

Lines and routes of approach into the work of Hans Vandekerckhove

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Let us begin with a polemical reduction: throughout the richly varied oeuvre of Hans Vandekerckhove, one 'genre' crops up time and again with undisputed regularity and dominance: landscape.

This, in a certain sense, offers the writer, critic and disinterested viewer a straightforward entrance into the work, for in contrast with portraiture, still life, history painting, abstract compositions or monochromes, landscape painting almost automatically enables us to enter the pictorial, imaginary world of the artist. If we find ourselves 'before' a painted landscape – think of historical precedents by such artists as Bruegel, Poussin, Monet or Hockney – not only do we look *at* the picture, but our gaze leads us *into* the world of the painting; we imagine ourselves in this process of looking as virtual inhabitants of the landscape (a street, a garden, nature) which has been brought to life for us by the artist. 'The world is not before me, but around me,' remarked the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty once with the categorical aplomb that characterizes every revolution of thought. He might just as easily have been speaking about art: not before me, but around me.

A viewer standing in front of a canvas like *Aurora borealis* (1999) becomes, as it were, one with the mysterious figure in the painting, who is standing at a crossroads (and not just a symbolic one) in a sparse, snow-covered landscape. Another example: I'm looking at *Cypress Avenue* (2002) and unwittingly find myself walking along with the artist, who once ventured into this alley of dusk-drenched cypresses to the vanishing point on the horizon – the destinations of all life and motion.

Hence my decision to regard and survey the painting of Hans Vandekerckhove in its entirety as a landscape, and to venture through it.

It is a landscape crossed by various, naturally worn paths, fed by thematically diverse routes of approach. In the exploration of these 'themes', I wander along these routes (some more familiar than others) and survey different, often recurring motifs in Vandekerckhove's work – parcels of this landscape, so to speak, that each have their own rich history and deep roots in the traditions of (primarily Western) art. Unique to the 'art of walking' is, of course, that every unforeseen bend in a journey never before embarked upon constantly opens up new perspectives, surprising vistas and unexpected horizons. Every walk results in 'a line made by walking' (to use the title of a work by Richard Long, the spiritual father of walking as art) – every landscape is an unsuspected goldmine of visual associations and historical references and the result of years or centuries of sedimentation: centuries in the case of the generic history of Western art, and years in the case of the actually experienced history of Vandekerckhove's own artistic practice.

In this thematic survey of the (recent) work by Hans Vandekerckhove, the tourist, amateur archaeologist, herbalist and botanist repeatedly cross each other's paths – five times in total; it could just as easily have been more often, or less.

Route 1: Viewmaster, 2002

Two icons of Western art define the alienating tradition of the *Rückenfigur*, and although at first glance they seem to have precious little in common, their paths do cross in the work of Hans Vandekerckhove, which indeed also contains many such figures seen from the back. On the one hand shines the canonical, historical image of Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*Wanderer above a Sea of Mist*) – without doubt one of the most reproduced paintings in Western art – and on the other the enigmatic, Surrealist classic *La Reproduction interdite* (*Not To Be Reproduced*) by René Magritte. These two 'anti-portraits' – in both images the mysterious 'faceless' protagonist turns away from the 'portraitist' – paradoxically vie with undisputed masterpieces in the

portrait tradition in terms of their familiarity. Friedrich's famous *Rückenfigur* stands as the pinnacle of Romanticism in the visual arts, and it is precisely this romantic impulse that inspired Vandekerckhove's strikingly systematic reconnaissance of this motif. *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (1818) epitomizes the era of the radically individualist genius artist as an indomitable, savage force of nature (Friedrich was a contemporary of Beethoven, Byron, Géricault, Napoleon and Turner¹), whose fervour began to lose its impetus on the threshold of modernity, the era which would inevitably sound its demise. Friedrich's *Wanderer* combines Germanic disdain for the vale of tears that stretches out far beneath his Olympian gaze with melancholic despondency and religious awe for the spectacle of the natural landscape as well as modern, urban consciousness. The object of his reflective gaze is (literally) swathed in a mist of ambivalence and ambiguity: is the mountain wanderer looking *back* on a past from which, with pain in his heart he must take his leave, or is he looking *forward* to an uncertain but hopeful promise of an unknown (because veiled in mist) future? Friedrich painted his dandyesque *Everyman*, in a time ravaged by revolution and it is – one might add: fortunately – almost impossible to distil an unequivocal political statement from his pictorial manifesto; the picture's very ambivalence raises this hyper-individualistic portrait of an anonymous amateur mountaineer to a paradoxical monument to modern European consciousness. Ambivalence and ambiguity are the raw material of all good art, and they are used as raw material by Hans Vandekerckhove, whose work resounds with echoes of Friedrich's *Rückenfigur*. Do the figures in his canvases turn their backs on the viewer – a visual declaration of independence which states that the work also continues to exist beyond the viewer's gaze – or are they sunk in dark thoughts? Aversion or introversion? Do they revel in their own 'illegibility' or is it the impossibility of meeting our gaze that causes them to cower in torment? Perhaps they are, via an unrecognizable, long detour, none the less *en route* towards us?

