

Rinus Van de Velde in conversation with Koen Sels

When it comes to the work of Rinus Van de Velde, I am not some remote onlooker asking questions from a position of productive ignorance. I am actually all too familiar with the day-to-day, routine-like, slightly meditative rhythm of his work. For years, I have been writing texts while Rinus draws, asking what he thinks is happening on the drawing he is creating, taking naps induced by the automated rhythm of his drawing, gossiping with him about friends, repeating the same jokes and phrases over and over again, interrogating each other about our favorite candy bars, who the best artist of all times is, how our attitudes to life and art differ or coincide, how our girlfriends are doing. While asking these questions, we play that game—without actually calling it a game. We produce self-images, necessary illusions that are rewritten, censored and adjusted retrospectively.

The approach and context for this interview are no different. I again ask Rinus questions while he draws. But this time, the rules are stricter, so we can't simply fall back on what we usually take for granted and at last I can run through a few very pertinent questions that have remained unasked too often—questions that Rinus will most probably *reframe*. *But how should we play ourselves this time? Out of the mouths of which characters do we usually speak, without even realizing we are doing so? And how should we even approach this formalized version of the type of conversation we have conducted so very often?*

Rinus Van de Velde (R): Perhaps I should just explain that I have wanted to do an interview with you for quite a while, mainly because you are the only person who can record one while I am drawing. I read in an interview with Billy Childish that he does the same thing—gives interviews while he works. But I don't like the idea of just anyone watching me while I work. It is, after all, an intimate process, a daily life that I do not wish to open up to just anyone.

Koen Sels (K): The act of drawing is in fact the backbone of your artistic practice—something you do every day, conscientiously and to some extent automatically. It keeps your work together.

R: That's true, although my routine is not the same as it was when I started out. In the past, I used to do just one drawing every day, but that ceased to be the case quite a while ago: as time has gone on, drawing has increasingly become just one part of my art. It is, I admit, an important part and the final step, but there is so much more to it now.

K: Is all the rest—designing and constructing sets, photographing scenes and so on—something you also consider to be part of your work? For example, in your exhibition in Berlin you also showed the set that formed the backdrop to your drawings. I wonder if you also consider that preparatory work, the whole process leading up to your drawings, as part of your art? In other words: to what extent do you still adhere to the idea of the object as the work of art? Is the work in the wider sense—the effort put into it, the creative process, perhaps even your lifestyle—also art?

R: Since I started building sets and have increasingly worked in partnership with others, it would be true to say that that process has increasingly become part of my work. The set I exhibited in Berlin served not so much as an autonomous sculpture or an end-product, but as a left-over from that process, a glimpse behind the scenes, a way of demonstrating that my works are fictional constructions. But I do not intend to make that way of working a hard-and-fast rule. For my exhibition *The Story of Frederic, Conrad, Jim and Rinus*, for example, I did not include the set. Yet both the drawings and the captions below them and on the wall revealed that there was something phoney about the setting. An important concept for me is that of “reduced reality,” a term Edward Lipski used when he visited me in my studio. It is about using minimal resources to evoke the illusion of a place, without

completely removing the sense of the illusory. I also use sets for practical purposes: I do not need to leave the studio, which I am reluctant to do, and I maintain complete control.

K: Your drawings are realistic, but you also emphasize their fictional nature. Why is that important to you? I have the feeling that for you, it is not about—forgive the expression—a sort of post-modernist deconstruction of the image, but about the deceptive nature of the image in general.

R: Partly it is, of course, because the image is not to be trusted: to start with, it can be interpreted in so many different ways. I counter that by creating a clear and specific context with the caption. But my work is based on the idea of myself as the protagonist in a fictional autobiography. I do not believe it is worthwhile to be honest about myself. Why should the so-called truth about myself be interesting as a subject? In any case, I would soon run out of things to say. On the other hand, I do spend all day on that fictional life, so to some extent it is also my real life. Compare it to the fake bus shelters that are sometimes installed in the gardens of nursing homes: they give residents with dementia the feeling they can get away if they want to, which reduces their need to escape.

K: I don't believe that your work is solely about your personal escapism. But if it isn't, why do you continually include your own person in it? Is it an expression of narcissism, conscious or unconscious?

R: No, I am just always available. That is why I am interested in someone like Cindy Sherman, who succeeds in, so to speak, making her work completely about herself. But there are practical reasons for that, too. For me, my work is not about myself to that extent, anyway. This figure has really become a character, a character that I could be, but do

not really have to be. On the other hand, I cannot really see myself creating socially committed work involving complete outsiders.

