

'If today's art contributes to the struggle against nihilism, then this is mainly because from time immemorial it has also acted as life's temptress and stimulator.'
Jos de Mul, April 2004¹

'I didn't know that so many artists could see God.'²

Mirjam Westen

Living Targets is the name of a series of works that Rinke Nijburg made in 2004. On circular, square or oval panels he paints colourful images within a black bordered target frame. You can recognize motifs which earlier, from 1998, played an important role in his work. ³A female figure with a male figure lying on her lap, referring to the Christian iconography of the Pietà; a standing male nude in whose pose art historians will recognise St. Sebastian; a figure bent forward with legs apart, supporting his head in his hands, seeming to peer out from blue skies and white clouds at something beneath him; feet, hands, ears, eyes and mouth arranged like a collection of relics. When Nijburg exhibited the *Targets* in the artists' initiative De Paraplufabriek in Nijmegen in the spring of 2004, we were permitted to take pot shots at the glossy, reflective objects with an air rifle. The surface of the panels was already perforated with bullet holes when I visited the exhibition. Conditioned by my daily practices which in part are precisely aimed at preventing art works being damaged, I did not manage to conquer my hesitation and pick up the rifle.

Given the nature of the pictures, are we supposed to be imagining the 16th century iconoclasm of the reformers? Or the injurious assaults, whether politically motivated or not, whereby at the beginning of the 20th century Velazques' female nude and Newman's painting *Who's afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* at the end of the century were cut to shreds? The targets installation has nothing to do with iconoclasm or art vandalism. Nor with blasphemy. Offering the opportunity to actually fire at the target brings to mind the shooting performances by Niki de Saint Phalle, Valie Export or Ulrike Rosenbach in the Sixties and Seventies of the 20th century. Nor is venting criticism the grounds for shooting at Christian motifs in the *Targets*. Nijburg calls the holes in the panels literally wounds and scars, which is his way of expressing man's infinite vulnerability. This association is strengthened all the more by the use of Christian imagery referring to martyrdom and suffering. There is no unequivocal distinction,

though, between perpetrator and victim.⁴

While the last two decades saw many people doubting the ability of painting and drawing to convey meaning, it became clear for Rinke Nijburg while a student in the Eighties that precisely these arts offered him the possibility to bring together and combine different worlds in a meaningful way. Having set himself this task he has developed since 1990 into a virtuoso painter, a sensitive draughtsman, as well as an inventive graphic artist and inspired writer.

Human figures occupy a central place in his work. The world of his imagination deploys not only vulnerability, but also suffering, doubt and impotence, as well as compassion, hope and the desire for closeness and intimacy. Recognisable figuration is coupled with an expressive style or with a taut, modest delineation. His work has never been so much a search for style as a continual search for meaning. That it is not a question of *what*, but *how* it is painted is for him an 'absurd' idea.

As a *pictor doctus* he draws on subjects from Classical and Biblical stories, legends, fairy tales, literature, philosophy and everyday experiences. In particular, the iconography of Christian motifs, such as the Pietà, the stigmas and apocryphal stories about saints such as Francis, Sebastian and Hubertus are important sources of inspiration. With the blending of all these motifs Nijburg has created an extensive and intriguing body of work over the last fifteen years, which often, if not always, seems contrary to the mores of his time. If painting is repeatedly declared dead, he is surprised at renowned artists who 'declare painting dead yet still want to go to bed with the corpse'.⁵ If photography, video art and installations created a furore in the early Nineties – and doubts now and then strike Nijburg as well - he complains about 'the tyranny of the sensitive plate' and campaigns in articles against the inability of artists' initiatives to exhibit painting in a respectful way.⁶ When during his student years he runs up against the taboo surrounding religion and art, Nijburg wears, without a trace of irony, Jesus badges on his jacket lapels. Against the background of the opposition whipped up between figuration and abstraction that has long taken hold of the (inter)national art world, with figuration being regarded as traditional, conservative and hardly innovative, he confesses to 'simply making old-fashioned, beautiful pictures'.⁷