The impossibility of a meeting with the viewer, the rear view as monolithic, unequivocal, corporeal 'No' is of course, nowhere better articulated than in that other iconic *Rückenfigur* – René Magritte's impenetrable *La Reproduction interdite*. What the German Friedrich did for Romanticism, the Belgian Magritte did for Surrealism – the authoritarian source of their most programmatic images, their respective archetypes – both, tellingly, look at us with their backs.² Magritte's backs (obviously) tell a very different story to Friedrich's: in his famous *Wanderer* the latter painted the portrait of the anonymous hero turning his gaze *outwards*, to the spectacle of the world and its elements; Man as self-willed tamer of a sublime, awe-inspiring Nature, or at least as an equal sparring partner who dares to enter into a titanic duel. Magritte, on the other hand, depicts the enigma of the human Self precisely at the moment the gaze is turned inward, to the barren mountainscape of the psyche – which in Magritte's work is then reflected, both literally and figuratively, in the canonized motif of the bourgeois interior, the mirror. (In Magritte's paintings there is almost by definition no room for Nature, unless in a strictly domesticated variation such as the garden: the only real *Fremdkörper* that the bourgeois subject in this dreamworld gets to see is that which grins at him from the abyss of the enigmatic 'Self'.) Hence, in pictures such as *The Border*, *From Here to Eternity* and *Riverman*, Vandekerckhove paints not so much landscapes as (self-)portraits. The rear views that make the most lasting impression are perhaps those in *From Here to Eternity* or, much more explicitly, *My Head is My Only Home*, in which the landscape as an environment disappears completely in a portrait of an internal, or internalized world – a bare skull with thoughts resounding audibly. In this Vandekerckhove once again ties in with an art-historical tradition with a long pedigree, reaching undisputed peaks in both Romanticism and Surrealism: that of landscape painting as a kind of (self-)portrait; of the resonance between external and internal worlds; of the allegorical analogy between the mental microcosm of the 'I' and the macrocosm of an increasingly desolate, apparently lifeless Nature. Many of

Vandekerckhove's landscapes – snowy, abandoned, inhospitable, dystopian, in a number of cases downright post-apocalyptic – reflect the classical tropes of the modern psychic condition: isolation, alienation, loneliness, a faint glimmer of hope that can turn in an instance to desperation, repentance, contemplation and, above all, dispondency, the mental condition which perhaps is embodied best of all in the *Rückenfigur*. That doubt, dilemma and ambiguity – the promise of an uncertain future, which may lead to optimism as well as its opposite – play such an important role in Vandekerckhove's work, becomes perfectly apparent in his titles, ranging from *A Brand New Day*, *Crossroads*, *On the Way to the End*, *The End of the Night* and *Shadowland* to *Stranded* .