K: You have already played numerous characters in your work, both fictional and real. Usually, it was about figures that lead a completely different life from yours or about artists who do completely different work from you. Are you actually testing out lives and standpoints without having to identify with them?

R: Yes, I think so. It is incredible that it is even possible to test out different standpoints. Don't forget that it's difficult to relate to a single well-defined aesthetic and remain faithful to it. In my work, I can become different artists without losing a certain individuality I very much identify with an anecdote about Richard Prince. Prince saw a photo of Franz Kline looking through the window of his studio and thought: that is what I want to be, and he then decided to become an artist. In any case, my work is about the image of an artist and my position on that, the extent to which I can be an artist—or several artists—myself. I have a great need to present things clearly, to work in a structured way. Thinking about characters helps me to break open that structure. Yesterday, I lay in bed thinking about a line of poetry by Walt Whitman: *"I am large, I contain multitudes."* Whitman departs from the self and in doing so actually achieves the universal. I don't think I'm really a community artist, as Whitman perhaps was, but for me that quote does mean that you are always connected to a community. The self is always social and, especially as an artist, you mirror yourself on other artists. You sign a contract with a tradition. And, especially today, it is impossible simply to select a statement and adhere to it.

K: But, to a certain extent, you do start from a specific view of art: the view that asserts that an artwork is not so much localized in the work itself, but is rather a way of life, as is the case with Joseph Beuys to some extent. It is just that your life largely takes place in your studio and on sets, and is emphatically not "real" life.

R: I have always been extremely interested in the biographical. I believe that a lot of art can only be understood through the life of the artist. That certainly applies to someone like Martin Kippenberger. My interest in the biographical can go quite far. When my gallery manager Tim Van Laere met Franz West, Franz said: "Let's go and eat cheese in the mountains." Every time I see Franz West I think of that anecdote, which has almost become a key to his work for me and is even almost as much part of his work as his sculptures. I also connect the person to what he creates: for Franz West, art is often something balancing on the edge of the functional. He was one of the first people to blur the boundaries between design and art, which is also about encounters: chairs, tables, places where you can sit with someone. For me, therefore, the biographical is a way of giving meaning to a work, making art into something that is not only about yourself. You can only really understand artists like Lucian Freud or Mark Rothko if you have some idea what kind of people they are. You need to know the context in which something was made; it is not possible to understand a work purely in isolation. Reading about it and discovering all kinds of peripheral information is what really gives a work meaning for me. That's what happened at the first exhibition I saw, of the Fauvists: I understood nothing until I started to hear the stories related to it. Let me give another example, of an artist who is extremely important to me: Guston is only Guston because he started working in Abstract Expressionism. He only became really interesting when he broke completely with tradition. A work like Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is only meaningful if you know the story. I am always suspicious of works that remain "untitled" and that is why my work has captions, to guide the viewer in how to read the work, to provide some context myself. That context may equally well be the history, an anecdote, the way something was made But understanding an artwork in isolation is not possible.

K: That's because you're creating a work in a time when art no longer speaks a universal language . . .

R: Medieval iconography was readable to anyone who knew the stories and symbols depicted. That cannot be compared to what goes on now: in any case, art had a different function. Now, there is no longer any clear iconography. Maybe that is what my work is about: testing the possible meanings of an image.

K: In the past, you literally collected images and usually didn't know what they represented. And then you simply interpreted them off-the-cuff as you saw fit.

R: Yes, I just used captions, mostly quite short and ambiguous ones, to give a new meaning to found photographs. It was always about making something new out of something already there, a "Wasteland-like" strategy, in which you question the notion of originality. I searched for photographs randomly, via all sorts of different channels and databases. The most difficult thing was to determine why I should choose a specific photograph, and I wondered whether I should bring some structure to my archive. Eventually, I started looking at thousands of photographs every day and a kind of database began to develop in my memory. I then took two images from the archive and juxtaposed them and as soon as I did that, a story began to unfold. That's what drove my work forward. If I then needed a specific image for the story, I would search for it in my memory. All of the images I selected had a certain openness about them. They could not be too iconic because that would have been too determinative, because everyone already reads that kind of image in a specific way. The problem with those found images was that I easily succumbed to the aesthetic pleasure that old photographs can evoke and therefore often ended up with the same photographers. I did not want my work to be only about the appropriation of that aesthetic and so eventually I started creating my own images to avoid the pitfall of nostalgia. Now, I'm starting to think that it may be possible to combine different types of images: found images inspire and create a story themselves, but you can also blend them with self-made images. It does not need to be conceptually watertight as far as I'm concerned—that was never the aim of my way of working.