Philosophers and historians may have announced the end of grand narratives but that does not stop him from sharing with us in conversations and articles what it is that most motivates him: his desire to summarise thousands of narratives in a sort of cosmology, a single grand narrative. A deadly serious undertaking, you might think, were it not for the fact that Nijburg himself is the first to regularly comment on this haughty aspiration with humour and remarks that put it into perspective. “On the one hand I’m still searching for a sort of system that gives meaning to things the way that the grand narratives deluded us into believing”, he writes in the summer of 2004, “on the other hand I’m just a simple child of the times, trying to live in a continual state of neurosis with a reality that has exploded once and for all and has put paid to all grand narratives and codes. What remains is that a Don Quixote-like attempt to interpret the world is not only diverting but also offers the only possibility of not lapsing into a futile wait for an all-consuming, light-absorbing black hole.” Resignation is not for him. His attitude is characterised by passion and compassion for mankind and the world. ‘Being involved with the other is the best weapon against scepticism, and that’s what I’m trying to find a form for in my art’, he observes in an interview in 1998.⁸

A stiff person as wandering soul

I got to know Rinke Nijburg during the preparations for the exhibition with which the postgraduate students concluded their training at Ateliers Arnhem in 1991. At that time his work consisted of a series of exceptionally narrow, tall paintings. The subjects and the light, bright colour scheme are suggestive of idyllic childhood memories. Elongated, schematically accentuated figures are standing in the foreground, sometimes at full length, as with the boy gazing at a sailing boat in *Het vaartuig dat ik en nog iemand zagen* [The Boat that I and Someone Else Saw]. The figures, their faces lacking, are strangely cut off at the edge of the picture. Like side wings in a theatre they flank abstract spaces, as in *De armen en het kruis dat Hans bedacht* [The Arms and the Cross that Hans Thought up] or the view of a village in *Een lange wandeling rond een gereformeerde kerk* [A Long Walk around a Reformed Church]. The latter painting could be referring to the only outing that Calvinists are permitted on Sundays in the village of Lunteren in the Veluwe where Nijburg grew up. Nijburg won the Royal Subsidy for

Painting in 1992 with these works.

Between 1992 and 1996 Nijburg worked out these stylistic characteristics further. The everyday surroundings and events in Amsterdam, where in 1993 and 1994 he attended the Rijksacademy, inspired him to produce such works as *De Staatsliedenbuurt* [The Staatslieden District] (1993) and *Oranje boven* [Orange up] (1993). Disproportionally long human figures stand no longer at the edge but more often in the middle of the picture. Their arms raised bolt upright and stretched legs suggest stiffness and awkwardness. The diagonals created by the raised limbs lend the scene a certain dynamism. It is now walls and houses that function as side wings. The perspectival distortion, broad brushstrokes and contrasting colours give rise to rectangular and oblique areas reminiscent of the figurative abstraction and spatiality in the work of Roger Raveel, whose work he became acquainted with in the Museum of Modern Art Arnhem.

From 1994 Nijburg shifted the scenes more and more often from indoors to outdoors. Straddle-legged, introverted, faceless male figures stand half in the doorway or stride through rooms and corridors. Aptly described by one critic as 'everybody and nobody', they lack identity and every trace of physicality.⁹ The poetic, almost jovial atmosphere of his earlier work has given way to rigidity and reticence, as though the artist wants us to share in his wrestling with figuration and schematic abstraction. Open (elevator) doors and windows with a view onto the outside contribute to the suggestion that the stiff person is continually in transit. This impression is even more strengthened by titles like *In & Uit* [In & Out], *Zie dat ik terugkom* [Make Sure I Return], *Het raadsel van de aankomst* [The Enigma of Arrival] and *Het eeuwige vertrek* [Eternal Departure] from 1994, which are inspired by Nietzsche's notion of the 'eternal return', alluding to the cyclic transformation of nature. The remarkable traversing of walls, windows and doors offer the wandering figures little space to move. The effect of constriction and intangibility disappears as soon as the figure is depicted frontally and is directed towards the viewer. The scenes instantly become more accessible. In a number of paintings with titles such as *Het behouden huis* [The Preserved House] (1994) and *Het iets te kleine huis* [The House a little too Small] (1993), a standing, icon-like figure is holding a square representation of a building in front of himself. In a series of gouaches

from the same period the figure is showing a square in which the form of a head is mirrored, or a landscape, as in *Boerenpsalm* [A Farmer's Psalm] (1994). There are notable scenes in which the figure is kneeling with his head hidden behind a depiction of a face ringed by a halo, as in *Veronika* [Veronica] (1994) and *De trage voortgang van de pelgrim* [The Pilgrim's slow Progress] (1994) which seem to usher in an introspective phase in Nijburg's life.¹⁰ The square frame in the picture is inspired by early-Christian depictions of saints who wear a square halo instead of a round one.¹¹

