



Resist in time! Remain in space! The work of Sarah Smolders.

Invited to exhibit her work in a space located within the former military hospital of Antwerp as part of *LITTLE HISK* in 2017, Sarah Smolders chose to reproduce the wallpaper still present in the corridor of this run-down space which had been abandoned quite some time before, using the original colors in the very same disposition on the wall of the room. The painted surface appeared to be identical to the original the viewer could see before entering the space, and almost none of the pictorial gesture was really visible. And yet we were seized by a kind of dizziness; a slight, unsettling strangeness, due no doubt to the presence of this intact surface which has been reproduced, not really standing out from what remains of the ancient walls or the surfaces of the floor and ceiling, which the artist had left untouched. The wallpaper had been reproduced in the true sense of the word, and it is for this reason that one could not recognize the gesture as pictorial. Even when one eventually discovered this, or when it was suggested that the intervention lay in this identical reproduction of an original we had seen in the corridor, one could not really see the artwork. It seemed to be elsewhere.

The gesture of painting in this work nonetheless possesses a certain virtuosity. There is effectively a level of work lying behind this action, and much consideration of the processes and materials to be used in order for the painted surface to correspond with the older surface that it reproduced. Sarah Smolders herself seems to attribute little importance to this know-how. And yet she

dedicates significant time to it, and in her interviews she highlights the material process of creation, something which is highly physical, long, and often tedious. As with the very recent exhibition *concrete/concrete* in September of this year at *Netwerk* in Aalst, the production of floor tiles placed on the ground was the result of ten months' work. She handled the 22 tons of material at least six different times during the creation and installation of the tiles. The casting of more than 10,000 copies, in dyed concrete, followed by the painting stage closely resembles the gestures of craftsmen from the 17th and 18th centuries, perfecting complex techniques of trompe l'oeil marbling which decorated castles and bourgeois houses.

Sarah Smolders also employed this technique in her intervention in the house of the Governor of Gent during the exhibition *Trust in the Unexpected* in 2017. *A Line Drawing of a Room* was made up of four adjustable scaffolding poles, fitted between floor and ceiling, placed in different rooms within the house and connected to each other, at a height of around 2 meters, by a rope which formed a rectangular space which ran through the mansion, passing through various doorways. All of the elements used by the artist in the exhibition space were decorated and made to look identical to the trompe l'oeil marble of the walls adorning the stately residence.

If one were to stop here and focus on this aspect of Sarah Smolders' work, one might imagine it is dedicated to a form of craftsmanship, a know-how, that she refreshes and brings up to date. And yet no, her work is not that of a virtuoso. It is enough to simply experience it. Her work deals with site-specific elements and nothing of craft know-how is on conspicuous display when one finds oneself in these strange spaces. Despite all her knowledge, her art is not demonstrative or functional and never presents itself as work well done. Everything is concrete and down to earth. At *Netwerk* the floor tiles were placed on the ground. They were as concrete in nature as the original tiles still covering the lower part of some of the art centre's walls. But the new tiles were simply placed resting according to gravity and cover the whole floor area of the place. This material aspect of things still does not suffice to explain what one perceives. Even when immersed in the experience of this specific place, it was as if some aspect remained out of sight, hidden from view.

Sarah Smolders has remade the same painting every year since 2011, that reproduces a section of the floor of her studio on a canvas. For the first 11 years, her program says, the canvasses will have the same size as the windows in her Tilburg studio, 196,5×122,3 cm. This work is realistic and archaeological. The painting process documents the changes that occur in and on the floor of the space. It deposits the traces left over a period of time and shows what remains of actions, or to be more specific, between the actions. It is not a question of stopping time, of painting a time which is inexorable and wistfully past, like the suspended time in the work of Roman Opalka for example. Sarah Smolders doesn't paint the trace of what has happened and nor does she reproduce the sheen of time like an illusionistic and virtuoso painter who, like a restorer, hides it in the missing parts of an ancient decor. Rather, she seems to capture time through the implementation of painting, through its production in action.

