Global Conceptualism: The Last Avant-garde or a New Beginning?

Professor Sarah Wilson

Enthusiasm, irony, ambivalence

Armando’s aesthetic negotiation of ‘The War’ in The Netherlands

10,489 words
Acknowledgements

I would first of all like to express my gratitude to Armando, for sharing with me his stories and showing me immense hospitality and kindness upon my visit to his home and studio in Potsdam. I would also like to thank Ernst van Alphen for his willingness to meet with me and engage in a stimulating and useful exchange of ideas. Finally, I am indebted to Professor Sarah Wilson for supporting my research, guiding my thought processes and challenging me wherever necessary.
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Introduction

'Reality is a tangled mess of nuances. Art is the reconciliation of this reality'

– Armando, 1985¹

Every year from 4-5 May, the Dutch commemorate the victims of the Second World War and celebrate the liberation of the Netherlands from its German occupiers. Like so many other Dutch grandchildren, I reimagine this historic event through my late grandparents. I remember their stories: exciting ones about hiding secret radios to listen to 'Radio Oranje' broadcasted from London; painful ones about eating poisonous tulip bulbs and 'hunger treks' to find potatoes in the 'Hongerwinter' of 1944/45. I remember their hatred of the German language and their life-long smoking habit; picked up from the Canadian liberators throwing cigarette packs from their tanks that day in May and ever since allowing them not only access to the memory of the joyful occasion, but to the actual taste of freedom. More so than any Dutch artist, Armando – born as Herman Dirk van Dodeweerd – has worked to restage, reflect, negotiate and perpetuate the legacy of the war years in his works.²

Having spent the period 1940-1945 as a child living on the edge of the Amersfoort forests where the German occupiers erected a prison camp, Armando witnessed the transformation of his former playground into a terrain circumscribed by walls, barbed wire and watch towers: Police Transit Camp Amersfoort.³ It is here, ‘a place petrified in guilt and shame’, alluded to throughout his oeuvre as ‘the spot’, that he observed the lines of prisoners, accompanied by German soldiers or Dutch SS volunteers, being led towards the

¹ De werkelijkheid is een warboel van nuances. Kunst is de verzoening van die werkelijkheid – Armando, quoted in L. Ferron (ed.), Armando: Schilder/Schrijver (Weesp, 1985), p.32
² As explained to me by the artist, he has carried ‘Armando’, his Italian grandmother’s nickname for him, as his full name since early childhood – Conversation of the author with Armando in Potsdam, Germany on 12/05/’15. See appendix 4
³ The occupation of The Netherlands by the Nazis started with the Dutch capitulation on May 15, 1940 and ended with the liberation by the Allied forces on May 5, 1945. Camp Amersfoort’s is where the Germans in 1942 murdered a hundred Russian soldiers and dumped them in a mass grave, in 1943 executed a group of 72 resistance fighters and in 1945 performed the largest retribution fusillade of the Dutch occupation years for the failed attempt on the life of Dutch SS commander Hanns Rauter on 7 March 1945. See Foundation Camp Amersfoort: http://geschiedenis.kamp-amersfoort.nl/p/home-geschiedenis, accessed 03/06/’15
camp to be subjected to audible ‘stalking and shooting, trashing and humiliating’ or away from it to be shipped off to a more final destination from which most would not return.\(^4\) It is during these formative years, living a reality Armando has described as ‘solidified’, ‘compressed’, ‘intensified’, that the foundations for all his future artistic endeavours would be laid.\(^5\)

Driving past ‘the spot’ on the way in to Amersfoort now, it is impossible to miss the fourteen-meter high bronze representation of a ladder reaching into the sky (fig. 1).\(^6\) When asked to create a public sculpture commemorating the camp’s victims in 1994, Armando wrote an accompanying text which explains that the ladder, in a literal sense, was the the tool of ‘the enemy’; the object the prison guard would climb to reach his watchtower and assert his superiority over the prisoners below.\(^7\) However, despite their subjugation, the prisoners also had access to a ladder: ‘the ladder of thoughts’, which, albeit imaginary, was much higher:

‘It was the ladder of thoughts, because thoughts are free. Via this ladder, the wishes and desires of the prisoners travelled and thoughts and wishes undoubtedly came back from elsewhere’.

Armando recasts the ladder as the mental route along which the victims were free to escape their dire conditions. The ladder thus functions as an indicator of the infinite and unbounded power of the imagination to transcend reality:

‘A ladder connects low with high, but probably equally high with low. A ladder connects heaven and earth, embodies the yearning for that which lies higher than the humane. The ladder as solace, as escape’.

Armando’s poetic description of the yearning for transcendence, to escape

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\(^4\) Armando, *Uit Berlijn*, (Amsterdam, 1982), p.38

\(^5\) L. Ferron, ‘Armando’, *Vrij Nederland*, 4/11/’78; The camp and its meaning for Armando have been described by H. Nieszink in ‘Armando en Berlijn’, *Bzzletin*, no. 173, 1990, pp.39-49

\(^6\) See the national 4&5 May war monuments website: [http://www.4en5mei.nl/herinneren/oorlogsmonumenten/monumenten_zoeken/oorlogsm onument/2046/Amersfoort,’De+Ladder’, accessed 03/06’/15](http://www.4en5mei.nl/herinneren/oorlogsmonumenten/monumenten_zoeken/oorlogsm onument/2046/Amersfoort,’De+Ladder’, accessed 03/06’/15)

\(^7\) See appendix 1 for the full text and translation of *De Ladder van het Kamp*
bounded reality and reach a realm of infinite freedom, reveals the Romantic
desire that the artist employed throughout his career to negotiate, overcome and
commemorate the Second World War, in The Netherlands still invariably known as ‘the war’.\(^8\) It is this negotiation that this dissertation will aim to lay bare and assess.

As a painter, writer, poet, journalist, actor, draftsman, print-maker,
sculptor, musician, TV- and filmmaker, Armando holds a unique and difficult-to-
summarise position in the post-war cultural landscape of the Netherlands.\(^9\)
Fundamentally, his themes and subjects are inextricably linked to the history of
his home country, yet in 1979, he moved to West Berlin. Originally having left on
account of receiving the prestigious one-year DAAD grant, the former Third
Reich capital – then still marked and divided by the Berlin Wall – appealed to
Armando for offering a proximity to history, to evil and to an endless number of
significant ‘spots’.\(^10\) Incredibly, yet entirely per chance, one of these was the
studio that was assigned to him, formerly occupied by Arno Breker, the absolute
embodiment of the ‘evil’ Nazi aesthetic.\(^11\)

Despite never having returned to his home-country, his stature in The
Netherlands did not decline; his influence is still felt and heard in every cultural
realm he has contributed to. The Dutch celebrate him widely and consider him
one of their most important living artists, exemplified by the extensive Dutch
monograph that has recently appeared in honour of the artist’s 85\(^{th}\) birthday.\(^12\)

He has been awarded a range of different national prizes and accolades, has been

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\(^8\) The prominence of World War Two in the Dutch national consciousness is illustrated by
the foreword to Armando’s collection of Germans’ memories of the war, *We Waren Nog Zo
Jong: Duitse Herinneringen* (Amsterdam, 1999), in which Dutch Jewish poet Judith Herzberg
stresses how World War Two remains ‘for us still the war, ever more the’. The lack of Dutch
involvement in the WWI goes some way to explaining this commemorative prominence

\(^9\) As described in Armando’s catalogue for the Venice Biennale of 1984: *Armando mobilises
every available artistic means to conjure the totality of his obsession* – G. Van Tuyl (ed.),
*Armando padiglione dell’Olanda 41*. Exh. Cat. Biennale di Venezia, 1984, p.6

\(^10\) The DAAD (The German Academic Exchange Service) has been appointing this prestigious
one-year grant (including an assigned studio and living space in Berlin) to circa twenty
international artists each year since 1962. For a comprehensive list, see the database of The

\(^11\) Conversation of author with the artist. See appendix 4

\(^12\) Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Armando 85* at Museum Oud Amelisweerd
from 19 September 2014 to 29 March 2015, this celebratory monograph forms a valuable
up-to-date collection of the documentation on the artist, yet does little to situate the artist
critically in an art historical context beyond the Dutch one. See A. Melissen (ed.), *Armando:
Tussen het Weten en Begrijpen* (Rotterdam, 2015)
royally knighted, represented the nation at the Venice Biennale of 1984 and had a museum dedicated to him by the municipality of Amersfoort.\textsuperscript{13}

However, the artist/writer does not enjoy the same stature internationally. This might be ascribed to the fact that Armando’s diverse literary output is predominantly in Dutch.\textsuperscript{14} Adequately coming to terms with his visual work without understanding his writing is a challenge, since his oeuvre forms a type of Wagnerian ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ that presents the same recurring motifs, mannerisms and expressions across his different media.\textsuperscript{15} With the exception of Germany, where the artist has had a range of solo-exhibitions since his emigration, his international visibility limits itself to his activities as part of the Dutch Nul-group in the early 1960s, in the context of which his work was recently shown in New York at the Guggenheim’s 2014 exhibition Zero: \textit{Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s–60s}.\textsuperscript{16}

In so much as Armando’s oeuvre has been considered in its totality in Dutch scholarship, it has primarily been understood biographically. The most important early interpreters have read Armando’s works exclusively as metaphoric expressions of his child-hood war memories.\textsuperscript{17} An exception is the 2004 publication \textit{Shaping Memory} by Dutch art historian Ernst van Alphen, who has taken a radically formalist approach in assessing the aesthetic operations at play in Armando’s works, convincingly calling attention to their indexical nature

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\textsuperscript{13} The museum and a large part of the collection were destroyed in a fire in 2007. Since 2014, the collection is housed in Museum Oud Amelisweerd, near Utrecht; for an overview of Armando’s awards and prizes, see the artist’s chronology in appendix 2

\textsuperscript{14} This interpretative problem is attested to by the fact that the catalogue for Armando’s only UK exhibition, \textit{Armando: Damnable Beauty or Resonance of the Past}, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1989, contains abstracts of writing translated especially for the occasion. See for a selection of these rare translations Appendix 3

\textsuperscript{15} Armando has described himself and his oeuvre as a tree, each of his endeavours constituting branches that ultimately stem from the same roots. Consequently, I will closely involve Armando’s writing in my discussion of his visual work. Unless stated otherwise, translations are my own

\textsuperscript{16} His first big German exhibition was at the Nationalgalerie in 1984: \textit{Armando, Fahnen}, Nationalgalerie Berlin, Westfälischer Kunstverein Münster, Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach, 1984. See appendix 2 for a full exhibition history

\textsuperscript{17} See C. Blotkamp, \textit{Armando: nieuwe schilderijen en tekeningen, literair werk, Herenleed}. Exh. cat. Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 1976; R. Fuchs, \textit{Armando}. Ex. Cat. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1981; Armando’s withdrawal from artist groups and lack of adherence to a definutive tendency since the mid-1960s has led to the dominance of the biographical angle – Conversation with Ernst van Alphen, Amsterdam, 04/05/’15
through the use of Rosalind Krauss’ post-structuralism. However, none of these authors, including Van Alphen, successfully allow for Armando, his biography and his artistic strategies, to be situated in a larger post-war art historical context.

I will aim to rectify this. Taking my cue from Van Alphen, I will analyse Armando’s specific formal mechanisms, yet without ignoring the historic and artistic context in which he operated. Complementing visual analyses with a critical situating of Armando’s work and sources, I will aim to balance the dominant biography-driven approach and the a-historic formalist angle employed by Van Alphen. Since Armando belongs to the last living generation of eyewitnesses to the period 1940-1945, this consideration is both timely and necessary.

Although not having been at the forefront of the international avant-garde, Armando played a key role in inserting radical European tendencies into the conservative Dutch artistic landscape through a secondary alignment with the French and German innovators of Informel, Nouveau Réalisme and Zero during the 1950s and 60s, to be discussed in my first two chapters. In my final chapter I will show how, from the 1970s onwards, Armando innovatively combined the formal and stylistic mechanisms he had developed under the influence of these avant-gardes to suit his personal themes and artistic needs: the negotiation of his experience of the Second World War. Demonstrating that it was his turn to Romanticism that enabled him to do this, I will argue that Armando’s pertinence lies in his development out of the first to decades of his career to form an artistic practice marked by openness and ambivalence that not only helped the artist negotiate his own traumatic memories, but equally took on a political significance for shaping Dutch viewing, thinking and remembering the Second World War.

