and tested methods and utilitarian conceptions. His Proppenproject (Paper Wad Project), displayed during an art fair, could for example be understood as an unusual, but not less effective, psychological test. To this end visitors were asked to make wads out of newspapers with which they had to topple a pyramid of empty cans, placed in a cage of chicken wire, in order to create an ever changing work of art. Thus the artist acquired knowledge about the wad-maker. Oey's conclusion ran: 'The insecure made the wad way too tight. It is far easier to topple a pyramid with a loose wad than with a tightly crumpled wad.' As part of the disorganising interventions the window of Oey's pharmacy on the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam should not go unrecorded. The Nestor of window-art used it as a permanent exhibition space for both his own work and that of other artists. Furthermore Oey was the founder of printing office De Vingerpers (The Finger Press), of which he was the managing director and the only staff member. The name is directly tied in with Oey's fascination for the finger, which by nature has the inclination to act just as autonomously as the shapes Oey conceived in his graphic work. His graphic work might even be the upshot of this very same finger. After all Oey said: 'I discovered that the finger is most elementary. Before language existed, people pointed out things. This was the preliminary stage of language.' And precisely a finger is what Oey partially lost when his hand got jammed between the embankment and the boat during a boat trip in Iceland. As a visual artist Oey considered language as a not very watertight form of expression. 'If you use words to say what you mean, it will never quite cover it and always fall short', was his opinion. With his 'comic' books, like the De Vingerpers-publications 'Over het Slaan van Munten' (About Minting Coins) and 'Behalve Eetbaar zijn Knikkers ook Vergiftig' (Besides Being Edible, Marbles are Poisonous) or the aforementioned 'Een Keizer? Neen, een Vlag' (An Emperor? No, a Flag), Oey played off language against image. For example, under a square with a small arrow he wrote the words: '- For years I've been waiting for a movement from the opposite corner. I'm still waiting.' '-You keep the focus of your pupils too big. Thus the solubility stays too small.' Saying too much is so boring, according to Oey Tjeng Sit. His extensive, playful oeuvre is a remedy against any form of ponderousness.

Betty van Garrel, Amsterdam 1980.