

INVAGINATIO TRANSCENDENTALIS

On Jan De Cock's *Collateral Damage*

by Marc De Kesel

The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up,
and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ...
After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth.
[Revelation 6:14; 7,1]

Imagine that you are strolling around quietly in the beautiful rooms of museum, with the walls covered with works by old masters that are waiting patiently for your gaze. However, your freedom of movement is interfered with time and again, subtly, but quite efficiently. In the middle of each room there are wooden boxes, crates, fences, or whatever, standing “in your way”. At first you use them to sit down on to have a rest and look at the old paintings. But then the pain in your back tells you that is not what they were made for. Furthermore, you start to notice the subtle signs on the wall that remind you of a poster near the entrance of the museum. And suddenly you become aware that you have landed in the middle of a work by Jan De Cock: *Collateral Damage Fig. 7*. The poster had cried it out aloud at the entrance, but as it was your intention to spend an afternoon looking at old fine art, you had ignored its loud message, referring it to the realm of screaming hoardings one is confronted with every day. And thus, in the middle of a museum of old art, you stumble across modern, contemporary art.

As it turned out, this was not a bad way to become acquainted with Jan De Cock's work. For me, anyway, it worked fine. Not only I had suddenly tumbled from old art into contemporary art, but I also noticed old art tumbling into De Cock's modern boxes and those in turn wrapping themselves around the frames of the old masters. It was as if the old Giotto had folded into the brand-new wooden boxes and as if the boxes in turn had wriggled themselves into Giotto. No, it was not Giotto tumbling from his pedestal. What I was confronted with was a “tumbling” that Giotto had invented seven centuries ago, which now became visible in De Cock's simple gesture, in this installing small wooden, empty spaces in these artful rooms. One gesture had folded or slid into another, almost like an “invagination”. It was as if both arts, the old one and the new one, had

folded their edges, folding themselves over and into each other. And for a brief moment, in that “vaginal” instant, that with which our Western art has been struggling since its origin surfaced again.

That, at least, was how it seemed to me. De Cock’s *Collateral Damage Fig. 7*” had something “vaginal” about it, to the extent even that it seemed *transcendentally* vaginal, as I will try to explain below. The reader will forgive me that in order to argue my point, I will have to make a long historical detour, which starts with Giotto. For like no other painter before him or after him, Giotto has inspired the paradigm of our contemporary Western visual culture. And the “images” De Cock produces are precisely about this paradigm. As we will see, with these images De Cock puts us in our proper place!

In a way, Giotto di Bondoni (1267-1337) had an affair of sorts with frames, boxes, crates, in short, with constructions in which he tried to wrap reality in a dense and accurate manner. We only need to think of the famous Capella Scrovegni in Padua: one large box that has been painted inside on all sides. The separate paintings seem wrapped in painted boxes, crates, frames; these in turn contained other boxes and frames: the wrappings of other things. The paintings themselves – the love story of Joachim and Anna, the Passion, etc. – have often been wrapped in painted architectural spaces: in rooms, houses, canopies, fences. Saint Anna sits in her house as if it were a box with a tiny window, through which the Angel comes tumbling in with the message (the Annunciation) that she will become pregnant. Or there is the scene with the Last Supper, in which the participants are crowded into a room that is much too small. In the Church of Saint Francis in Assisi there are the wonderful frescoes of the defiant Jacob, who, with the consent of his mother, deceives his dying father and steals the primogeniture from his brother. It is as if Giotto has tried explicitly to portray the scene in a room such as one could find oneself in anywhere, i.e. in a real room. That, precisely, seems the aim of visual art in this instance: portray things in such a manner that we are under the impression that we are in the very room where they happen. In a more classical formulation: art is supposed to translate our three-dimensional everyday space in a parallel two-dimensional image.

Thus Giotto – and the entire first generation of Renaissance painters – defined the image: as a mirror, a representation. Giotto, for that matter, did not actually represent the entirety of daily reality. The artist still paints unrealistic saints performing equally unrealistic sacrosanct exploits. Yet he paints them in a space that is expressly like the space in which people

moved around. And this space is precisely what preoccupies Giotto and the other painters of the early Renaissance. The saints cannot possibly be *present* in the same way that they are *represented* in the painting. After all, they are saints, belonging to a different, supernatural world. But the space in which they appear in the paintings is the space that surrounds us. The “box” in which they are depicted is a house, a room, a city, like one encounters everywhere.