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18 In 1997, van Alphen had already pointed to the indexical principles of the Lyotardian sublime at play in Armando’s literary work in a publication that also addressed Christian Boltanski and Charlotte Salomon. See E. Van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust effects in Contemporary Art and Literature*, 1997

19 The recent Bremen and Houston retrospective and scholarly repositioning of the work of German informel artist Wols, who, like Armando, used a multiplicity of artistic methods to negotiate his traumatic war experiences, attests to the institutional impetus to reassess this art’s history – *Wols: the Retrospective*, Kunsthalle Bremen, 2013, *The Menil Collection*, Houston, 2014
In France and Germany, the devastation of the period 1940-45 formed the impetus for influential new intellectual thought to arise reconsidering the authority of rationality and man’s being in the world in light of his perpetration of the horrors of the holocaust.\textsuperscript{20} Lacking a comparably rich intellectual tradition, Dutch cultural life was not to the same extent engaged with the moral and ethical implications of the violence and terror that had marked the occupation years.\textsuperscript{21} Additionally on a political level, the Dutch could not conceive of the end of the war as a national victory from which to muster collective national pride and progressive impetus to reshape the nation, since their liberation had been a passive event.\textsuperscript{22} These factors led to a collective societal aim of simply erasing the period in which Dutch national sovereignty had been compromised and reset the historical clock to 1939.

Where questions regarding the occupation years did arise, the Dutch establishment was more concerned with purporting a vision of The Netherlands as a proud nation of ‘resistance’ than tackling urgent questions relating to capitulation, collaboration and persecution.\textsuperscript{23} This was highly problematic since, in the Netherlands, the deportation of the Jewish population had been considerably easier, their eradication considerably more effective, than in any other occupied country. More than 20,000 Dutch men volunteered their services to the Waffen-SS while the rest of society did little to provide resistance or

\textsuperscript{20} In France especially, existential thought took the intellectual world by storm. Thinkers such as Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty began to reconsider man’s being in the world in purely experiential terms, questioning ‘the impotence of reason confronted with depths of existence [...]’ – W. Barrett, \textit{Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy} as quoted in M. Lewin, \textit{Antoni Tàpies and cultural identity: between the national and international, 1953-1976}, Ph.D Thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2008, p.95

\textsuperscript{21} An exception formed director of the Stedelijk Museum Willem Sandberg’s engagement with Auschwitz when he invited Dutch artists to propose a commemorative sculpture for the camp’s victims after exposing them to filmmaker Alain Resnais’ \textit{Nacht und Nebel}. The resulting artwork was Carel Visser’s, \textit{Auschwitz}, now in the Tate collection. See J. Boyens, ‘Het werk van Carel Visser’, \textit{Ons Erfdeel}, no. 32, Sept.-Oct., 1989, pp.535-544

\textsuperscript{22} Where in France, the day commemorating the end of WWII is called \textit{Jour de La Victoire}, ‘Victory day’, the Dutch call theirs \textit{Bevrijdingsdag}, ‘Liberation day’. Like its 1940 annexation and incorporation into the Third Reich by the Nazi’s, the liberation of Dutch soil by the allied forces was considered an event that had happened \textit{to} the Dutch.

\textsuperscript{23} In the early decades after the war, politicians, historians and (visual) artists jointly constructed a picture of the war that, cleansed of all sorts of unsettling facts and details, was in perfect keeping with the collective idealised image of a new, and above all modern, Netherlands – W. Frijhoff, M. Spies (eds.), \textit{Dutch Culture in a European Perspective: 1950, Prosperity and Welfare}, (Assen, 2004), p.35
sabotage the plans of the occupier. Yet looking back, the Dutch were quick to view themselves as ‘good’ or ‘right’ and the German enemy occupiers as ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’.

For a long time, this black-and-white thinking was allowed to persist in the Dutch imagination. Of defining influence was the National Institute for War Documentation, who’s director, the Jewish Loe de Jong, found it of primary importance that Holland was united in its condemnation of the Germans and the holocaust. Additionally, popular imagination was grabbed by the publication of the diary of Anne Frank, whose horrifying story hardly inspired a justifiable questioning of the roles of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’. In 1965, holocaust historian Jacques Presser – whose classes Armando attended at the University of Amsterdam in the late 1940s – published the first confrontational study into the persecution and eradication of the Dutch Jews during the period 1940-45.

Subsequently, Armando chased his understanding of his fellow man’s capacity for ‘evil’ by interviewing Dutch SS volunteers together with his journalist colleague Hans Sleutelaar. The resulting book The SSers presented the untold accounts of these collaborative ‘traitors’, who were given the platform to relate their often arbitrary, mundane motivations. Because of its dry, commentary-free presentation, the collection of interviews received great criticism. As the first attempt to lay emphasis on the stories of these ‘perpetrators’ however, it was of immense importance; it highlighted the fact

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24 Of the 140,000 Dutch Jews that lived in Holland in 1940, almost 107,000 were deported to German camps, which over 100,000 did not return from. This equates to 75% of Dutch Jews killed, in comparison to 25% in France, 40% in Belgium and less than 2% in Denmark – see J.C.H. Blom, ‘De vervolging van de joden in Nederland in internationaal vergelijkend perspectief’ in De Gids, no.150, 1987, p.496
26 De Jong was director of the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie from 1945-1979. His convictions came to expression most influentially in his imposing 14-volume study into the history of The Netherlands in World War Two, Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog, the first appearing in 1969, the final volume in 1994; S. Haasnoot, ‘Het is tijd voor een opvolger van Loe de Jong’, Historisch Nieuwsblad, no. 4, 2004
27 The diary was published under the name Het Achterhuis. Dagbrieven van 14 juni 1942 tot 1 augustus 1944, on June 25, 1947
28 J. Presser, Ondergang: De vervolging en verdelging van het Nederlandse jodendom 1940-1945 (Amsterdam, 1965)
‘evil’ had been committed by seemingly average Dutchmen, who after the war, continued their ordinary lives, like the silent majority of the population. Instead of allowing a vision of ‘evil’ as spectacularly exceptional, as the domain of the German ‘enemy’, Armando’s down-to-earth relativism revealed the banality, the contingency of the crimes committed.\textsuperscript{30}

Since then, the Dutch engagement with the nuanced realities of the occupation has increased, albeit at a slow pace. Although during the 1960s a new rebellious student generation heavily criticised the bourgeois docility of their parents’ wartime behaviour, it was only throughout the 1990s that Dutch films, tv-series, novels, documentaries and historical studies started to demonstrate a definite shift away from the defining ‘good’ and ‘bad’ paradigm.\textsuperscript{31} The most fruitful period for research into Dutch responsibility commenced in the new millennium, when Chris van der Heijden decisively broke with De Jong’s black-and-white moralism, instead suggesting a ‘grey’ historical lens.\textsuperscript{32} However, long before, Armando had started to further confuse the concepts of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’, ‘guilt’ and ‘innocence’ in his art and writing. Reporting on his observations of the ‘enemy’ in Berlin in a bi-weekly column in \textit{NRC Handelsblad} from 1979 onwards, he wrote: ‘So there they were then: the perpetrators, the hated people, there they were sitting and humming a tune. Perpetrators? Accomplices maybe, victims perhaps. Or just people. I can’t always remember the exact order’.\textsuperscript{33}

In a study into the Dutch perception of Germany, forthcoming in 2015,\textsuperscript{34}

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\textsuperscript{31} For an overview of how Dutch fiction treated WWII up to the 1990s see D. Schram, \textit{Overal Sporen: De Verwerking van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Literatuur en Kunst} (Amsterdam, 1990); an important study into the collaboration of the Dutch police during the occupation was published in 1999: G. Meershoek, \textit{Dienaren van het gezag. De Amsterdamse Politie Tijdens de Bezetting door de Duiters} (Amsterdam, 1999); In 2000, filmmaker Willy Lindwer produced an influential documentary on the actions (or inactions) of Dutch railway employees entitled \textit{Zij Deden Hun Plicht} (‘They Did Their Duty’)

\textsuperscript{32} Van der Heijden’s publication, \textit{Grijs Verleden. Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog} (Amsterdam, 2001) inspired a range of other work re-assessing the behaviour of the Dutch during the occupation, such as a study in to their ‘bourgeois docility’, C. Kristel (ed.), \textit{Met alle geweld. botten en tegenstellingen in burgerlijk Nederland} (Amsterdam, 2003) and a study into the survival chances of Jews in Dutch municipalities, M. Cruces, P. Tammes (eds.), \textit{‘Gif laten wij niet voortbestaan’}, (Amsterdam, 2004)

\textsuperscript{33} Armando, \textit{Krijgsgevoel} (Amsterdam 1986), p.110. See appendix 3 for, \textit{Flarden}, ‘scratches’; an excerpt of Armando’s writing for \textit{NRC Handelsblad}
Britta Bendieck argues that Armando and his ‘enemy’ investigations made crucial contributions to the nuancing of the image of Germans in Holland.\footnote{B. Bendieck, ‘Widerholungserfahrung Armandos kuenstlerische Nachfragestrategie’, in Caral Dauvenvan Knippenberg et al. (eds.), Wiederholen/Wiederholung, (Heidelberg, forthcoming in 2015) as quoted in A. Melissen (ed.), Tussen Weten en Begrijpen, p.10} Plainly and with humour, Armando ‘questioned the existing self- and enemy image of The Netherlands’ at a time when survivors still held an unbridled hatred for the ‘heartless’, ‘not-to-be-trusted’ Germans.\footnote{My grandfather, a doctor and well-read intellectual, would curse the Germans in my presence and familiarised me with terms such as maffen (a Dutch swearword for Germans), razzia, illegaliteit (‘illegality), goed (‘good’ or ‘right’) and fout (‘bad’ or ‘wrong’). Throughout his life, he refused to buy a car of a German make.} Consequently, despite not intending to moralise, Armando’s work became politically significant. By simply laying bare the experience of ‘the other side’, ‘the enemy’, without judgment, Armando forced a more nuanced imagining of not just ‘the war’, but equally ‘the Germans’ in his home country.

The period 1940-45 has remained a fundamental point of reference for the Dutch collective consciousness; through the influence of popular culture, the memories of older generations and historic imagination spurred on by the annual 4-5 May remembrance service, generations of Dutch children have grown up with a decidedly poor esteem of their easterly neighbours.\footnote{Armando’s role in negotiating this enmity should be remembered however. Seventy years after the end of the war and eight-five after Armando’s birth, this dissertation sets out to do so.} However, together with their narrators, the influence of witness accounts on younger generations is also disappearing and, luckily, the idea of Dutch/German enmity is slowly fading. Armando’s role in negotiating this enmity should be remembered however. Seventy years after the end of the war and eight-five after Armando’s birth, this dissertation sets out to do so.


35 My grandfather, a doctor and well-read intellectual, would curse the Germans in my presence and familiarised me with terms such as maffen (a Dutch swearword for Germans), razzia, illegaliteit (‘illegality), goed (‘good’ or ‘right’) and fout (‘bad’ or ‘wrong’). Throughout his life, he refused to buy a car of a German make.

36 Bendieck’s study follows in the footsteps of a range of studies into the perception of Germany in Holland. This started with a 1993 study for the Dutch Institute of Foreign Affairs that found that the concept of ‘the war’ remained a driving factor behind the persistence of damaging stereotypes: L. Jansen, Bekend en onbemind: het beeld van Duitsland en Duitsers onder jongeren van vijftien tot negentien jaar (Clingendael, 1993). Since then a range of publications have examined the Dutch/German relations, such as J. Vis, G. Moldenhauer (eds.), Nederland en Duitsland: Elkaar kennen en begrijpen (Assen, 2001), the result of a scholarly collaboration between the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen and Carl van Ossietzky Universiteit; In 2005 the role of WWII in the moral education of Dutch children was examined: P. Mooren., H. van Lierop-Debrouwer (eds.), De Tweede Wereldoorlog als moreel ikpunt, (Leidschendam, 2005); In November, 2010 the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen dedicated a further lecture series by Dutch and German scholars to the subject: De oorlogstijd in literatuur en film in Duitsland en Nederland van 1945 tot 1960.
Ch.1 1950s Informel: Fervent violence and painterly enthusiasm

Violence, [...] shackled violence. What else remains for me but to stylize violence, to aestheticise it

- Armando\textsuperscript{37}

See Armando's *Peinture Criminelle* (fig. 2) A thick, red skin of paint. Swollen and protuberant, lacerated and whipped; crusty and irregular, like the surface of a newly healing wound.

