

Sandra Kruisbrink. Understanding the world is about taking a certain distance.

Looking at the work of Sandra Kruisbrink (Laren, the Netherlands, 1961) is like listening to the music of Arvo Pärt. You step into an ethereal world that envelops you completely, without knowing exactly what atmosphere you are entering. I experience Pärt's music as spiritual, both in a religious and philosophical sense. It feels as if through his music he is creating a world view or, even better, structures of feeling. The music sounds at the same time hopeful, sad and liberating. In his compositions Pärt constructs a new world or a new spirituality (*Tabula Rasa*), one that is based on human self-examination (*Spiegel im Spiegel*). I experience Sandra Kruisbrink's work as having similar structures of feeling; it feels edifying, cautious, but also liberating.

Although Kruisbrink and Pärt work in entirely different artistic disciplines, they each have a direct link with romanticism. In my eyes it is the recognition and embracement of tradition that connects them. You could say that they are neoromanticists, belonging to a strand of contemporary metamodernism.

Because metamodernism is not yet widely familiar, it is perhaps useful to expand on this somewhat, and to clarify how I see Sandra Kruisbrink's position in relation to this new theoretical development.

Metamodernism is not considered to be an artistic movement, but as the structure of feeling of people who see not just the place they live in but the whole world as their home. The ideas of the metamodernists occupy a far wider field than the arts alone. The *Metamodernist Manifesto* by Luke Turner, written in 2011 and published online, is about the new fundamental relationship between the individual and society, politics and the economy. A number of artists, writers and theoreticians, such as Tim Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, have translated this into their professional practice. In their work, the big story, political engagement, affect and craftsmanship have returned. In interviews and their own writing they clearly express how metamodernism relates to the arts. They believe that metamodernism represents a renewed enthusiasm and engagement, a rediscovered and informed naivety and sincerity. They look at the world with fresh eyes and do so with the knowledge that is at their disposal: no new dogma, no *tabula rasa*, but the desire to construct a new future without cynicism. Vermeulen and Van den Akker observe that metamodernist art is often romantic and optimistic, but that it never entirely surrenders to a thought or feeling; postmodern relativism is too deeply rooted. Vermeulen and Van den Akker explain attitudes, strategies and artistic practices from the perspective of the socioeconomic and sociocultural developments of the past decades. They believe the spirit of the age has reached a tipping point, whereby artists are relating to a new cultural sensibility: an emerging structure of feeling. They associate this with the triple crisis that has increasingly held the West in its grip since the start of the new millennium. They define this crisis as the corrosion of the (geo)political centre, the climate crisis and the credit crisis.ⁱ

What is perhaps new about the thinking of the metamodernists is that they allow for the existence of doubt; they accept that the world is made up of many contradictions, possibilities and impossibilities. They embrace dialectics; they want to use the lessons of the past to create a new future. Like the thinkers of the Enlightenment, their focus lies on politics, education, science (now technology and ecology) economics and culture.

As previously mentioned, the metamodernist attitude can be seen most clearly in the recent revival of the romantic tradition. This tradition never disappeared, it merely came to be unvalued in Western art, as it was not seen as innovative. The British thinker Arthur Lovejoy writes that there are many definitions of romanticism. He argues that it can be understood as a period or a paradigm, a tendency or a movement, a way of living or a feeling. To some people today it is extremely political; to others it is didactic. Other people again think that it relates exclusively to the arts. One stresses nationalism, the other ecology, the next *Bildung*, and yet another principally the sublime and the ethereal.ⁱⁱ

The sublime and the ethereal relate to metamodernism as the sublime and beauty relate to romanticism. The same characteristics apply, but in the form of permissible contradictions. The oscillation of feelings.

Vermeulen and Van den Akker write: "Through its many forms, the romantic sensibility is however characterised by the oscillation between different poles of significance: the eternal and the transient, nature and culture, hope and melancholy, enthusiasm and irony, the exceptional and the everyday,

and so on. The core of the romantic sensibility is thus precisely the tensions that ensue from the reconciliation of irreconcilable poles, the connection of two opposite positions, an impossible possibility: a double bind.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This neoromantic sensibility has been articulated in a range of art forms and a variety of styles. In architecture it has sometimes been expressed as the tension between the eternal and the transient; in Bas Jan Ader’s performances as a questioning of reason through the irrational; in the work of among others Peter Doig, David Thorpe and Erik Odijk as the reclamation of culture by nature; as the retaking of civilisation by the primitive; and more recently by obsessions with the mystification of the ordinary.

What these artists have in common is that they do not refer back to mythology, mysticism and alienation only to be able to interpret or question everyday life, but also to redraw the world. Perhaps precisely because they realise that this is impossible.