In these spaces, Giotto rarely depicts *ordinary* people. If there are any at all, the fact remains that the majority of the characters are saints. Why would he paint ordinary people anyway? The art of painting is supposed to depict a *true* image of humankind, and truth tells us that humans are not exactly ordinary. Admittedly, people are mortal, finite, sinful – whatever people used to think about humans at the time. Admittedly, people are “natural”. But at the time, these trite facts were not considered to coincide with the essence, the truth about humans. The truth, that meant that if people lived according to divine law, they would transcend their natural state and acquire a supernatural, saintly state. Saints, therefore, are central in Giotto’s paintings. They guide our eyes away from our earthly condition and remind us of our true, i.e., heavenly destination. From the finite, confined space of our terrestrial existence, they will take us to the infinity of heaven.

Giotto’s contemporaries – e.g. Cimabue, whom he may owe his career as a painter – for that reason depicted the saints in a heavenly space. Not surrounded by blue skies or a green nature, but literally by a golden heaven. In that space nobody wore shoes: shoes are forbidden on holy ground (as Moses learned before the burning bush). Because the art of painting should confront us with the real world, it distracts our eyes from the world in which we live. An image is true, not because that which it depicts is present around us, or because it represents the world around us, but because it is an *icon*.

The term “icon” is the name we use for the paradigm that underlies Giotto’s first works (and up to this very day the Orthodox visual culture). It is an image that not so much wants to evoke a presence (i.e. *represent* something), but want to guide us away from what is present here and now, in order to take us to other, higher regions. The fact that an icon is capable of doing so, is because the icon presupposes us to be images ourselves. We are “the image of God”, science (i.e. theology) at that time taught people. But, it adds, we have made a serious mess of our being God’s image.

Hardly had we been created, living a “beautiful” life in paradise, ignorant of suffering and death, we, sinful humans, at once defiled our image. We were severely punished for that. We became the “ordinary”, unsteady, somewhat miserable mortals we are so familiar with. At the same time God gave people the Law, which was to enable us to establish a just relationship with Him. When that turned out to be ineffective, He intervened in person. God became a human being himself. The Ghost became “flesh”. The Immortal became a mortal being who died the death of human beings. In this way He delivered us from our mortality and “carnality”. We are referring here to the Incarnation, the embodiment of God in the flesh of Christ, which is directly linked to Christ’s Resurrection, Christ’s rising from the dead. Through the Incarnation, human mortals could resume the immaculate immortal body that had originally been created for them.

Before the thirteenth century, the Incarnation had been considered from a *Neoplatonic* view, i.e as an “*emanatio*”. In that view, God was an inexhaustible, incessantly overflowing “source from which the good welled up”. This idea actually provided a model of reality, or, as it used to be called, creation. All layers of reality were pervaded by this excessive goodness: the creatures of superior intelligence (angels) generated those of lower intelligence (humans). The lowest in this rank was considered matter. But as even the lowest level was an “emanation” (an incarnation) of God, matter, too, reflected God’s image.

The painterly image belonged to the material level. It was therefore transient, devoid of “spirit”; as such it could deceive and even ruin people. But if the image was the result of a righteous, saintly creative process and if it was contemplated from a proper, holy point of view, the material image would reveal the emanation of God. And the icon exemplified *par excellence* how God had incarnated into the material level. The icon therefore showed the finest qualities of matter. Of course, it was a perishable piece of wood, but the beauty of its painted surface reflected the eternity of the imperishable heaven. Thus everyone contemplating the icon was indeed able to transcend earthly life, or even return earthly life to its heavenly destination.

Cimabue – and even Giotto – set the scene of Christ’s Crucifixion in an unearthly, heavenly space. On the cross – the symbol *par excellence* of the Incarnation – they depict a Christ in all His glory. The material world, death, finiteness, vanity, sin: all these spiral upward towards God. And yet in these paintings one already notices the change that will come to prevail in the Early Renaissance. The glorified body of Christ at the cross is also visibly that of a human being, suffering, lethally wounded, dying. The

glorified Christ is replaced by an endless variety of tormented, gruesome scenes of Christ crucified.