I return once more to Caspar David Friedrich – not the canonical Friedrich of *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, but the less well-known author of the more subtle and restrained *Der Mönch am Meer* (*Monk by the Sea*, 1810), a vast canvas now in the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin. This is Friedrich in a less characteristic mode (strange though it may seem in retrospect, this painting achieved much more fame in its day than the *Wanderer!*), with the turbulent Turner breathing down his neck. The crystalline, alpine air that lend his later paintings their characteristic, crystal-clear hardness and Olympian self-assuredness is absent here. Instead there is a morbid formlessness, which restores natural violence to its brutal originality. The monk at the edge of the sea churned by the storm is barely recognizable as a human being, let alone as one seen from the back; he resembles more the archetypal homunculus from medieval times. Where the later *Wanderer* is clearly portrayed as a *personality* – through details in clothing, attributes and posture (I have always thought that Arthur Schopenhauer must have looked just like this) – the monk by the breaking surf is devoured in a bottomless abyss of antediluvian formlessness: in many respects, in this visionary, almost futuristic canvas, Friedrich foretells the stereotypical formal language of postwar, twentieth-century Existentialism – the language of the world awaking from the ecstasy of a genocidal apocalypse; the language of Beckett, Giacometti

and Reinhardt. It is precisely this less well-known Friedrich whose sinister shadow we come across again in the paintings of Vandekerckhove that best seem to represent this 'post-apocalyptic' condition: *The Border, Remain in Light, The River, A Storm is Coming* . These are the landscapes which the Romantics might well have painted too, if only they had lived at the time of Hiroshima, Chernobyl or global warming like Beckett, Giacometti or Tarkovsky.³ These are wasteland-scapes, often with a tragic, sinister beauty, complete with surreal colours and – emblematically lonely in the centre – the eternally vacillating, eternally procrastinating nomad-cum-*Rückenfigur*. Where is he going?

Route 2: Gardening at Night, 2000

Closely related to the *Rückenfigur*, as an archetypal representation of the mythical hermit, is the gardener and the art of gardening; a second important and frequently occurring motif in Hans Vandekerckhove's painting – and one that can boast an entirely individual, many-branched family tree in recent and ancient (Western) art history. The most famous gardener in cultural history and at the same time – a telling counterpart – the first *anti-hero* in the literature of that history is, of course, Candide: Voltaire's unsuspecting, reluctant adventurer embodies the alignment of gardening and horticulture with the intellectual drama of 'renunciation' – the resolute turning of a disillusioned back on the world. (Again – but this time only figuratively – the *Rückenfigur*.) No wonder, in other words, that the garden itself and the symbolism of gardening and related horticultural activities and practices are so prominent in the religious imagination in which this drama of renunciation plays such a crucial role. It is difficult for us to imagine a religion that doesn't feature a single gardener, an enclosed garden or a paradisiacal garden. In the specific case of Christianity, the imagery of which has had such an immense influence on the art of painting, this religious exploitation of the allegorical potential of the garden reaches a glorious zenith: the heroic story of the origin of humankind, The Fall, begins in the Garden of Eden. (Paradisiacal

vegetation flourishes in Vandekerckhove's pastoral cycle around the greenhouses of fellow artist Franky DC, the enigmatic subject of the tribute that is recalled in the next heading), and ends in the garden of Gethsemane in which Christ spent his final hours as a free man.

Horticulture was, ultimately, also the organizing principle behind the rule of many monastic communities: the monastery garden was simply the closest thing to the Kingdom of God in this vale of tears.

Gardening is a quasi-religious activity in which the Promethean Man measures himself against the creative power of his mythical Maker – and is inevitably confronted with his limitations, which is what makes gardening so popular with philosophers after Voltaire. '*Cela est bien dit, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin*', decides the unhappy Candide, for ever cured of his delusions of grandeur, in one of the most famous closing sentences in all of literature. The pragmatic, staccato tone of his call for, literally, a manual contemplation of the physical and mental limitations of human abilities and aspirations echoes in equal measure dedication and resignation, self-knowledge and self-denial – all of them basic ingredients for the religious attitude. Many later embodiments of the garden as an artistic experiment in the art of *Weltbildung*, from Claude Monet's sumptuous garden at Giverny and the gardens of Pierre Bonnard to the luxuriant, flourishing rock garden of the English filmmaker and all-round supraesthete Derek Jarman in Dungeness (his ghostly silhouette crops up in Vandekerckhove's *Gardening at Night*, 2000, and we shall come across this influential figure more often) thematize the fragile equilibrium between megalomaniacal self-satisfaction and defeatist, melancholic escapism. In these different gardens, but also in the handful of monumental land art experiments American artists like Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson carried out in the 1970s,⁴ the artists in question might for a moment imagine themselves omnipotent demiurges – an illusion they might feel condemned to after a few painful defeats in the 'real' world of concrete, glass and steel.

