

Peter van Amstel  
Kelbergen 33  
1104 LB Amsterdam  
tel +31 20 600 4139  
mob +31 6 302 352 06  
fax +31 8 422 69 422  
post@petervanamstel.nl  
www.petervanamstel.nl

Jacob ter Veldhuis in New York  
**Obsessed with American culture**

"A wonderful milestone, another step further"; composer Jacob ter Veldhuis, better known locally as Jacob TV, is far from unhappy about his mini festival in New York. In early May 2007, at the Whitney Museum at Altria in the heart of Manhattan, the only music to be heard for three nights was that by this Dutchman fascinated by American culture. A nice occasion to also present a brand new release with six cd's and two dvd's full of highlights. Too bad the hall echoed so much, that the video screen was living room size. But the goal had been reached: *exposure*. A pretty big audience at the concerts, a two-hour radio program, broadcasts of music from the new cd's, an ample announcement in Time Out, good reviews in the New York Times, among others. All that more than makes up for the occasional disappointment.

The high first floor of the building on the corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Park Avenue, right across from the main entrance to the Grand Central Station Terminal train and subway station, sounds like a cathedral. A granite floor of fifteen by forty meters, high walls of stone and glass. Granite inner walls, granite benches. The location is called the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, after the Altria Group, parent company of tobacco giant Philip Morris, owner of the building and patron of the Whitney Museum. Here, the Whitney Museum, located fourteen blocks to the north, has been organizing performances of music, dance and theatre by Americans of renown for twenty years. For the first time, a foreigner is part of the program in this anniversary edition, Jacob ter Veldhuis. But then, according to the program booklet, he is obsessed with American culture.

02 New York.docx

**the curator**

The hostess of this three-day mini festival, Limor Tomer, curator for performing arts of the Whitney Museum, explains why she decided to present this Dutchman at this bastion of American art. "My definition of what is American is changing, the borders are shifting. Jacob's work is so deeply rooted in American experience, that to me he is sort of a mirror on American art, on American culture. He is obsessed with American politics, American goods, American TV. The raw material of everything he does comes from America. It is an interesting way of looking at ourselves through the eyes of someone who is on the outside. That is why it makes perfect sense to have his music in our museum.

"I came to know his music through my friends of the Prism Saxophone Quartet, they introduced me to *Pitch black* and the other boombox pieces. I thought: oh my God, who is this guy, why don't I know him? Why does hardly anybody know him? The funny thing is, while the establishment doesn't know who he is,

there are a few people who do. A few of the most innovative, smart, risk taking musicians like those of the Prism Quartet, New Century Quartet, flute player Margaret Lancaster. Especially Margaret told me all about him. Then I decided that I had to do something to make sure he gets on people's radar. So I just wrote him this e-mail: Hello, my name is Limor, I live in New York, love you. Will you come over, for we want to do a three-day mini festival of your work? A few months later he came, we met, and now here we are at the festival."

*Jesus is coming* for saxophone quartet and ghetto blaster has been put on the music stands of the Prism Saxophone Quartet. The male and female dancers of the Miro Dance Theatre are crawling, running and rolling across the floor to warm up for the rehearsal of tonight's performance. But first the quartet and the loudspeakers have to be moved out of the corner, away from the walls, to get rid of the worst sound reflections. Quite a bit forwards helps, although it doesn't help much. The quartet could easily play without amplification, but almost all the pieces on the program are for musicians and boombox. Boombox is the generic name Ter Veldhuis has invented for any kind of audio equipment, as long as it can reproduce the samples in his pieces for musicians and audio track. The words in the text samples are important, but rendering them understandable in this ten thousand cubic meter bathroom turns out to be no piece of cake. Tonight, with the audience present, it will certainly sound better, with less reverberation, and more understandable as well. Although nobody is really confident.

02 New York.docx

### **the dancers**

Because it's so nice and close to the Whitney at Altria, Ter Veldhuis is staying at the Super8Hotel in 46<sup>th</sup> street. It so happens that right across from the hotel's entrance there is a large, light green plate of glass in which the names have been etched of the friends, spouses and colleagues of locals who have lost their lives on September 11, 2001. In Times Square, a few blocks away, Ter Veldhuis earlier recorded the words of a furious evangelist who now has a part in his composition *Jesus is coming*: "God kills, you idiots. God kills. Is he out of his mind? What do you think? I don't know... sort of... ha ha ha ha. Armageddon!" Because of "this idea of imminent doom and death and tragedy, in very urban social settings", Amanda Miller, choreographer and dancer of the Miro Dance Theatre, was impressed by Ter Veldhuis' boombox music.

