

Metamodernism

& Me, a metamodern artist

Where does my art fit into all this? In this last essay I will describe how my own work is connected with metamodernism, or better yet: how it's coming from metamodernism. After all, my longing to understand my own work better was the starting point for my research into metamodernism. Therefore it seems fitting to conclude this bundle of essays with an analysis of my own paintings.

When I started at the Royal Academy of Art in 2014 I didn't have a clue where my art came from. I just liked to paint, draw and write, but didn't put much thought in my underlying motives or train of thoughts. However, during my study this became increasingly important: *why* do I make the things I make. *What* drives me, *how* and what do I try to *communicate* through my art?

Coming home

Somewhere during the summer, before I started the 3rd grade at the Royal Academy, I read the essay *Notes on Metamodernism*. Eventually, this article has become really important to me. It has helped me tremendously to place my work into a theoretical framework. It was important for me to clarify my art, so I could explain my work to others. But how can I explain something I don't understand myself?

Reading *Notes on Metamodernism* felt so familiar, without really knowing why and I wasn't at all able yet to explain the

concept to others. After reading the essay for the first time I didn't actually comprehend the concept fully yet. It was a pretty difficult read and I lacked a lot of knowledge. In the beginning it was more of a feeling I had; a feeling of belonging, of coming home. But gradually, by reading many, many books, essays and articles, the concept became increasingly clear and everything just seemed to fall into place.

Metamodern me

I never really felt comfortable within postmodernism. It's hard to explain why, but I think I'm too much of an optimist or idealist and on top of that I strongly believe in progress. Postmodern cynicism, scepticism and irony don't appeal to me at all. Postmodernism feels so meaningless, it doesn't seem to add anything anymore and I really couldn't fit myself into it anywhere. Then I read the article *Notes on metamodernism* (2010) and I immediately felt it was good. The pursuit of sincerity, the space for (pragmatic) idealism, with informed naivety, daring to look into the future again. All these elements appeal to me and I feel much more at home with them, than the characteristics of postmodernism.

For years I've been walking around with this feeling something fundamental is changing in our world. That sounds very vague and it is. What I try to say is I've got a feeling we're at the start of something big, a revolution or a turning of the *zeitgeist*. To enter this revolution with a postmodern mindset seems anything but desirable and I never imagined postmodernism could provide solutions for the contemporary, complex issues we face today. In my view, metamodernism is much better able to do this, because it adopts a more open attitude towards all possibilities, without precluding anything in advance, or immediately attacking everything.

Metamodernism adds hope and faith in progress. It believes society truly has evolved and positive developments are really possible. Possibilities, potentials, they can be dangerous, but are always real and necessary. For that reason metamodernism is also based upon critical, self-reflexive dialogue about the future of society. I feel that's exactly what we need right now; an open attitude towards, and critical dialogue about, all possibilities for a better future of our society.

Painting

As an artist I've mainly dedicated myself to painting. I've always felt strongly connected with painting and from an early age my interest in this has been great. Paint has always had a huge physical appeal to me. I think it's a wonderful material and I still enjoy every day I work with paint. Of course, painting is a very traditional craft and that's one of the qualities I highly appreciate. I value the craft and through my painting practice I feel connected with the tradition and history of painting. Painting feels like a mission to me, although I don't really know how to explain what this mission actually entails.

Painting is inextricably linked to being human. The oldest (rock) painting that, until now, have been found, dates back to almost 40,000 years ago! And since then, painting has always been a part of humanity. Painting has been declared dead for so many times in the last 150 years, it's difficult to keep track. However, there are two developments in the history of art that have shaken painting on its foundation; the development of photography in the 1830s and the emergence of the ready-made in 1910s. In spite of this, painting has survived, it never really died and it never will, I am convinced of that much.

For me personally the craft of painting is something sacred. Yes, perhaps I can best compare it with religion. I'm not a

religious person, but painting gives me comfort and hope. By painting I am closer to the truth. It's my way of connecting with the world, connecting with the past *and* the future. I'm almost certain that I would be a very unhappy person if, for whatever reason, it would no longer be possible for me to paint.