Something in our Western iconography has changed here and its importance can hardly be overestimated. In that change the paradigm that dominates our visual culture up till this very day was born: the paradigm of representation. As the fourteenth century drew to a close and a new century dawned the Incarnation – then the term used to refer to the essence of reality – is no longer merely depicted as a reference to heaven, i.e. a reference to *whereto* the Incarnation will lead us, but also and primarily as a reference to our terrestrial life, to that *in which* God had incarnated: the world as it presents itself to us. That change may seem subtle, but it was the basis of a new visual paradigm: the paradigm of representation.

The extremely complex history of this change of paradigm is hard to outline here in short. That the change came about has to do with the fact that the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation devaluated, and that in turn has to do with Aristotelian philosophy becoming a predominant influence in theology in the thirteenth century. Thomas Aquinas, e.g., no longer considered the essence of things an emanation/image of God, but rather a relatively autonomous, “free” potential, a force which allowed things to become what they are *without His intervention*. Thus reality ceases to be an image, as it was in Christian Neoplatonic philosophy) and becomes a “physical” entity, like in Aristotelian philosophy. It becomes a “ΝβΦ4Η” (physis), or as Thomas translates this Aristotelian term, a “natura”: reality as it “operates” and unfolds itself.

The doctrine of emanation received more nasty (and possibly the final) blows from the nominalistic reaction against Thomism. William of Ockham and other fourteenth-century nominalists rejected the concept of God incarnated in favour of a sovereign God of the will: a voluntary God who is no longer confined to a rationally layered structure of a reality that is His emanation. This God enjoyed an absolute – in our opinion even absurd – freedom to do as He pleased. He could therefore incarnate in the most unusual, even “fantastic” matter. Material objects no longer needed to shine with the lustre of heaven, i.e. things no longer had to bear witness to a divine origin. Precisely the raw, abject materiality attested to God’s power of incarnation. God’s divinity was now measured with the extent to which he could lose Himself (incarnate) in the most ungodly matter and in a disgraceful death. This view led to an apotheosis of cruelty in the depiction of the Crucifixion. In the fifteenth and sixteenth century people continued to believe that humans are the image of God, but this image reveals itself in a state in which human beings are entirely cut off from

God (and from humanity for that matter). That is why we see so many almost obscene depictions of Christ martyred, dying or dead. In Christ's blood that flows, in the horrible wounds, in His clouded eyes, in His mouth open with exhaustion, it is revealed how far God's incarnating grace extends.

Yet not these "realistic crucifixions" were the prime base for a new visual paradigm. The origin of our realism – or rather, that which we, who owe so much to the paradigm of representation, have come to *designate* realism – is to be found in a more trite and formal fact: in the changing space in which the sacrosanct (the true) happens. And in this respect Giotto was of major importance.

Indeed, in Giotto's paintings we do not yet encounter realistically cruel crucifixions. Though we do see a tormented, dying body, its dignity and serenity still bear witness to the imminent glorification. Moreover, the scene is always depicted against a golden – heavenly – background. There is one Crucifixion by Giotto with a background of a blue – terrestrial – sky, yet that sky is roaming with angels from heaven.

The Crucifixion is actually the only scene from the story of the Incarnation which Giotto does not situate in a natural space. All other events are explicitly depicted within our terrestrial space. The Incarnation has happened *here*, in rooms we walk in and out of every day. That, precisely, is central in Giotto's frescoes. The Incarnation is incessantly proceeding in the *now*, in our concrete, everyday human world. In short: not in a supernatural, but in our natural world.

In that sense Giotto is not a precursor, but a real exponent of the Renaissance. The "grammar" this culture uses, seamlessly splices the divine and the human. Our everyday reality is the place *par excellence* in which God incarnated becomes "visible". The focus on the divine starts to coincide with a focus on our concrete, terrestrial world. As before, an image that does justice to its qualities as an image, is supposed to be a display of the glory of the Creator, but it no longer needs to distract our attention from the earthly in order to focus our eyes on the heavenly, like the icon used to do. On the contrary: the place to meet God is here on earth. Here, in the boldness of nature, the divinity of God is fully present, because this divinity has incarnated in our material world. But no monotheist religion – not even Renaissance Christianity – can conceive that a mere image can cause God to be present. "To honour God", the image must therefore represent our banal, concrete reality in which He has incarnated.