Deviating from the previous series because of its three metre, horizontal format is the brightly coloured painting *De stille planeet* [The Silent Planet] (1994). It depicts three boys standing with open mouths and closed eyes. Are they singing, or does their facial expression denote awe? The one in the middle is spreading his arms like a priest and holding in one of his hands a book with a picture of a luminous planet, which could be symbolising the vanitas motif just as much as *carpe diem* - seize the day.

Scepticism and belief

As stiff as these paintings, for which Nijburg was awarded one of the Buning Brongers Prizes for painting in 1994, are, so free and unconstrained are the drawings (and texts) created in the same period. Summarily worked out sketches in charcoal and ink reveal a highly imaginative world in which autobiographical elements are woven with motifs from world literature. The mountain landscape of the Swiss Lenzerheide where Nijburg and his wife, artist Gerda Ten Thije, stayed on their honeymoon, is an important source of inspiration in the *Souvenirs uit Lenzerheide* [Souvenirs from Lenzerheide] (1991-1993) series. Endearing little human figures seem to be astonished at so much natural beauty. There are graceful scenes in which a little boy stands on one leg on a mountain peak and reads the map, or with arms outstretched assumes the pose of someone crucified, balancing a crucifix on his head. Also influential was reading the work of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who, in Lenzerheide of all places, wrote the manifesto *Der europäische Nihilismus* (1887), a struggling with and above all an indictment of bourgeois Christianity. Nietzsche's contention that there is no one truth, that subject and object, the I and reality are merely fictions and interpretations, was of great influence.

Souvenirs uit Lenzerheide and the charcoal series *Tien dezelfde dagen uit het*

leven [Ten identical Days from Life] (1992), inspired by the Romantic book *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* (1826) by the German writer Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff, represent the overture to Nijburg's *magnum opus* which appeared in 1997. This is the book *De werken van Herkules. Een getijdenboek in honderd tekeningen* [The Labours of Herkules. A Breviary in a Hundred Drawings]. Nijberg strung together a selection of ink drawings made between 1992 and 1996 and a text written under a pseudonym to create a single grand narrative. His desire to make a single grand story acquires its first concrete form in *De werken van Herkules*. There are references in it to the mountain that Nietzsche's Zarathustra climbs, to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and to classical myths and Biblical stories. In the book the narrator Ronnie is climbing Mount Janus in Switzerland together with the young Hercules. As the narrator's alter ego, Hercules questions everything they encounter on their way. Named after the mythological hero who first had to complete six labours before becoming an immortal god, little Hercules takes nothing for granted. He asks every crucifix they come across what is the right way up the mountain, calls the Christ on the cross a Punch puppet and with no scruples at all lugs a crucifix up the mountain to show it a different horizon. He even considers cutting down all crucifixes with a chainsaw. All these questions and the lugging slow down the tempo and, by means of loosely drawn tableaux that are not lacking in humour, we see how Hercules manages to reach the top, while Ronnie already gives up at the first patch of fog. The climb can be regarded as a sort of pilgrimage, or as a metaphor for the inner conflict between scepticism and faith, between disbelief and belief. And much more in fact: when I take stock of Nijburg's work, I can come to no other conclusion than that *De werken van Herkules* represents a turning point in his oeuvre. The book marks a breakthrough to a looser handling of styles, colours and motifs, to an uninhibited stream of images and words. I regard the climb in this sense as a metaphor for Nijburg's own quest, both visually as well as in terms of content. And the guy who reaches the top is Rinke Nijburg himself; in no hurry to begin the descent, he is enjoying the view from the summit.

Empty room

In 1996 Rinke Nijburg exhibited ten large paintings in Gallery Art & Project in Slotdorp.