In the autumn of 1956, Armando showed this work and three others in an exhibition entitled ‘Liga Nieuw Beelden. Architectuur en Beeldende Kunst’ in the newly opened Sandberg-wing of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The reactions were damning. The almost entirely monochrome red enraged public and press, who considered its redness a deliberate evocation of blood, communism and a provocative comment on the Sovjet-Union’s bloody suppression of the Hungarian revolution in October of that year.\textsuperscript{38} Press response ‘Bloedvlek op Nieuwe Beelden’ (‘Bloodstain at Nieuwe Beelden’) in the *Dordrechts Nieuwsblad*, dozens of open letters to *Het Parool* expressing worry over these ‘criminal’, ‘dangerously communist’ paintings and a subsequent headline in the same newspaper: ‘Degenerate Art’.\textsuperscript{39}

After the chaos and devastation of the German occupation and World War II With little else to turn to after the chaos and devastation of the occupation, the Dutch cultural establishment instigated a period of political and cultural restoration. Looking back to the familiar bourgeois, Christian norms and values of the 1930s, this resulted in a return to the austerity, rigidity and

\textsuperscript{37} Van Tuyl (ed.), *Armando*, p.8
\textsuperscript{38} A. Melissen (ed.) 2015, p.61
unimaginativeness that had dominated the national outlook before the war.\textsuperscript{40} Profoundly disheartening for artistic and progressive individuals, the earliest attempts to break through the mould were made by the Dutch members of the international CoBrA movement, which brought together free-spirited, Marxist individuals from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam desiring liberation from the oppression of ‘civilised’ bourgeois society. The name CoBrA, as a contraction of the respective cities, was an artistic stand against nationalism and a rebellion against the bourgeois establishment and its hypocritical ideologies, which were ultimately to blame for the brutality and horror of the holocaust.\textsuperscript{41} Despite having found their sole supporter in the form of the influential Stedelijk Museum curator Willem Sandberg, the potency of CoBrA’s rebellious optimism and visionary idealism was short-lived in Holland.\textsuperscript{42} Both the restoration of the old Dutch order as well as the looming threat of the atomic bomb resulted in the stifled cultural and political climate that Armando inherited as a student of art and history in Amsterdam in the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{43}

During the second half of the 1940s, Dutch Cobra had caused the type of public uproar that Armando would aspire to duplicate; Armando as shown in 1956 mirrored the infamous 1949 CoBrA exhibition that had incited similar anger and hostility towards the left.\textsuperscript{44} Especially Constant had strongly

\textsuperscript{40} During the 1930s, both Dutch public and private life had been dominated by a rigid social structure that organised society in confined, vertical ‘pillars’ according to different strands of Christian convictions (indicated by the term \textit{verzuiling}, literally ‘pillarisation’). Society was exceptionally bourgeois: there was little to no social mobility, economic attitudes were conservative and moral norms and values were restrictive and oppressive – Frijhoff, Spies (eds.), \textit{Dutch Culture}, p.456

\textsuperscript{41} The most prominent Dutch CoBrA artists were Karel Appel, Corneille and Situationist Constant Nieuwenhuis. Combining the originally Surrealist aim of re-imagining a collective subjectivity based on irrationality and the unconscious and their Marxist revolutionary ideals with an air of humour and frivolity, they practised a spontaneous and ‘skill-less’ type of art, seeking authentic creativity in the drives that governed children’s art – C. van Houts, \textit{Karel Appel: de Biografie} (Amsterdam, 2000), p.175

\textsuperscript{42} By 1951 the Dutch CoBrA group dismantled, its members emigrating to Paris in order to escape the oppressive cultural atmosphere of The Netherlands – F. Gribling, W. Boers (eds.), \textit{Amsterdam 60/80: Twintig Jaar Beeldende Kunst / Twenty Years of Fine Arts}, exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Fodor, 1982, p.8

\textsuperscript{43} The Dutch backlash against CoBrA had to do with the perceived connections between modern art and a communist agenda; a conspiracy that was (rightly) believed to have been institutionalised by the Stedelijk Museum’s Willem Sandberg – W. Stokvis, (ed.), \textit{Doorbraak van de modern kunst in Nederland} (Amsterdam, 1984), p. 33

\textsuperscript{44} Infamously, a poetry reading on the eve of 5 November 1949 led to a riot when Belgian poet Christian Dotremont had held – with an air of intellectual superiority and contempt for
influenced Armando, who joined his Dutch section of the Situationist International and shared his lament of Dutch culture as ‘so antiquated, so primitive’. He stated: I’ve always found Constant the best of the bunch, the most fanatical. I like his enthralment’. Thus, Armando – least of all interested in the docility of the dominant realist painting at the time – initially took his cue for causing controversy from the activities of the CoBrA group and started producing CoBrA inspired drawings with which he made his debut onto the Dutch art scene in 1953. At his solo debut in 1954 at the Amsterdam gallery Le Canard – one of the few places in the country that welcomed the work of experimental abstract artists – the artist showed works in coloured pencil and gouache, often featuring the little ladders characteristic of Constant or the animalesque eyes, heads, whiskers and tails recognisable in Appel’s work (fig. 3-6).

Yet Armando was of a generation younger than the CoBrA radicals and, having missed their vital moment in the late 1940s, had to turn elsewhere to assert his independence and make his mark artistically. Consequently, soon after his public debut, Armando’s work would abandon the motifs and signs of CoBrA’s playful idealism and optimism. His first solo-exhibition of paintings in Le Canard in 1957 consisted of heavy, gestural canvases with disconcerting titles referencing violence, anguish and a distrust of his fellow man, such as J’ai Tué Mon Frère Abel (1954) (fig. 7), Homo Hominis Lupus (1956) (fig. 8) and several Peintures Criminelles. At the opening, CoBrA poet Jan Elburg’s made it clear that

the ‘simple Dutch speaking provincials’ – a pro-Soviet type speech in French. See J. Elburg, Geen Letterheren: Uit de Voorgeschiedenis van de Vijftigers, (Amsterdam, 1987), pp.159-160

45 The first statement released by the Dutch section of the Situationist International, signed by Armando, the architects Anton Alberts and Hard Oudejans and Constant himself, as quoted in Frijhoff, Spies (eds.), Dutch Culture, p.466

46 J. Heymans, Een Boom: Over Armando (Amsterdam, 1999), p.23

47 Armando in 1951: ‘In my eyes it is completely ridiculous that you could, after all those excesses of evil, simply continue with that refined, pre-war stuff’ (In mijn ogen was het volslagen belachelijk dat je, na al die uitwassen van het kwaad, gewoon met dat verfijnde vooroorlogse gedoe doorging) – quoted in Heymans, Een boom, p.23

48 Holland did not have galleries oriented towards the international avant-garde of the same caliber as Iris Clert in Paris or Galleria Apollinaire in Milan. Sandberg’s Stedelijk Museum programme formed a unique bastion of institutional progressiveness in this context. See for a description of the gradually increasing isolation of the Dutch art world before and during the Second World War: W. Stokvis, CoBrA (Amsterdam, 1985), pp. 51-52; For an overview of Sandberg’s exceptionally progressive and international exhibition programme see A. Petersen, Sandberg: Designer and Director of the Stedelijk (Rotterdam, 2004)
Armando's relation to CoBrA's hopefulness was now of a divergent nature: ‘Armando's paintings originate from the very violence that is the business of man. Thus the stains of blood, the grooves in Armando’s work, the vague, unrecognisable images of man form the traces that a collapsing civilization leaves behind on his canvasses’. 49 Armando's expressed admiration for Constant therefore might be interpreted as having been limited to this artist’s La Guerre print series or his painting Burning Earth of 1951 (fig. 9), a comment on the eruption of the Korean war that year. Constant’s continued Situationist idealism, could now not be further removed from Armando’s outlook on humanity: not homo ludens, but Homo Homini Lupus. 50

Shortly after his solo-exhibition in Le Canard, Armando found there was room for his disillusioned, dejected perspective - ‘civil decency is nothing more than a thin layer of varnish’ – with the Nederlandse Informele group, consisting of Henk Peeters, Jan Schoonhoven, Kees van Bohemen en Jan Henderikse. 51 With this younger group of artists he could advance his attack on Dutch art and society in unison, assert his independence from the revolutionary legacy of CoBrA and express affiliations with a type of art that had been developing in France, Italy, Spain, Germany and Japan since the end of the Second World War, denoted alternately with gestural abstraction, matter painting or ‘art informel’. 52

Rooted in the automatism of Surrealism, the paintings of, among others, Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Georges Mathieu, Antonio Tàpies and the Japanese

49 Jan Elburg, Opening of exhibition Armando in Galerie Le Canard, Amsterdam, 26-01-'57: De schilderijen van Armando zijn voortgekomen uit hetzelfde geweld dat mensenwerk is. Zo zijn de blokplekken en de groeven in Armando’s werk, de vage onherkenbare mensbeelden: de sporen die een uiteenvallende samenleving op zijn doeken achterlaat [...] Ik zou plaats inruimen voor een kleine plek hemelblauw, ergens een vorm waaraan men houvast heeft, een glimp van een lichter land, groen op de kale rotsen – typoscript in Armando’s archive

50 Although Constant’s art was decisively preoccupied with the anguish of war during the 1950s, he never abandoned his Situationist belief and visions for a new, hopeful world in which man would be free and able to express his creative potential, as illustrated by his 1964 painting Homo Ludens – See Moderne Nederlandse Schilderkunst/Modern Dutch painting, exh. cat. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1983-84, p.9

51 *Beschaafdheid is niets meer dan laagje vernis* – M. Bril, ‘Dubbelgesprek met Armando’, *Haagse Post*, 10/03/’90

52 ‘L’art informel’ – as it was denoted by the French critic Michel Tapié in 1951 in relation to his exhibition *Les Signifiants de l’informel* and asserted in his influential 1952 *Un Art Autre* – represented a break with the pre-war tradition of geometric abstraction; the order, compositionality and rationality of cubism and constructivism
Gutai group were characterised by a gestural abstraction: spontaneous painterly gesture, a lack of defined forms, the experimental use of non-paint materials such as sand and dirt and indeterminate, expressive surfaces. Armando was well acquainted with the pioneers of this art through his activities as a journalist at the Haagse Post, where he took up a position in 1957. In December 1957 he wrote on Georges Mathieu and the ‘new directions’ recognisable in French painting and in 1959 he assessed the use of sand, cement, jute and plaster in the works of Spanish painters such as Tàpies. Their influence can be felt in the paintings Armando exhibited with the Informele group, Dubuffet’s heads from the early 1950s for example (fig. 10) relate to Armando’s paintings of the same subject from 1956, such as Tete Noire II (fig. 11), also displaying the scratching and indentation of the painted surface.

The earlier J’ai Tué mon Frère Abél (1954) – carrying a dramatic biblical reference to violence in its title – equally staged this aggression through painterly fervour and gestural enthusiasm. Violent contrasts and expressive brushstrokes, like small lacerating marks in oil, demonstrated the act of painting in temporal manner and reflected the painter’s fervent energy. In this it is like Mathieu’s ‘action painting’, described as ‘striking’ by Armando in the Haagse Post. Another article had regarded the auctioning off of the collection P.A. Regnault, which contained Chaim Soutine’s Le Boeuf (1925), bought by the Stedelijk Museum in 1958 (fig. 12). Armando’s Peinture Criminelle 3-58 of that year clearly reveals the affinity the painter felt to the agony, decay and defeatism of Soutine’s work, painted in the aftermath of the First World War (fig. 13). Giving his canvases French titles and clearly taking on the forms and techniques of the European avant-garde, Armando attempted to break out of the stifling provincial traditionalism of the Dutch art scene and draw connections with current international artistic developments.

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54 The informele group operated primarily from the alternative artistic hub Galerie 31, in Dordrecht and also regularly exhibited in Germany, such as in 1958 in Galerie Gunar in Dusseldorf, in relation to which the group composed their first manifesto Credo I. The exhibitions in Germany came about with the help of then vice-director of the Stedelijk Museum Hans Jaffe, who had identified Armando’s work as promising as early as 1955 in Het Parool – H.L.C. Jaffe, ‘Experimentele Kunst. Protest tegen sleur’, Het Parool, 04/06/’55
Armando’s *Peintures Criminelles* from 1956-1958 demonstrate violence and destruction through the look of disintegration; paint, now with the addition of sand, melts into one blur, resembling a mixture of earth, dirt, blood. (fig 14-16). These works do not stage the gesture of violent painting, but seem to depict the site where violence has occurred and left nothing but despair in its wake. In this they relate to Jean Fautrier’s devastating *Otages* from 1942, exhibited in Paris at Galerie René Drouin in 1945, which recall the vague contours of mangled bodies, formless, disintegrated corpses and limbless torsos. In 1956, Fautrier returned to the theme and produced a range of works in homage to the victims of the Soviet attack on Hungary, the same year that Armando produced his red monochrome *Peinture Criminelle* (fig. 2). Although interpreted by the highly-strung, conservative Dutch press as pro-communist, Armando’s work reads as an analogous condemnation of the violence, its gory thick, red impasto embodying the marred and raw state of an open wound.