Take e.g. *Pentecost*, one of Giotto's works in the National Gallery in London. Maria and eleven Apostles are crammed in an all too small, closed room, the Holy Ghost descending like a baptism of fire. At first sight, the rendering of the crammed room may seem clumsy or primitive. But the painter's skill is irrelevant. Precisely because the boundless Holy Ghost pervades the room, it seems to explode. What Giotto wants to show, is that the divine is present *here and now*, in *our* rooms, in houses and streets *like ours*. It is our world that is "bursting" with God's glory. And therefore the artist also expressly depicts "unholy" human beings outside the closed "box", emphasizing the earthy location of the box in which the holy fire is burning. These people are not looking up, searching for heaven. Their gaze is not drawn upward by a "stairway to heaven" (like an icon used to function). They are watching a *secular* setting, and that is probably the subject of their conversation, as they search to meet the eyes of their companions – and ours.

In the case of Giotto, the secular space still provides the subject matter for his paintings. The artist explicitly – in my view all too explicitly – shows us rooms, houses, halls and public squares. His paintings are as it were a spyhole that allows us to glance into these. A century later secular space is no longer a subject matter, not because it is absent, but simply because it has become *omnipresent*. The painting even starts to coincide with space. It literally offers a view of the world. It has become a window onto a space that is entirely like the space in which the window has been hung. The image finally becomes representation.

A decisive factor in this evolution was the discovery of the *linear* perspective c. 1420-1430 by Brunelleschi, Van Eyck, Alberti and other artists. The pictorial space is now constructed with the sole aid of *straight* lines that converge in a *single* point, which adds to this space an infinite, continuous and homogenous dimension. Note that this space is different from that which we see with our own eyes. As we see with *two* eyes, our mind constructs a spherical – and therefore closed, finite – space. In classical antiquity the perfect line was the circle. The universe was considered a sphere ("sphaira" or "ball"). For painters this spherical surface provided a model of a perspectival view. The linear Renaissance perspective, however, constructs space from a *single* point; the pictorial plane therefore becomes an open, infinite space. The universe remains spherical, but "every point from this sphere is the centre" (as Pascal will say later) and the perfect line is now a straight line that ends only as it approaches infinity. Our view of reality is supposedly defined by these

straight, infinite lines, which extend our visual field to an infinite *flat* surface that can be constructed from every point in space – a point which becomes the centre of that space.

The discovery of linear perspective was not merely inspired by the desire to improve the technique of painting, but mainly by *theological* motives. For this single vanishing point – the point situated in the endless depth of the image in which all lines converge – what else can it be than the point where the one and only God was when he imagined reality before He created it? Certainly God did not dash off His creation at random. The infinite omniscient God had a perfect image ready of what He was about to create, an image that comprised the rational unity of the entire universe. The human image of the universe, on the contrary, lacks this unity. Our view is simply too restricted, too finite, too much blurred by sinful desire. But divine providence, it was argued at the time, has compensated this defect. We are able to construct a view of the world, relating to the one point in which all lines converge. There, in this point, situated somewhere in *infinity*, we *finite* mortals are able to sense the place from which God watches the world and shapes the world. And behold, if we construct our image departing from this point, the two-dimensional space that results, is surprisingly like the three-dimensional space which is our usual abode. The image constructed by the painter consequently provides a view of true reality: our terrestrial, concrete reality, which as such bears witness to God's Incarnation.

The idea of the Incarnation – the central concept of the Renaissance – has thus been defined in *formal* terms. The point from which the infinite God views the world, is incarnated in the point from which finite humans are able to construct a “realistic” image of the world. Humans, of course, cannot see with the eyes of God – that is too absurd an idea to contemplate – but the human view of reality is considered to be part of the view in which reality itself resides. That the human image is “realistic”, should be understood in this sense: it is based upon the essence of reality itself, i.e. on the creative view of God, which is the basis of all that is. In that same sense, the image is also a “scientific” image. The painter *knows* what he paints. In Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* “science” can trace every single constituent, every flower, every plant, every stalk of grass. Van Eyck does not simply paint random objects: he paints reality “as it is”, i.e. as it has been created by God, one species after another. Likewise, it is not merely chance that the vanishing point, i.e. the point from which the painting unfolds, coincides with the place of the Incarnation, namely where the Holy Ghost descends in the guise of a dove: at the top of the central

“natural” lower panel, close to the “supernatural” upper panel. The place is actually situated on a straight line from God to the Mystic Lamb, halfway the Dove and the Lamb – exactly at the place of the Incarnation. Van Eyck’s altarpiece is one of the first successful attempts to apply the geometrical perspective. It is a “scientific” illustration that both with regard to form and content effectively succeeds to summarize the contemporary paradigm of truth in an overall image. In that sense it is a perfect scientific and realistic representation of the prevailing concept of reality.

