

A journey from self-portrait too self-portrait

By Maarten Beks, art critic. From 'Joost Sicking 1932 – 1986'. Translated in English by Karin Beks.

First of all, let me state that I never met Joost Sicking, so in order to create a picture of him in my mind I have had to rely on stories told me by his wife and daughter, and on journalistic sources. Some photos, and a self-portrait from his days as a student at the Academy of Fine Arts (Advanced Institute), Antwerp, were also available. This self-portrait, a gloomy (and artificially darkened) painting in the Flemish-expressionist manner, indicates considerable prospects for his future. In other words, a promising work, whose potential is completely unrelated to its own future fulfilment. For Joost Sicking, like most significant artists, remained promising all his life. Both his final works and his very first experiments contain a pledge, though always a different one. What secrets are hidden in those photos (from the family collection, and from catalogues and newspapers) and that self-portrait?

Usually a self-portrait reveals more than a photo – something created by a third party. But, strangely enough, in this case the resemblance between the painted portrait and the photos could not be more striking – or more eloquent. The photographer never catches Joost Sicking looking vain, and neither has he himself been able to do so. The photos look so much like the self-image that I can only suppose he did not make a habit of posing. We are confronted with a man who is 'good-looking' but is not – or hardly – aware of it. What is especially imprinted upon the memory is the El Greco-like facial structure. That Byzantine quality may have gained certain Gothic accents over the years, but no matter how much the cut of the face has changed, it is always a 'beau masque', photogenic to say the least.

Does that face also inform us of his ambitions? Perhaps. The man is an artist and not ashamed of the fact. No trace of either false modesty or false immodesty. Rendering outward expression to his inner calling comes naturally to him. The self-portrait suggests this; as do the photographs, even when the hero is taken by surprise, imagining himself unobserved by the All-Seeing Eye. It is apparent that Joost Sicking would never pose as someone else (even when posing) and it is also apparent that this was not a matter of self-satisfaction. But as this face seems so free of inner discord (too much so perhaps?), it offers little opportunity for facial analysis as

practised by the writer Simon Vestdijk, according to whom the rather incongruous face of D.H. Lawrence had an angel's brow, the nose of Socrates and the lips of a whore. Study of Joost Sicking's almost over-regular features does not yield such nice or interesting observations. On the contrary, he looks a little too virtuous, in the way saints were supposed to look according to 50s and 60s monumental art.

That is why the said exhibition on 'Looking' can be interpreted as an act of courage and a fairly cruel joke both.

Dissonance

However, there was a dissonance, one which would always remain in the shade, no matter whether he was being photographed by himself or by others: the eye which was missing, and was never allowed to join in. Why? No one knew, but he, and he was emphatically making no comment and too much comment on the question. If you are really out to conceal something, you may become an exhibitionist of concealment. But in the end neither the subject nor the act of that concealment will remain a secret. Joost Sicking once devoted a complete exhibition to the very deficiency limiting and controlling his field of vision, but which he would not allow to limit or control him. Of course the press, who had always looked conspicuously away from Sicking's evil eye, reacted rather shamefacedly to the 'performance' – if that is the right term. Personally I deem it wise to sympathize with both parties. One may well wonder why a man should feel inclined to exhibit his own 'default', but it is evident that he wanted people to recognize at last what they were unable to find out for themselves. What is more: Sicking cloaked his bad intentions in nice theory. 'Do you look with your left or your right eye?', he asked the visitors to the exhibition. That was not merely his personal way of dealing with the V-2 that had deprived him of his capacity for spatial vision, but also a, rather malicious, method of pointing out to everyone else that their laziness and his necessity resulted in exactly equal ways of looking. With the difference (or so one can guess) that he had discovered a compensation – clairvoyance – whereas they had to make do with their home-made short-sightedness for the whole of their lives.

As our story continues the presence of that 'thorn in the flesh' will be felt from time to time, yet for now we shall stick to all the other things that render the face of this artist 'so different, so exciting'. It is an idealist's face – not a recommendation in every respect – the

face of a martyr, an inquisitor, combining both poles of radical righteousness. That is why the said exhibition on 'Looking' can be interpreted as an act of courage and a fairly cruel joke both. Delicate, for sure, but at the expense of all those people who apparently had behaved too delicately until then.