Like Fautrier, Armando did not trivialise the horrors of violence by giving them form, instead evoking violence through a literal embodiment of it. As the artist explained in 1971: ‘I have hated the war so much that I came to identify with it. I have become the war itself’. At the same time, Armando created drawings that reflect his obsession with violence. Convulsive, jerky lines concentrated themselves in dense scratches and frustrated outlines, such as in his ‘To Mike Hammer’ of 1954 (fig. 17) and untitled drawing of 1958 (fig. 18). Indenting the surface of the paper with the edge of blunt, crude workman’s pencils, Armando forcefully transferred the tension in his hand on to paper.

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55 Referred to by Andre Malraux as ‘hieroglyphs of pain’, Fautrier’s subject-matter for the original *Otages* is inextricably linked to his experience hiding from the Nazi’s in Châtenay, France, where the surrounding woods were used by the occupying German troops for the torture and summary execution of French prisoners. It is tempting to assume that – although the artist never makes this explicit – Armando’s works stem from his witnessing of brutalities during his childhood living near the forests of Camp Amersfoort. See S. Wilson, ‘Jean Fautrier: Orthodoxy and the Outsider’, *Art International*, no.4, Autumn, 1988, p.36
56 This particular painting is amongst those that were lost in the 2004 fire of the Elleboog church in Amersfoort, then the location of the Armando museum
57 *Ik heb de oorlog zo gehaat dat ik me er mee ben gaan identificeren. Ik ben de oorlog zelf geworden.* – Armando quoted in B. van Garrel, ‘Een dagje met Armando’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 17/4/’71
58 The reference to Mike Hammer, the brutally aggressive character from Mickey Spillane’s crime novel that Armando considered a figure of inspiration at the time, indicates Armando’s obsession with violence – V. Tuyl, *Armando*, p.61
59 *Heymans, Een boom*, p.92
About these he stated: ‘I cannot deny it. This type of drawing was created out of hatred. [...] Aggression. Hatred. [...] Such a drawing, a person was murdered in it. And that then is art’.60 His jarring, cramped lines do not reveal an image of a murder; he considers them murder itself.

The works from Armando’s informel period, although easily interpreted as pathos-filled expressions of inner struggle, were not meant to give form to the personal feelings of the artist. Armando himself stated that he had, from the start, ‘resisted the tendency in the visual arts for the artist to record his own moods or feelings’.61 Indeed, the formlessness of the thick crusts in Armando’s Peinture criminelles and the harsh self-evidence of his lines hardly imply the artist’s hand. Instead, these works appear to have been created by nature, arrived at spontaneously, if not without force.62 It is this appearance as fact, the look of inevitable actuality, that the Informele group as a whole adhered to as prescribed in their manifesto-like Credo I of 1959: ‘Not ‘beautiful or ugly’, not ‘good and evil’ (they still exist), but art that is no longer an art, but a given fact, like our paintings [...] ruthless and irrevocable, like the sun speaks’.63

This insistence on factuality aligns itself directly with the described working methods of contemporary international informel artists. The Japanese Gutai group – which Michel Tapié had exhibited alongside French informel since the mid-1950s – aimed to ‘impart life to matter’ instead of ‘distort’ or ‘alter’ matter, it’s name meaning ‘concreteness’ in Japanese.64 Equally, Italian ‘arte informale’ artist Alberto Burri spoke of his work as ‘an irreducible presence’, ‘a

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61 P. Hefting, ‘Gesprek met Armando’, Museumjournaal, no.2, 1974, p.38
63 Credo I: niet ‘mooi en lelijk’ meer, niet ‘goed en kwaad’ meer (ze bestaan nog steeds), maar een kunst die geen kunst meer is, maar een gegeven feit (als onze schilderijen). [...] meedogenloos en onherroepelijk, zoals de zon praat.’ – This text was written by Armando and originally published in Maatstaf 6, no 9, 1958, p. 810-811 and included in A. Melissen (ed.), Tussen Weten en Begrijpen, p.253
reality which is part of myself.\textsuperscript{65} Analogously, Armando’s works, albeit reflecting the artist’s preoccupations, did not metaphorically represent a personal narrative, but presented matter as fact; directly staging the violent act, or depicting its results. At the opening of Armando’s solo-exhibition in Galerie.31 in Dordrecht in September 1958, the poet Cees Buddingh equating Armando’s art with an indictment-in-paint; one that attacked the Dutch public for their ‘looking away’ from the crimes committed during the occupation years.\textsuperscript{66} Thus, bringing informel into the Dutch context, these works can be seen as an attempt to stage a confrontation with the truths of that which had occurred on Dutch soil only a decade earlier. Armando produced assertive reminders of that which during the fifties in The Netherlands was actively suppressed: the violence perpetrated during the occupation.

Around the turn of the decade, Armando and the other members of the Informele group start to see an exhaustion occurring in the gestural manner of informel. This was in alignment with the loss of enthusiasm for gestural painting in Europe in general. The MoMA’s \textit{The New American Painting} exhibition as well as a Pollock retrospective that toured across Europe from 1958 to 1959 asserted what had already become clear to many; gestural ‘expressionist’ painting had now become a North American ‘brand’, exported and used as a Cold-War marketing tool.\textsuperscript{67} Thus, when in 1959 Willem Sandberg curated a Stedelijk exhibition entitled \textit{Vitality in Art} – comparing work by Dubuffet and Tàpies with Pollock and De Kooning, stating that the contemporary condition ‘screamed for a protest that erupts cursing and roaring in painting’ – the Dutch painter Frank Gribling responded: ‘the scream has been dismissed.’\textsuperscript{68} Additionally, Sandberg’s

\textsuperscript{65} A. Burri as quoted in J. Hamilton, ‘Making Art Matter: Alberto Burri’s Sacchi’, \textit{October}, Vol. 124, Spring, 2008, p.34
\textsuperscript{66} C. Buddingh, 1958 as quoted in A. Melissen (ed.), \textit{Tussen Weten en Begrijpen}, p.63
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{The New American Painting} was organised by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, New York and appeared in Basel, Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris and London (May, 1958 – Sept, 1959). First discussed and criticized by Max Kozloff and Eva Cockroft in \textit{Artforum} in the mid 1970s, Abstract Expressionism was indeed used by the American government as a political tool for asserting the U.S.’s cultural dominance over Soviet influences in Europe. See M. Kozloff, ‘American Painting During the Cold War’, \textit{Artforum} 11, no.9, May, 1973, pp.43-54; E. Cockroft, ‘Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War’, \textit{Artforum} 12, no.10, June 1974, pp.43-54
\textsuperscript{68} Willem Sandberg in catalogue for \textit{De Vitaliteit in de Kunst}, exh. Cat. Stedelijk Museum, 1959 as quoted in W. Beerens, \textit{Actie, werkelijkheid en fictie in de kunst van de jaren ’50 in Nederland} exh. cat. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1979, p.21; F. Gribling,
show had still trumped the Dutch members of CoBrA as the response to international developments, not including the art of the younger Informelen, who had trouble asserting their position in the shadow painted by CoBrA's living legends.  

For Armando at this time, immoderate, unbridled aggression made room for a calmer, cooler, more obviously objective appearance. Having produced near monochrome canvasses in 1957 (fig. 19), a further move towards a greater depersonalised aesthetic led him to the production of fully black *Espaces Criminels* from 1958 onwards (fig. 20). This was undoubtedly inspired by the large Kasimir Malevich’s collection that Sandberg had acquired and exhibited at the Stedelijk museum in 1957. Additionally however, a general European turn away from expressive, humanist gesture could have led to the fact that soon sand, like colour, would disappear from Armando’s works. The smooth oily blackness that remained would prefigure the look of his *Black Water*, the pool of liquid installed at the *Nul-0-Zero* exhibition at The Hague’s Gemeentemuseum in 1964 (fig. 21).  

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Ch. 2. 1960s Nul: Ludic irony and cool indexicality

‘You should be writing or painting that which hides itself between knowing and understanding. A small indication, a hint is possible, a suspicion, no more, and that alone is already quite a lot’.

- Armando, 198671

Early in 1957 Yves Klein had already invoked Malevich’s squares at his first exhibition of identical blue canvases at Gallerie Apollinaire in Milan in January and Galerie Iris Clert in Paris in May, where he released 1001 blue balloons on the boulevard Saint-Germain-des-Prés.72 1957 also saw the first major European retrospectives of Dada, first in Paris, then in Düsseldorf the following year.73 In this latter city, evening exhibitions in Heinz Mack and Otto Piene’s studios led to the formation of the German neo-dada group Zero that same year.74 In 1960, Pierre Restany drafted the manifesto for Nouveau Réalism, which, signed by Arman, Yves Klein, Daniel Spoerri and Tinguely among others, encouraged the ‘poetic recycling of urban, industrial and advertising reality’.75 It was in this context that in 1960 Armando, together with Henk Peeters, Jan Schoonhoven and Jan Henderikse – three of his fellow Informelle group colleagues – started the Nederlandse Nul group, bidding his painting of the fifties goodbye (fig. 22).76 From 1960 onwards, Armando produced ‘ready-made’ works of art and installations; walls mounted with car tires and panels adorned with steel bolts, shiny plates of tin or barbed wire.

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71 Armando, Krijgsgevoel, p.161
76 In the Kroniek voor Kunst en Kultur; no. 5-6, 1961 Henk Peeters and Armando published an article which stated that ‘the Dutch avant-garde has reached a period, in which it clearly rejects the informel tendencies of the 1950s’ (De nederlandse avant-garde heeft een periode bereikt, waarin zijn zich duidelijk afzet tegen informele stromingen uit de vijftiger jaren) – as quoted in F. Gribling (ed.), Informele Kunst, p.39
In a text entitled ‘An International Primer’, published in the literary magazine Gard Sivik in 1964, Armando summarised the common principles that had determined his artistic method during these years:

[...] not to stifle Reality with moralism or interpretation (to art-ify it), but to intensify it. Starting point: a consistent acceptance of Reality. [...] Working method: isolating, annexing. Hence: authenticity. Not of the maker, but of the information. The artist, who is not an artist: a cool, pragmatic eye. [...]  

This ‘cool’, new, ‘pragmatic’ art represented a decided contrast with Armando’s earlier informel work. Nul represented a break with the despairing melancholy of informel – with Armando commending the ‘refreshing rise of consumerist society’ in which ‘everything was beautiful’. In 1961 Armando and Henk Peeters cited Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein and the German artists of the newly formed Zero group, Uecker, Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, as the inspirations for their new art. The artists had come in contact with their works through their joint exhibiting in Germany, Düsseldorf primarily. Their neo-dadaist influence led Armando to appreciate the aesthetic of reality, ‘the adventure of the everyday’, expressing itself for example in his 1962 Stedelijk Museum untitled wall of car tires (fig. 23), his 1964 Five Red and Five Black Barrels (fig. 24), reminiscent of Nouveau Realiste Christo’s oil barrel intervention protesting the Berlin wall in 1961, or his Black Water from 1964.

As part of the Nul group, Armando gained the institutional attention the artist had lacked during the 1950s. Three large exhibitions, two at the Stedelijk in 1962 and 1965 and one at The Hague’s Gemeentemuseum in 1964, brought

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78 J. Wesseling, Alles Was Mooi, p. 8
79 An example is the previously mentioned 1958 exhibition in Galerie Gunar. In 1961, the Dutch Nul artists participated in the exhibition ‘Internationale Malerei 1960-61.’ in the German Wolframs-Eschenbach, where Armando showed three works. - A. Melissen (ed.), Tussen Weten en Begrijpen, p. 67
80 See for Christo’s 1961 project: http://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wall-of-oil-barrels---the-iron-curtain#VXhHV1zBzGc, accessed on 5/06/’15
together over twenty-five artists from eight different countries.\textsuperscript{81} The formation of Nul thus allowed an alignment with the artistic energies that were sweeping through Europe in the early sixties and marked the start of the decade that was to provide liberation from the conservatism and religious moralism of the fifties.\textsuperscript{82} This international impetus explains much of why Armando turned towards the banality of the everyday. Yet the artist was to turn his back to Nul at the height of its institutional success during the Stedelijk Museum exhibition in 1965.\textsuperscript{83} What function then did Nul play for Armando and why did he reject it so quickly?

Armando was the first out of the Dutch painters to arrive at the full black monochrome and equally to start incorporating objects into his works.\textsuperscript{84} An 	extit{Espace Criminel} from 1959 features ten nails sticking sideways out of the long, rectangular support (fig. 25), showing the influence of the German Gunther Uecker, who had been hammering nails into his works since 1957 (fig. 26). 