To show that the divine, eternal, infinite truth has incarnated into our terrestrial, transient, finite world, the painter no longer has to draw the attention to human space, to rooms, squares, churches, palaces that appear like “boxes” on walls or panels. During the High Renaissance these walls and panels themselves become the *perfect* “boxes”. But we no longer notice that they are boxes because the space they suggest looks the same like the space in which they have been hung. In his paintings Giotto still showed reality in clearly separate spaces, behind fences that were indeed obviously fences. One could still see that they housed a truth that only *miraculously* (through the Incarnation) had appeared there. Now the fences become perfect frames – perfect in the sense that they are self-effacing. They become windows onto the world, windows that have been constructed in such a way that we do not look *at* them, but *through* them. They become mirrors, “images” that have no other purpose than to be images that become invisible while we look at them.

The Renaissance representation emphasizes more strongly the image than the icon does. It presupposes a more radical presence of God (Incarnation) in our earthly world. God has incarnated into our world to such an extent that His image coincides with it. Where there is nothing divine or saintly, where the image only represents that which is visible outside the image: that is the best place to depict God. A purely secular image, devoid of God, thus becomes the only “religious” image that the religion of Incarnation now allows.

The Reformation had no scruples about the logical consequences. The iconoclasm during the second half of the sixteenth century proved the seriousness of the ban on images in religious matters. In this way it proves, *a contrario*, the finite triumph of the paradigm of representation. If the image indeed represents that which is present outside the image, then by definition God is outside the image. In the end, in Protestant countries the visual culture became almost exclusively secular, even in the churches.

Even if the subject is actually religious, Protestant painters mainly depict scenes from middle-class life that hardly bear witness to the idea of the Incarnation.

No longer portrayed, or rather, in that logic, *perfectly* portrayed, the Incarnation will finally disappear altogether. Its place, i.e. its abode in our world, is increasingly reduced to the sphere of the strictly personal. From now on, we will encounter it only in the faith that resides in the soul, and the soul, for that matter, becomes increasingly ethereal. It becomes locked up in the sphere of the private; in the public realm – where culture is made – it loses its importance. Representation, as the perfect image of the religion of Incarnation, will deal the final blow to religion, precisely because it is perfect.

Of course there was also the Counter-Reformation, which emphatically declined to break with the visual culture of the Renaissance and cried for ever larger vistas of heavenly bliss. But the bombastic visions of supernatural triumphs betray in fact that the truth they claim – God's Incarnation – has become detached from the earthly even in the Roman world. Despite the aura of heavenly glory, the Baroque images betray that the Incarnation is fading. The Baroque paintings are hollow images that in a certain sense prepare for a culture with images that only represent that which is present. The Baroque "box" with which the Counter-Reformation thought it could save God incarnated, was actually its coffin. Undeniably a magnificent gold and marble box, but a box filled with death: God's amazing box.

As the modern age dawns in the seventeenth century, the Incarnation, which had been the paradigm of our culture for centuries, gradually but irreversibly loses its impact. Christian religion, founded on the Incarnation, has never really recovered from this blow. However, the paradigm of representation, which had equally been forged on the anvil of the Incarnation, continues to determine the grammar of our visual culture.

The icon had drawn our eyes from that which is visible to that which is invisible (God's Incarnation). The Renaissance had changed that view drastically: only in that which is directly visible and in its flat representation were we able to see the eternal God incarnated. Because of that, the visible world acquired an *infinite* dimension. That dimension remained after the God incarnated had died. Then, too, an infinite world was left for us to represent. Like the now deceased God had once made a representation of the world for himself before creating it, we approach the world from the model (representation) we make of it. What is more, to

produce these representations we do not merely seek inspiration in the essence of things, i.e. we do not approach reality as it “essentially” is. We ignore the “essence” and treat reality like a representation. We have excised the soul (the essence) from the world and have reduced it to a vast domain of representation that no longer accept the laws of some or other essential presence.

With Heidegger we could call this the condition of the modern or postmodern technique. This technique presupposes a world that consists of representations without reference to any presence, which are therefore entirely at the mercy of our manipulative powers (i.e. our technique). At the time of the Renaissance, the artist could still claim that he showed things themselves. In that which he showed the essence of things and that which was at the origin of this essence were supposedly present: the creative God. The phrase “the death of God” expresses that this essence has become baseless, that there is nothing behind things, that, in short, there is no essence. Contemporary references to “virtual reality” or to “a visual culture that is out of hand” in fact express the very primacy of representation, a representation that can no longer be linked to any essential presence.