Finally, the garden as philosophical experiment is unthinkable without the rhetorical cliché of the culture/nature dialectic, or to use the neater phrase, nature versus nurture: true gardening, the art of horticulture, is a tricky balancing act between too much or too little discipline, too much or too little control. Where should the hoe intervene and what should the shears leave well alone? Where may the vegetation grow profuse and voluptuous, concealing the gardener's careful tracks? Where and when does the garden lose its 'naturalness' and become petrified as culture, as an overcultivated artefact. And where and when does the garden overcome the chains of chaos and entropy that characterize all natural processes? The true garden and the climax of horticulture is a perfect synthesis of intervention (forcing, dictating, guiding) and restraint (effacing, withdrawing, disappearing). The true garden, in other words, is nothing other than a sensuous metaphor for the work of art as such, which, after all, can also be regarded as the result of a contest between savage, 'natural' creativity and the inexhaustible impulses of imperious reason. Is painting, then, not sometimes gardening?⁵ I mentioned landscape painting in the introduction as the dominant 'genre' within Vandekerckhove's oeuvre – a deliberately polemical reduction! – and compared this oeuvre as a whole with a landscape, with a world which I, as a viewer, can enter. In his paintings of gardens, then – paintings of a partially domesticated, partially wild nature – I enter the world of art and the work of art in its most symbolic ontological quality, a world of essences. If the garden (or gardening) is the pre-eminent emblem of the work of art (or the artistic attitude), then the painting of a garden is the pre-eminent characterization of art in its most fundamental sense. Of prime importance in our confrontation with art – the empty canvas before the eyes of the artist, the completed work before the eyes of the viewer – is what Stendhal so appositely described as his idea of beauty: *la promesse de bonheur* of a late summer's day in an overgrown garden...

Route 3: Franky's Greenhouse, 2005

An artist I admire very much (who it is doesn't matter here) said to me not long ago that in his view, 'architecture is an excuse and a refuge for weak art.' The artist in question is first and foremost a painter and over the years I have increasingly come to identify with his intuition. In the 1990s especially, at the height of the trend for informal installation art and the hybrid genre for which the French curator, Nicolas Bourriaud coined the high-flown incantation 'relational aesthetics', the gradual coming together of art and architecture gave rise to a rampant spread of uninspiring art and exhibition practices – let us attribute them to the 'Koolhaas effect' – exhibitions full of scale models, building plans and statistics, urban design proposals and endless videos of almost identical, vertical concrete villages in foreign megalopolises. What disturbs me most about such visual (and often intellectual) anything-but-stimulating practices, is their often barely concealed craving for power – because architecture, far more than fine art, of course, relates to power. Practically speaking, an architect has much more power than an artist – the power to give shape to the world that surrounds us, even to impose the form devised by architecture on the world. And this type of power in due course gives rise to predictable fits of envy and jealousy. Has it not been the dream of artists since the era of the historical avant-gardes not only to 'interpret' the world, but also effectively to change it? Is it not inspiring to watch the Gehrys, Koolhaases and Pianos of this world playing with their enormous volumes of building materials, entire armies of colossal cranes, demographical statistics and minutely detailed model cities? And if we agree that the artist today has an obligation to fulfil in the secularized public domain, art now and then also has its share in this kind of brutal display of power.

This may seem a round-about way to reach the conclusion that the architectural motifs in Hans Vandekerckhove's work are *not* evidence of such a hunger for power – and perhaps this is one of the reasons why

architectural motifs actually *work* in his art and why architecture does not merely *function* in it as a refuge for uninspiring, tedious art.