"A couple of years ago I went to a festival in Holland", she recounts during a break in rehearsals, "and there I heard this fabulous combination of sampled sound bites and musical instruments. After I found out that Jacob was the composer, I visited his web site and discovered all these other pieces. I loved the music and since then I've listened to a lot of his stuff on-line." The idea of creating a choreography for it came from the

Prism Saxophone Quartet. "They said: we think this music is very visual", Miller continues, "and would be well served by having a full dance performance to go along with it." "We love the Dutch", fellow Miro choreographer Tobin Rothlein agrees. "I like Jacob's appreciation of pop culture, his music is intricate and layered, it's brilliant. When you listen to it more and more, my God, it's so complicated, so well thought out. But the first thing I hear is this enjoyable love of music, and that reminds me of my friends in Holland."

In the fall of 2006 Rothlein, with the complete dance company, worked on his production *Civilian/Warrior* for three weeks at the Grand Theatre in Groningen. That piece is about what it means to fight, seen from the perspective of a soldier and based on stories, interviews and texts by conscripted soldiers and veterans. "The Groningen staff brought us in, they gave us editing space and time, they gave us an apartment and they fed us. A budget too, a whole crew and production space." This created a bond, it made the collaboration with a Dutch composer all the more pleasant and interesting. And what's more, the themes of Ter Veldhuis' and Rothlein's work are also surprisingly similar.

In the Whitney program *doom, death and tragedy* come up in abundance and in various forms. In the aggressive *Grab it!* we hear the words of a prisoner condemned to death, the somber *Pitch black* features the voice of American trumpeter Chet Baker, killed in an accident in Amsterdam, and that of a frightened Billie Holiday is heard in the bittersweet, sometimes gently swinging *Billie*. Also on the program are the hushed, almost motionless *Postnuclear Winterscenario No.10* and the seductive *The garden of love*, decorated with bird sounds, based on a poem by William Blake, in which thorn-bushes grow rife among the tombstones. These pieces are ready-made *statements*, almost everyone who hears them finds them impressive enough. How to add something essential to them as a choreographer? "Yeah, that was tough", the choreographers concur. Miller: "We had to find a sort of underlying tone, and then pull that out. Yes, there is doom and tragedy, and yet, in each of the pieces there is this kind of finding solace or sanctuary. That seemed to be the real connecting point to all pieces."

In the evening the hall fills up rather well, most of the hundred or so folding chairs are occupied. Important to the composer: there is quite bit of press present. "Provocative, eclectic *Pitch black*, with dance and sax" reads the headline in next day's Philadelphia Inquirer. The New York Times writes, under the somewhat more reticent headline "Dutch composer samples pop culture and gives it a melody": "His orchestral music resembles Jeff Koons in its earnest explorations of kitsch", and "The pieces themselves were bright and pleasant and defied easy categorization", but also: "take away the words, as he did in

Peter van Amstel  
Kelbergen 33  
1104 LB Amsterdam  
tel +31 20 600 4139  
mob +31 6 302 352 06  
fax +31 8 422 69 422  
post@petervanamstel.nl  
www.petervanamstel.nl

*Postnuclear Winterscenario No.10*, and you were left with a New Age-y meditation". And finally, what it was all about in the first place: "Yet ultimately the most important point about this series of free concerts is that it is a chance to hear the work of an artist - well performed in a rather echoey space - who is significant in Europe and not well-known here." And a lot more people will get that chance, for the Prism-Miro combination of saxophonists and dancers is going to tour the States with this Ter Veldhuis program.

The Thursday and Friday night programs lend themselves better to a different hall setup, Ter Veldhuis and the organizers have decided. On Wednesday night the hall was used lengthwise, today it will be breadthwise. In the middle of the long glass wall along Park Avenue there is a platform, seven steps above the hall floor. This elevation will serve as a stage from now on. This means a renewed struggle with the sound, that blasted echo. It was a real disappointment last night, according to Ter Veldhuis, who is also not happy with the living room-sized video screen on which *Heartbreakers* and part of *Paradiso* will be shown later. "Which part shall I use?" Ter Veldhuis wonders out loud. He hesitates between provoking the New Yorkers with a naked woman in the orgasmic *Heaven of lust*, or seducing them with the lush, beautiful *Heaven of love*, with its saccharine images by video artist Jaap Drupsteen. He chooses love, not lust, but in the end *Garden of Eden* is shown because the engineer makes a mistake in the evening.

02 New York.docx

There is a saxophone quartet playing tonight as well, the New Century Quartet this time. A greasy performance of *Heartbreakers* is heard, a composition from 1999 based on texts from American talk shows with Jerry Springer, originally written for Dutch jazz band The Houdinis, with images by VJ Danielle Kwaaitaal. No dancers tonight, but an informative conversation between composer Jacob ter Veldhuis, guitarist Kevin R. Gallagher, who will play on Friday, baritone saxophonist Connie Frigo of the New Century Quartet, and composer-music expert-journalist Frank J. Oteri, who also dedicated a radio talk show to the Dutchman. Ter Veldhuis is resplendent in his bright red jacket, among the unassuming black of his discussion partners. And yet the conversation doesn't catch fire, for the questions are too friendly and the praise is too plentiful. At the end, New Century alto saxophonist Christopher Hemingway plays bloodcurdling duets with Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderley and Art Pepper in the terribly tricky *Buku* for alto saxophone and boombox. Audience attendance is a little disappointing tonight. Those who are there visibly enjoy this experience, which is sometimes painfully confrontational, always miraculously recognizable and pleasantly informative to boot.

