

Animation Practice, Process & Production

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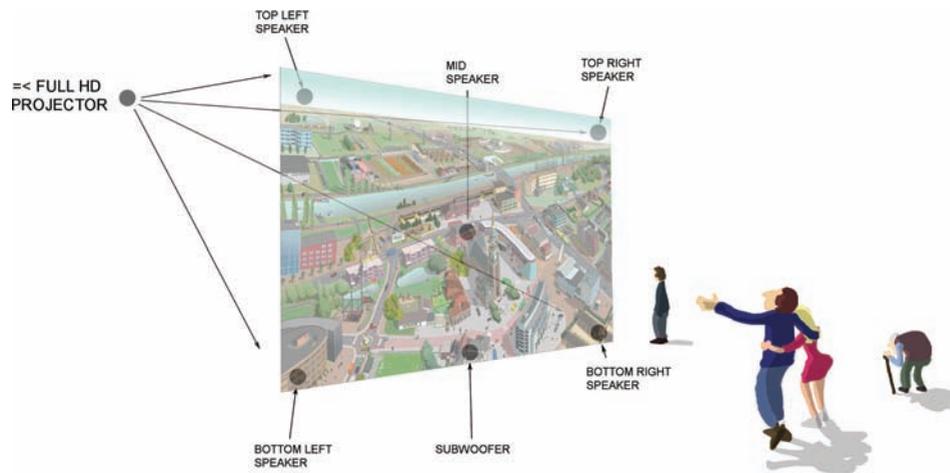
MAARTEN ISAÄK DE HEER

Handelingen: animating an imaginary town

From 1997–2002 I studied fine arts at Minerva Academie in Groningen. During my studies I did an Erasmus exchange to Stockholm’s Kungliga Konsthögskolan and spent a lot of my time in Berlin. For some reason, my professors never really cared that I was abroad. I met them a few times a year in a pub in Amsterdam, where we used to chat about art for an hour or two. I spoke a lot and was active in art and school discussions. After my first year I swore not to paint or draw ever again and I reconstructed my work to take actions, and essentially create conceptual interventions into various contexts. With a good study-friend of mine, I squatted in a room in the academy building in my second year. We started making parodic videos about things that concerned art and the school; for example, for security reasons we were not allowed to use the media classroom at night. So we stole a school computer and made a video about the ‘kidnapping’ of the equipment, just to prove how silly the school policy was at that time. We put the looped video in the school cafeteria for everyone to see.

Later on, we wrote and organized a semi-fake lecture (fake story, real persons) on different types of artists – the painter, the designer and so on. This was parodic and caricatured the assumed

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Handelingen is an installation designed for large-scale, sometimes outdoor projection, which can be viewed as a full and extended image, or may have some of its areas or points of interest as the subject in the frame, given its high resolution and detailed work in each local scenario within the image.

definitions in the arts, and how this was taught. And as a final conceptual act, I organized a church ceremony in the school's great hall. It was a Protestant ceremony, which I wrote together with my mother, who is a Protestant vicar. There was a choir and an organ, which enriched the clashing effect in the context. So, no animation there. But I forgot to tell you that all the while, I was educating myself in video-editing and started to grow fond of animation. I made my first animation when I was about 21. It was a 20-second digital cut-out animation of a dog and a moose ... nothing more. I had no plans, at that stage, to use animation as conceptual art in a social context.

For my final exams I started drawn animation. I wanted to make a series of short animations about a goose. It was based on a pun: Gans Egaal means 'completely blank' in Dutch, but also 'Goose White'. This is how Gans Egaal came to life. The idea was, if you want to make a Gans Egaal film, you have to show the goose, give him a particular direction or activity (for example, riding a bike), then introduce a problem (he crashes into the barrier as it drops down on the beach), and let him choose the most obvious way to overcome the problem (he gets up and carries on) ... there you go. I wrote a formula for his character: it was $0+0+0=0$. The films play on the idea that there is an expectation in stories, and in animation, that something unusual should happen, but with a character who is basically 'inanimate' and not very clever, a lot of time passes, and not much happens, and he eventually does the obvious thing.

People liked it a lot, so I carried on making the series.

Link: <http://www.heerenmeester.net/en/m/ge/ge.html>

The next series I made was in another technique: I digitally cut out video shots, frame by frame in Photoshop. I wanted to make a series about bad things happening in a utopian environment: billboards for a new housing estate. It always seems like a place where everything and everyone looks happy. So I cut out all kinds of situations and put them together in ultra-short animations. The series was called *Alles Wordt Nieuw*, which means 'All Things New' in English and refers to a religious song textbook with the same title. I like to produce irony in most of the situations I intervene in.