The narrowness and height of earlier work has given way to imposing, two by three metre horizontal canvasses. In one series, an indoor space seen from a high viewpoint is painted in bright, contrasting, thinly applied colours. Contours of walls, windows (or are they paintings?) and open doors vanishing sharply towards the horizon give the room a sense of space that seems to continue beyond the picture edge and is not, as previously, abruptly cut off. Notably absent are the wandering figures. The rooms may well look empty and deserted, but they do contain traces of occupation. Just as in the history of art many a Biblical scene offers symbolic views through to a background depicting both a 'living', green landscape as well as a 'doomed', withered one, Nijburg's windows and door openings likewise furnish two opposing views. Colourful groves, trees facing a black dike, a black cloud. Life versus death? In the mysterious painting *De bezoekers van de lege kamer* [Visitors to an Empty Room] (1996), my eye is drawn to the open black door and the door opening filled with yellow. Only on closer inspection do I suddenly perceive a white and grey shadow in both corners of the window and then, in the black door, the vague afterimage of a female figure. In another series there's a rigid, unapproachable double bed set up diagonally in the room, once again with a view of the outside. The feeling of abandonment is present in these works the strongest. On the bed in *Het slapende medium* [The Sleeping Medium] (1996), a pillow has been replaced by a television. In *Hotel Limbo* (1996) a black bolster lies next to a white one; a contrast evoking an emotionally laden atmosphere of loss. Only later, after the series was completed, did the artist realise that 'the empty room' was about the death of his mother: the parental home is devitalised.¹²

The absence of human figures only lasts a short time. It seems as though the artist had needed the emptiness of the room in order to focus attention on the human figure in his work after 1996 and to render it as a figure of flesh and blood. Although a detailed facial expression seldom appears, Nijburg lends his figures more physicality and identity than before thanks to a looser, sometimes even flamboyant style. To this day he exploits figuration to plumb humanistic themes and to represent emotions and experiences. The stiff detachment in his early paintings is no longer to be seen.

A recurrent motif in his paintings, drawings and gouaches is the recumbent

figure. The moving *De schepping van Adam* [Adam's Creation], dating from 1997, shows an affinity with Hans Holbein's painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521-1522). Against a background of a rising or setting sun and across the entire two metre breadth of Nijburg's painting lies a person bound to the ground with white and black lines. The skin colour indicates nakedness, the flat, horizontal position suggests a lifeless state. Any indication as to whether it is a man or a woman is lacking. The head is hidden under a white cushion; at its feet the figure is wearing laced shoes. What most catches the eye is the bright pink, helpless little baby lying on top, its head raised. The scissors in the left hand of the one lying chained still has to cut through the umbilical cord, after which the new life can be welcomed. It also appears as though the bandages have to be cut loose before the old life can be released. Birth and death, feelings of joy and sadness converge in this piece; exactly as in Nijburg's own life in which a period of mourning is enriched with the birth of his first child. The motif of the figure pinned to the ground is derived from an episode from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). When Gulliver is washed ashore on the beach of Lilliput he is tied down on the beach by the Lilliputters. Nijburg recognises in this an analogy with the crucifixion of Christ.

The figure lying prone recurs in such works as *Smelten* [Melting], *Vriezen*, [Freezing] and in the series in which a female figure is surrounded by smaller figures, both from 1997. In the latter, which resembles Marlene Dumas' Snowwhites series from the Eighties, the woman appears to be lying on a sickbed and giving her 'next of kin' a final lesson in life. The proximity of the figures in *Het vergrootglas* [Magnifying Glass] and *De schietles* [The Shooting Lesson], for example, creates an atmosphere of empathy and intimacy.

Narrative rewrites

Both the narrative aspect and the visual motifs in Nijburg's paintings are closely related to the drawings and graphics created after the Hercules book in 1997. Nijburg exploits drawing so as to quickly transform his stream of thoughts and ideas into images and texts. In 1998 he presented a hundred and fifty coloured-in dry-point drawings as one big visual narrative at the Prix de Rome Graphics exhibition, for which he was awarded the basic prize. The title is *What does the inversion of a cock sing when a fool betrays*

his master? – a cosmology in 144,000 prints. The cock refers to the apostle Peter who betrays his master, and the number of prints to the 144,000 sealed of the house of Israel, as described in the Apocalypse. Above and below the row of prints he hung other prints so that the viewer could weave together different narrative lines horizontally and vertically. The structure of the drawings and the texts under or beside them give them the appearance of strip cartoons.