Aquarius / Pisces

One can read in Sicking's face that he was a man who liked to step forward and testify. And that his patience in explaining things was infinite. Also perhaps that he could not resist being didactic. Can I be more specific? Hardly. Even though some rationalizations do spring to mind: Joost Sicking was born on February 18, 1932, i.e. just under the sign of Aquarius, and barely missing out on the more frivolous aspect of Pisces. Having a calling and adamant convictions is what suits Aquarians. In, or in-between, very many lines devoted to him, I can read how Sicking the painter was always willing, even inclined, to add a free supply of theory. Where his theory on colour was concerned he would uphold his findings with the sort of obstinacy with which Goethe used to defend his Fabenlehre. Sicking has the face of a man who is fond of being in the right. That kind of face tends to be like thunder whenever its owner is being contradicted in a single respect – usually some theory – or not taken completely seriously. I hope you will not contradict me in this respect, for I know such persons as I know myself. Like Goethe (my intuition tells me) Sicking would gladly have sacrificed his artistic calling on the altar of truth, if only another Newton had appeared to thwart his vision of colour. Sicking looks sympathetic yet easily irritated. One might claim that he was gentle and grim. So in the final resort it is safest perhaps to think of him as a man who was always addicted to an all-controlling 'Trotzdem', addicted to the belief that, success or no success, he had to preserve his precociousness as Knight of the Rueful Countenance. His face does not betray self-consciousness but self-confidence, although the exact opposite might have been expected in a person with this type of handicap. A person with only one good eye – though what an eye!, as was said about Monet, for different reasons – tends to versatility. A monomaniacal inclination drives them to prove that it gives them an advantage over others. And was Sicking versatile? Well let us say that his single-mindedness drove him in every possible direction, where his gift for concentration made him wage war against a good many windmills, and he never grew too tired to engage into new skirmishes. Like so many significant artists, he creates the

impression that he always worked at the same painting, while experiencing all those paintings as the first self-portrait in which he could recognize himself.

Was Joost Sicking an inspired conversationalist? All my attempts at getting under his skin through his works and through what has been said and written about him, tell me, that in any case, he talked much and lectured even more. I think – no, I know, that he was a fatherly teacher at home, with his daughter Caro as his favourite conversational partner. The interviews published in the press, are quite informative, especially about the interviewers. They seldom had the chance to get a word in; the number of answers always exceeding the number of questions. They had to be good listeners, capable of quick mental reconstruction or translation, otherwise they would return home, shattered. Anyway, that is the picture those interviewers were usually kind enough to paint of the situation, accepting the blame themselves. However, I am still not sure whether he was a gifted, sociable, nimble talker. The question should really be: who controlled his mind? The lecturer or the conversationalist? Did he produce his comments there and then or the night before? Nescio. Yet something tells me that his spur was instruction rather than entertainment. Had he not been nurtured in the atmosphere of education? His father, the principal of the Tilburg Art Academy, was one of those rare fathers who wish their sons to become artists, being artists and educators of artists themselves. But neither his daughter nor his son, 'nurtured in the seraglio' though they might be, kept to the straight and narrow path to visual art. This may have had something to do with the theoretical contemplations on art, always illustrated with examples and documents, with which the elder Sicking used to entertain them. Their briefest possible detour towards the muse was linguistics and philosophy. Art renders children (and not only children) speechless, defying them to inward articulation, reasoned silence. Never tell an artist his work has struck you speechless. He will be flattered but confront you with the unavoidable question: how speechless?

<p><i>3 + 3 = 7. That is esoteric and, above all, heretical calculating. It is the axiom of the artist in revolt.</i></p>

Credo in numbers

For when artists are not actively and professionally practising silence they are seldom speechless. Usually we are so well-informed about what possesses them because they have been

expressing it themselves. Joost Sicking did more: he also testified to the nature of his inspiration when painting. In fact, during a considerable period of time he primarily painted his credo. And his profession of faith was $3 + 3 = 7$.

That credo is a magic formula, a spell, and so it becomes imprinted upon the mind, like a good incantation should. Initially the outcome, 7, is introduced, painted, with some trepidation – yet never more convincingly, perhaps for that reason – like the formula of a ‘mysterium tremendum ac fascinans’. Therefore it was also possible to conclude – for the time being – that ‘7’ really meant ‘more than 6’.

‘7’ is a wished-for, an invoked outcome, ‘wishful calculating’.

Please God don’t let it be 6 for in that case I’ve been painting in vain. Let the outcome be a miracle to be double at the very least.

All artists believe in miraculous multiplication, linguistic miracles; they never consider the tautological consequences of $1 = 1$.

Do not underestimate those number-paintings. Joost Sicking had discovered the quantitative formula to solve the quality problem, which leaves anyone with anything to say in Artland so helplessly eloquent nowadays.

$3 + 3 = 6$. Thus goes the axiom of the resigned and contented among us. As soon as men start calculating in human qualities and their interconnections, instead of in pale numbers, dissent is in order. Wherever three people are gathered in His name, one more is represented, the Scriptures teach us. So if you write down a 3 you must carry at least 1. On the other hand, if the situation becomes really serious, extraction of roots will become problematic and all logarithm tables will have to be revised. But perhaps even orthodox arithmetic requires Sicking-type transformation. For unfortunately many elements of the arithmetic system which are considered pure gold, are not nicely round, natural figures. Would not the figure Pi and the figure Phi – the mysterious number of the Golden Section – improve by mathematical calculation according to Sicking instead of according to Cocker?

