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Henk Peeters

WILFRIED LENTZ, ROTTERDAM, NETHERLANDS



lolita-detail, (prototype) #65-05, 1965, foam, wood and iron in perspex vitrine: 51 × 51 × 26 cm. All images courtesy: Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam

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A trailer for *ZERO Revolution: Henk Peeters* (2015) shows the various members of the pan-European, post-war avant-garde network doing their thing – painting each other's bodies, attacking metal sheets with sharp implements, scorching canvases with flame. The film concludes with the auction of Peeters's personal collection of ZERO works at Sotheby's, Amsterdam in 2001. The elderly artist confesses to feeling conflicted about having offered up his legacy for €1.45 million: 'Such are the times. That's how it goes. And now I've sold out.' Peeters died in 2013, and this exhibition of his early and late work at Wilfried Lentz gallery, entitled 'lolita-detail', dramatized the discomfort of a radical who lived long enough to see the relics of his youthful utopianism immortalized in an auction catalogue.

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aquarelle Z #64-07, 1964, 16 plastic bags filled with water on velvet in perspex vitrine, 52 × 52 × 17 cm

Peeters was a founding member of Nul, a Dutch chapter of the ZERO movement established by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene in Düsseldorf in the late 1950s. ZERO – recently the subject of major survey exhibitions at the Stedelijk, Amsterdam (where the abovementioned film premiered); Guggenheim, New York; and the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin – situated itself in opposition to the expressionism (and perceived atavism) of Art Informel. While he is now recognized as a senior figure in a movement whose recent institutional recognition has been matched by its surge in market value, Peeters was initially inspired by the possibility of an enlightened, rational, populist art. That much was apparent in the earliest work on display here: consisting of 16 water-filled plastic bags mounted in a grid on velvet backing, *aquarelle Z #64-07* (1964) is both engagingly humble (the bags look like ones you'd use to transport goldfishes from fairgrounds) and glossily austere. It's exemplary of ZERO's light-touch; their homespun take on American minimalism, divested of the latter's furrowed-brow determination to tackle Big Themes. Like the best of Peeters's early work it sparkles with a retro-futuristic sheen, the simplicity and confidence of its design evocative of a mid-century period in which Europe's immediate future looked considerably rosier than its immediate past.



streepje-wit nr 1, 2004, cow hide with passe partout, 52 × 37 × 4 cm

After helping organize a survey of ZERO work at the Stedelijk in 1965, Peeters retreated from the art world, devoting much of his time in the next three decades to working as psychologist for the Dutch Society of Sexual Reform. Most of the space at Wilfried Lentz was devoted to work made in the last 15 years of his life, long after ZERO had petered out. The minimalist objects and two-dimensional works dotted around the walls were at first glance consistent with the uncluttered aesthetic of Peeters's earlier achievements, so it was a surprise to discover that the clean, consumerist, mass-produced materials of his youth were replaced by a less modern medium: cowhide.



chiel-II, 2005, cow hide with passe partout, 32 × 22 × 4 cm

These late, pastoral pieces are altogether softer and more rueful than Peeters's '60s iconoclasm. Stretched like canvas and tastefully framed, the Friesian hide of *familie Schoonhoven* (2005) resembles a Rorschach card or (at a squint) a Robert Motherwell pastiche. It was surrounded on the walls by small glass cases in which Peeters arranged long tufts of cow hair teased through card passe-partouts. We might read the slits as a nod to Lucio Fontana, patron saint of ZERO, but the works' eroticism is unmistakeable (a closer relative might be Méret Oppenheim's *Fur Breakfast* [1936]). Ranged around the room, these works of varying hirsuteness resembled advertisements for options in a waxing salon.

Noticeably hairless was *lolita-detail (prototype) #65-05* (1965), made just prior to Peeters's long sabbatical. A cube of flesh-coloured foam is pinned to a wooden base, creating four folds. With only the slightest intervention, Peters transformed this unremarkable wad of stuffing into a sculpture of a female's pinched legs below a cleft. Like Peters's later works, it plays on a male eagerness to refigure even humdrum domestic objects as sexualized images of women (and vice versa: when Humbert Humbert dreams of Lolita he sees her 'recline in dull invitation … flesh ajar like the rubber valve of a soccer ball's bladder.') Peeters once insisted that his work 'must not be artified', and by placing this assemblage of household junk behind glass, he poked fun at the impulse to remove art from everyday life, or to treat objects as untouchable, taboo or revered. The sculpture's latent content and title, moreover, draw a cruel analogy between Humbert Humbert's desire to corrupt and the collector's mania for acquisition. Presented in the context of his career, and his later disillusionment, *lolita-detail* reads like a young artist's pre-emptive strike against the market's assimilation of his ideals.

Ben Eastham

Responses