Link: <http://www.heerenmeester.net/nl/m/awn/awn.html>

From 2004 to 2006 I worked on a third series called *Waterlanders*. *Waterlanders* was a series of seven ultra-short animations in which the protagonist explodes for joy. Again, in each there is a situation in which a person experiences a 'best case scenario' – a boy collects toys from a lorry involved in a crash, but gets to ride in a police car, put on the siren, and give all the toys to his schoolmates before he just blows up with happiness. In another, a girl has a fantastic day at school, and excitedly tells her father before blowing up in the back of the car on the way home. It is a final irony that the characters are so happy they expire. It is quite a good 'animation' idea, too, as it references this kind of 'death' in many cartoons.

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Link: <http://www.heerenmeester.net/en/m/wl/wl.html>

This was the first time I started to edit my material, but I didn't really like it. I'm not an editor (my brother, thankfully, is) and I'm not a good storyteller in the classical sense. With *Waterlanders* however, I started to use the Wacom tablet! And I combined drawn animation with loops of photographic sequences as the backgrounds.

I didn't really like *Waterlanders*. I tried to tell stories in a fairly traditional way through the editing and animation. The storytelling is basically linear, and I noticed that it seemed very restricted, and subject to certain rules that our television-trained minds are used to. Leave the editing to the editors, I thought, and went back to what I actually used to do with my animations: showing and exploring a situation.

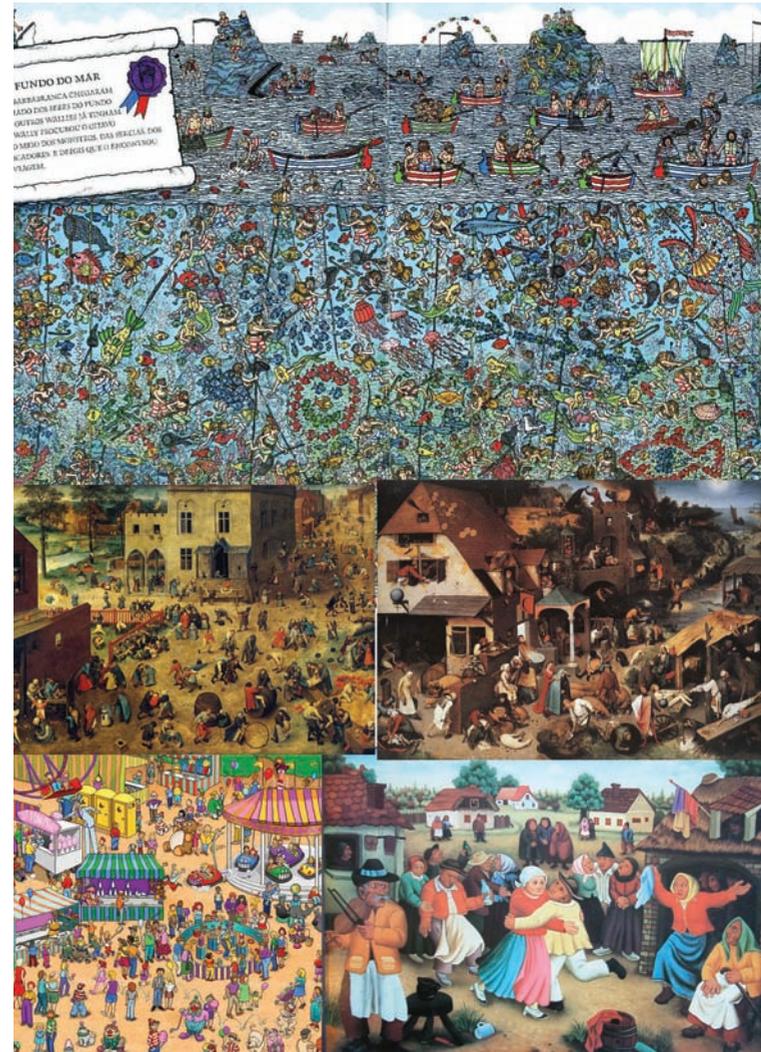
My previous animations were all fixed shots of *one environment* in which things happened. Sometimes I used panning to enlarge the view. After *Waterlanders*, I realized that my creative interest really lies with these kind of images. I wanted to explore a single shot of a situation. This is where I came up with the idea to make a really large 'situation'. In German it is called a *Wimmelbild*. In English, I found the term 'busy picture', like 'Find Waldo' or 'Where's Wally?' or the image books by Ali Mitgutsch. This is a picture that shows a lot of action at the same time, and seems to hide a lot of unusual details, action and characters. I also thought, of course, of Pieter Breugel's paintings and wanted to make a similar picture, but animated.