Two archetypes define the presence of architectural motifs in Vandekerckhove's work: the summer-house or the greenhouse on the one hand ('Franky's Greenhouse') and the bridge on the other. The summer-house is a concrete part of a broader body of iconographic motifs I discussed earlier, and in any case represents only the lowest echelons of the megalomaniacal architectural imagination: the greenhouse is an *anti-monument* which, in a certain sense, seems to make fun of the gigantomania of architecture and to throw light on its most narrow, modest and petit-bourgeois aspects. This, of course, is linked to the ethos of renunciation that characterizes horticulture as a whole: whoever is proud of the modest task of gardening as an exercise in resigned self-reflection ('*cultiver son jardin*'), naturally places little store by the worldly pursuit of the Holy Grail of power, but perhaps searches precisely for a smaller world than the power-mad person would like, a world on the intimate scale of the individual's life history. It would not be out of place here to refer to the autobiographical roots of the horticultural motifs in Vandekerckhove's oeuvre. Hans Vandekerckhove grew up amidst lustrous green and scented greenhouses and indeed had his first studio in one such idyllic glass shelter – the unique aroma of the greenhouse serves almost as his highly personal Proustian madeleine; a fairytale key to a lock behind which old, but undiminished, powerful memories lie hidden.

The greenhouse relates to the hut which, in the history of twentieth-century philosophy, is the embodiment of the understatement and of self-imposed isolation in an ethics of domestic disappearance: the two most famous huts of the philosophical tradition belong to (and were built by the hands of) two thinkers whose relation to the toxic potential of power was, to put it mildly, problematic: Martin Heidegger's hut in Todtnauberg presents the conceited philosopher and Nazi sympathizer as a grumpy country bumpkin, while the hut of Ludwig Wittgenstein beside the Norwegian Sgone Fjord, marks the philosopher as a tormented, autistic

hysteric. Two snapshots of a philosophy of (relative) powerlessness in the kind of architectural context that most strikingly evokes this powerlessness: it is no accident that the most interesting thinking of the last century took place in the modest 'anti-architecture' of the hut (the summer-house, the *gîte*) and not in castles, barracks, palaces or fortresses – all of them petrified upshots of power cravings that leave Hans Vandekerckhove unmoved.

Parenthesis. Two telling exceptions confirm the rule of Vandekerckhove's preference for humble, down-to-earth architectural forms: the oriental, richly decorated palaces in *Alhambra* and *A Bigger Splash in Granada*, both painted in 2002 and to a certain extent still odd-ones-out among the Spartan volumes that dominate Vandekerckhove's oeuvre and the ominous silhouettes of nuclear power stations in canvases like *Remain in Light*, *The River* and *A Storm is Coming* (all 2004). The power station in these works reminds us immediately of course of the desolate landscape of Dungeness in Kent, haunted by a strange kind of poetry; the improbable biotope in which Derek Jarman had his bare rock garden laid out. The cooling towers in Vandekerckhove's canvases appear as silent, surly witnesses to Jarman's AIDS-accelerated death in 1994. These morbid landscapes also refer to a series of pictures in which the artist pays homage to the legacy of another, visually brilliant filmmaker: Andrei Tarkovsky.⁶ In the films of Tarkovsky too, more specifically in his cinematic philosophy of the 'Zone' – the allegorical no-man's-land after which Vandekerckhove named another painting in 2003 – architecture sooner has a dystopian than a utopian impact – the petrified omen of imminent doom.

In the other exception, that of the Andalusian gardens of pleasure and similar stone islands of paradise, Vandekerckhove honours yet another icon: the spirit of the 'Moroccan' Henri Matisse unmistakably courses through these paintings, in which

Vandekerckhove brews his own, easily recognizable 'orientalism'. Orientalist reflexes – a typically eastern use of certain ornamental techniques and motifs – also appear elsewhere in his painting, for instance, in the graphic silhouette of the mountain that forms the background of *Stalking Hieronymus*, in which we immediately recognize the holy contours of Mount Fuji in Japan. This orientalism is, of course, not without romantic overtones: certainly since Delacroix visited Maghreb at the beginning of the nineteenth century there has been a long tradition of orientalist *Sehnsucht* in the romantic view of the world.