$3 + 3 = 7$. That is esoteric and, above all, heretical calculating. It is the axiom of the artist in revolt. When the sum stops exceeding 6, artists stop believing in their creativity. They start longing for mutations, not confirmations, of the order of things. A painter who paints well cannot count. It is only when counting becomes re-counting that the Sicking-deviations start counting, and that the ends of all stories start to differ from the beginnings. For into any story, which is meant to be more than a tale of pure deduction, the

'twist', the unexpected development changing everything, is introduced sooner or later. How many people are involved in a situation in which two people are looking into each other's eyes? Sartre counted eight, and if eight is the right number, profanely speaking, then at least nine is probably more like it.

Power to the imagination: $3 + 3 = 7$. An anti-bookkeeping slogan in the flag of the revolution. I think Joost Sicking, a painter who could not resist thinking and who derived all his theories from the practice of painting, stuck to painting for a single reason: his belief that the world and even Reason are open to reason. For even Reason has reasons unknown to itself. And painterly Reason will not accept stagnant mathematics in which explosive mutations do not take place along the way. Sicking liked his computer to have a creative virus. He was one of those disturbers of the peace who can be found at the intersections of roads and parallel lines, calling out that the number line is curved. He is headstrong, though in a different way, like the man about whom Goethe said that 'he is headstrong, he is not a mathematician for nothing'. As far as Sicking was concerned, what was true of the line of numbers could be applied to the flat surface of a canvas too. Question: might that conviction also have been grounded in hypercorrection, compulsively practised by someone who was supposedly incapable of three-dimensional perception? Two eyed people tend to believe that the observational system of one-eyed people is like that of Cyclops or of photographic lenses, with all the strange side effects of grossly exaggerated perspective. Perhaps Sicking too programmed his observation on exaggeration. In any case he did not settle for painting like a man with one eye. Quite the contrary: he thought he should have three eyes. Within his system one eye too many barely sufficed.

When Joost Sicking started painting things on canvas which other people jot down on – and heartlessly erase from – blackboards, he proved that he was seeing more sharply, not to mention differently, with one eye than the rest of us do with two.

Calculating and drawing

Sicking managed to convince me. At the table before me is 'Gödel, Escher, Bach', 'a masterpiece without precedent or peer in modern literature'. I open that book as if it were the 'I Ching' and am treated to a drawing in the author Douglas Hofstätter's own hand. A human head in which the brain is replaced by a mass of numbers, grouped into four huge divisions of small numbers.

Together they yield the final outcome of: $2 + 2 = 5$. The subscript: 'the brain is rational ($2 + 2 = 4$); the mind may not be'. Is 'Alice in Wonderland' perhaps a simple report of a holiday in the Empire of the Spirit, written by a rational being? Is painting/drawing related to the spirit rather than the brain after all? Julien Green qualified the heyday of information and automation as 'a revolt of intelligence against Reason'. On that level the oeuvre of Joost Sicking is an insurrection of mind against ratio. An essay called 'On plus one does not equal two' by the mathematician Paul Weiss (published in 'the Neural Sciences'), would also have given him great pleasure. Artists often get support from the most unexpected and respected quarters. Not often from other artists.

Allow me to meditate on Sicking's figured paintings and drawings a little while longer. This much is clear: he wanted to draw differently rather than calculate differently. And most of all: he wanted to relocate symbols which supposedly are inseparable parts of formal sign systems necessitating constant rapid decoding. How to transfer such symbols from one system to another, how to turn mathematical figures into artistic presences? One may proceed in the manner of Winnie-the-Pooh, dreamily fixing on the exterior shapes of these functional symbols and so completely unsusceptible to the express traffic going on in the world of numbers. Pooh contemplates numbers and their possible meanings in his own infinitely slow manner, straining his eyes over their visual presences but failing to see what is behind them. He looks but does not see. When bees arrive to trouble him while he is looking for honey-bees, $7 + 7$ in number – he starts adding them up by way of a suggestive method, while constantly asking himself whether the outcome should be 12 or 22. No other number pleases him, has the right sound to it, or would impress the world. He counts in the way we count sheep. We doze off while counting and we count on while sleeping. That is probably how Lewis Carroll's poem on a mouse-tail got its mouse-tail shape or how Apollinaire's poem on the Eiffel Tower came to look like the Eiffel Tower. The dream of Reason can also breed graceful fairies and attractive monsters.