## the musicians

The Friday night concert has the most varied, attractive and best-attended program of the three. In the afternoon flautist Margaret Lancaster storms across the stage, hyper-excited, during the rehearsal of *Lipstick*, as a prelude to the forceful and extremely focused performance that evening. Cellist Dorothy Lawson shines in *Tatatata*, and pianist Kathleen Lancaster, hair dyed bright red and clad in a canary yellow, tight-fitting tracksuit, is persuasive in *The Body of your Dreams*. This piece is undoubtedly Ter Veldhuis' most lighthearted piece for boombox and soloist, with sound samples from a television commercial for a slimming product: "fine-tuned wave transmissions will vibrate fat away, no sweat, no workout". But the two final pieces of the evening are among the most grim in the boombox repertoire: *Grab It!* about a prisoner condemned to death, and *The White Flag* about the war in Iraq.

Electric Kompany, a chamber music ensemble with a rock band's line-up, led by guitarist Kevin R. Gallagher, will handle these pieces. Gallagher, as he explains on the way from a rehearsal studio to the concert hall, is interested first and foremost in the sound of the electric guitar, in his instrument's possibilities in composed music. But of course also in the music itself, in the compositions others come up with for him, and in their meaning. To Gallagher, Ter Veldhuis meets almost all these requirements. "I heard about his music in 2000 through a friend who was teaching at the same university as I was. He knew I was looking for composers writing pop influenced music. He had heard Jacob's *Grab it!* for saxophone and boombox, and said: listen, you got to hear this. So I put it on, and within the first thirty seconds I was asking for Jacob's e-mail address. I visited his web site, wrote to him in order to get this piece. Then I told him I wanted to arrange it for electric guitar and we started mailing ideas about that back and forth. The notes in the guitar version of *Grab it!* are mostly his of course, the way of dealing with them on guitar are mine. This is how we became friends."

02 New York.docx

To Gallagher, Ter Veldhuis builds a bridge between traditional composing and pop culture. "Jacob's music gives young composers the opportunity to see what is possible in contemporary music, and to no longer wonder how they can fit into some composing tradition. When I tell people that I play in a rock band doing composers' music, they kind of recoil. But the fact of the matter is, when something is done well with taste, then it will be accepted. This boombox music is not a gimmick, for in that case I wouldn't have exposed my group to it. I think younger composers will see that, they'll see that here's this guy pushing the limits and being rewarded for it. We'll see more and more of this, and gradually contemporary music will be more and more related to modern society. Which it should be in the first place anyway, and Jacob does that very well. That is why I was attracted to his work in the first place." Musicians like Gallagher, flautist Margaret Lancaster and the saxophonists

Connie Frigo and Christopher Hemingway are the ones Ter Veldhuis can depend on the most. They get their teeth into his music, they are his friends and ambassadors overseas.

The guitar version of *Grab it!* closes the three-day Jacob ter Veldhuis mini festival in the Whitney at Altria. Gallagher had already predicted that the New York audience wouldn't be put off by alleged blasphemy and crude language, which are a real problem out of town. This evening, Electric Kompany presents the world premiere of *The White Flag*, to Americans no doubt an emotional confrontation with the madness of the war in Iraq. One soldier tells how he shot and killed a woman waving a white flag. She wanted to surrender, kept walking towards him, and he didn't trust things. President Bush is featured with a soothing formula. The audience listens in fascination and, at the end, applauds respectfully for the Dutchman Jacob TV who investigates the American *way of life* so penetratingly, hitting a nerve in the process.

"Jacob's music just doesn't sound like any other music I've ever heard", curator Limor Tomer says. "It hits you in a very deep place, you know. It is so beyond the intellect, beyond chord changes and resolutions and whatever. He's tapping into a sub-sub-sub-intellectual place, and that is why I love him. I can't explain how he does that, I think he himself doesn't know how he does it. There is no way to know that. It's magic."

Peter van Amstel

*A breach in the dike – the promotion of Dutch Music Abroad*  
*Stichting Gaudeamus, Muziekcentrum Nederland, 2007*  
*ISBN/EAN 978-90-812526-1-4*

<b>Peter van Amstel</b>
K e l b e r g e n 3 3
1104 LB Amsterdam
tel +31 20 600 4139
mob +31 6 302 352 06
fax +31 8 422 69 422
post@petervanamstel.nl
www.petervanamstel.nl

02 New York.docx