The following year Nijburg received the Gelderland Graphics Prize, for which an accompanying book was published. *The New & Burning House* contains a compilation of drawings and texts from 1998 and 1999. The pictures are reminiscent of film strips or comic strip cartoons with speech balloons. Associations pile up in the titles and texts and in the drawings, with references to St. Francis of Assisi, St. Sebastian, the devil, Gulliver, Cinderella and the Heems Children. Nijburg's symbolism fans out widely and is full of humour, hidden meanings and absurd turns.

An important visual motif is a recumbent male figure, sometimes surrounded by other figures or half hidden under a tent, which causes not only a dramatic but also a humorous effect. The most striking motif is the pistol pointing and shooting in all directions, as though Nijburg wants to point out to the viewer that not only history but also our present, daily life is saturated with conflict and violence. In the title drawing *The New & Burning House* (1998), the central figure is surprised about a previously unnoticed house. A little figure in a lit window is shot dead without mercy and the house set ablaze. In *Assis Great Disrespect / Bloody Piercings* (1998) the central figure pierces himself with a pistol on the same places as the wounds of Christ. On the cover of the book is the drawing *St. Sebastian* (1998). The crumpled martyr has his arms spread open. Large arrows stick out from his eyes, shoulder, torso and legs. The philosopher of art Daan Van Speybroeck describes his work appositely as juggling with myths, Biblical stories and fairy-tales and distinguishes 'two contrary tracks that are in a sort of continual, stubborn consultation with each other, sometimes inclining to mockery but generally in great seriousness.'¹³ But Nijburg is not just concerned with juggling tricks. His stringing together of motifs from handed down (and autobiographical) stories and images is a comment on the human condition, an attempt to fathom and make bearable our doubts, longings, fears and vulnerability. The main theme in his work is the

symbolic rendering of suffering, which Nijburg sees as belonging to the deepest essence of existence. 'Suffering is our eye, as it were providing us with access to God, the other and the world, and hence to ourselves. We become acquainted with and fathom the depth of something only in confrontation with its opposite. If we were only happy (...) we would completely coincide with ourselves (...). Then there would be no solace (...). Without suffering there is no possibility of really reaching out to the other (...). Without suffering we cannot know reality', he explains in an interview.¹⁴

It is not surprising that Nijburg, who grew up in the Dutch Reformed Church, draws inspiration from the Catholic visual and textual traditions, rich as they are in motifs like suffering, sacrifice, compassion and humility. Nijburg's earlier work already dealt with the struggle with belief and suffering, as in *De Werken van Herkules* and the three-part series *Stigmatisatie* [Stigmatisation] (1996), in which a kneeling figure, inspired by Giotto's St. Francis, is gazing upwards at beams of light. From 2000 he created a stream of pictures based more recognisably than before on the stigmata of Christ, and, in addition to St. Francis, also on the lives of St. Hubertus and St. Sebastian, their expiatory and self-sacrificing convictions, the representation of Mary with the dead body of Jesus on her lap (the Pietà) and the day of Creation. Nijburg wilfully recycles elements from Christian art, adding contemporary aspects so that space is created for other meanings. 'For many people Christianity is closed off by all sorts of clichés. By looking at its imagery in a different way for once, it gains another, new meaning', he says.¹⁵

Stigmata

Nijburg's interest in existing Christian imagery has been stimulated by the numerous exhibitions for which he is invited or which he initiates himself. In 1999 he presented the group exhibition *Van het lam de laatste dingen* [From the lamb the last things] in the Arnhem artists' space Hooghuis, for which he asked painters to respond to the late-Medieval *Lamb of God* by the Flemish Van Eyck brothers. In 2000 he exhibited the series *De Kruisweg - 14 staties* [The 14 Stations of the Cross] (1996-1999) in a Roman Catholic church in Elst and Amsterdam. In December of the same year Nijburg transformed the De Gele Rijder exhibition space in Arnhem for a month into a

Schuilkerk voor een dakloze god [Conventicle for a homeless god]. In close collaboration with Gerda ten Thije and Ellen Grote Beverborg, an impressive 3 by 12 metres mural of St. Francis preaching to the birds was created, showing large woodpeckers inflicting wounds to his feet, hands and side. Nijburg contributed a striking narrow, tall painting of a standing, naked youth, *St. Sebastian* (2000).¹⁶ This saint, who lives on in the apocryphal story about the Roman army officer who has to pay for his faith with a martyr's death, inspired many an artist to create pictures expressing sacrifice and mortification. Nijburg is not so much interested in the violence and physical suffering as in the symbolism of the arrows piercing Sebastian's body. The arrows stand for the aggressive way in which some people look at other people, in particular people who think differently, the way that 'looks can kill'.