Often such things are really mental puns by sedate, very well-read neo-illiterates or post-literates who like turning their backs on semantics now and then to create situations in which the monopoly of pure semiotics becomes temporarily possible. An illiterate might feel that the word 'illiterate' looks more beautiful than the word 'literate' since the first word contains more letters than the second one. That is Pooh's way of seeing things. On the level of

unadulterated visual enjoyment – beauty is ‘id quod visum placet’ – much was lost when we became able to read all words and unable to see them. There may even be a link between mathematical illiteracy and a preference for geometric-abstract art. Many people who are not good at maths are so fascinated by the aesthetics of geometric figures that they never get around to reading these figures properly. Maurits Escher was one of these people, as he has told us himself, and by now we know what riches he derived from that poverty. Everyone envies everyone else’s ‘frame of mind’ and for artists in particular that is a good method to get one step ahead of the clever clogs. When Joost Sicking started painting things on canvas which other people jot down on – and heartlessly erase from – blackboards, he proved that he was seeing more sharply, not to mention differently, with one eye than the rest of us do with two. There was also that happy time when he even began to see two things where we see only one. He saw two code systems at once and developed a third one enabling him to adapt system A to levels B and C. The eye expects a signal and receives an image. The conceivable becomes perceivable to an inconceivable degree. Usually the level of visibility is inversely proportional to the level of legibility, but when this suddenly turns out to be true no longer even a blind spot becomes a source of light.

Aesthetics and scandal

But procedures can be made even more complex. Sicking’s letter/number-paintings are interesting as well as persuasive. For they are legible in a provocative way. They combine the aesthetics of undecipherability and the scandalous aspect of readability. On of our eyes tells us ‘it’s beautiful’, the other says ‘it’s wrong’, and if they cooperate properly they will conclude that this is a paradox. Two systems which have existed in a state of cold peace until now, back to back, are suddenly at war. They want to exclude, fence off one another, but instead they are closing one another in. These two statements allow for only one comment: if one is right the other must be wrong and vice versa.

In her memorable introduction on the occasion of the opening of the posthumous Sicking exhibition at the Lambert Tegenbosch Gallery (1987), Caro Sicking quoted a paternal saying which had always stuck in her mind. ‘Letters are social forms. They can be joined in writing. Numbers, however, are asocial. They are separate quantities’. So separate even, Caro says, that $3 + 3 = 6$ was a calculation her father could not agree with. On a painterly

level, that is. Where pocket money was concerned $3 + 3$ never exceeded 6.

If numbers were representations of reality – for that is clearly how Sicking was determined to see them – then the sum of two red threes, both with a long dash in the centre, could not be anything but a red, horizontally striped 7. I suppose that this unsuitability of numbers to be written in italics has also been noticed by the great numerologists. They searched for centuries, after all, for the infinite.

The texts and tokens which Sicking assimilated into a large series of beautiful paintings and even more beautiful drawings, are probably only half as beautiful as he could have made them. But that is not how he wanted to make them. He was not out merely for simple beautification, but also for demonstration. He emphatically wanted to link up two separate systems of representation, and in a way which would enforce constant mutual friction. He did not like to suppress theory completely for the benefit of perfect harmony. The eye can only be focussed if constant mutual interruptions between reading and visual enjoyment are taking place. One can say A but not B. One can order the eye to refer the sensory stimuli to another department from the one usually dealing with these. At this point sign A becomes image, but at the same time one sees to it that the next letter is read – assimilated – in the normal way. 'Look at it, it says what it says', next to 'Read it, it does not say what it says'. That seems like a loss but it is a profit. For the syntax of visual art has gained a chapter. Because painters are actually unable to articulate negative statements. 'Vanishing light' or 'Slowly dusk approached' are paintable up to a point, but 'He never came' may present a problem in a painting without a title. Painters can only gain command over a set of possibilities exclusively connected with word-painting if they resort to a certain innate conflict between visual and written language, like Joost Sicking has done. Instead of resorting to over-popular, facile enticements like quotations or other post-modern devices of the 'Ceci n'est pas un Margritte'. As a man and a painter Sicking was too serious for that.

Van Griensven had found the right adjectives: grotesque, nervous, quick-tempered.

The left hand

On the other hand, although appearances are against us, we would in no way like to create the impression that Joost Sicking,

who had started his public career with a self-portrait, made only conceptual paintings of the 'Art and Language' type after that. He was a brilliant draughtsman before everything else, and he knew it. Perhaps that is why he forced his hand to no small degree.

Although he could draw like an old master he would also attempt to draw like a child. Virtuosos are inclined to draw with their left hands – they are afraid to be considered 'ultra-right'. And besides, these were the 60s. Everybody had left-wing convictions and everybody thought of virtuosity and elegance as Einstein thought of it: 'Elegance is becoming hairdressers, not to scientists'. Against Dufy et al. anathema was pronounced.

Sicking drew like the best of them, even when he was not making statements 'on drawing', even when he was not trying to be clumsy and especially when he was painting. The latter is apparent most of all where his early career is concerned, but there were also other, later periods when his drawing hand was barely enjoying the 'upper hand', probably because he was drawing like a born painter; he was not, by the way: he thought 'on colour', painted about colour, but thought too much of it to be able to think in it. This gave him great force. The immensely potent still-lives of the mid 60s should be especially referred to in this connection. There may still be a little of that knotty Flemish heaviness about them, but they are without precedent. Where is the nervous well-aimed hand to match his?