Actually, the representation now represents nothing but representations. It seems as if we have come full circle. But surely this situation implies that representation is no longer a category, a paradigm? Can we still use the concept of representation and the corresponding grammar to deal with the problems of our contemporary sophisticated visual culture? Do we not urgently need a new visual paradigm? What does the term representation still mean if it only represents representations? As every reference to a presence is lacking and presence and representation can no longer be distinguished, it seems as if we had parted with the logic and concept of representation. Furthermore, is the concept not a typically *modernist* concept that proves inadequate to cope with the problems of our *post-modern* era? Maybe we have already found better alternatives with concepts like “simulacrum”, “body”, “transit”,... in the works of Baudrillard, Deleuze, Perniola, and other authors?

This is not the place for a critical scrutiny of these new paradigms. The difficulties and the range of the problems involved are too overwhelming. Furthermore, the concepts themselves are the subject of heated controversies. Yet, it is feasible – and within this context extremely interesting – to dwell upon the obstinacy with which Jan De Cock holds on

to the paradigm of representation. Indeed, his work abounds with references to modernist architecture and modernism. Furthermore, contrary to other contemporary artists, Jan De Cock does not present his work as a *Jenseits* of modernism – beyond modernism – and, consequently, beyond representation. The work may not exactly operate *inside* the paradigm of representation, but rather in its *margin*, but it certainly does not move *beyond* it.

That is certainly true for the work that so subtly stood “in the way” when I strolled about the Museum of Fine Arts. The wooden boxes and crates are indeed representations, more in particular representations of the museum itself in which they have been installed. In that sense they “repeat” the modernist representative gesture which itself led to the creation of the phenomenon of the “museum”. For the museum is simply a “box” that is used to present representations. And as these representation are not presented where they originally belong, that implies that they *represent*. De Cock’s boxes repeat the “box” of the museum in which they are installed, but they are empty, devoid of content. In that sense the boxes are *transcendental*. They represent the museum *formally*: as a frame that can only function if it withdraws inside its own transcendental twilight and never endorses a “content”. The frame is intended *not to be seen as such*, but to make other things visible. Because of this iterative aspect, the space of the museum folds inside: the museum space becomes something *inside* the museum. In the representation the representational device itself is folded inside – invaginated. It therefore functions as a frozen wave or a fossilized vaginal fold, which disturbs the process of representation itself. The space, in which the public normally moves about freely now becomes something we “collide” with, something that restricts our elbow-room, hampers our movements. In a broader sense: normally we move *inside* the representational space (and the fact that our culture has become a culture of the image only intensifies our awareness of this fact), but now we find ourselves *opposite* this space, in danger of colliding with it.

Folding the representational space inside itself: that is precisely what *Collateral Damage* seeks to achieve. And the space it uses to achieve this goal is often modernist, i.e. representational. If it is not a museum (like in *Fig. 7*), it may be a modernist bank building, like in *Fig. 3*. The work consists of a number of rooms from a building from the 1960s. It is crammed with boxes and fences, which in this instance fill the surface of the space. It is as if the work is a sort of archeological site, a neat stage setting of an excavation that reveals the foundations and base structure of a modernist building – and of modernism and representation *tout court*. In

short: the result of an archeology of modernist representation, represented in an exquisite representant of modernism. Whereas the boxes and fences stood “in the way” in the museum, here they are quite easily accessible. The archeological sites are merely represented: they are presented *in front of us*, we cannot enter *into* them. In each room there is even a security officer whose task it is to watch that no one dares to cross the “border of the representation” and enter the site.

The latter is not merely a detail: once more it is a variant of a constant in De Cock’s oeuvre. The public is expressly kept outside the work, as if we are not *allowed* to enter it, as if we are forced to consider the work not merely inaccessible, but a definite obstacle. The way in which the work folds the representational space in itself, like an “*invaginatio*” has an important consequence, for this gesture reveals a fact the representational logic tried to hide: we, as the subject of the representation, are by definition *always* outside the representational space. The place from which we relate to the transformed, representational universe, does *not* belong to that universe. That place is *nowhere*. Furthermore, the strict logic of the representation will always lie in this regard – even with respect to ourselves – as each representation will time and again try to hide this fact.

