

**A fleeting everlasting monument  
for a moment that has yet  
to become history-defining.**

By Eelco van der Lingen

Judging from merely looking at Pierre Bonnard's oeuvre you wouldn't think he lived through two world wars. The company joining for tea in the painting 'Le Thé' from 1917 seems to pay little attention to the war raging outside at that very moment. The fruit bowl on the buffet that Bonnard painted near the end of World War Two does not seem any less abundantly filled or painted in more sombre tones than the fruit bowl he painted in 1933. Whereas Picasso threw all his abhorrence of the atrocities of the war raging on around him into 'Guernica', contrastingly Bonnard's garden, his breakfast or his love in a bath tub do not seem to have to compete for attention with any wartime horrors whatsoever.

One might argue that Bonnard subtly pinned down the zeitgeist by letting everyday life fall apart in form and colour, into a chaos of many stained strokes. But that sublime disintegration of straight lines and sharp colours is a constant in his oeuvre. Indeed, it seems to be a reflection of the artist's own reality and vision on the art of painting rather than impending doom, major injustice or drastic occurrences that derange the world order.

For a long time the major events happening in the world also passed by Lennart Lahuis, seemingly without affecting his work. His work mostly took place within a triangle between a series of small-scale scientific and philosophical observations, the transience of materials and the passing of time. All of it caught in poetical imagery in which conceptual actions and aesthetical qualities of specific materials go hand in hand. Sure enough, Lahuis made large works such as 'Mechanismus V'; a wall-sized installation depicting the inside of a clockwork, but most of the time his work has a small and intimate touch to it. 'Mechanismus V' consists of a wall filled with pulped laser prints through which the original image of the clockwork can be faintly made out, like some distant memory, rendering it more personal and fleeting rather than monumental and overwhelming.

This fleeting quality of his work can be traced back to the exhibition of 'Airspeakers' at his final presentation at De Ateliers in Amsterdam in 2013, an installation with transparent cone bags filled with Listerine. Visitors were met with the fresh but sickly scent of slowly evaporating mouthwash. Towards the conical tops of the bags the mass of coloured mouthwash gradually diminished and a gradient appeared from a deep Listerine-colour at the bottom to a transparent liquid at the top. The Listerine not only evaporated, but it also disappeared into nothing visually. On the ground a colourful aquarelle could be made out where the maker 'spilled' the blue-violet coloured Listerine.

In his later work these spills form words and sentences on floor panels. Although the words seemed to have been applied there using a Harry Potteresque kind of magic, it essentially boiled down to a simple physical procedure. Lahuis made use of the capillary motion of water, combined with the tension between hydrophobic and hydrophilic surfaces. The only thing that was needed was a gallery employee who would every now and then spray some water over the boards. The evaporating water contrasted with the text that was taken from philosophical reference books or from scientific prints. Books filled with wisdom and knowledge to be conserved for the span of a human lifetime, or much longer.

In 2015 Lahuis was awarded the Koninklijke Prijs voor Vrije Schilderkunst (the Dutch Royal Award for Contemporary Painting). He was awarded this prize for a number of works that showed different kinds of 'stand-in' imagery from picture frames, glooming behind a thick layer of beeswax on paper. The depictions were conceptually related to the idea of representation; an image of a parrot that functioned as a colour test, an image showing the metric size of a passe-partout, generalised skylines or famous people from another era, etc. But above all the images were subtly shimmering out there in the distance, from behind the wax. For his most recent series Lahuis incorporated a technique normally used to stabilise pages from burned books. This is a method that intends to slow down the transient nature of the damaged material, whereas Lahuis' work is normally all about the very temporary nature of materials.

The volatile and temporary character of the work make it seem like it wants to constantly escape our reality. Even though the wax is hard and solid and even though the burned texts are stabilised, it still feels like the work constantly wants to evade time, as if all it wants to do is amalgamate back into nothing as soon as possible. One might even argue it wants to remove itself from the artist – its creator.

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Picasso's 'Guernica' is a reaction to the bombing of the eponymous town during the Spanish Civil War. The event is mainly remembered thanks to the painting. This particular bloodbath introduced the strategy of city bombing, a method that Nazi Germany would later use to great advantage. It however never became one of those moments after which nothing was ever the same again. It never became a 9-11.