Contrary to all expectation about painted still-lives, they are done in black and white. But who would ever ask for colour, or who would dare claim that the control exercised by the draughtsman's hand undermines the 'peinture'? However, if you think differently you should also notice that Picasso, who was the divinity of Sicking's innermost thoughts, was a draughtsman before everything else, a draughtsman who never provided more masterful proof of his heroic courage than in his paintings. After all, drawing is the ability to define, to hold sensations in the palm of the hand, to comprehend the emotions and passions of comprehension. Now let us see what was being written about Sicking in those years.

I cite a quotation. The 1987 Sicking exhibition at Tegenbosch' occasioned a catalogue with an excellent text by Chris Bergman, who aptly quoted from a newspaper review (the *Nieuwsblad van het Zuiden*) by Jan van Griensven, of February 13, 1965.

'He (Sicking) does not believe in naturalistic painting. An inexorable but necessary deformation of form has been the result. What is most conspicuous in this? Primarily it is the emphatic function of drawing and the subordination of colour. His dynamics

are close to ecstatics. The grotesque quality of his drawing technique, the quick-tempered, nervous brush technique, the expressions and exposures of self, the full scale of tensions, in short, all have left their marks in the on going battle on the canvas. It goes without saying that charm, the one missing quality, would have been completely out of place here.'

As I read this I feel inclined to exclaim: 'Well-done, Jan!' For if my memory does not fail me, Jan is an old acquaintance of mine, a painter who started writing relatively late in life but whose vision must have been at least twice as acute as that of more seasoned colleagues half his age.

Van Griensven had found the right adjectives: grotesque, nervous, quick-tempered. He talks about painting and means those painterly graphics which are so well-defined in the 1964 still-lives that you can almost retrace them one by one. Nowadays, paintings which for the larger – and often the most exciting – part, are done in pencil, surprise no one. But in Sicking's time this was still considered more or less as 'high-handed sinning'. He was a pioneer of painting with the pencil. His still-lives are fearlessly informal, but their inner organization is so supreme that one thinks of a pre-programmed shadow boxing match between two systems trying to make each other feel out of place. But which, in the end, can do without one another no more than Holmes and Watson. By the way, Sicking's still-lives are not so very still. Something is going on between that chair and that coffeepot, between that table and that cutlery. In another still-life, which is in the collection of the Province of Noord Brabant, that tenseness-in-stillness is at its most extreme. The size is emphatically oblong, all forms are stretched, the table takes up so much room that the other objects have a hard time holding their own ground. Van Griensven was right: this still-life is exploding with inner tensions which all leave their marks, one by one. These still-lives cannot keep still and yet they are so firmly grounded.

He was constantly on the lookout for new beginnings enabling him to paint as (if) he had never painted before. He looked for risks, for that is where opportunity is hiding.

Risks

How did he do it? How to make a still-life a battleground, where all things war against each other? How to change a still-life into an electrostatic generator while keeping it still? Talent alone does not suffice. Constructional talent plus destructive intelligence sounds

more like it, perhaps. The two gifts cannot be added up. That would be about as effective, for instance, as attempting to find out the cleverness of a committee by adding up the I.Q.'s of the committee members. Once again $3 + 3$ most certainly does not equal 6. Still, a new connection might possibly be affected at this point if we introduce a new element called 'courage', or perhaps even 'pathetic courage'. Joost Sicking was always a courageous painter and sometimes I regret that courage which often made him set out on far-fetched quests for things – adventures – while he was actually in the very midst of them. He rarely finished his projects. He was constantly on the lookout for new beginnings enabling him to paint as (if) he had never painted before. He looked for risks, for that is where opportunity is hiding. He laid foundations, practised cornerstone testing, but his unrelenting search for new points of departure rendered him apt to forget the constructions proper. He regarded his 'bon genre' in the way of the Dutch author Menno ter Braak who, when asked for a brief definition of the secret of significant literature, replied that: 'It is in the huge risk of the word undermining art on the philosophic side and philosophy on the artistic side'.

Sicking's over-courageous tendency to confront visual and representational systems, which have outgrown one another, and are undermining one another, has already been mentioned. In that respect the still-lives are as high-charged as the later letter/number paintings and all the previous works, including the paintings on newspaper. What could less resemble virginal canvas (untrodden snow, too beautiful to be marked with footprints) than those oblique printed pages, cut from 'Yesterday's papers'? Paper still stirred by old news. Paper, which is black in the face with lying, over-patient paper requiring to be used a second time, longing for 'other voices from other rooms'.

From '64 to '65, that was quite a step. In some of these paintings on printed newspaper it is as if a colour-blind painter has suddenly discovered colour perspective, as if the sun is rising behind the seven grey veils, as if a black-and-white TV set started receiving colour overnight. And yet: it cannot be denied that there is something slightly oppressive about any painting on printed paper, and most of all if the 'still-life' theme becomes replaced by the 'life study' theme. However, other changes have also occurred. And still-lives can be pressurized or wrenched out of joint. They can be done in colour or not in colour or even against a background of stock market lists, but their relationship to 'new figuration' will

always be like that of a silent demonstration as compared to the storming of the Bastille or the Winter Palace.