I see this theoretical explanation as important to my comprehension and description of Sandra Kruisbrink’s attitude to her work. I do not think that Kruisbrink is consciously occupied with metamodernism and certainly not with its romantic attitude. Kruisbrink trained at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in the 1980s, when modernist ideas were in their heyday. Her choice of drawing, with nature as a subject, was directly opposed to the modernist ideas of the time, whereby lecturers propagated conceptual art, installation and new media. Drawing as an independent discipline was not appreciated at art schools, and at some it was not actually possible to graduate in drawing. The choice of drawing, with nature as the subject into the bargain, is evidence of strength of mind and independent thinking, and also, in retrospect, of foresight and sensitivity to the direction in which the world was moving.

Kruisbrink does not describe herself as a politically or socially engaged artist. Neither is a political, didactic, nationalist or ecological definition of romanticism discernible in her work. On the other hand, it does demonstrate the sublime and ethereal aspects of neoromanticism, with its permissible contradictions. The oscillation of feelings towards nature with the aim of “understanding the world better by taking a certain distance from it”, as Kruisbrink told me in an e-mail quoting from *My Struggle: Book 1* by Karl Ove Knausgård.^{iv} Here Kruisbrink’s work embraces the romantic tradition and adds a new element to it, precisely the element that is so important to the neoromanticists: the ability to interpret or question everyday life, but also to redraw it. To Kruisbrink it is important to keep the world at a certain distance in order to understand it better. She maintains this distance literally while walking in the mountains, by looking through the lens of a camera to see the world indirectly. The photos help her to redraw the natural world.

In an e-mail to me she describes how she approaches her work and why she chooses to do so:

“A way I create that distance [*from nature and/or the world*] is by taking photos. It seems impossible to me to draw in the woods. The direct and literal presence deprives me of the possibility to tell my own story. By taking a photo I create a distance from the tree or mountain. It doesn’t matter if I take a photo of an entire mountain range or zoom in on a detail. The poetry, the solace, the silence and the emptiness are brought near to me in my studio via the photos. Drawing is important to me not only as a way of translating something, but as an action in itself. Endlessly making lines and dots to create an image is an almost meditative act that helps in conveying what I want to show about nature.”

So what is it that she wants to show about nature? And how does it help her to understand the world better, so she can tell her story to us as viewers? It seems as if it is not so much nature itself that she wants to show but the state of mind that arises from the compositions she chooses from nature. The photos she takes while walking in the mountains often combine a mountain range, a single mountain, and trees, sometimes in the distance, often close by. In her studio, Kruisbrink edits or modifies the photos. She reduces the composition to the atmosphere she wants to convey. Sometimes dark mountains and trees become white patches and patterns, like inverted shadows. When she has reduced the image to what she sees as its essence, on a blank sheet of paper she starts drawing from the edited photo, building up the image meticulously using dots and lines, sometimes leaving tree branches and areas of mountain blank. Sometimes she also creates this emptiness using a collage technique. Contours cut from drawing paper are positioned on the paper, creating an effect like stage wings. It is not only in her choice of subject that Kruisbrink produces this ethereal and meditative experience, but also, as she writes herself, through the technique she uses. It is also the painstaking work of drawing dots and lines that makes an important contribution to the meditative atmosphere that

she not only experiences when she is working, but which she also conveys to the viewer. Usually there is no horizon in the image. This gives the observer the viewpoint of a hovering figure, released from the ground and able to float through the drawing with the feeling of having escaped from gravity. If you surrender to this as a viewer, you can literally take a distance from the world. Kruisbrink's intention is thus to offer you the possibility as the viewer to take a distance, and to create space in your mind. You are not therefore looking at an image of nature to see how beautiful, inaccessible, ominous and sublime it is, but at nature redrawn. From the space that the work endeavours to create comes emptiness, silence and not-being, which offers possibilities to look at the world with fresh eyes to try and understand it.

Diana Wind

Director, Stedelijk Museum Schiedam

Diana Wind has been Director of the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam since 1995. She has curated many exhibitions for the museum, including regular solo and group shows in the field of drawing.

With Arno Kramer (artist and curator) in 2011, Diana Wind was responsible for the major retrospective on contemporary drawing, *All About Drawing. 100 Dutch Artists*.

ⁱ Robin van den Akker & Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernisme, Twijfel*, part 1, pp. 9-20, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Idem p. 12

ⁱⁱⁱ Idem p. 12.

^{iv} Karl Ove Knausgård, *Min Kamp 1*, 2009, Forlaget Oktober.