Special mention should be made of a bizarre 'micro genre' within Vandekerckhove's work. I'm thinking here of the five paintings the artist made in 2003 of bridges, piers, wooden footpaths and related constructions that span and traverse space: *Hanging Garden*, *Hokusai mon amour*, *Land's End*, *The End Of The Night*⁷ and *Zone*. In a certain sense these accessories too are part of the 'anti-architectural' discourse described above: they are certainly architectural elements, but in no way are they buildings. The essence of the bridge lies concealed in its bridging function, in its negation of static space; in the ambiguous symbolism and mysterious scepticism of the 'between' embodied by this anti-architecture.⁸ Like the *Rückenfiguren*, whose faces by definition must remain an unsolvable riddle to us, and just like the girl's figures I will return to in a moment, the bridges, crossroads and footpaths symbolize the fundamental aporia of art – the drama of insolubility itself. Without this doubt, this ambivalence and duplicity – is the *Rückenfigur* crying or smiling? Is he coming or is he ready to leave? Does the bridge in *Land's End* lead to a garden of paradise or an anything but attractive 'end of the world'? If art as such is unthinkable, it exists by the grace of the potential 'yes' or 'no' that is contained in any doubt, in any 'between', in any dilemma.

To put it another way: *The Border* is the title of one of Vandekerckhove's works painted in 1999 – again a *Rückensicht*, again

with the lugubrious silhouette of a cooling tower on the horizon – but it might just as easily be the name of a painterly obsession.

Route 4: Sea Breezes, 2001

When the Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra shot to international fame in the early 1990s with her portraits of young teenagers in the surf and on the beaches of De Panne, Dubrovnik, Kolobrzeg and Yalta, it was difficult not to think of Botticelli's iconic image of Venus emerging from the waves. Since then this particular group of works within her oeuvre has become so emblematic of distinctive preoccupations and thematic obsessions in the art of the nineties – the teenager and his/her specific cultural experience; the ambiguity and ambivalences peculiar to this period of transition in life; the porous suppleness of our (sexual) identity; the experiment in posture and gesture – that today it seems to have become impossible to see adolescents or children on a beach without immediately being reminded of Dijkstra's modest masterpieces. (One photo, taken on the Baltic beach of Kolobrzeg in Poland, has by now been reproduced so often that, together with Friedrich's *Wanderer*, it seems to have been engraved on our collective visual consciousness: I should think that this may safely be attributed to a certain level of mastery in the image itself.) This, at least, was my personal experience, when a few months ago I more or less accidentally got to see Vandekerckhove's *Sea Breezes*. Of course, there are numerous irreconcilable differences between both artists' oeuvres and practices. Perhaps the greatest difference is one that at first glance seems to be anecdotal in nature: in *Sea Breezes* and the related paintings *Ballerina*, *Two Girls* and *Black Water*, Vandekerckhove portrays his own daughter, whereas the singular effect of Dijkstra's photos is guaranteed by the unbiased, almost academic distance inevitably resulting from the anonymity of the portrait's subject. Vandekerckhove paints family portraits – this informal category also includes the self-portraits, the most beautiful of which is perhaps *Riddles in the Dark* – while Dijkstra's series of photos lean on the anthropological approach of August Sander (and to a

lesser degree Diane Arbus or Richard Avedon) in which every individual is in a sense reduced to a type. Is this where the 'difference' between photography and painting is symbolically enlarged, in the dialectic between intimacy and distance?⁹ Or am I overestimating this difference? Perhaps the information that Hans Vandekerckhove introduces his own daughter in these pictures is confidential and therefore secondary: none of the paintings' titles attribute a clear identity to the children in them and, in the usual way, the faces of the figures in these paintings are generic and vague enough to be labelled as a kind of contemporary Everyman – in other words, just like the 'types' in Dijkstra's photo series, or the more or less stereotyped extras in the photographic tableaux of Anna Gaskell, Katy Grannan, Justine Kurland and Althea Thauberger. The (teenage) girl as *genre* (young boys seem, for all sorts of reasons, to be a less plausible iconographic motif, and Dijkstra's most successful photographs are portraits of girls, too), perhaps because girls pave the way to the most popular, most practiced genre of Western art, from Altamira to the present day: woman and the female nude?¹⁰ Or is it because a girl's body, more so than a boy's (whose development into manhood is somewhat more straightforward and in which the socially determined image of Man as aggressor, possessor, breadwinner, holder of power and instigator is renewed time and again), remains a symbolic region of doubt and ambiguity for so long, and therefore of the possibilities contained in this doubt? Or would it be perhaps because there are no male muses?