K: Didn't you find that it was slightly disrespectful to treat photographs that had a specific link with historic reality in that way, to rip them out of their context?

R: I never wanted to know what those photos depicted; they needed to invoke a certain sense of wonder. The photographs that I could understand easily simply did not belong in my archive. And yet I did not select the images just because they invoked this sense of wonder—that aspect was actually what I wanted to eliminate. That way of looking at images actually does have something aggressive about it: it's a complete denial of the notion that photographs testify that "something has happened." But I started from the idea that the photographic claim to truth is also a form of fiction. If you rob photographs of their context, the actual construction emerges; you then see that they also have narrative qualities within them. I still play around with that documentary aspect of photography, but I also show that images tell a story in a certain way at the same time.

K: So what are the images featuring photos of yourself in the studio intended to document?

R: I want all the works to look like documents. That is why even the drawings have a photographic quality: they stay close to a certain reality—or at least pretend that this closeness exists.

K: Would you say that they emphatically portray you as someone acting out all kinds of fantasies and anxieties? That they aim to use the game and the construction to record something essential?

R: You always feel that the works are posed, constructed in any case. But you need to be able to believe in them, just as I think Richard Prince really believed in Franz Kline in his studio. I think that is a fundamental ambiguity in my work.

K: Posing has taken on a new meaning these days. Taking photographs of yourself and being able to determine how you look while taking them has become normal nowadays. People photograph themselves as they want others to see them.

R: It's also about that: being able to see a fantasy image of yourself, externalizing it. I believe that is a fundamental human need: to be able to see oneself from a distance. Well perhaps not fundamental—eating and drinking are fundamental. But it's definitely a very human desire.

K: Could I therefore argue that people strive to be something just slightly different from their real selves, in contrast to what the cliché says, and that your work bears witness to that?

R: Yes, that is a nice distinction. I think that people do indeed want to be that other person, which is where feelings of jealousy and frustration come from. A lot of people see my recent work as a series of self-portraits, but, for me, it is actually about representing the other or the otherness—which is a recurring theme in art history, just look at Goya or Alice Neel. It is about gaining control of the external world, even the external world in yourself. Actually, that applies equally well to so-called more traditional work, such as that by David Hockney, who attempts to capture the landscape of his youth. By portraying myself, I try to understand myself as an “other”, as someone who is seen as an outsider and is defined by the process of depiction. A key aspect here is that it involves stills, frames, which demand that everything that comes before and after them should be invented. Therefore they possess a

great openness. With film, it's completely different: a still has a much greater mythical potential.

K: And yet your work is more cinematic than it used to be. Why is that?

R: It is more cinematic because I have started to take the photographs myself and because I have begun working with set builders and a cameraman, who arranges the lighting and takes the photographs. However, the film itself is missing and you get a kind of trailer that refers to the whole story and is in that sense representative. Everyone poses standing still: there is little movement, just the suggestion of a story. The caption works like in a silent movie, in which you see the scene first and then a frame with a caption explaining what is happening in the pictures.

K: Indeed, that is the way you work: you first make an image and only later interpret it or read it as a story.

R: Yes. Although in thinking up the images, I am already thinking in a narrative or textual way.

K: But it is still important for viewers not simply to be looking at a well-made image. The narrative potential of drawing as an art has always been an essential factor.

R: That's true, and with self-made images you have even more control of that: you can fill images with elements that have a narrative value. In the past, I sometimes needed five drawings to say something; now, as in a lot of classic painting, I can create a drawing that includes everything essential. By filling a work with all these elements, I ensure that the individual work stands alone and does not lose its meaning when it's no longer part of the installation. I find that exciting, because with that kind

of autonomous drawing you run counter to the historically marginal position of drawing as an art—drawing was always seen as an ancillary medium. For me, a drawing can have exactly the same function as a painting—or at least that’s what I aim to achieve.

K: Why do you still make drawings based on photos, by the way? You could also stop at that point: the image is already there after all.

R: People look at drawings in a different way than they look at photographs, which, as I said, have a claim to truth or a documentary value. Drawings are more fictional in nature. I deliberately make use of that aspect of the history of drawing as an art. The notion of designing, drafting, or charting is also closely related to drawing. Making drawings of those photographs suddenly places them in a completely different, self-invented universe.

K: Stories and myths are extremely important for you, but what do you believe is their function? You’re surely not simply attempting to unmask fictions?

R: No, I believe that we need these fictions. You can deconstruct and unmask everything, but ultimately you always need new constructions and masks. And if you do not need them, you still create them—even against your own volition.

I’ve finished drawing, by the way. All drawings naturally end somewhere, unlike paintings, on which you can continue to work infinitely.