\textit{Peinture 4} from 1960 features, besides eight nails – this time presented parallel to the canvas’ surface – two fist-sized holes at either edge of the otherwise smooth black space (fig. 27). This rare example of Armando’s destruction of the canvas reveals the influence of Lucio Fontana, who had been slashing and piercing his canvasses since 1949.\textsuperscript{85} Fontana’s influence is also visible in Armando’s drawings of 1960. In contrast to the earlier forced, frustrated lines, these new sheets were covered in lightly speckled dots that would subtly imply circles (fig. 29), mirroring the manner in which steel bolts were jotted across the surface of his red, white or black tin plated panels (fig. 30-32). Besides new forms and styles, the European avant-garde had also shown Armando and his Nul colleagues that provocation generation attention. In a spirit of ludic, anti-

\textsuperscript{81} Tentoonstelling Nul, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1962; Nul-0-Zero exhibition, Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, 1964; Nul 1965, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1965. In the latter exhibition, Gutai also participated

\textsuperscript{82} As Sarah Wilson asserts, the European shift to the continuum of the present in the visual arts took place at a time of an intellectual fascination with ‘everyday life’ - S. Wilson, ‘Paris in the 1960s: Towards the Barricades of the Latin Quarter’ in Paris: Capital of the Arts 1900-1968 exh.cat. Royal Academy, London, 2002, p.331

\textsuperscript{83} The artist explained that although he participated in the exhibition, he withdrew from the movement before its opening and is therefore not seen in any of the photos of the Nul group at its opening –

\textsuperscript{84} J. Wesseling, Alles was Mooi, p.17

\textsuperscript{85} See http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=1930, accessed 04/05/’15
establishment rebellion, they composed a range of Dada-esque pamphlets, such as the text ‘Einde’ (‘End’), which lamented the bleak character of the Dutch cultural scene and suggested, with a heavy sense of irony, that perhaps the Dutch population would be better off without art.\textsuperscript{86} Furthermore, Armando fashioned himself the identity of a cool, detached and haughty businessman, breaking with his image as a violent rebel during the start of his career.\textsuperscript{87} A written self-portrait from 1960 – reminiscent of Georges Mathieu’s self-aggrandising third person description earlier that year – exemplifies this: \textsuperscript{88}

‘A tall, slender man entered a gigantic building in one of the world’s metropolises. He had a feline-like, athletic body, a strikingly handsome face and a dark moustache. His cold, inspecting/discerning eyes momentarily glanced over the crowd that watched him quietly and filled with awe. […] It was the phenomenon Armando that entered in order to present to a select audience one of his exclusive shows, new forms, new words, new words’.\textsuperscript{89}

However, for all the ludic posturing and humorous energies running through Nul, Armando was still occupied by the same problematic subject-matter. His works were composed of unmistakable references to the industrial

\textsuperscript{86} ‘Where Dutch art has plunged to a provincial level, the value of the Gilder rises [...] The Dutch population doesn’t need art for its well-being, in fact: art can be missed like a hole in the head!’ \textit{(Waar de Nederlandse kunst is afgezakt tot een provincial peil, stijgt de waarde van de Gulden. Het Nederlandse Volk heeft voor zijn welzijn helemaal geen kunst nodig, ja: kunst kan gemist worden als kiespijn!)} – ‘Einde’, pamphlet sent together with another text entitled ‘Manifest against nothing’ which constituted an invite to the ‘International exhibition of nothing’ to be held in the Amsterdam Galerie 207 in April in 1961 – both reprinted in A. Melissen (ed.), \textit{Tussen Weten en Begrijpen}, pp.255-256


\textsuperscript{88} Mathieu’s near ridiculous, panache-like commentary of his artistic process related to his public and live creation of his 3x6m \textit{L’Entrée de Louis XIII et de la reine Anne d’Autriche dans Paris à leur retour de Bordeaux}, in the courtyard of the Chateau Courances on 22 May 1960 – See B. Marcadé, ‘Pretentious? Moi? Document: Georges Mathieu’, \textit{Tate Etc}. issue 18: Spring 2010

\textsuperscript{89} Een lange, slanke man betrad een gigantisch gebouw in één van de wereldsteden. Hij had een kattachtig en lenig lichaam, een opvallend knap gelaat en een donkere snor. Zijn koude, loerende ogen gleden even over de menigte, die hem bij de ingang stil en geïmponeerd gadesloeg. […] Het was het fenomeen Armando, dat binnen trad om aan een besloten publiek een van zijn exclusive shows te tonen: nieuwe vormen, nieuwe woorden, nieuwe woorden – Armando in \textit{Gard Sévik}, 1960, quoted in N.J.A. Cornelissen, \textit{Armando, Brakman, Mutsaers: Over Filosofie en Literatuur}, PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2012, p.17
aesthetics of war: the cold, harsh metal of armour plating, the black rubber of truck tires, the barbed-wire used for fencing (fig. 33). Although ready-made, the reality from which these materials stemmed was very specific and hardly flippant.\footnote{This was recognised by Wim Beeren as early as 1964, who wrote that Armando’s Nul works were ‘riddled with associations: night, death, terrifying nothingness, the war’. (Omdat zwart met zoveel associaties geladen is: de nacht, de dood, het huiveringswekkende niets, de oorlog) – W.A.L. Beeren, ‘Signalement. Armando’, Museumjournaal no. 5-6, 1964, p.149-153} Armando however, had never claimed that Nul represented emotional neutrality. In his 1964 text in \textit{Gard Sivik} he had, along with the need for a cool, business-like eye, asserted that the artist’s selection from reality could be studied to understand his personal psychology.\footnote{‘[…] Poetry as the result of a (personal) selection from Reality. Interest for the psychology of the ’artist’? Study the how and why of his selection.’ (Poesie als resulatant van een (persoonlijke) selectie uit de Realiteit. Interesse voor de psychologie van de ’kunstenaar’? Bestudeer het hoe en waarom van zijn selectie. – Armando, ‘Een internationale Primeur’, \textit{Gard Sivik} 7, 1964, p.3} Thus, in contrast to the grandfather of the readymade, Marcel Duchamp, who claimed not to be guided by ‘taste’ in his selection of objects, Armando let his personal history determine his engagement with the everyday.\footnote{Duchamp stated in 1961 concerning his method of selection: \textit{This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste … in fact a complete anesthesia.} – M. Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades’”, talk delivered by Duchamp at the ‘Art of Assemblage’ symposium at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 19 October 1961’, Published in \textit{Art and Artists}, [1966] and reprinted in M. Sanouillet, E. Peterson (eds.), \textit{Salt Seller, The Writings of Marcel Duchamp}, (New York, 1973)} His childhood memories never far at bay, trauma was merely subdued, poured into more contained forms and hidden behind the smooth surfaces and ludic irony. As Armando himself had asked in 1957, ‘are comedy and seriousness really even distinguishable, doesn’t one just merely hind behind the other?’\footnote{Armando, ‘Nieuwe Richting in de Franse Schilderkunst: Georges A. Mathieu, “Action-Painter”, Komedianterie En Ernst’, \textit{Haagse Post}, 28/12/’57}

During the 1950s Armando staged a portrayal of war by enacting violence with paint and depicting the scenes of its occurrence, which point to their own destruction referentially. In his Nul period Armando sees this indexical strategy through to its logical conclusion, pointing to violence with elements taken from objective reality. These elements are straightforward, unambiguous, honest. They do not represent anything other than their own object-hood, but they relate to violence in a semiotic sense, they touch the war associatively and thus reference it. They do not need Armando’s ‘interpretation’ or moral annotation;
they provide truth, or ‘authenticity of information’ all by themselves. Additionally, they retain a violence of artistic process. The Nul practice of dispassionate, ruthless ‘isolating’ and ‘annexing’ mirrors the insidiously ‘rational’, calculated, bureaucratic method with which the Nazi’s targeted and displaced Jews, homosexuals and gypsies.\textsuperscript{94} Perhaps Armando’s ability to conceptualise this working process in itself as violent, as war-like, explains the lack of a continued engagement with Fontana’s method of literal destruction, as seen in \textit{Peinture 4} (fig.27). Tearing the objects of war away from their original context and quarantining them in an art environment proved sufficiently violent.

Alongside his visual practice of isolating and annexing, Armando pioneered the development of an innovative new literary style in the Belgium experimental magazine \textit{Gard Sivik}. Armando, together with Hans Sleutelaar, Cornelis Bastiaan Vaandrager en Hans Verhagen took charge of the direction of the magazine and heralded a type of poetry that became known as ‘The New Style’ (\textit{De Nieuwe Stijl}), the name under which \textit{Gard Sivik} continued in 1965.\textsuperscript{95} The most radical of The New Style poems are cycles of isolated fragments of language as Armando encountered them in his day-to-day life, such as snippets of ordinary conversations in the train (\textit{September in de trein}, 1963). Often ambiguous, absurd or banally plain, the linguistic fragments can appear as much comedic as grave, leaving the reader unsure of how to interpret them. ‘September in the train’ finishes with the words:

\begin{quote}
‘this carriage sways a lot, doesn’t it.

it does

you can tell it’s the last one.

indeed you can
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{94} As Ernst van Alphen points out: ‘It was with these methods that the Nazis tried to shape Germany. Jews, homosexuals and gypsies were isolated, countries were annexed’, E. Van Alphen, \textit{Shaping Memory}, p. 13; ‘rational’ here should be considered to refer to the type of rationality that Max Weber described as formal rationality (\textit{Zweckrationalität}); a rational logic that only applies to the methods employed without a regard for their ends. Although the Nazi’s methods might have been rationally efficient and effective, the end to which they worked was utterly absurd and indefensible, lacking any type of ‘substantive’ rationality (\textit{Wertrationalität}). See M. Weber, \textit{The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism} [1904-05], (London, 2002)

\textsuperscript{95} W. Beeren (ed.), \textit{Actie, werkelijkheid en fictie in de kunst van de jaren ’60 in Nederland}, exh. cat. Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1979, p. 148
yes, there's nothing behind it, is there.'

In a literal sense, there is indeed nothing that follows 'the last one', 'this' being the last carriage, as well as last poem. Yet one cannot help but wonder: nothing behind Armando’s art, nothing behind life, behind death?

Alongside fragments of conversations, Armando also devised poems by taking ready-made fragments from texts, which often display the black humour characteristic of 'The New Style' at the time. Armando’s ‘Agrarian cycle’ of 1964 consists of isolated fragments from instruction manuals for the use of farm machine in which banal humour is absent, but ambivalence abound. The cycle includes the sentences ‘the machine requires little maintenance/the machine’s operation is very clean’ and the excerpt:

'with steel teeth
the roots of the sowed crop are not damaged
the weeds are nipped in the bud
with steel teeth

The effect 'clean land' must be astounding'.

Several of the words in the original Dutch infer violent meanings. The Dutch phrase for ‘nipping in the bud’ literally translates as ‘smothering the germs’ and the word for sowing, zaaien, can also refer to the inflicting of destruction, terror and despair. Isolated from its original context therefore, the instruction manual appears to propagate a set of highly disconcerting values; those of a sterile, well-

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96 An example is Armando’s 1965 cycle that consisted of brief comments made by those working or living in a mental institution – Armando, 'De Mongolen' in Armando, H. Sleutelaar, H. Peeters, C. B. Vaandrager, H. Verhagen (eds.) De Nieuwe Stijl deel 1 (Amsterdam, 1965), pp.7-15
98 Verderf zaaien, literally translates as 'sowing destruction/decay'. Other Dutch words related to agriculture, such as 'mowing' indicate violent imagery as well, since zaaien also refers to the act of shooting someone down by means of a stream of uninterrupted, randomly directed bullets. Armando uses this linguistic imagery for example in the chapter 'The Presence' of 'The Street and the Shrubbery' – See appendix 3
oil machinery, a system similar to that which underlay the scientific management operations the Nazi's employed for their genocide. Albeit non-explicit and ambiguous, the implied affliction of injury by cold, hard steel is chilling.

Here, indexicality is at the root of Armando’s artistic mechanism. Death is not explicitly named anywhere, yet as Van Alphen argues, ‘like the footprint that signals the presence of an animal or human being, this isolated discourse merely suggests cold-blooded and perfectly organised murder’.  

Armando turns towards ready-made language to capture traces of violence within the Dutch linguistic landscape. He explained: ‘That is my opinion of a poem. They have to recall something, but simultaneously they should contain a mystery, and that three-hundred-fold ambivalence. Because, it isn’t relatable, it isn’t quantifiable’. No metaphor can capture the horror of the Second World War; it can only be related by means of neighbouring language and concepts. The decontextualisation of Armando’s isolated elements allow for their interpretation to remain open, inconclusive, creating the space necessary to grasp ‘that, which hides between knowing and understanding’.