Route 5: homeward bound: Painter's Road, 1998

We began this long discussion of the work of Hans Vandekerckhove in the shadow of Caspar David Friedrich's titanic *Wandervogel*, the proverbial standard-bearer of Romantic art; it becomes the status of the *Wanderer* that we should close our musings with a return to the Romantic attitude – an impulse Vanderkerckhove's work is certainly extensively involved with.

Not only does Vandekerckhove draw much of his subject matter from a historical arsenal of symbols which boasts a long history in the

Romantic literary and artistic traditions (girl, garden and gardener, orientalism and ornament, *Rückenfigur* and so on), he paints them too. Is there anything more romantic, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, than the daily practice of painting, which is the most archaic and maybe in some ways the most outmoded of all art forms? Much has been written over the past few years on the expected (and in many cases hoped for) 'end' of painting. And behind the relatively violent, furious debate about the end of art – an old Hegelian prophecy which in the 1980s and '90s was resuscitated mainly by the American critics Arthur C. Danto and Donald Kuspit – lies concealed little more than a nonchalantly veiled settling of scores with (or perhaps rather a plead for) painting as the *ars prima inter artes*, the most esteemed and noble of all the arts. Painting's supreme historical position, worthy of a *Wanderer* and towering above all other arts, is the reason why it is most easily exposed to sharp criticism. 'Trouble.spot Painting' was the title of one of the most ambitious exhibitions (МУЖКА, Antwerp, 1999) to address the current state and more or less immediate future of painting in Belgium. The 'problematization' of the concept of painting as such reveals the extent to which pictorial practice has marginalized itself. Is this self-imposed marginalization in fact not the pre-eminent feature of the Romantic attitude? As if the art of painting, by explicitly problematizing its own contemporariness and its own premises, by proactively seeking out the margins of art wanted to turn its own back on the world...

In 2005, Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt organized another highly successful (and still much discussed) exhibition entitled 'Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art'. This was an exploration of 'the desire for the paradisaical, the beautiful, and the fairy-tale' – and it is no coincidence that painting played first violin in this amalgamation of pastoral Biedermeier and heroic fantasy, despite recent superficial attention for a long-ignored undercurrent in the conceptual art tradition which has explicitly or implicitly romantic overtones.¹¹ Peter Doig, Uwe Henneken, Christopher Orr, David Thorpe: in the work of these artists

there blows an unmistakable, instantly recognizable breath of the patron saint of Romantic painters, Caspar David Friedrich, who is, not coincidentally, also being celebrated this year (2006–07) in a travelling blockbuster exhibition dragging behind it the subtitle 'Die Erfindung der Romantik' (The Invention of Romanticism), whose cultural philosophical maxim says that 'Romanticism is on everybody's lips again, in art and literature as well as advertising and entertainment'. In the work of the Polish artist, Wilhelm Sasnal, viewed by many as the most influential artist of the post-1970 generation, the renewed urgency of the painterly gesture seems to go together with a certain Neoromantic revival. Or might it be that a romantic-heroic tension lies hidden in the historical 'decision' of a young artist to go back to his canvas or studio, and in so doing, to *turn his back* on the world of ubiquitous new media?¹²

The true identity of the *Rückenfigur* in Friedrich's *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* is one of the best kept, most intriguing secrets in the history of Western art. Although nothing in his philosopher's outfit betrays any trace of painting activity, it would seem to be logic itself that the mountain walker is a painter.

¹ As already noted above, Friedrich's lonely walker belongs to the select category of the most reproduced works of art in Western art; in my own, personal library this small masterpiece (anyone who has ever seen this painting in its natural setting in the Hamburger Kunsthalle will no doubt remember its modest size) decorates the cover of Paul Johnson's *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815–1830*, a classic historiography that examines in detail the heroic individualism of the artists mentioned here, but also *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* by the authoritative British Marxist, Terry Eagleton. That Eagleton and Johnson occupy diametrically opposed political positions (British Marxism versus American conservatism) once again bears witness to the deep ambiguity of Friedrich's now classic idyll. We will return to this ambivalence repeatedly throughout this essay. Finally, Friedrich's universal imagery also illuminates many recordings of, to name

just one, Beethoven's solo piano music, such as Emil Gilel's sonatas in my personal collection. It is therefore no coincidence that the *Wanderer* features on Maurizio Pollini's highly acclaimed recording of Franz Schubert's 1822 *Wanderer-Fantasie*. Schubert is also the composer of the celebrated *Lied Der Erlkönig*, a title that also adorns one of Vandekerckhove's canvases. And so on!