Initially, I thought of using four television sets plus DVDs to enlarge the area to animate. I imagined that I would stack and combine our televisions to make a square four times bigger. I saw a similar thing by a student at the art school in Berlin. He made a cow walk from one television to another and back, synchronizing the players to achieve the effect, which I thought was a great idea. But pretty soon, after I started drawing the environment, and the church, the houses, the railway and the roads, I noticed that the installation I had in mind was nothing more than 4 times PAL, which means high definition (HD). So I changed my Flashstage into 1920 × 1080 pixels and worked on.

At first, I used a lot of photography taken from aerial viewpoints to learn the perspective of buildings when seen from a bird's-eye perspective. The church in the piece, for example, is a mix of two existing churches, one in Amsterdam, the other in a small village near to where I used to live as a child. The modern building right next to the church also exists in reality, and is also next to a church. It is a typically Dutch way of misusing architectural talent! Dutch architects are blinded by the expectations of their originality and also the restrictions of city planning! My piece has some of this implied critique.

But after a while I drew imaginary buildings, although a lot of them are based on memories of buildings I know. I was already living in Berlin at the time and I quickly understood that I wanted to picture my memories of Holland, a Dutch landscape, a cityscape, with its inhabitants living their everyday lives, and once more, within such an environment, I would make something go wrong.

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Various examples of the 'busy picture' filling the mise-en-scène with over-determined incidents and information, implicitly requiring the viewer to make sense of the image and its meanings themselves.

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Eventually, I was able to work in 4K, which means about four times more pixels than HD. HD is about four times as much pixels as PAL. So 4K is useful, as it affords the artist the possibility of, firstly, creating more detail in a picture and, secondly, enlarging the picture further. But artists wouldn't be artists if they hadn't found a solution to their own creative problems themselves. If I had started *Handelingen* ten years earlier, I would have used multiple televisions, or multiple projectors, using computers to synchronize the video data. Of course that would have been technically more complex for me but not impossible.

Using 4K is super, of course. I had the experience of seeing exactly what I had been working with on my PC as I was doing it, but it is just a technology. Meanwhile, there is 8K and 16K, but really it is the content that counts. For the narrative used in films and television, resolution is not important. It is the editing that tells the story. *Handelingen*, though, is a 'busy picture', more like a painting, and therefore the more pixels, the better! The fact that 4K is a streaming format, I find impressive, but ultimately, it is not interesting for the development of my work.

Immediately after coming up with the idea of animating a busy picture I plunged into drawing the landscape and buildings. I never made sketches for the background environment, I took the first design I drew and have been looking at it for three years. It never really annoyed me. Sometimes I chose to get rid of a building, or replace something, but the canal, the streets and the railway, the bridge, the church stayed the same. Animating and drawing *Handelingen* was exactly like playing with models, like model trains. It is the bird's-eye perspective that provokes a feeling of being almighty. So I played along, only with the thought of creating 'a lot'. I wanted to confuse the eye, but at the same time, I wanted it to be impossible for the viewer to see everything at once.

I realized that I did not want to tell stories through montage, and equally recognized that I might not be able to realize an extended narrative in a classical style, so this was another way of accumulating narrative, but one that the viewers could partly create for themselves. It was never my main objective to make a new kind of animation. I just liked the idea. It was only until I started to explain the project to the people at the Dutch Film Fund that I noticed there was a big difference between *watching* something and *looking at* something.

The film people at the Fund read the 'sort-of-scenario' I had prepared as a film scenario, trying to identify a beginning, a middle and an end, with protagonists that should be well constructed to deliver the story to the viewer. It was never my goal, though, to serve the viewer with television; I did not want them to *watch* my work. I wanted to make something for people to be able to *look at*. Looking at something implies that one does it oneself, and seeks understanding, sensation, narrative, whatever, from interrogating the image. It was very difficult to explain this to the Film Fund committee, who could not see that this was a set of animated scenarios within a fixed *mise-en-scène*. In fact, we organized a full HD viewing of the piece when it was almost ready, to try to raise money

for the post-production! I don't think that this is a difficult concept to understand, but it probably shows that 'film' is still seen in a fairly orthodox way, while 'animation' or 'art' can function differently. In the end, the Dutch Film Fund never raised any questions about the outcomes.