I also like the solitude of painting. I'm mostly by myself in my studio, working for hours in silence. It's a very contemplative exercise and painting always has a huge calming effect on me. So, when I started at the

academy it was never really difficult to know what I'd want to do. I've always considered myself being a painter and I applied to the academy, because I wanted to develop myself as a painter. The first two years I had to go through all sorts of practices: sculpting, 3D modelling, printing, etc. However, from the start of the third year on I could really devote myself to painting and that's when my "theme" began to develop. Or, actually, that's when everything came together.

In my paintings I investigate the interface between nature and civilization. Contemporary nature is increasingly represented by artificial design that has to generate the mere illusion of nature. The way we build, shape and inhabit our world and the

place we assign to nature herein, says something about the way we relate to nature. Later on I'll elaborate more on this.

Philosophy

One important thing I can't leave unmentioned, is my love for philosophy. I've always been interested in philosophy, although I never made a conscious connection with my painting practice before. This only just happened during my Fine Art study at the academy.

What mainly attracts me in philosophy is this "struggle" that's been going on for centuries now, between Thomas Hobbes (1651) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762). It's one of the most fundamental issues of our time: are humans by nature good or evil?

Hobbes is the pessimist who believes humans are naturally evil and civilization saved us from our animalistic instincts¹. Rousseau is the optimist who believes humans are, by nature, good and civilization has ruined us². That's very bluntly explained, I know, but it will do for the point I'm trying to make here.

For years scientific evidence suggested Hobbes was right and civilization was our salvation from turning into a war of all against all³. However, over the last couple of years, the opposite seems to be proven by newly found and reinterpreted evidence⁴. For example; Pinker's book *The Better Nature of our Angels* (2012) - which provided a big part of the evidence in favor of Hobbes- , was found to contain serious calculation errors, which means his research results are not correct⁵. In short: Rousseau is winning. Evidence supporting his claims is piling up⁶. Time and time again wars appear to break out, only when societies become hierarchical. Rousseau has foreseen this and went straight against the belief in the

progress of civilization. However interesting it may be to go deeper into the accumulating evidence, supporting Rousseau's ideas about civilization, to make my point it's not necessary to do so. It seems we don't want to believe man is naturally good. This idea that humans are naturally evil, murderous and egotistical is one of the most persistent doctrines in history. So many different people (intellectuals, theorists, artists, politicians, religious, etc.) have argued it and the idea seems so obvious, that no one usually bothers to actually prove it⁷. Now the opposite is proven more and more and nobody seems to (be able to) believe it. It's incredibly fascinating.

Hobbes's philosophy has been linked with postmodernism, it fits perfectly⁸. Hobbes is mentioned by Botwinick in his book *Postmodernism and Democratic Theory* (2015) and according to him Hobbes can even be 'appropriated as path breaker for postmodernist society'⁹. So, let's say Hobbes is postmodernism. However, right now Rousseau seems to be on the winning hand, so if Hobbes is postmodernism, then what is Rousseau? Maybe Rousseau is metamodernism? The belief that man is naturally evil has a tremendous influence; ideas are never just ideas. Our image of man determines the way in which we organize our economy, democracy, our educational system and much more. But what if this idea, of man being naturally evil, is a myth? This will have a huge impact on all areas of life. So, the point I'm trying to make with the statement *Rousseau is metamodernism* is: what if, when we move from Hobbes to Rousseau, this will have a huge influence on our collective awareness and what if this is exactly what metamodernism entails?

Of course, this is just a hunch, a thought that popped up in my head during the writing of my thesis. There are immediately objections: Rousseau doesn't believe in progress, for one, and his fatalism about civilization turns out to be as misplaced as Hobbes's pessimism about human nature. However, I think it

could be an interesting thought to investigate. For me it's the result of my thesis and I'll have to work out the idea further. This is what I'll probably be doing for the coming years (?) However, for now I think it is important information to understand where I'm coming from and what lies beneath every painting I make. For me, this whole thesis has been a revelation in relation with my work. I connected my love for philosophy with my painting practice, which was a huge step for me.