² Another *Rückenfigur* by Friedrich, *Frau am Fenster* of 1822 (a portrait of the artist's wife), became significant enough a century later, almost literally recaptured by the other patron saint of Surrealism, Salvador Dalí: his 1925 *Woman at a Window* is perhaps his 'least Surrealist' canvas – a portrait of his sister, Ana Maria. Family scenes and family portraits are also a frequently recurring theme in Vandekerckhove's work.

³ Tarkovsky? It is not without reason that I evoke the illuminating example of the Russian film director: the influence of Andrei Tarkovsky on the work of Hans Vandekerckhove manifested itself in the past quite literally in various homages to Tarkovsky's most famous protagonist, the nameless stalker from the experimental science-fiction film of the same name (1979). I wrote extensively on the related existentialist motif of the anonymous, solitary individual in the desert or 'Zone' in an earlier essay on the work of Vandekerckhove (see *Stalking Hieronymus*, published by PMMK Ostend and Deweer Art Gallery, 2003).

⁴ For a more profound philosophical reflection on horticultural practices in contemporary art, I refer the interested reader to my essay 'Minima Horticulturalia: Reflections From the Back Yard' in the exhibition catalogue *Grazie*, Stiftung Schloss Dyck (Neuss, 2003), and the related 'Notes on Green Thought (& Gardening of the Mind)', which was published in the catalogue for the exhibition of Lois & Franziska Weinberger at SMAK, Ghent, spring 2005.

⁵ 'A painter is a gardener' was telling enough and the title of an important solo show in 1999: it was Vandekerckhove's first tribute to (the garden of) the British multi-talented artist, Derek Jarman, whose name crops up with significant regularity in Vandekerckhove's work.

⁶ See Vandekerckhove's *Stalker* series .

⁷ With this title the artist is, of course, referring to the misanthropic debut in 1932 of the master poisoner Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose outlook on life was of course irreversibly distorted by the apocalyptic experience of World War I – the global conflict that transformed the whole of European civilization (which we traditionally identify with its architecture anyway) to mud, pulp, blood, guts and trenches, a 'landscape' that also inspired Beckett.

⁸ 'Between' is such a peculiar word that it is hard to describe or define without using the word itself; in a sense, the same is true of 'bridge'.

⁹ At the risk of ending up among the treacherous quick sands of 'influences', it might be illuminating in this context to refer to the inspiring example of David Hockney, whose presence subtly appears elsewhere in Vandekerckhove's oeuvre (see *A Bigger Splash in Granada*, an unadulterated tribute to this English aristocrat of the brush). One of the most fascinating highpoints of Hockney's long and rich career is undoubtedly the double portrait he painted of his parents in 1977, particularly that of his mother – a canvas that both the author and the subject of this essay were recently able to admire at the touring Hockney exhibition 'Portraits' (LACMA, Los Angeles/National Portrait Gallery, London, 2006). This disarming variation on the iconographic theme of the Annunciation is also reminiscent of Vandekerckhove's own *Conversation Piece*, in which he portrays himself in conversation with his daughter.

¹⁰ The image of adult women is, paradoxically enough, utterly and completely absent from Vandekerckhove's imagery; there are only men, most of whom are modelled on the artist himself.

¹¹ 'Romantic Conceptualism' is a concept that was first coined by Jörg Heiser in the British art magazine *Frieze* in 2002; recently André Rottmand reclaimed the term in an essay in the German review *Texte zur Kunst* (2006). This undercurrent is almost entirely entwined with the life and work of the Dutch-American conceptual-art pioneer, Bas Jan Ader, who died young and whose work has recently become the subject of almost hysterical hero worship.

¹² Closer to home, finally, the tenacious legacy of Romanticism also nourished the work of two of Vandekerckhove's fellow townsmen and contemporaries, Michaël Borremans and Jan Van Imschoot – even though in their particular cases and in line with 'Belgian' tradition, this legacy is nuanced, or even sabotaged, by the ghost of Magritte, decidedly the least Romantic of all painters.