If as an artist you would have to pick a moment in which you would decide to start commenting on the political reality at that specific moment, what would be the right moment? How to decide that a specific moment is a moment after which nothing will ever be the same again? For Lennart Lahuis Brexit was that specific event he felt he had to include in his work. Of course Brexit will have an influence

on the future of the European Union, but will it be anything more than a footnote in the history books in a hundred years' time? Is Brexit an event of equal standing with the fall of the Berlin wall or the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York? Will it be comparable with the Cuban missile crisis or the murder of Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo? The future will tell, but for Lahuis this will be the moment that current events started playing a role in his work. According to him the sense of shock he experienced when he woke up and heard about the result of the referendum, as well as a similar sense of shock when Donald Trump was elected president were the main reasons for giving our political reality a place in his work.

In late 2017 Lahuis took a residency in Great Britain, he flew over the English Channel and remembered having read an article in science magazine Nature about how the Channel originated. For millions of years Great Britain was part of the European mainland, connected through high cliffs that separated the waters of the South from a large oceanic basin in the North that originated from melt water from the last ice age. 450,000 years ago this natural dam eroded because the sea in the North overflowed and slowly wore out a crevice in the bridge between France and England.<sup>1</sup>

Lahuis connected the creation of the Channel to the fact that was Brexit and decided to dedicate a work to it. This work consists of a clay tablet made of the same type of clay that can be found at the bottom of the Channel. On Lahuis' large clay tablet the original article from Nature is printed and a constant flow of water creates small river beddings in its surface. Just like the process of which the article writes its clay landscape erodes through the gullies formed by the water. Slowly the text erodes. Whatever remains will be unreadable and lose its direct meaning.

The text in the clay is formed by laser-cut plastic letters that Lahuis mounts one after the other into a custom-made rails, so that specific sentences appear. It is a practice reminiscent of typesetting. Before the days of the computer and the practice of desktop publishing, the typesetter would make many a row of letters inside a shape the size of the page, in order to be able to print a text. Once again Lahuis uses a method aimed at the preservation of meaning for a work that contrastingly is based on temporariness and erosion.

**The fact that the work is slowly disappearing does not concern Lahuis. You could say the essence of the work is not even in the material that it is made of, but in the non-material aspects of it. The erosion of the work reflects the**

<sup>1</sup> 'Nature Communications' volume 8, Article number: 15101 (2017): Two-stage opening of the Dover Strait and the origin of island Britain, Sanjeev Gupta, Jenny S. Collier, David Garcia-Moreno, Francesca Oggioni, Alain Trentesaux, Kris Vanneste, Marc De Batist, Thierry Camelbeeck, Graeme Potter, Brigitte Van Vliet-Lanoë & John C. R. Arthur

original erosion of the UK's connection to mainland Europe as well as the political erosion of Europe in the times of Brexit. These are three timelines of completely different orders of magnitude that come together in this specific work. The original Brexit took place over the course of many hundreds of thousands of years, the current Brexit is decidedly faster, but it is still slow when compared to the process of erosion in the work. That process will start at Art Brussels, in the capital of Europe. When the fair is over the text will be severely eroded, maybe even unreadable.

The conjunction of these three timelines might well be the essence of the work. It is an idea that takes shape in the mind, triggered by the work. That idea easily outlives the work. This way Lahuis creates a fleeting everlasting moment; a short-lived, but ultimately immortal, occurrence.

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In addition to the question whether Brexit will eventually turn out to be more than just a footnote in European history, the question also arises whether this will be a one-off 'politically engaged' work or whether Lahuis will more often include current events in his work from now on. Lahuis may no longer be an artist who wants to distance himself from what's happening in the world around him, but as for now his work still appears to be doing that for him. In that sense it is less important for the artist to have a politically engaged attitude than for his work to eventually escape his grasp, to stagger off, to fall apart and as such to ultimately deny the world around itself.

Lahuis registered different components: a residency, a geographical history and a political reality and he interconnected them within a visual poetic gesture. More important still than what Brexit means for European harmony or the artist's involvement with current affairs might well be the artist's personal choice to bring together a set of occurrences that just so happen to coincide in time. In the end maybe it's all just about the poetic value of the centuries-old clay travelling through its original position at the bottom of the Channel from one mainland to the other.

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Eelco van der Lingen is curator of Contemporary and Modern Art at the Frisian Museum in Leeuwarden where in November 2018 he will curate a solo exhibition by Lennart Lahuis. Previously he was founder, director and curator of Nest, an independent exhibition space for contemporary art in The Hague where he curated more than 60 exhibitions. He was also responsible for the exhibitions 'Nice 'n Light' at Centraal Museum Utrecht, 'The Divine Doing Nothing' at Museum Kranenburg and 'Shift & Drift' at Tent in Rotterdam. Eelco is a committee member for the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts (AFK) and the Mondriaan Fund.