

# Art of gambling as Art

## On Meidam en De Kroon

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Characters, reduced to barely recognizable shapes, seated behind or leaning against empty tables. More often than not they are staring fixedly straight ahead or looking away apparently indifferent. Sometimes however there is a somewhat uneasy, averted glance. Often both at the same time. Explicit facial expressions are not to be found, although unconsciously male determination, more than female hesitance imposes itself. In the beginning, before there were separate identities, food was provided. As a matter of course dinner guests presented themselves. Seated in a tilted perspective, they are about to consume *The last supper*. In this ritual of eating and drinking they will fuse with the spiritual body. Their separate identities will be nothing but changing moments, attached to arbitrary names. But these names are just as volatile as the foam on the crest of waves, that a turbulent sea leaves behind on the beach: the sole proof of their ever changing existence. During this feast the inner self becomes susceptible to divine law or truth. As drinks turns itself against the drinker and the excessive eater becomes prey to his own gluttony, the individual is turned inside out. Precisely in and through this dissipating violence, so characteristic of every feast, reconciliation takes place. Identities spin around and around in a whirling dance of heated bodies, as snowflakes during a blinding storm. This communion realizes itself as a sacrifice of personal identities.

Paradise lost. For modern beings *The Last Supper* is either the last meal of a criminal, faced with the death sentence or an archaic spectacle. However, they cannot resist the temptation to re-enact it at regular intervals. In recreating their 'paradis artificiel' individuals are perhaps looking for a disturbing physical reminiscence, that will enable them to lose control momentarily without perishing. That is why they sometimes gather round *Der grüne Tisch*. The spectacle of a last meal is re-enacted in a controlled manner: Gambling and Speculation. Identities, those shaky results of precisely that systematic restraint in view of every spectacle and each excessive dissipation, shall, once the play has begun, inevitably dissolve in its voracious dynamics. Because, however arbitrary a rule might be, from a certain unanticipated moment it will determine as divine law the fate of the players. The moment a party game turns into a prestigious power play, the play takes possession of the players. Possession eventually becomes obsession.

No price is too high. In the heat of the battle for every participant the moment comes when, with a last excessive bid he not only in desperation wants to regain his lost possessions: he wants to overcome his obsession as well and to come to his senses. A game, especially gambling is a disturbing event, mainly because the inner self and outward appearance are continuously merging. The participants are turned inside out. Balancing on the verge of reality and play as a prisoner of appearances one cannot make a clear distinction anymore between true intentions and feint movements, between spirit and body. The whole body becomes a mask. Gambling is the ambivalent event, in which every right-minded being, against his or her better judgement and more often than not premeditatedly, is consumed. Nevertheless even by this fake ritual, in which gain suddenly changes into loss and self-preservation from one moment to the other turns into self-sacrifice, the participants are forged together. They become companions in misfortune. The game produces a tight, but explosive community. Paradoxically those companions in misfortune are bound together by virtue of something that escapes every

strategic wager, but at the same time nonetheless motivates every new urge to overtrump the other.

At first sight this explosive element is locking in Meidam De Kroon's painterly personalities. Nothing happens. Perhaps the characters are paralysed from the very start by the awareness of their own inadequacy. Is that the reason why tables and chessboards remain empty, the players sit empty-handed, the deck is not yet dealt, the pieces are ostentatiously absent? They seem to be trapped between reality that they left behind and the game that has yet to begin. As if stuck in an *Entr'acte*. Are they already linked together by their shared indecisiveness? Is it the tension of anticipation for the game, that confines them to the table? Or are they, incapable of beginning by themselves, just waiting for the decisive move to be made from outside, that will set the game in motion, because they lack authority themselves? Are they expecting a referee? A lawyer, a judge or a *Magistrate*? Or is it the spectator? If so, that explains why the characters are all directed towards that spot, where once Meidam De Kroon called them into being and at this very moment we, the spectators, stand. While we observe them with a scrutinizing look, hoping they will betray their secret, we without realising it give in to their desire to play. After all, once we confront ourselves with the characters we can no longer be a spoilsport: the game has started that very moment. We are already part of the game and playing the moment we start wondering about its possibility. By actively observing our identity is at stake: we are producing a community. The play of the world unfolds. That is why the group, whatever formation they assume, seated in a square, a hollow square, a circle or opposite each other, is opened to the front or from above as if we, the spectators, are invited to join the game. In fact we are raised up to a god-like position. We appear to be the lost participant, always offside, but as such the *raison d'être* of all playing. We are god. And if so, we are at the same time the secret we tried to elicit from the group.

