

ArtReview

Where do we go from here?

FUTURE GREATS

New artists for a new era

Alterity **CURIOSITY**

Disco Style Happiness Honesty

INFILTRATION Lightness

Memory Potentiality **REFRAIN**

Transmutation Sincerity

SOCIAL SCULPTURE, Civic trust.

Truthfulness

Saskia Olde Wolbers *Yes, These Eyes are the Windows*

Stigter Van Doesburg, Amsterdam 15 October – 19 November

In 2012 a Chinese businessman bought a house, unseen, in London at an auction. The house, 87 Hackford Road in Lambeth, is where Vincent van Gogh lived when, from 1873 until 1874, he worked as a junior assistant in his uncle's art dealership. A blue plaque marks the historical significance of the dilapidated house. I cannot afford his paintings, the new owner told the press, but I can afford his house. Two years later, Saskia Olde Wolbers made an audio installation in this flaking wreck, concerning the events that took place there. And then came the film *Yes, These Eyes are the Windows* (2015), its title taken from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) – 'Yes, these eyes are the windows and this body of mine is the house' – and refers to the notion that the Hackford Road house is much more than, to quote the film, "old bricks and bad plumbing": in some miraculous way it appears to have become human, as if the artist's spirit has crept into the gaps in the floor and the cracks in the plaster and holds sway over its inhabitants' lives.

The house itself is therefore the main character and does the talking. The fragmented narrative, beautifully voiced by actor Tom Brooke, is based on the letters and memories of previous tenants, former owners and their descendants, a postman, a council official, an art valuer and a few more characters (a few too many, in my opinion; pay attention or

you will soon lose track). We hear that the house, due to be demolished, was saved thanks to the attic room's former lodger. Why? "It was in this house that Vincent's character was beginning to form into that of an artist," it is said. The nineteen-year-old lodger from the Netherlands is described as a religious fanatic, an alcoholic troublemaker with radical socialist ideas. He is said to have fallen in love with Eugenie Loyer, the landlady's daughter, and to have twice asked her to marry him, to no avail. This unrequited love is believed to have plunged him into a depression that was to be the cradle of his tormented artistry. Are the anecdotes based in truth? Mostly not, but occasionally yes. As often is the case in Olde Wolbers's work per se, the line between illusion and reality is fluid.

The images are mesmerising. Beautiful shots of the vacant house show peeling wall-paper, discoloured net curtains in the window, a shaft of sunlight in a twilight room. At times the residents themselves appear. Hearing their words indirectly, through voiceover, only enhances the ghostliness of their appearance. The images alternate with shots of odd structures that appear to be underwater. We see an attic room waving sluggishly, a balustrade dripping slowly in psychedelic colours. It is astonishing how images from different genres (documentary, costume

drama, science fiction) blend effortlessly into one lingering, feverish vision.

Gradually we lose all footing and everything becomes uncertain. In the Poe-style storyline of the postman who copies Van Gogh paintings in his spare time, the master speaks to him via the portraits of postmen (as is well known, a curious subgenre in Van Gogh's portraiture). The madness acquires disquieting features when Vincent no longer believes he is Vincent but instead the reincarnation of his brother, who died at a young age. "The painful longing that affects him so is not just for the brother he never knew, but also for another version of himself." "I have been born twice," the young man calls out euphorically, "I am the resurrected!" Here resound the echoes of Spiritualism, which was in fashion during Vincent's brief stay in Victorian London. What the film resembles most is a séance that has got out of hand.

The fluidity of facts in the imaginative narrative about what may have happened in the house partly reflects the boundless mystification of Van Gogh as a tortured genius, a myth that clearly fulfils a deeply felt need. Half reconstruction, half invention, the film moves between present and past, between fantasy and reality, and dissolves the chronology of history in the timelessness of the imagination.

Dominic van den Boogerd

Translated from the Dutch by Suzanne Jansen



Yes, These Eyes are the Windows (still), 2015, HD, 18 min 25 sec, voice-over: Tom Brooke.
Courtesy Stigter Van Doesburg, Amsterdam, and Maureen Paley, London