It can be questioned to what extent the formal qualities of Armando’s Nul panels – deadpan, closed, opaque – are effective at creating the three-hundred-fold ambivalence the artist speaks of. Although Armando’s visual Nul works undeniably reference the aesthetic of war, they do so without much subtlety. The tin-plates, steel bolts, car tires and barbed-wire are at risk of banally overstating their content, giving away – in their literality – much more than a mere ‘hint, a suspicion’. Although Armando’s development from the 1950s into the 1960s followed a progressive logic, the final formal outcome of Nul, the deadpan, lifeless look of the readymade, directly opposed the energetic evocations Armando had painted at the start of his career.

Consequently, once the novelty and radicality of the ready-made had worn off, Nul quickly became exhausted for Armando, who might have realized

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99 Van Alphen, Shaping Memory, p.14
100 dat is mijn opvatting van een gedicht. Ze moeten iets oproepen, maar tegelijkertijd moeten ze ook het raadsl inhouden en die driehonderdvoudige ambivalentie. Omdat..., het is niet te vertellen. Het is niet aan te duiden. – B. van Garrel, K. Schippers, ‘Ik wil de macht hebben om de geschiedenis stop te zetten’, Haagse Post, 13/04/’74
that the ‘cool’ and ‘authentic’ self-evidence of his works impeded any further consequence being drawn from them. Where an artist like Jan Schoonhoven, who did insist on art necessarily being impersonal and ‘entirely objective’, adhered to the aesthetic for the rest of his career, Nul’s matter-of-factness – principally concerned with objects from everyday consumer-driven reality – failed to effectively relate Armando’s preoccupations.\(^{101}\) The overload of ironic posturing and self-assured banality led the artist to claim that Nul had exhausted him mentally, that he had come to resemble ‘a skeleton inwardly’.\(^{102}\) Hence, in 1965, at the height of its institutional success, Armando turned his back to Nul.\(^{103}\) From constituting one of the movement’s most boisterous proponents both in his art, writing and in the public eye – Armando stopped making art all together until 1967.\(^{104}\)

Still, despite its short-lived potency, the relativism and light-hearted coolness of Nul had been important for Armando, who stated that Nul had allowed him to gain distance from the obsessive hatefulness and unbridled anger he had harboured during the 1950s.\(^{105}\) Through his alignment with the international artistic turn towards the everyday, the artist managed to achieve nuance, gain perspective so that by 1965, Armando stressed the need for historic consciousness, concluding *De Nieuwe Stijl* part I with the sentence: ‘historical awareness is the only reliable guiding principle’.\(^{106}\) Once applied to the culturally and historically specific situation of post-war Holland, this awareness led to the

\(^{101}\) Jan Schoonhoven stated: ‘The work of art should not be the bearer of the artistic will of its maker, but should be entirely objective.’ – as quoted in V. Alphen, *Shaping Memory*, p.35

\(^{102}\) Conversation of author with the artist. See appendix 4

\(^{103}\) Furthermore, Armando objected to the fact that the institutional success of Nul had led to the style becoming accepted, routine, in Armando’s words: ‘secularised’ and ‘objectified’. – A. Melissen (ed.), *Tussen Weten en Begrijpen*, p. 71

\(^{104}\) As has also been pointed out by Frank Gribling, Armando’s sudden withdrawal from the art scene mirrors Marcel Duchamp’s who equally realised that the act of isolating reality and bringing it into the realm of art – the act of the readymade – is not endlessly viable. – L. Ferron (ed.), *Armando schilder/schrijver*, p.57

\(^{105}\) If I judge purely on the content of my work, I was still completely war in the 1950s. In the 1960s, because of the coolness of that Nul period, I managed to gain perspective. Through the making of that book, I came to realise these things. And now I apply them, thank god’ (*Als ik puur op de inhoud van mijn werk af ga was ik in de jaren ’50 zelf nog helemaal oorlog. In de jaren ’60 heb ik daar door de koelheid van die Nul-periode afstand van kunnen nemen. Door het maken van dat boek ben ik me die dingen bewust geworden. En nu hanteer ik ze, godzijdank*)

\(^{106}\) Armando, H. Sleutelaar, H. Peeters (eds.), *De Nieuwe Stijl, deel I* (Amsterdam, 1965), p. 112
journalistic project that resulted in *The SS'ers* in 1967. Although unintentionally so, Armando’s ‘descend into reality’ had enabled a sense of restrain and perspective, ultimately encouraging the journalist objectivity and emotional distancing that characterised this ground-breaking publication.\(^{107}\)

Additionally significant was his production of the first scripts for the absurdist comedic television show *Herenleed (Gentlemen’s Sorrow)* acted out together with Cherry Duyns and first televised in 1974. This Beckettian programme – which had as its decor the Dutch Veluwe, the expanse of forest-rich heath in the Eastern Netherlands located near former Camp Amersfoort – staged nonsense conversations between two nameless men representing two absolutely opposite identities – man one confident, self-congratulatory bourgeois bowler-hat-wearing ‘master’, man two insignificant, bespectacled, modest ‘servant’.\(^{108}\) In their absurdist exchanges, Armando found a context in which to express his growing concern with subjectivity, the complex relationship between master and servant, the perpetual interchanging of good and evil and the ambivalent character of the Dutch landscape.\(^{109}\) My final chapter will reveal how these concerns took centre stage in Armando’s art after 1965 and how the artist turned to Romanticism to reconcile the tensions that characterised his previous engagements with informel and Nul.

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\(^{107}\) J. Heymans, ‘De onvoltooid verleden tijd: in gesprek met Armando’, *De Revisor* 16, no. 4, 1989, p. 66

\(^{108}\) Armando, C. Duyns, *Wat Zegt, wat doet, verzameld Herenleed* (Amsterdam, 1985)

Ch. 3 1970s and beyond: Romantic ambivalence

‘Look, coherence is missing, you see? And it stands to reason, since no coherence exists’" - Armando, 1973

‘The more questions, the better. Answers are not appreciated.’" - Armando, 1994

Armando’s reorientation after Nul was decisively influenced by his sparked interest in Romanticism. The artist remarked that after the complete preoccupation with everyday reality that had characterised his Nul period, he turned to the lofty heights of the German Romantics in order to ‘recharge spiritually’. The works of Goethe, Novalis, Schiller, but also Wagner became important sources of inspiration – their ‘sensibility’, their ‘sacral atmosphere’ appealing to Armando – and during the 1970s a range of works came into being that relate to, or depict landscapes.

In addition to a desire for elevation and the obvious parallel with the Romantic interest in nature however, I would like to suggest that Armando’s attraction to the Romantics was intimately related to the conceptual ambivalence inherent to their project. It has already been argued that many artists of the post-war era – specifically conceptual artists – resemble the Romantics of the late 18th century in their identical reaction to an exhausted artistic tradition and failing of culture and politics in their time. The

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110 Armando, _Dagboek van een Dader_ (Amsterdam, 1973), p.128
111 Armando, _Voorvallen in de Wildernis_ (Amsterdam, 1994), p. 101
112 Conversation of author with the artist. See appendix 4
113 B. van Garrel, ‘Een dagje met Armando’, _NRC Handelsblad_, 17/04/’71. Also see the work of Caspar David Friedrich on the cover of Armando’s _Dagboek van een Dader_ (‘Diary of a Perpetrator’), published in 1973; Heymans, _Een Boom_, p. 74
114 As argued by Jan Verwoert, a connection can be drawn between the Romantics and the post-modern artists that turned towards radically new, destabilising conceptual art practices around 1970, exactly the time of Armando’s reorientation. Where the Romantics had turned to emphatically ambivalent, open, inconclusive forms of art to mediate their disillusionment with the violent ramifications of the French Revolution, post-modern avant-gardes sought to undermine the absolute truths of Western rationality and art that had resulted in the horrors of the Second World War. – J. Verwoert, ‘Impulse, Concept, Concept, Impulse’ in Jörg Heiser and Ellen Seifermann (eds.), _Romantic Conceptualism_, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Nurnberg, Nuremberg, 2007, p. 166
Romantics valued the open over the closed, the unknown over the known, the infinite over the limited and continuously aspired to reach a higher absolute, a fundamental, aesthetic revolution, a qualitative improvement of reality.\footnote{115} Yet as Jos de Mul wants to emphasise, they were also ever aware of the tragic, ironic futility of this aspiration. Each of these characteristics is pertinent for thinking about Armando’s work from the 1970s onwards.

The influence of Romanticism first came to its most obvious expression in Armando’s poetry; a 1971 new collection of poems, entitled ‘Heaven & Earth: a heroic cycle in 3 parts’ could not have contrasted more greatly with the style and content of Armando’s Nul cycles. Its poems are riddled with references to supernatural powers, epic battles, cruel gods, overwhelming forces of nature and stories of heroic human endeavour.\footnote{116} However, in Armando’s visual work from the period – to which he returned in 1968 – subtler Romantic elements can be discerned. The first series of drawings display a profound openness and soft formal quietude. Delicately meandering lines move horizontally across paper of much grander dimensions and reject the harsh frustration of his informel work. Lack of composition denies any focussed object or form, yet Armando’s lines do seem to represent something other than themselves, something out of focus, beyond reach. Instead of pure abstraction, the lines evoke natural forms, like a system of underground roots (fig. 34) or the outlines of rock formations (fig. 35).\footnote{117}

The first painting Armando created after Nul is a large black triptych over which he applied a haze of colour, prosaically titled Resurrection (1971). The painting mirrors the drawings in its prioritisation of evocativeness over literality; pools of blackness, seemingly oscillating between different coloured gradations, evoke the suspicion that something more than solid wall exists

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[115] Friedrich Schiller, disappointed by the violent bankruptcy of the French Revolution, pleaded for a fundamental, aesthetic revolution. Equally, Novalis considered Romantic thought as nothing less than a qualitative improvement of reality, giving a ‘mysterious stature to the everyday’ and the ‘appearance of the infinite to the finite’ – Novalis [1800] as quoted in De Mul, Romantic desire, p. 7; F. Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man [1795] (Oxford, 1981), p. 58
\item[116] Armando, Hemel en Aarde: een Heroische Cyclus in 3 delen (Amsterdam, 1971)
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behind them. Works that followed were equally made up out of multiple panels, spacing the viewer’s gaze and evoking mystery, openness and the unsaid. In this they differ from Armando’s deadpan Nul statements.

The objectivity of Nul retained its influence however. Throughout the seventies, Armando started to explicitly refer to nature by incorporating photographs – isolated, ‘readymade’ selections from reality – he took of forest scenes on the Veluwe Heath, to which he had moved back in 1968. Black and white photographs of ominously looming treetops, silhouetted against the sky, feature in multi-panelled configurations alongside empty white panels, only sparsely marked by the artist’s evocative line (fig. 36), painterly extensions of tree shapes (fig. 37), or disconcerting red marks. Their mysterious atmosphere stems not in the least from their enigmatic titles, such as ‘Accused Landscape’ (1972) or ‘Guilty landscape’ (1977).

The motive to which these relate would determine an important part of Armando’s future output; the natural landscape as guilty, as complicit with the evil that occurred in its presence through its role as silent, unmoving witness.\textsuperscript{118} In Armando’s obtuse, anti-narrative ‘Diary of A Perpetrator’ (1973), this preoccupation first presents itself:

‘August 16
This landscape has committed evil. I can suspect the armies. It is peaceful here, but unfitting. Silence sometimes comes after noise: here was pain, here a fellow man thrashed’.\textsuperscript{119} Later, Armando writes:

‘They grow and keep still. Whatever happens. Quite a bit has happened near the trees. Stalking and shooting, thrashing and humiliating. […] The trees in front must have seen a thing or two. Those behind can hardly be blamed, they could never see anything. But the edge, the seam of the forest: that has seen it.’\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{118} Heymans, Een Boom, pp.31-32
\textsuperscript{119} Armando, Dagboek van een dader (Amsterdam, 1973), p.78
\textsuperscript{120} Armando, Uit Berlijn, p.38
Apart from revealing a Romantic interest in landscape, the motif relates to Armando’s continued intrigue with the index. The indictment of the landscape as culpable is not metaphoric; trees are not personified on some hypothetical symbolic plane, but are condemned literally; the contiguity between the physical edge of the forest and the perpetrator constituting the conditions for pronouncing the trees guilty.¹²¹ The trees are old witnesses, present at the time of the occupation and remain, in their physical constitution, as the remnants of the exact moments in which the acts of ‘thrashing an humiliating’ were committed.¹²² This concern with physical traces is underlined by the use of photographs, which, as Rosalind Krauss insists, itself rely on the ‘physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image’.¹²³

In this light, Armando’s practice can be compared to that of Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer, who at the same time was examining the difficulty of calling attention to the troubling history of his home country.¹²⁴ His Uruguayan Torture Series (1972) – which consists of thirty-five photo etchings showing commonplace objects or body-parts in combination with single, short, ambiguous sentences that together invoke specific torture practices (fig. 38-39) – aesthetically the lifeless, ‘guilty’ objects that witnessed and perpetrated horrific violence. Like Armando’s ominous landscape photographs, Camnitzer’s images induce hair-raising chills through staging ambivalence over what has occurred. A simple glass of water, in combination with the text ‘He feared thirst’, points to the variety of dreadful practices to which opponents of Uruguay’s