In constructing the images, I wanted to be as least manipulative as possible. I wanted the viewer to be overwhelmed by action in the image, and then become selective in combining various actions and scenarios, and thus create their own stories.

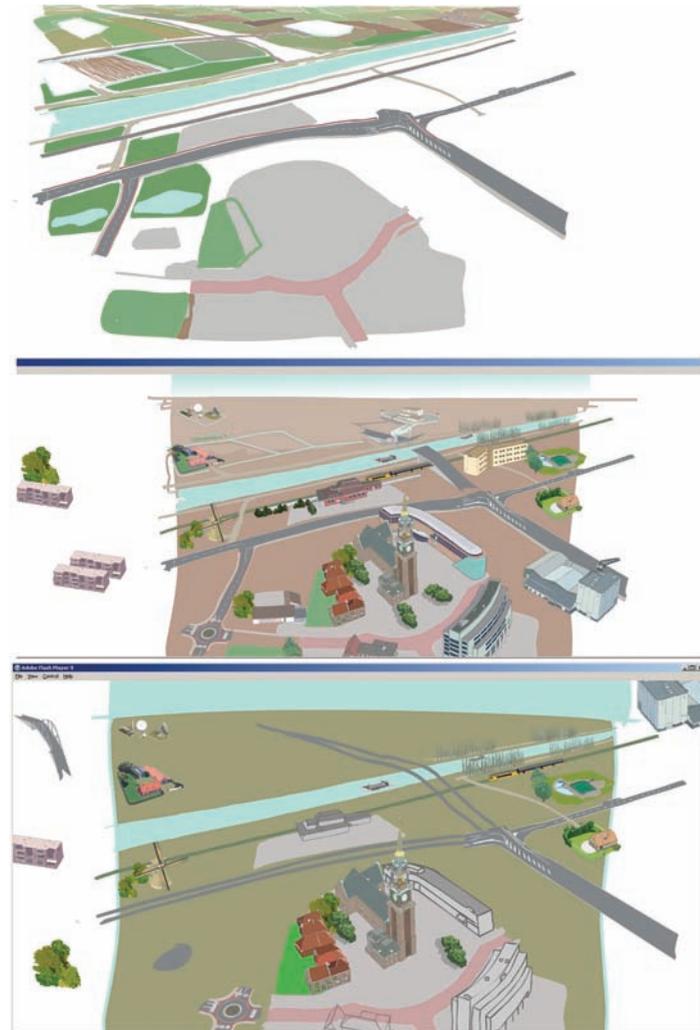
In the summer of 2006, I made a bicycle tour to the Czech Republic. After entering the country, I stood on a hill and looked down upon a village; the Elbe crossed through it. There was an industrial area, some houses, a school, a church, farms, and around it, tractors were working the land. Standing on the hilltop, all the sounds were brought to me by the wind. Sometimes, I could hear the tractor really loud. And then I could hear laughter from the village, a dog barking, a gust of wind, a car horn. It was a very peaceful setting and we (I was there with my brother) automatically started to fantasize about the people down there. I think everyone would have done the same thing. Observing and fantasizing, creating your own stories. Let your mind do the editing. *Handelingen* seeks to work in this spirit.

I took the first design I made. Then, after studying and copying the aerial photography of Dutch landscapes and cityscapes, I started to control the drawing of perspective and worked more loosely. The perspective is never really the same, but the composition does not 'tip over' and imbalance in ways that would direct the viewer to a particular point. The naïve painters also used perspective in a really free manner. It gives you more freedom to create the feeling of overall steadiness, but in fact it is never steady. Also, I think I couldn't have made *Handelingen* with an absolutely correct perspective, as it would have looked boring and fixed, and not served the sense of 'aliveness' I saw from the Czech hill, and which animation freely allows.

The colours are the colours I recollected from (modern) Holland. They are not highly saturated colours, and there is a lot of pastel. Pastel colours are very compromising in some senses, and non-provocative. They are the colours the government uses (not during elections, though). It is the same with interiors of public buildings, public schools, local government offices, etc. They are all pastel-painted concrete boxes. This is helpful in some ways, but a challenge in others. You do not want the colour palette to be banal, but at the same time you do not want the colours to 'over-direct' the viewer to a particular place, story or feeling.