Arrows, as well as the stigmata of Christ and St. Francis, are a metaphor for psychic suffering. Unlike the tormented state of Sebastian, St. Francis appears as a contemplative figure. The latter theme was given a new impulse in 2003 through the exhibition *De nieuwe kleren van Franciscus* [St. Francis' New Clothes], initiated by the Franciscan Friar Minors in the Netherlands. With six other artists, Nijburg and Ten Thije were asked to depict an aspect from the life of the 12th century saint who, after being 'struck' by a vision, gave up his riches in order to live in poverty in the service of God.¹⁷ Nijburg and Ten Thije were inspired by St. Francis' preaching to the birds and exhibited two large drawings. In *Blind Bird Watcher, listening to the Waters rising*, a figure is standing half in the water, reminding one of medieval pictures of Jesus baptising people in the River Jordan. *Black Sermon - after Hitchcock* depicts a figure with one arm outstretched, against a background of farmland and electricity cables. Well-behaved, meek listeners appear not to be present among the audience. As though he has ended up in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), St. Francis is surrounded by aggressive-looking birds of prey, so that the sermon to the birds can turn at any moment into a lugubrious stigmatization. His appearance also differs from the traditional iconography. In one drawing he appears as an androgynous, white figure, in the other as a negroid Indian. The artists seem here to be allowing the theme of contemplative seclusion to touch on exclusion. After all, the woman and the non-white race were typified for centuries in Western Christianity as 'the other' and regarded as unequal to the white man. Another

striking difference are the tattoos on the body, which add an extra layer of meaning. A burning heart, a crucifix, a fish, the face of Jesus with the crown of thorns symbolise suffering, sacrifice and innocence.¹⁸ Nijburg's desire goes further than just symbolism: 'I would like to drag the man from the valley of Spoleto to the coming century so that he could once again serve as a great example of the capacity to relinquish foolish things, of compassion with damaged nature, of brotherhood with the least well off, and of his ability to devote himself to the flow of life and the eternal God', is how he expresses his motivation.¹⁹

In Nijburg's painting *Song of Joy* (2002-2005), St Francis appears as a happily dancing, androgynous figure, dressed only in underpants and T-shirt, against a sumptuous background. The pose and the title are misleading. On closer inspection, the thickly painted, corrugated head seems to evoke the suggestion of a battered face, with traces of leprosy.

Pietà

The Pietà likewise occupies an important place in Nijburg's oeuvre. For the *Pietà* exhibition in 2001 in Uden, Nijburg made the colourful painting *Tattoo*.²⁰ Not a classical, suffering, bent forward Madonna, but a Latin American-looking young woman viewing us with a penetrating gaze. In her lap lies a half-undressed, black-haired male figure with a tattoo on his arm. Despite the flat painting and the rather schematically shortened figures, the scene possesses an unprecedented pathos.

This theme is elaborated in an alienating way in the painting *Cold Turkey* (2001). Three large, black electricity poles are standing in a bright orange landscape. In front of one of the poles sits a resigned, naked youth on a cone-shaped platform. A white wad where his mouth should be could indicate that he has been silenced. White doves are sitting on his head, shoulder and knees, their sharp form making them look ominous. The absence of other human figures and the dominant black of the poles and their shadow strengthen the effect of abandonment and threat. It is interesting to see how this picture came about. In the original version the figure is painted lying in the lap of a woman. Dissatisfied with the result, Nijburg made her disappear behind a pole and turned the lap into a white rock, thus creating the reference to the visual motif popular in

Gothic art of Christ on the cold stone, the moment just before he was crucified. It is only by knowing this background that I can make a connection between the poles and the three crosses on Mount Golgotha.