My paintings

Like I said before: in my paintings I investigate the (uneasy) interface between nature and civilization. Besides this being a



really interesting and inexhaustible subject, it's also a painterly metaphor for my underlying train of thoughts and, maybe most of all, my feelings towards the current state of our society. I believe we've become

increasingly alienated from one another and from our community. On top of that we seem to have lost all connections with nature. In my paintings I try to formulate a new narrative of longing, structured on a belief of the possibility for a better future. In this process I ask myself

questions like: how do we relate to nature? How does society relate to nature? Are nature and civilization compatible, or will one always dominate and / or suppress the other? Why are we becoming increasingly alienated from nature and each other? How comfortable do we actually feel in our environment? How aware are we of our surroundings? All questions my paintings, hopefully, also bring to the viewer. However, of



course it's in the first place about my own personal feelings and me finding a representation for that in contemporary landscapes and sceneries. The landscapes become an adequate expression of moods and the

fundamental romantic sense of loneliness is an important concern in these representations. Naturally I feel connected with my predecessors, like Edward Hopper, for example. His landscape paintings are filled with symbolic meanings and psychological moods.

My focus is, like Hopper, mainly on everyday scenes. The most banal places can become the subject of a painting; a highway, the suburbs, the shed in the garden of the neighbors. However, unlike Hopper, I never paint people, because I believe they are too distracting. If you paint people, the painting will almost immediately become about those people. I

want to elevate the everyday surroundings, to present it as something mysterious. I want to draw attention to what I can't put into words, because language fails. I want to reconstruct



and heighten our assumptions and ideas about our built environment, but at the same time I want to accept it just as it is and show it in all its beauty and ugliness. In this process I seek answers, or

solutions, but I know these answers and solutions will never be final. We'll always be attempting to find the best possible answers and perspectives at that given moment. It's not about reaching a precise goal, it's about the journey, to keep on moving. During this continuous movement I'm aware of all the contradictions I want to reconcile: nature and civilization, beauty and ugliness, enthusiasm and irony, love and hate, good and evil. Despite knowing these contradictions can never really be reconciled, I nonetheless attempt to.

The subject matter of my paintings can probably best be linked to New Romanticism. It's all about elevating the mundane, the commonplace, the everyday and filling it with significance and meaning. Like I said before, I want to draw attention to the everyday and hope this will lead to asking questions like the ones I've mentioned earlier. Metamodernism is to keep asking

questions, always search for new solutions, never settle, never presume we know it all and we've achieved the best we can, but always keep an open mind towards new possibilities. It's never about fulfilling, but will always be about attempting despite its unfulfillable-ness. I don't look back at Romanticism to laugh at it, nor to cry about it, but to see a future again that was lost from sight. The destiny of the metamodern man and woman is to pursuit a horizon that will forever stay out of reach.

Bibliography

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- ² Rousseau, J.J. (2004). *The Social Contract*. Penguin Books Ltd, London.
- ³ Hobbes, T. (2010). *Leviathan*. Boom Uitgevers, Amsterdam
Pinker, S. (2012). *The Better Angels of our Nature*. Penguin Books Ltd, London.
- ⁴ Bregman, R. (2018). Dit is de vraag waar bijna al onze politieke debatten om draaien (en het antwoord geeft hoop). *De Correspondent*. Obtained from:
<https://decorrespondent.nl/8001/dit-is-de-vraag-waar-bijna-al-onze-politieke-debatten-om-draaien-en-het-antwoord-geeft-hoop/1989075091311-150d9bfe>
- ⁵ Idem.
- ⁶ Idem.
- ⁷ Idem.
- ⁸ Willms, B. (1989). Leviathan and the postmodern. *History of European Ideas*, 10, 5, (569-576).
Botwinick, A. (2015). *Postmodernism and Democratic Theory*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, US.
- ⁹ Botwinick, A. (2015). *Postmodernism and Democratic Theory*, p.170. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, US.

Paintings

- Page 63: *Interlude*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 18,5x18 cm
- Page 66: *Untitled*, 2017
Oil (sketch) on canvas 12,5x12 cm
- Page 67: *You're not Free*, 2018
Oil on wood, 18,5x18 cm
- Page 68: *White Picket Fence*, 2017
Oil on canvas, 35x34 cm