I suppose I started with an odd format; it was almost a square. I believe my 'canvas' at that stage was about 1200 × 1200 pixels or so. It obviously illustrates that my original idea was about wanting to make a moving painting rather than a conventional film. Later on, I started to appreciate the visual possibilities of the common 16:9 format and changed to that. It suited the panorama better, of course, and enabled me to extend the perspective, and implied narratives. I am most pleased with the audio, too. It is suggestive without being intrusive. The quality of the animation itself could have

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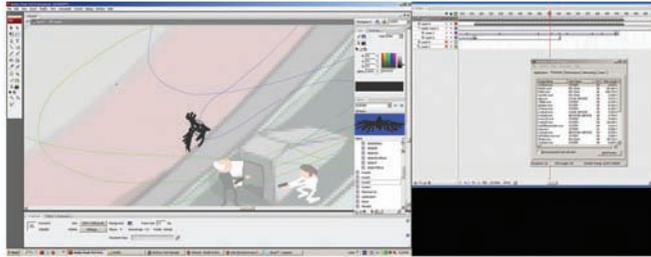
The original design of the area upon which the environment would be developed, focusing on fields, roads, key landmarks and the shifting perspective as the landscapes became more built up and detailed.

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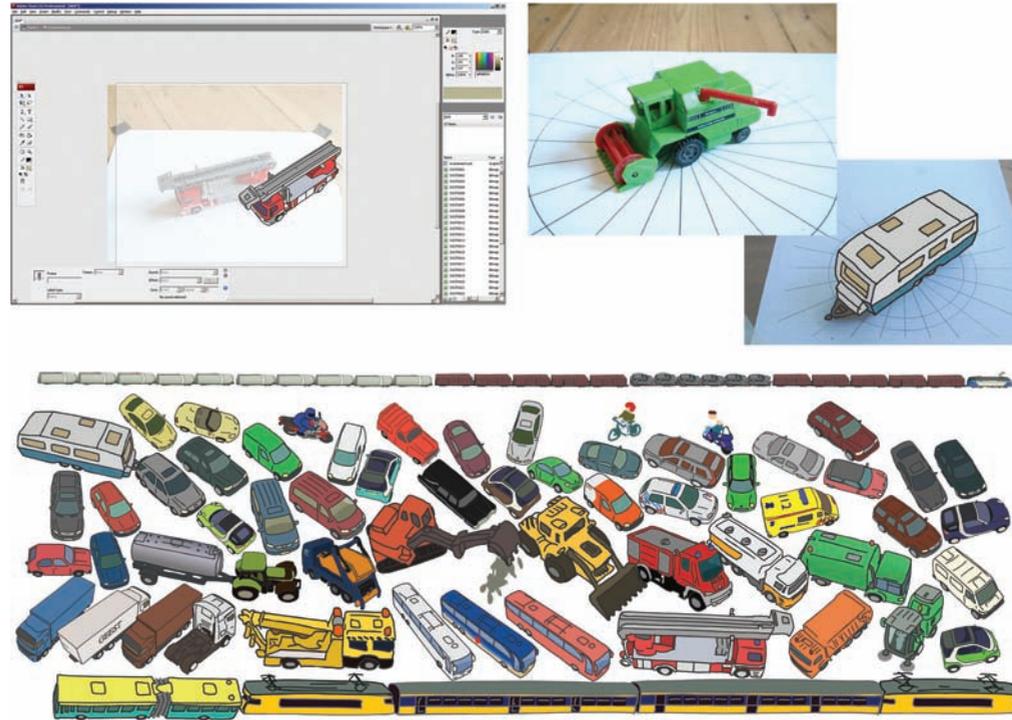
Working from aerial photography and lots of reference photographs of buildings, roads, parks, pathways, etc., building up the extensive detail in the environment.

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The 'animation' in the piece is essentially predicated on moving components within the environment. Bird flight and flying objects were first considerations as the development of the piece was essentially configured from the air.

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Copying a range of toy models I created a range of assets, particularly in regard to road vehicles, trains, etc. The viewer often follows the movement of any one of these vehicles to establish a possible narrative or find a point of visual interest.

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Finally, the people. Even though the people are for the most part 'abstract' they have enough common features to empathize with for the viewer, and enough to individuate them as a person. As soon as they are placed in a scenario – here, for example, in a car accident – then they gain a role and function, and prompt emotional interest in the spectator.

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been more consistent. I started animating *Handelingen* in the summer of 2006. I am not a trained animator, so in the winter of 2007, I bought Richard Williams's *The Animator's Survival Kit* and started to study the principles. A bit late, I admit. So there are old and new animations in *Handelingen*. Also, with more money, I could have got a team of animators to perfectly work out every detail in animation, but then again, *Handelingen* was more about quantity of graphic imagery, and less about extended or complex animation sequences.

Web: <http://www.heikonaut.de>



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