The large quantity of Pietà drawings reveal what an inexhaustible *fundgrube* the theme forms. Whereas Nijburg previously arranged his series chiefly as a comic strip, since 2001 he has been using a different form to express an endless stream of associations. He rewrites and covers with drawings the prints from one and the same Pietà picture, adding to it human figures and colours, each time including new written musings in the form of a dialogue. The texts look like an endless annotation, a fascinating tangle of lines around the same scene: a prone male figure with one or more figures behind it. His attitude suggests a state of dismantling and arouses compassion. The content and montage of texts estranges the scene from its medieval context and places it in our own times through the mixture of figures from fairy tales, Bible stories and banal texts.

Het mirakel van de schouderwond van Christus [The Miracle of Christ's Shoulder Wound] (2001) tells about the shoulder wound that Christ sustains when he falls and lands directly on the pebble thrown down by Tom Thumb. Similarly streaked with humorous and absurd ideas is the drawing *Marie, heb jij het ook zo koud?* [Marie, are you as cold as I am?] (2003), in which the recumbent figure describes how the soul slips out of his body with the warmth and he hopes to warm himself up at the fire of tears in Marie's eyes. In *Come on Baby, Light my Fire* (2003), with the Christ figure dressed as a conjuror, the little matchstick girl is staged, together with a tramp and the Heems Children. In the intriguing drawing *Ranja kringloop* [Orange Squash Cycle] (2004) the stream of words is replaced by a fountain of orange squash spurting from open wounds. Institutionalised religion is under discussion in the magnificent work *5475 wonden* [5475 Wounds] (2001), one of the many highpoints from this series. Nijburg reminds us, not without irony, of the exercise conducted around 1450 by Thomas van Kempen who wanted to know what was the exact number of Christ's wounds and came up with the figure of 5,475.

At first sight Nijburg seems to desecrate the Pietà through his stream of associations that are not devoid of humour, yet the deeper motivation is precisely his

genuine interest in the expressiveness of insistent symbols. Just as a stigma remains visible on the body after it has been stabbed (as with Christ), and the signs of the wounds can symbolise a state of being 'touched' and 'moved' (on the part of his followers), the wounds in Nijburg's work refer to how he himself is affected and touched. His entire oeuvre testifies to a concern with all that binds and divides people. It testifies to a desire to connect everything together and to make it meaningful, in order to offer a counterbalance to the absurdity of our existence and to the weight of reality. In reusing existing symbols and metaphors, particularly in his Pietà drawings, he spans the personal and the social, the everyday and the unfathomable. 'An artist who is still interested in Christianity at the end of the twentieth century has a problem. (...) For an artist who still concerns himself with God either hasn't heard the bell tolling or has not seen the clapper hanging (...)', he wrote in 1999.²¹ That this attitude is now being overturned is shown by the renewed interest coming from the art world in engagement, the spiritual and in humanistic themes in general. 'Painting is again a vehicle for spiritual transcendence', the curator Laura Hoptman concluded recently.²² Last November I forwarded to Rinke Nijburg a press release announcing the exhibition *100 Artists See God*. A few seconds later he emailed me back, not without self-mockery: 'Thanks for your encouraging mail. I didn't know that so many artists could see God. I thought I was one of the last.'²³

Translation Michael Gibbs

Rinke Nijburg - *Piercing the Spirits of Homo Sapiens Sapiens, A Cosmology in 144.000 Images*, The Netherlands, Arnhem 2005, pp 86 – 107.

¹ J. de Mul, 'Kunstzinnige Kruisochten' *NRC Handelsblad*, 2 April, 2004

² Title is quoted from email correspondence with Rinke Nijburg.

³ The form is reminiscent of Pop Artists like Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns or Jacques Frenken, particularly the latter's *Crucifix/Target* from 1966.