The paradigm of representation had its origin in God incarnated. If there is still a place where we can feel the presence of this God (despite his death), it is precisely here. We relate to this world that has been reduced to a mere representation in exactly the same way that God related to it as he imagined the world before He created it, i.e. we view this world from the same place. God may be dead, but we are still observing the world from the same place. But we pretend to ignore this fact, i.e. we repress it from our minds, because in matters that concern its foundations, modernism cannot allow any references to God, even to a God that is dead.

The paradigm of representation was accepted when we were able to relate the representation to the vanishing point: the point from which God imagined the world before he created it. This technique enabled us to create realistic representations, i.e. it guaranteed us representations that are anchored in reality. A *finite* representation of reality was thus certain to relate to the point from which the *infinite* God observed us creatively (in the “hard”, Christian sense of the word) and sustained us, along with the entire reality.

And yes, God died, but we continued to observe the world, to look at it as a representation. That representation, of course, no longer had an ontological foundation, but all the same, we continued to look from the

infinite point that was situated outside “being”, but from which everything was so beautifully imaginable, representable.

This is the logic René Descartes made the new foundation for our view of reality. Descartes’ s famous “methodic” doubt irrevocably reduced everything to representation. That is even implied by the mere fact that he wondered whether the equivocal representation can be related to an essence or presence. It is common knowledge that the doubting subject first inspired him to presuppose the existence of these gallivanting representations, and that he then resorted to God’s goodness to find a base for the existence of these representations in our objective reality, i.e. outside the subject. Descartes’s construction soon proved both ingenious and untenable. The death of the good God robbed the representations from their objective foundation. The subject, too, proved not the solid foundation Descartes had hoped, but a mere shadow, or as Julien Offray de la Mettrie put it in his philosophical pamphlet *L’Homme machine* (1748): “a ghost in the machine”. The objective world is the *only* world and our representations are simply anchored *in this world*. Up till now, that is more or less the principle that underlies our scientific world view.

But this construction denies that the world can be imagined from a position that is formally *in front of* – i.e. *outside* – this world. Descartes still believed that outside the world (the objective world, the *res extensa*) there was another, separate world, a second substance: the *Cogito* (*res cogitans*, which we came to call the “subject”). Though the Cartesian *Cogito* proved baseless, the point from which we look at the representations is still formally outside of them. What we call an “objective” standpoint, is the point where the scientific observer stands *in front of* his or her object, deliberately *outside* the object. No matter how neutral, value-free – objective – this point may be, this point itself is never truly objective: by definition it does not belong to the world of objects itself.

Everything has become representation, everything has become representable. Except the one formal point from which the representations are represented. Outside the representations – i.e. outside everything which exists – there is nothing, *yet these representations are presented from this “void”*. If at the time of the Renaissance people presupposed a God in this “void, it was because one had to be omnipotent like God to bear this infinite nothingness beyond everything which is. Only God could hold out in this void. After all, God was not confined to *being*, like we are, for He Himself had created “being” precisely from nothing.

When at the dawn of modern times Descartes situated this infinitely small point from which the world expands in the guise of a representation in humans and their doubts, there followed at once a controversy about the nature of this human point. Did it exist in its own right, disconnected from the objects/representations outside the point (the view that followed from the Cartesian *Cogito*)? Or did it share its foundations with other objects/representations (the view that followed from La Mettrie's materialism)? In that case it was a thing amongst things, an object among objects, a representation among representations. Both the subjective and objective definition fail to appreciate the futile size and the "non-place" of this point. Of course, representations of the world are created by humans, who use these representations to manipulate the world. But are humans *themselves* not a mere representation, and has this representation (self-image, identity) not been created at a point that by definition escapes the nature of representation?

Representations of the world are created by us, who use these representations to create the world. This almost divine freedom and omnipotence we owe to the paradigm of representation, which allows us to become the creator of our world. But who are we? Where do we find our "selves"? Can we imagine the "self" from which we represent the world? Can we represent the "self"?