As time went by these frantic paintings gained an almost self-evident aspect: the 'alien objects' and the paper on which they were painted yellowed in perfect harmony, gradually in the way of all documents. Meantime this Vulgate edition of 'Guernica' retains all of its shattering quality. Nothing really disastrous is happening on that canvas, and everything is catastrophic. It is simple: things near-to-home are wrapped in 'far-from-home' language, the language of Vietnam and Assassination-of-Kennedy journalism. Pets and children wander about, doing homely, graceful things, but what does homely happiness look like when it is painted against a World Press photographic background? Although Joost Sicking was a happy human being he apparently had a hard time being a happy painter. A painter does not become a Morandi, Matisse or Bonnard by familial harmony alone, so one should beware of suspecting domestic conflict behind Sicking's aggressive attitude in the work environment. What may have contributed to this was his position as a young artist. He was about 35, and was of course impatient, while the art world was excruciatingly patient and, as usual, the 'world-situation' did not look hopeful either. Two reasons to heed Rilke's autumnal warning of 'Don't build your house if you are homeless now' – much less a studio. Joost Sicking felt like most artists: excluded. The 60s had not completely come into their own as yet, and neither had Sicking. He had, however, caught the spirit of revolt. But his work, which was certainly representative of that climate, was clearly not considered representative enough to be exhibited in the most representative places. At that time the Eindhoven Van Abbe Museum was one of those spots 'where it was all happening'. Though Eindhoven may have been seen as just some city in the Noord Brabant Kempen region, it was directly adjacent to all the capitals of the Republic of Art. Young upcoming Brabantians were warmly welcomed there from time to time. Unfortunately these same colleagues had already decided that Sicking was not one of them. A hard blow, for how do you cope with negative statements by the ones you know and respect as kindred spirits? Even alibis or honourable redeeming circumstances in which you can believe yourself become difficult to invent. In certain situations rejection can be interpreted as a distinction and an introduction to the Salon of the Unaccepted who are supposed to be tomorrow's heroes. In this situation no such comfort was at hand. The jury belonged to the same party.

Sabre and rapier

It was a good thing, therefore, that the ponderous and somewhat delicately constituted Sicking found a more robust fighter like Hans van Zummeren beside him at such a time. Thanks to this sabreur Joost Sicking was inspired to take out his rapier now and then and to find out which of his partial friends had become his decided enemies. The battle for the Brabant Biennale at the Van Abbe Museum, organized outside the auspices of the museum board, may have given Sicking a sick headache, but his determination decidedly improved. Eventually as a result, his 'playful action', combined with his 'newspaper work', made him a 'front-page artist'.

I suppose it was particularly in this period that he managed to detach himself from his intimidating role models. Formerly, when talking about Sicking, or when Sicking was talking, far too much was said about Picasso, Saura, Jime Dine, Goya or Grünewald, and far too little about the imaginary discussions in which Sicking would involve these giants when seated behind his easel. Some moments, Picasso, for one, was having a hard time of it, for the Picasso we all know and love, the Picasso of 'Guernica' was only half-liked by Sicking. And he was right. 'Guernica' always was and has become even more like an arrogant, triumphalist bullfighter piece, 'radical chic' demonstrating insufficient understanding of the disasters of war but quite sufficient understanding of the sportsmanlike aesthetics of war memorials and warrior statues – straight from the arena or from some warmongering newspaper. In the 50s and 60s Picasso was so much identified with 'Guernica' and the white peace dove that it was getting hard to take him seriously. This, however, was precisely what right-thinking left-wing people were doing, a fact which becomes even more amazing once one starts to wonder if that same 'Guernica' would be acceptable as a representation of the present-day ethnic wars in the Balkans. War is still not as simple as Picasso would have it.

In retrospect it is very clear that Joost Sicking was actually searching harder for new forms than anyone else was doing in 1965.

Parade

There is about as much resemblance between 'Guernica' and the Spanish Civil War as between Picasso's ballet 'Parade' and the First World War (his first testimony to his political neutrality). Joost Sicking recognized this and I am immensely pleased that he left a

statement avowing his courageous dissidence, in so many words. Those who would like to see a more adequate, modern 'Guernica' cannot afford to overlook Joost Sicking's testimony-on-newspaper. No semi-cubist painting, no dramatics in ceramics, enamel, glass or any other sacrosanct material, just plain black-and-white, come-rain-or-shine stuff.