The painted object that one sees, whether it be the canvas representing the floor of her studio, the wallpaper, or the trompe l'oeil marble in the Governor's house, has been produced within a given

period of time. But these painted objects reproduce a model. They are to be viewed within their close relationship to the concrete objects which are at the origin of the painting and which are still present on-site. These other original objects, in turn, result in another process of material creation; they carry another temporality within them. Time is in no way linear in the work of Sarah Smolders, it is a question of unfulfilled time which never really occurred. One could say that it is quite simply ongoing, immanent, or even that it is so caught up in the present and the past of places, that our experience of it becomes unsettled and bewildering.

Perhaps *A Line Drawing of a Room* in the Governor's house is the work that allows one to understand a paradigmatic element in her work. The decoration of the trompe l'oeil marble, which she reproduces on the four iron poles and the rope, exists elsewhere on the walls of the architecture of the place. This original painting is visible, entering inexorably into resonance with what has been produced, or rather reproduced, by the artist. It is in this situation of non-correspondence of the two painted surfaces, that the spectator experiences a painting, which is not to be seen. Rather, one has the experience of matter deposited on the iron and the rope. It is like skin, attuned to another, different skin, an older epidermis that has covered the walls of the place for centuries. The newer painting resonates; it is not a representation, it is the place of a specific thickness which aligns with a character, a wavelength already present on-site. The painting is *pneuma*, it becomes organic. Once it has caught our attention, it begins to breathe, to transmit, and to filter that which is already present in the space, transforming everything.

Translated into musical terms, one could say that the artist's intervention attunes itself to a sound wave already present in the room, in this case it is the more ancient skin of the painting which covers the architecture of the Governor's house. In perhaps an even stronger fashion in the most recent installation at *Netwerk*, the new, colored concrete floor tiles are used to cover the ancient floor, emphasizing the original character of the few tiles on some of the walls. The wave that emanates from the new floor is due to the few pre-existing tiles on the wall, but is now amplified and spread throughout the space. The place is at the same time the place it has always been, but also a new place which begins to breathe in time, to the sound and the materiality of this primary wave. The painting of Sarah Smolders places us in the presence of the place.

Another artist, Luciano Fabro, has named this spatial quality a *Habitat*. In the early eighties he thus reused the spatialist ideas of one of his predecessors, also an artist from Milan, Lucio Fontana. The idea of Spatialism, published after the second world war in *Manifesto Blanco*, wished to bring an end to a certain notion of form in art, so as to conform to all dynamic forms, integrating them into a total space where art no longer describes the world but rather brings it into being through light and sound waves and through materials. Fabro shifts this idea of the material place to the place of subjectivity. He mentioned this in an interview with Maddalena Sisto (in *Casa Vogue*, Milan, 1981) in relation to the first installation of this series *Habitat* in Rome at the Pieroni gallery: "When space is created, it is a little like a skin that one feels on oneself, [...] I saturate it with emotions so that its nature can reveal itself." For Fabro, *nature* is this material and experimental wave which inhabits the concrete thing. It is the heart of what artists call form. *Nature* is not

subject to rules of perception. It is not intended for a sole spectator and so it cannot be considered simply in perspective. It is larger than the space that our gaze embraces, as it is deeply embedded in the matter of the world. For Fabro perception was a Spatialist process. It is caught in the concrete of what exists, and it is at the same time profoundly embedded in the gaze of the individual who participates not only in the piece that he or she observes, but also in the multiple materials of the world that they move through and that they are composed of. It is perhaps in this way that one could explain the strange experience produced by the painting practice of Sarah Smolders. Totally alien to any question of perspective, it requires the spectator to have a different view of the thing being painted in order to experience it. Sarah Smolders saturates; she does not reproduce what already exists, she condenses, harmonizes, and in no way addresses the composition of a shape. She puts time to work so that the nature of the place that one experiences can reveal itself as *form-nature*.

Bernhard Rüdiger