We can't. The point to which we owe our freedom eludes us. The point from which we represent ourselves and the world through our creativity, can itself not be represented. This "self" – this "point", this "place" – only penetrates the world of our representations when it is *too late*. We can impose the demands of our representation onto the whole world, but the nature of "void" from which we do so, becomes visible only when we ourselves *confront with utter powerlessness our own omnipotence*. That is e.g. the case when an individual holds his finger on the button which, if he pushes it, will cover the earth, this individual included, with a nuclear megacloud. In that apocalyptic instant our omnipotence faces what it is incapable of handling: omnipotence *itself*. The paradigm of representation allows us to subject everything to our representations, but when we allow this infinite power to do as it pleases, sooner or later we will be confronted with the possibility of our own destruction – which is the same as the destruction of everything that is. Faced with the "void" which then emerges, our omnipotence becomes powerlessness itself. And yet this is the "void" from which" our omnipotence – and our entire culture of representation – always operates. A nuclear disaster causes this "void" to become gruesomely real, but it is

the very same “void” that is *formally – transcendentally* – at the origin of each representation.

In De Cock’s *Collateral Damage* we are – fortunately – only briefly confronted with this “void”. The work compels the public and art lover to take the impossible place of this “void”. It represents the space of the museum (or any representational space for that matter) in a way that folds it in on itself. In this way the public is deliberately placed *in front of* this space – *outside* this space, in the “nothingness” that rules there – as the representational space has become space *tout court*. This “invaginatio transcendentalis” drops the public – and more in particular the Western subject – in a place it can only repress in the mind. At the place, e.g., where the angel stood at the end of times, as he rolled up the four corners of the earth, to fold the entire scene of “being” and cast it away.

In the Capella Scrovegni we see this angel depicted somewhere on the western wall, where Giotto used to depict scenes of the Apocalypse. In De Cock’s *Collateral Damage* we do not see the angel. Its place is taken by the public, or rather, its place is reduced by the public to a “void” in this representational space. Finding a place for this “void”, that is precisely what our culture – including our contemporary art – is about. And therefore we should not imagine that we are *beyond* the paradigm of representation.

Yet that does not imply that contemporary art can feel free to romp about in the meadow of representation – which is, unfortunately, often the case. Nowadays juries judging art competitions have no qualms awarding a first prize to maps of the world on which artists have erased areas of conflict with sententious slogans (Prix Jeune Peinture Belge, 2003). They even imagine that they can thus highlight the political dimension of contemporary art!

Contemporary art is not about content, but about representation. Content is an issue that is dealt with by our visual culture, which is about visible things. Art, however, should make visible that which is invisible. And that which is invisible is no longer a profound mystery or a Utopia that is beyond human reach (God, Being, Nature, the “idiosyncratic expression of an idiosyncratic emotion”, or the political dream of peaceful humans. For us that which is invisible is nothing but the frame of that which is visible. It is the horizon – the axiom, the paradigm, the premise, the first lie, the *prooton pseudos* – from which we see the visible dawn. Art therefore operates in the realm of the transcendental, and therefore, too, the gestures of art are so frail, so delicate. Art has to fold the representation inside itself, for this is the only way to reveal the inherent lies on which it

is based. All art – including “political art” – should engage in a play with images in such a way that the “misunderstandings that allow us to understand each other” (yet another term for “paradigm”) surface briefly. Thus we are able to glimpse the *subject* of the representation: ourselves, who, though we fancy we hold sway over the representation, are in fact by definition outside it. As we live in a time that is dominated by the “human-interest approach” (the “person” behind the famous face, behind the famous manager, behind the artist, behind the average citizen), art must show us the transcendental aspect of that “interest”. It must do the impossible, because what it must do is obscured by the strategy of representation: it must briefly show us the *proton pseudos* of the representation and confront us with the fact that “humankind”, which owes its greatness to the culture of representation, is actually that which the all-embracing representation apparatus by definition excludes from its own sphere: the “void” that is its subject.

Behind Jan De Cock’s work hides not “humankind”, but the “void” and his work is art – *modern* art – precisely because it is not afraid to evade that fact.

In *Collateral Damage Fig. 7* (the work that explicitly confronts old art) one of the old masters had been quite ostentatiously removed from the wall: where there used to be Géricault’s *Kleptomaniac*, there was apart from the obligatory plate with artist and title nothing but a naked nail. It is as if the representation, which steals its own subject, is folded over itself. In a split second the *invaginatio transcendentalis* highlighted the bearer – the subject – of the image. It is as if the entire museum, the museum of the world, the universe, which had become a representation, hung from that single naked nail. Fortunately, De Cock had taken care to provide “benches” to sit on to contemplate this staggering idea – though sitting was only possible when we forgot what we were sitting on.