⁴ The Targets installation provoked no discussion. Now that religions are entering the political arena, I wonder whether Nijburg will ever exhibit the installation with the gun in the same way, particularly after the murder of writer and filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004. For the time being, the use of the gun will possibly no longer be allowed in an institution with a large public attendance, either here or abroad. In New York in 1999, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani threatened to halt the subsidy to the Brooklyn Museum because of Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* in the *Sensation* exhibition. Ofili uses elephant dung in his work. In December 2004 the board of directors of Madame Tussauds in London decided to cut short the Christmas crib with wax figures of celebrities. The Vatican called the crib, which featured footballer David Beckham as Joseph and former Spice Girl Victoria as the Virgin Mary, 'blasphemy'. The premiere of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's black comedy *Behzti*, about murder and rape in a Sikh temple, was cancelled - because of fears of renewed violence - by the Repertory Theatre in Birmingham after being besieged by angry Sikhs on 21 December 2004. In Rotterdam in 2001, the musical *Aisha* was cancelled after threats from Muslims.

⁵ Cit. K. Feenstra, 'Art & Project geeft moderne schilderkunst nieuwe kansen', *Het Financiële Dagblad*, 7 Sept., 1996

⁶ 'De geketende tekening. Over de tekening als voorstudie voor het schilderij', *Het Blad*, vol. 114, April 1995, p. 10 and 'De helse liefde van Romeo. Over de moeilijke verhouding van het kunstenaarsinitiatief en de schilder' in *Cover-Itch!* Arnhem: Hooghuis 1996, pp. 24-30

⁷ Academy tutor Ruud Peeters once said, according to Nijburg: "There was a time that if a student was making art in a figurative way I would have kicked him out of the academy." Interview M. Westen and R. Nijburg, 6 April, 2004

⁸ Wouter Prins, 'Op atelierbezoek bij Rinke Nijburg', *Origine* 4, 1998, p.34

⁹ Martin Pieterse, 'Hoe klassiek is de moderne figuurschilderkunst?', *De Gelderlander* Febr.10, 1995

¹⁰ *Veronika* refers to the apocryphal story of Veronica, who handed Jesus a cloth to wipe away the sweat on his way to Golgotha. A print of his face was supposed to have been left on the cloth afterwards.

¹¹ See also *Rinke Nijburg*. Cat. exhibition SBK Gelderland. Arnhem: 1996, p.7

¹² His style and the absence of human figures in the room gave rise to the idea, expressed by some artcritics, that this work was essentially about the end of painting, either Nijburg's main concern was painting in itself. See for example S. Postma, 'Lichtvoetig werk Nijburg getuigt van geloof in de schilderkunst', *Noordhollands Dagblad*, 14 Sept. 1996

¹³ D. Van Speybroeck, 'Over de verbeelding van het geopenbaarde woord in het werk van Rinke Nijburg', *Speling*, vol. 1, 1998, p.24

- ¹⁴ P. Verdult, 'Weerspiegelingen en stigmata. In gesprek met Rinke Nijburg' in B. van Iersel, W. de Moor and P. Verdult (ed.), *Onuitwisbaar aangedaan. Over beeldende kunst en religie*. Nijmegen: Katholiek Studiecentrum en DAMON 2000, p. 41
- ¹⁵ See M. Pieterse, 'Kwik, Kwek en Kwak en de Heilige Drievuldigheid', *Het Blad*, vol. 134, 2000, p.10
- ¹⁶ Other participating artists were Grootendorst & Van den Berg, Wout Herfkens, Jan Meijering and Anne-Marieke Nooij.
- ¹⁷ Gijs Assmann, Nicolaas Dings, Otto Egberts, Gijs Frieling, Wim Konings and Janpeter Muilwijk participated also in this exhibition.
- ¹⁸ See P. van Kester, 'Franciscus preekt voor de vogels', *De nieuwe kleren van Franciscus*. Cat. Utrecht: Provinciaal Franciscanen 2003, pp.30-38
- ¹⁹ In Nijburg's lecture 'Laserstralen uit de ether. Over de gevleugelde stigmatisatie van Sint Franciscus van Assisi', held in Arnhem, 19 March 2003
- ²⁰ Curator Marc Mulders selected however not this picture, but some of Nijburg's drawings for the exhibition in the Museum for Religious Art.
- ²¹ R. Nijburg, 'Het nieuwe Rijke Roomse Leven', *Het Blad*, vol. 132, Dec. 1999, p.11
- ²² *Artforum International*, May 2004, p.76
- ²³ Institute Contemporary Art, Londen, '*100 Artists See God*', 10 Nov. 2004 - 9 Jan. 2005