¹²¹ E. van Alphen, Shaping Memory, p.11
¹²² In the chapter ‘Presence’ in ‘The Street and the Shrubbery’, Armando described his encounter as a boy (in the third person) with corpses hanging in a tree after ‘a few bombs had been dropped’. The boy asked a woman: “How did they get into that tree?” “from the blast, of course”. Told them back home: dripping bodies in a tree, a leg hanging loose’. – See appendix 3
¹²⁴ A military dictatorship took hold in Uruguay in 1969 and became closely allied with the dictatorial regimes of Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Paraguay, all of which exchanged political prisoners across the borders for torture and execution. Camnitzer, like Armando, emigrated from his home country, albeit not out of choice, but as a political refugee. He pursued his aesthetic negotiation of Uruguay’s traumatic history from New York City from the early 1970s onwards – See L. Camnitzer, Alexander Alberro in Conversation with Luis Camnitzer (New York, 2014), p.102
Both Armando’s landscapes and Camnitzer’s objects allow us to catch a glimpse of that which is too terrible or traumatic to imagine or capture directly. Sensing the inadequacy of representation, the failure of reality to bridge the gap between the phenomenological world and the greater, supersensuous Idea, is what the Romantics called the experience of the sublime. In the post-war period, both Jean François Lyotard and Theodor Adorno have theorised Kant’s concept of negative representation as the most appropriate means with which to commemorate trauma, particularly that of Auschwitz, which, like the sublime, represents a concept so terrible, utterly ungraspmable, that it cannot be represented. Armando’s indexical landscape negatively represents the violence, since it fails to show the signs of its occurrence. Armando calls attention to the fact that the forest, the trees were (literally) unmoved in the face of sublime evil, continued to overgrow ‘the spot’ and simply ‘laughed in the background’. By marking the landscape with his pencil or brush, he revealed it as marked by a violent history.

Yet, despite his awareness of nature’s radiating indifference to this history (or perhaps because of it), Armando recognised its beauty:

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125 In his 1790 ‘Analytic of the Sublime’ Kant theorised the feeling as a disturbing, overwhelming sensation, a ‘negative pleasure’ stemming from the crisis of the imagination as it tries and fails, in the face of immense scale or grandeur, to fathom a totality. This inadequacy of the mind to present the unpresentable functions as a reminder of the existence of something supersensuous and absolute – I. Kant, ‘The Analytic of the Sublime’ [1790] in The Critique of Judgment (London, 1951)


127 As Edmund Burke stated ‘whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime’ – E. Burke, A philosophical Enquiry into the origin into our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful [1759] (Chicago, 1968), p.39
'You shouldn’t think that they went to go stand in a different spot. They are still standing there, as indifferent witnesses. I watch them. I look at them. And then something horrible occurs: they are beautiful, I find them beautiful'.  

Unwittingly having become intrigued by the beauty of the landscape – he felt compelled to transform it:

‘It is the beauty of evil, die Schonheit des Bösen, it is the beauty found in the belly of evil that looks for a place to show itself in evil’s wake, although I will have none of it. This beauty compels me to transfer the ‘evil’ to the guiltless domain of art (guiltless because it is amoral). And see: evil is evil no longer – it is art. It sounds incredible, but it’s true. [...] resulting, I hope, in the sublime. [...]’

Finding beauty where he believes there should be none constitutes a nonsensical, unethical discord in reality that drove Armando’s Nietzschean compulsion to aestheticise, aiming to stage the sublime as a reconciliation of reality and its contradictions.

During the early 1970s the German artist Anselm Kiefer – fifteen years Armando’s younger – had also become concerned with Romanticism and the power of art to transcend history’s evils and reveal its traces. Contemporary to Armando’s turn to landscape as the bearer of the marks of the Dutch occupation, Kiefer had started to create artworks that unearthed the evidences of Nazi history in the German landscape. His Märkische Heide from 1974 for example

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129 Ik bekijk ze, ik kijk naar ze, en dan doet er zich iets akeligs voor: ze zijn mooi, ik vind ze mooi – Armando, De Straat en het Struikgewas, p.244-245
130 Armando, thank you speech entitled ‘Dankwoord: over de schoonheid’, given upon his awarding of the Gouden Ganzaevoer, the cultural price of the Dutch Royal Publishing Association (Koninklijke Nederlandse Uitgeversbond) in 1987 (Amsterdam, 1987), n.p.
131 Armando has expressed his intrigue and ironic disdain for the beautiful at multiple occasions. In ‘The Street and the Shrubbery’, he states: ‘I’ve said it many times before, but I cannot repeat it enough: beauty is fishy, beauty isn’t worth a dime, beauty doesn’t care about a single thing’. (Ik heb het al zo vaak gezegd, maar ik kan het niet genoeg herhalen: de schoonheid is niet plus, de schoonheid is geen knip voor de neus waard, de schoonheid trekt zich nergens wat van aan) – Armando, De Straat en het Struikgewas, p.247
132 Whereas Armando was never acquainted with Luis Camnitzer’s work, his admiration for Kiefer is demonstrated by the fact that he introduced the artist to his friends, the collectors Martijn and Jeanette Sanders. This is explained by the collectors in a filmed interview that was displayed at the recent Stedelijk Museum exhibition of the Sanders’ collection: Bad Thoughts – Collectie Martijn en Jeanette Sanders, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2014-15
specifically refers to a district in Brandenburg that has historically been known for its strategic military importance (fig. 40). The title also references an old regional tune that was adopted as a marching song for Hitler's army, perhaps one that Armando overheard and caught himself admiring when sung by the enemy soldiers by Camp Amersfoort. Kiefer depicts what Armando would describe as 'a spot', of historic significance and located in a landscape not unlike the heath of the Veluwe.

One of Kiefer's early landscapes equally evokes qualities well-known to Armando. In his 1970 Winter Landscape, a stretch of farmland, roughly ploughed (with the same machinery referred to in Armando's 'Agrarian cycle') is covered in snow and tinged with the blood stains of the severed female head that hovers in the sky above it (fig. 41). Two of Armando's 'Guilty Landscapes' of 1976 – constituting similar bleak and ominous landscape depictions – are equally covered in red, blood-like splatters (fig. 42-43). The following year, Armando abandoned his work with photographs, but not the theme of landscape. Like Kiefer, he started to paint with enthusiasm and a mix of media again, exemplified by his 'Hostile Trees' of 1977, displaying two concentrated black patches of vigorously applied oil and sand (fig. 44).

This revival of energetic painting can be situated in the context of other German 'neo-expressionist' that had reincarnated expressive painting at this time. Once relocated in 'the lion's den' (or the eagle's nest?), Arno Breker's Berlin studio, Armando produced series of paintings that repeated the same subject in fervent black-and-white brushwork. These works, now with German titles, depicted: various 'guilty' objects identifiable as the attributes of the enemy, such as flags, Fahnen (1980-1982) (fig. 45), Prussian crosses, Preussisch (1982) (fig. 46-47) and rifles, Das Gewehr (1989) (fig. 48), and later, the architectural

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135 M. Rosenthal, Anselm Kiefer, p.18
136 See the work of the 'Neue Wilden': Jörg Immendorf, Georg Baselitz, A.R. Penck and Markus Lüpertz among others. The activities of this generation of German painters coincided with a larger international revival of painting by, for example, Julian Schnabel in the United States and Francis Bacon in the UK, as reflected by the Royal Academy's 'New Spirit in Painting' exhibition of 1981, partly funded by the German government. See A New Spirit in Painting exh. Cat. Royal Academy of Arts London, 1981; In this context, Armando received a prestigious exhibition at Berlin's Nationalgalerie in 1984, showing his series of flag paintings. See Armando: Fahnen, exh. cat. Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 1984.
features of the prison camp, such as watchtowers, Der Turm (1994) (fig. 49-50), and, ladders, Die Leiter (fig. 51).

Despite what might be perceived as the influence of neo-expressionism – the painterly enthusiasm, the loaded symbolism – and the lofty heights of Romanticism at this point in Armando’s career, neither his written nor his visual work slide into unbridled enthusiasm for exaltation, melancholic sentimentality or nostalgic longing. Although expressive brushwork returns, the palette limits itself to restrained black, white and many greys.137 Although heavy subject-matter is addressed, it is through a detached, matter-of-factly seriality; the repetition of indexical objects, taken from reality.138 Armando’s series hardly resemble the monumental history paintings infused with myth and legend that Kiefer would come to produce or the vividly colourful, densely populated panels produced by Jörg Immendorf in the late 1970s and 1980s. Instead, a series such as Das Turm (1987) seems to echo the silk-screened 1984 work of German pop-artist Sigmar Polke instead (fig. 52).

Equally, in much of the poetry that followed the enigmatically myth-infused ‘Heaven and Earth’, exaltation was entirely suppressed again. Armando’s subsequent collection ‘Discipline’ (Tucht) of 1980 consisted of ninety independent excerpt-like notations, bare and devoid of subjective pathos and ‘Peopletalk’ (Mensenpraat) of 1994 saw Armando fall back upon his Nul practice of isolating real-life language by recording and presenting conversational drivel he encountered in daily life.139 Armando’s Nietzschean compulsion to aestheticise his reality and neutralise ‘evil’ through the transformative power of art explains why the Romantics appealed to him, yet he retained a footing in the everyday. This is unlike Kiefer, who – being of a different generation – had never

137 A. von Graevenitz, ‘Wat ik probeer is de grijzen te vinden: Armando over Wagner, Berlijn en de schoonheid van geweld’, Jaargang, no. 6, 1985, p.25
138 In 1985 Frank Gribling already stated that the institutional interest for Armando’s return to painting fitted in with the ‘revival’ of painting by the German neo-expressionists, although he argued that Armando, a generation older than these ‘young wild ones’, managed to place painting in a cultural historic perspective, without ‘falling into the anecdotal of the image or the literary illustration’ – F. Gribling, ‘Armando en de Romantische traditie’ in L. Ferron (ed.), Armando: schilder/schrijver, p. 61
139 Heymans, Een Boom, pp.76-77
engaged with realism, the ‘wave of Pop enthusiasm’, that swept through West Germany in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{140}

Additionally, \textit{Herenleed} exemplifies Armando’s continued sobriety. Although its script often addressed the same themes as his poetry and painting – the beauty in evil and the hostilities inherent in reality and history – it addresses them through a thick layer of irony, as though the artist, in the words of Saskia Bos, ‘felt a need to place the pregnant themes in quotation marks for a minute, stripping them of their mythical proportions’.\textsuperscript{141} These features that appear antithetical to full-fledged Romantic enthusiasm explain why the artist only reluctantly wants to admits to a shared disposition with the Romantics, stating that he is ‘much to down-to-earth’ to be a ‘frenzied Romantic’, rejecting what he perceived as their ‘desperation’, ‘the decadence of that time’.\textsuperscript{142}

This tension between a desire for Romantic elation and a simultaneous relativism relates strikingly to the paradox that Dutch philosopher Jos De Mul has identified as crucial to historical Romanticism, first described by Friedrich Schlegel as ‘the eternal oscillation between enthusiasm and irony’.\textsuperscript{143} Despite Armando’s conviction that the Romantics’ hankering for totality was desperately decadent, de Mul argues that at its core, their project was tempered by the ever-present consciousness that fundamentally, it could not be realised.\textsuperscript{144} This striving for something knowingly unachievable is ultimately ironic, yet this irony

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[140] Although their artistic strategies are difficult to compare formally, Armando’s attitude resembles that of Kiefer’s teacher, Joseph Beuys’ more closely. Beuys, who in turn was a decade Armando’s senior, equally used irony to cloak his engagement with loaded political subject-matter, such as the theme of German guilt and responsibility. For a discussion of Anselm Kiefer’s positioning and reception in the German artistic landscape of the 1970s, see L. Saltzman, \textit{Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz} (Cambridge, UK, 2000), pp. 102-104. For a discussion of Joseph Beuys’ engagement with the sublime in post-Auschwitz context, see G. Ray, ‘Joseph Beuys and the After-Auschwitz Sublime’ in \textit{Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical theory} (New York, 2005), pp.33-50
\item[142] This down-to-earthness – a trait with which the Dutch self-identify on a national level, designated with the alliterative idiom ‘Nederlandse nuchterheid’ – shows itself continuously in Armando’s language in the form of curtailing irony and humorous turns of phrases that undercut both the unity and coherence of his messages and the expectation of his readers – B. van Garrel, ‘Een dagje met Armando’, \textit{NRC Handelsblad}, 17/4/’71
\item[143] In the introduction of his book De Mul explains: ‘my concern here is not so much with a description of a particular historical period, but rather with the stipulation of a specific worldview that is not restricted tot he romantic but that, as I will subsequently argue in this current work, is, in certain ways, still constitutive for our present experience’ – J. De Mul, \textit{Romantic Desire}, p.7
\item[144] De Mul, \textit{Romantic Desire}, p.9
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
makes it possible to live with the knowledge that nothing is final, setting it apart from empty sarcasm and providing a productive weapon against unproductive nihilism.