In retrospect it is very clear that Joost Sicking was actually searching harder for new forms than anyone else was doing in 1965. He would soon rediscover his discoveries in the newspapers – a nice illustration of the Sheldrake effect. 'Neue Figuration', 'Nueva Figuratione' became a trend whose supposed figure-heads are still remembered. The question of whether those people realized in time that there were others around, who were laying the foundations of the structure they had not dared build themselves, remains open. I have seen many sail under those colours – Sierhuis, De Lussanet, Gubbels, Ad Gerritsen, Engelman but also Arroyo and all these other foreigners included in Platschek's anthology – but in spite of all the hotlines facilitating art-world travelling, Sicking was never mentioned. Even though he made several paintings, which would have graced the cover of any new figuration manifest. That woman in red who merges so completely with her easy chair is brand new figuration, summarized in a one-letter word. She is a close relative of Soutine and Bacon, and yet there is no one like her.

Sicking's red-in-white evocation of a woman in the embrace of an armchair had so badly turned my head that I was remembering everything from upside down: like a red splash in a white world.

Metamorphoses

But how does one describe a painting? Answer: by very careful observation, if possible out loud. Yet still: from memory. Let me describe to you the way this is done and may easily be undone, especially if one of the highlights of an artist's oeuvre is at stake - 'Woman in red armchair' to call the masterpiece by its name. Yet, when writing from memory, I started describing a woman in red in a white armchair. Am I glad I had another look, and was granted the timely opportunity to consider those transformations to which memory subjects paintings like this one, and which can also be interpreted as further indications of their quality.

Here is one more example of a disgraceful description of the work in question. Once I attempted to define a synagogue's door in an early-period Chagall to a very grateful audience who, out of

necessity, were watching with their ears. I managed to ascribe the wrong colour to this memorable door. Although fortunately no one corrected me, I changed colours myself when I stumbled upon a reproduction of that painting afterwards. The experience also taught me something else: trying to describe an indescribable colour as a colour is unwise, as it is inadvisable to describe the 'undefinable' colour of someone's eyes. Better start with a description of the highly significant unreliability of your own retina, especially if the colour you have in mind of the retina registers merits, not facts, much less reality. The eye has seen the light when glimpsing those unforgettable eyes, and even after one day the inner eye, still beyond itself, starts feeling completely in the dark: Memory produces an equivalent of astonishment, rendering justice to identity, rarely to (personal) description. Memory may be a chameleon but it can; after all speak the truth.

What colour were Heinrich Heine's eyes? At least a dozen admirers – male and female – have left descriptions. It would seem as if they were primarily describing their own expectations and respective states of intimidation. And Heine's hair colour? Very reliable persons claim it was dark and fair. What is more, the poet was tall and of average height as well as much shorter than expected, but also portly, trim and even skinny. All this from eyewitnesses who would readily, willingly have made their statements in a court of law. A smaller degree of fascination would probably have produced much more objective descriptions so that we would have some notion of what Heine really looked like. In broad daylight, of course, not in a heavenly light.

Sicking's red-in-white evocation of a woman in the embrace of an armchair had so badly turned my head that I was remembering everything from upside down: like a red splash in a white world. That armchair, of tyrannical presence, was completely submerged, because when thinking of the woman I saw red. It is all as wrong as it could be, I know, but perhaps the artist or even a colour psychologist would inform me that my memory was in fact functioning properly. For what is important is that the woman had been there all along, like a negative, but not as a negative impression. She was only waiting to get out, she willed it so. It does not really matter that the memory hesitates between positive and negative, for the outcome will always be a reconstruction, carried out by a function which, if regarded this way, might even deserve to be qualified as 'photographic'. My memory translated a piece of auro-photography into real, orthodox camera-work.

How is it that the paintings originating after this crucial canvas were so increasingly dominated by white? Why did the master of black art start – in appr. 1980 – changing the very sparing red of his ‘white-and-red’ into very profuse white? I suspect at some level there is a connection with that very difference between image and after-image which was at the bottom of my inclination to turn a white woman in a red chair into a red woman in a white chair. The woman in the chair functions as a non-presence, but if you look at the painting too long you may find that the chair starts to pale while she, the woman, starts gaining a human tint.

White – reflection of all colours of the spectrum – and black – absorption of all colours – are well-matched opponents.

Malevitch’s black painting and Zero’ white-on-white paintings are mutually related like the North and South Poles, but as far as the eye and the memory are concerned there is not that much difference, about as much that is, as between a white book and a black book. Besides, the after-image of white letters against a black background is black letters against a white background. Or how about white writing against a white background? Evidently that is the sort of work Sicking may have liked to create most of all. And he did, sort of, although he could not refrain from adding a few ‘fractional letters’ in black. ‘Dear Mr Schat’, is how he begins a ‘painted letter’ to the Dutch composer. But the ‘rest is silence’, or that is probably what it says, white on white ‘Do not read it for it says only what it does not say’.

The shady lady in the red armchair is emphatically calling out for inclusion in anthology. Only masterpieces can survive their own metamorphoses, for that sort of work is a ‘metamorphoseon’ in itself. It can only remain itself if it changes itself continually, like clouds, waterfalls or fountains. No wonder the habitually bleak Sicking is remembered as a white tornado by so many.