To make this clear to us some characters have separated themselves from the group: the *Mediators*. Not as privileged parts of the whole, but rather as identifiable moments that briefly embody an explosive, ever complex and dynamic community. In order to be recognized they usurp the symbols of a totally implausible worldly power. Implausible because this power can no longer decree law. Out of sheer necessity it must confine itself to the drawing up of rules of the game. The mediators act as if they are the anonymous holders of power. They simulate the magistrates. Though of first sight some spectators might get the uncanny feeling that they are being called to account for a crime they never committed, this Kafkaesque fatalism does not fit the situation. They are *neither Suspect* nor suspects. The Plea of the magistrate is not meant to give arguments for our innocence or guilt. The magistrate of Meidam De Kroon are beyond revenge or penitence. They do not condemn. Nor do they ask for compassion, as little as a condemned criminal just before his execution, being served his last meal, asks to be pitied. Unlike the screaming Popes of Francis Bacon and although they seem to be left to their own devices after being cast out of the group, they are not hopelessly lost in their monochrome firmament. The oppression of a tormented inner self, that Bacon's characters with their blindfolded and averted eyes scream out, still concerns a real, meaningful world. The different meanings are at best shattered. In the paintings of Meidam De Kroon this existentialist aspect is forfeited. Their characters are no longer alienated nor inwardly torn apart. Inside and outside, spirit and body, individual and community converge. For that reason this dual entity is not embodied in the hollow eyes nor the screaming mouth, but in the folded or gesticulating hands. These are the moving centre of a manipulation without ultimate domination: in other words a play, of which the results, in spite of subtle strategies on the part of the participants, are beforehand unpredictable. Chance and fate dominate each game.

That magistrates know the world is meaningless. Therefore, the plea that is delivered, does not imply the *guilt* of persons in relation to the world, but the sheer necessity of playing in a world that has become so complex that no-one can be responsible anymore. Precisely because of this, power has to be staged. Their plea not only proves that we, against our will, cannot help but be involved in a play. It also opens our eyes for the fact that playing is inevitable, because in a meaningless world playing is the sole possibility to practise communion. Simply because there is no enigma or secret behind or above the world, the tablets have eroded and all messages have been lost, the quest for community has to be staged even more seriously. The magistrates do not plea for restoration of a violated law. Even less do they incite a state organised search for a lost paradise. They are bound to bear witness to an obligatory necessity of a rule governed theatre of the world. In this sense Meidam De Kroon's characters have less affinity with those of Bacon than with the painterly cinematographic figures of Peter Greenaway. In his meaningless universe his main characters are not searching for sense, but they create a meaningful orientation by mercilessly playing senseless games. They produce their own fate. Should they attempt to play foil, the characters would be destined to perish in an orgy of their own violence, gorging, guzzling and gambling, or as a result of their own miscalculations. And there lies the principle difference between Greenaway's violent gamblers and Meidam De Kroon's playful characters: their universe is not hermetically sealed, it is still opened to all sides. They do not, by means of rigid calculations, leave the spectator out of account. On the contrary, they count on him to join them.

Alex Meidam and Enno de Kroon are each others painterly chance. To a certain extent their artistic procedure expresses the above mentioned literal manipulation without domination. They join hands not so much to synthesize two separate conceptual schemes or to merge their individual emotions together, but rather to emphasize and intensify the unpredictable material process of pointing. Painting ultimately remains a game of chance. Although the sheer fact of their cooperation by no means can increase the aesthetic value of their paintings, their experimental procedure nevertheless has an artistic impact: by suppressing the personal signature and methodically introducing chance it places the stubborn process of pointing in the centre of attention.