Thanks to this dispersing in white, Sicking’s figuration could enter a real state of Diaspora at last. His work is transforming itself – as one title indicates – into ‘fractional images’. In his painted scores the intervals are becoming more important than the notes. In the 60s the unforgettable conversationalist Domien van Gent was philosophizing on ‘alienated text’ (which reconciled the garbled images); Sicking’s images have become alienated from one another by the snowstorm of white blowing over them. There is a painting called ‘Impairment of White’. That title evokes thoughts of an assault against the blank page, an irredeemable sin. Initially Sicking was leaving cracks in the overabundance, now he cannot restrain himself from leaving his fingerprints in the void. As if the

'virgo intacta' is being touched just a little, and feels a little gratified, just the same. Because, or so she muses, it has only added to her beauty and intactness.

At zero point

Yet fortunately Joost Sicking did not give in to the great temptation of 20th-century art: the perfectly monochrome painting. The notion of the absolute purity of the untouched canvas – *amor vacui* – is an esoteric heresy, a sin against the Holy Spirit (of visual art). That anti-human mysticism, culminating in the domination of the painted object over the painting subject kept afflicting the minds, even when the thermometer of art had long stopped indicating Zero. Mondrian tried to avoid that Nothingness when he simply continued on the left side of the Zero in his Plus-Minus paintings. These negative icons might possibly indicate that Sicking was right all along: $-3 + -3 = -7$. Yet it is a good thing that the best Zero works are not constructed from nothing but white, but also from unexpected, highly eloquent shadows as well as from those 'speech defects of shadows' whose picture was so carefully drawn by the poet Lucebert (one of Sicking's idols). Unadulterated white is the colour of iconoclasts. The colour of the Roman Catholic churches which they purified and white-washed. Of the monastic cells whose walls (according to the mystic Pseudo Dionysius Araopagita) contain a greater wealth of images than all the world's painted frescoes put together. The white wall, the white painting, turns out to be the ultimate desert temptation of St Anthony, for that canvas is a screen allowing projection of all the worst and most attractive of possibilities. Pure Nothingness is pregnant with meaning, even with impure meaning. It is negative lust. The critic Charles Wentinck will not refrain from accusing Mondrian. For he, Mondrian, is the Savonarola who purged art of sensuality, and introduced the beginning of a new ice age by doing so.

My guess would be that Joost Sicking's attitude towards Mondrian was more or less equal to my own. At times Mondrian is really very good, even to the senses, but one would not wish to share in the consequences. As to Sicking: it cannot be denied that his work is snow-clad to a quite satisfactory degree, though never more chillingly than Breughel's 'Hunters in the Snow' or Rik Wouters' 'Snow-covered garden'. Insufficient, that is, to wipe out the whole perceptible world, but sufficient for countless Christmasses. Impairment of white has indeed been practised, but merely on the level of the 'tender damage' in Werumeus Buning's best known

poem. Whereas impairment by white cannot be assessed. Sicking's white is of 'a whiter shade of pale', the colour of the 'neiges d'antan'. On this level the hue of the shadow between the white mirror and the sensuous pink surrounding it, especially deserves close inspection.

In 1980/81 Sicking's white was not what it would be in 1984. 'Study on cube' is lyrical geometry and extremely subtle at that, though admittedly it is the kind of subtlety which renders one allergic to more robust visual impressions. Delaunay is truly resurrected now. In connections with a painting from 1971, a landscape in which the colour circle rises over a cornfield by Van Gogh, this fact was still doubtful, especially as the sky, unlike Van Gogh's, is absolutely black – though not with crows. A rather programmed, doctrinal piece, this, contrary to that 1984 cube, which does not permit of such facile explanations to either children or proletarians.

Distant smile

In 1984 the still-life was making an unexpected comeback. 'Painting with vases' and 'Vase with Light and Shady Side', to mention the main treasures right away. The latter work is subtitled 'clay and acrylic paint'. The first piece demonstrates that a painter who tries his hand on clay becomes a creator of triumphant, two-legged things, just like Yaweh. And Sicking too saw that it was good, most probably, although he did not rest afterwards. Not, that is, before he had reduced himself to near nothingness once again so as to fully recreate himself.

I am referring here to his final self-portraits, from 1985. In his first self-portrait, which was also one of the very first works intended for the public, his missing eye had been smoothed away with such virtuosity that no one missed it. And, regarded at face-value, neither did he. Besides, a first introduction to his final attempts to see through himself does not immediately emphasize the fact that everything is present in his Modigliani-face except his eyes. That is why they have such presence – both of them. What is more, this face is all eyes. Invisible like all-seeing eyes, all-seeing like eyes that have stopped being observable, must needs be, will always be. We are the ones who are being observed, sympathetically, we hope, and 'with a distant smile'.