It is exactly this creative oscillation that came to characterise Armando’s painting practice. He explained: ‘I am continually looking for the redeeming image. I know however that I will never find it. But still I keep searching passionately’. For de Mul, this irony constitutes the goal of Romantic desire, since it fundamentally demands that the artist self-critically disturbs the illusion created by his work in order to ensure that the creative process does not become definitive, rigid. Thus when in 1986 Armando revisits the theme of Cain and Abel – first used to rage against the human capacity for evil in J’ai Tué Mon Frère Abél – he asks: ‘was Abel truly a better man than Cain, or was he simply weaker?’ Showing his awareness of the shades of grey that exist between historic (and painterly) black and white, Armando undermines the finality of his work. His questioning irony prevents him from falling into the illusion of a last, absolute interpretation of the world, but also determines his ability to remain productive in the face of certain futility, enthusiastically recreating his images of ‘guilty’ objects, of ‘evil spots’ endlessly.

Each of the paintings in Armando’s series represent a fragment of a totality that can never be completed, mirroring the historic understanding that Armando learned can never fully be achieved. His writing for NRC Handelsblad, reporting on his observations and experiences in Berlin, constitutes the literary parallel to these paintings. As a text entitled ‘Night’ explains:

\[145\] Ik ben steeds op zoek naar het verlossende woord of beeld, ik zal steeds op zoek blijven. Toch weet ik zeker dat ik het nooit zal vinden. Maar ik blijf hartstochtelijk op zoek, dat geef ik eerlijk toe – Armando, quoted in Heymans, Een Boom, p.66
\[146\] De Mul, Romantic Desire, p.10
\[147\] Armando, Krijgsgewoel, p.93
\[148\] ‘My paintings do not give answers. Of course not’ (Mijn schilderijen geven geen antwoord. Natuurlijk niet) – Armando, Voorvallen in de Wildernis (Amsterdam 1984), p.22
\[149\] Throughout his preoccupation with the motif of the guilty landscape, Armando undermines its coherence, repeatedly demonstrating his awareness of the nonsensicality of condemning the landscape: ‘No, I know, they are just trees, they cannot be blamed’; ‘Of course it is pointless to declare the landscape guilty’ – Armando, Het schuldige landschap/Die schuldige Landschaft, Berlijn, Amsterdam, 1998, n.p.; Armando quoted in D. Schram, Overal Sporen, p.11
\[150\] Armando’s short texts for NRC Handelsblad were bundled together in three books: Uit Berlijn (Amsterdam, 1982), Machthebbers (Amsterdam, 1983), and Krijgsgewoel (Amsterdam, 1986)
‘Sometimes I wonder what I’m doing here in Berlin. [...] Do you have any idea of what’s been hidden away of concealed here? You won’t discover a single trace, of course, but what counts is the fact that you make the attempt. What counts is finding a form in which to make the attempt: giving form to the attempt, giving form to your inability to do so’.\textsuperscript{151}

Armando’s stories are alternated with short fragments of conversations with the inhabitants of Berlin. Some express nostalgic longing, others traumatic memories, all relate to the history of the war.\textsuperscript{152} These fragmentary conversations are always headed by the title \textit{Flarden}, ‘snatches’, relating to the Dutch idiom of overhearing ‘snatches of conversations’. Also referring to the wisps of vapour that remain when a cloud has been dispersed by the wind, the word implies volatility, transience and incompleteness. Incidentally, the Romantics had given a prominence to the form of the fragment because, As Peter Osborne explicated, it could be posited as ‘the medium of reflection of the apparent contradiction between the finite and infinite aspects of absolute knowledge [...] it epitomises self-consciousness of the finitude or partiality of knowledge’.\textsuperscript{153} Using this form to shape his art and writing, Armando suggested the need for a continued openness and ambivalence in approaching ‘the enemy’ and ‘the war’.

Armando – who, at the end of his life, still feels an urgency to producing work as multifarious and stimulating as possible – has formed a resistance against the normative, received way of thinking about World War Two in Holland that can be seen as politically potent. Before negotiating the manner in which the Dutch viewed their German ‘enemy’ from Berlin, Armando had already undermined the certitude of the categories with which the Dutch viewed their

\textsuperscript{151}Soms vraag ik me af wat ik hier in Berlijn doe [...] Heb je enig idee wat hier verborgen ligt? Je zal er geen spoor van vinden natuurlijk, maar wat telt is dat je het probeert. Wat telt is dat je een vorm vindt om de poging te wagen: vormgeven aan de poging, vormgeven aan je eigen onvermogen – Armando, Uit Berlijn, p.39
\textsuperscript{152}See appendix 3
\textsuperscript{153}Friedrich Schlegel had described a dialogue as ‘a chain, or a garland of fragments’, describing the fragment as an \textit{ideal} form for communicating ideas. – F. Schlegel, \textit{Athenaeum Fragments} (1798) as quoted in Verwoert, ‘Impulse, Concept, Concept, Impulse’, p.169; P. Osborne, \textit{Anywhere Or not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art} (London, 2014), p.59-60
own war-time behaviour with *The SSer*’s. A further retrospective questioning of the behaviour on both ‘sides’ during the occupation was his autobiographical ‘The Street and the Shrubbery’ of 1988, in which Armando repeatedly addressed personal memories of ‘evil’ German soldiers exhibiting normal, positive, benign human behaviour, or ‘good’ Dutchmen perpetrating crimes and obediently following orders that were to result in violence and murder.

Armando’s undermining and reshuffling of the received categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent’, ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ can be interpreted in the light of the thought of Jacques Rancière, the influential post-modern theorist who, of the exact same age as Armando, has in recent years turned to analysing the ethics and aesthetics of representing the holocaust, perhaps driven by a similar awareness of the finality of the lives of those who lived through the period 1940-45. Rancière theorised that to give form to matters outside of their established realm is at the core of both aesthetics and politics, both defining a form of dissensus, ‘a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible’. He uses the dissensus to indicate a break in the sensible order that is created by the confrontation of the established framework of thought with the ‘inadmissible’.

In Armando, this ‘inadmissible’ constitutes the idea that historic roles and categories are in fact relative and that their supposed contradiction forms inaccurate representations of history and reality. This inadmissible occurs in Armando whenever he finds the enjoyable or the beauty in evil, such as in the ‘guilty’ landscapes, the materials and objects of war or, as described in ‘The Street and the Shrubbery’, in war itself:

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154 Armando stated that ‘through producing that book [*The SS’ers*], I became aware of all sorts of things. And now I apply them, thank god.’ (*Door het maken van dat boek ben ik die dingen bewust geworden. En nu hanteer ik ze, godzijgedankt*) – Foppe, ‘Vechten’, p.33
155 For an in-depth literary analysis of Armando’s ‘The Street and The Shrubbery’ see J. Vanderwal Taylor, ‘Language is the Landscape of History: Armando and the History of Enmity’ in *A Family Occupation: Children of the War and the Memory of World War II in Dutch Literature of the 1980s* (Amsterdam, 1997), pp. 84-119
157 ‘If there exists a connection between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus, the very kernel of the aesthetic regime’. See J. Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London, 2010), pp. 140-41
‘When they drove back, one of the boys said: “I like war” and he turned red. He was right of course, but you can’t say something like that. He knew that of course, otherwise he wouldn’t have turned red in the first place’ (Italics mine).\textsuperscript{158}

Armando admits to the fact that reality, our experiences and our perceptions of it, do not always necessarily align. However much we would like to make sense of history, of nature, ultimately ‘coherence is missing’, ‘since no coherence exists’. Yet for Armando, this does not excise a failure to try to reach a greater understanding. Instead it inspires an enthusiastic and ceaseless revisiting and redressing of history and his memories of it, ensuring that the questions they raise remain open, unanswered and therefore relevant to the present-day.

\textsuperscript{158}Toen ze terugreden zei de ene jongen: ‘Ik vind oorlog leuk’, en hij kreeg een kleur. Hij had natuurlijk gelijk, maar je mag zoiets niet zeggen. Dat wist ie ook wel, anders had ie geen kleur gekregen – Armand, De Straat en het Struikgewas, p.68
Looking back, Armando’s concerns from the 1970s onwards can already be discerned in his earlier artistic phases. His 1950s work aimed to reflect the aggression and frustration that had characterised both the ethos of the artist at the time and the ‘intensified’ ‘solidified’, ‘compressed’ reality of the war, confronting Dutch society with the violence in their suppressed past. In the 1960s, Armando’s preoccupation with reality became emphasised as he discovered the power of the index to point to ‘that, which hides between knowing and understanding’. The international avant-gardes of the 1950s 1960s which Armando introduced into the Dutch context, thus handed him tools with which he attempted to reflect his childhood experiences of ‘the war’. Yet it was his engagement with Romantic thought, developed independently of any artist group, which ultimately gave birth to his productive balance between enthusiasm and irony, his characteristic alternation between elation and soberness and his successful negotiation of reality, perception and history.

Armando’s Ladder, marking the former spot of Camp Amersfoort, can be considered an exemplary amalgamation of all concerns discussed. The monumental sculpture epitomises Armando’s romanticism; it connects ‘high’ with ‘low’, giving, in Novalis’ words, the ‘appearance of the infinite to the finite’ and a ‘mysterious stature to the everyday’.\(^{159}\) The occupation had tarred this everyday, had turned the object into something ‘evil’, ‘guilty’, yet aestheticising it allowed Armando to isolate it, recast it as an index of the sublime, reshuffle its meaning and fashion it harmless. The text demonstrates this process and reflects Armando’s historic consciousness. Describing how the ‘occupier’ only became ‘the enemy’ through the subjective course of history, Armando implies that a camp, a watchtower, a ladder were only needed because ‘the servants of the spot’ were expected to uphold the doctrine that came to reign their ‘large country’.\(^{160}\)

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\(^{159}\) Novalis [1800] as quoted in De Mul, Romantic Desire, p. 7

\(^{160}\) Armando related to me the stories he gathered throughout his time observing the German ‘enemy’, discovering what it might have been like, being a seventeen year old boy in a small rural village in Germany in 1939, never having left home, then suddenly going off to fight for the nation, for ‘freedom’. He explained that a former soldier told him that when he...
the Dutch public landscape, staged a sensitive, ambivalent, useful aesthetic negotiation of the legacy of ‘the war’ that remains – unlike destructive and harmful like my grandparents smoking habit – beneficial and politically potent for questioning, remembering and commemorating the legacies of the Second World War in The Netherlands.

crossed the border with Holland, he was under the impression he was coming to liberate the Dutch – Conversation of author with the artist. See appendix 4
Appendix 1

De Ladder van het Kamp
Published as: P. Coumans, G. Brethouwer, (eds.), Armando, de ladder
(Amersfoortse culturele raad/De zonnehof, 1994)

Lang, lang geleden, als was het de dag van gisteren, werd dit kleine land door een
groot land kwaad schiks veroverd. De veroveraar werd 'de bezetter‘ genoemd, voor
velen was hij van nu af aan 'de vijand'. Hij maakte zich meester en zette naar z'n
hand, want hij meende zeker te weten wat goed was: hij verkondigde een leer. En
wie denkt de wijsheid in pacht te hebben, moet andere meningen tot zwijgen
brengen. Mensen die afwijkende meningen hadden, laat staan zij die tot daden
overgingen, werden opgesloten in oorden, waar ze gretig vernederd werden.

Er was zo'n oord in Amersfoort, beter gezegd bij Amersfoort. Het werd 'het kamp'
genoemd. Kamp Amersfoort.

Ik was destijds toevallig in de buurt. Regelmatig zag ik de gevangenen voorbij
lopen en ik zag niet alleen, ik bekeek ze ook.

Toen men mij vroeg om over een sculptuur voor het kamp na te denken, was dat
voor mij een buitengewoon indringende vraag, want het kamp is nooit een dag uit
m'n gedachten geweest.

Het verzoek kwam op een merkwaardig moment, want het laatste jaar hield ik me
bezig met het motief van de ladder, en er is, naar mijn mening, voor deze plek geen
beter motief denkbaar dan een reusachtige ladder.

Waarom een ladder.

Een ladder verbindt laag met hoog, maar waarschijnlijk ook hoog met laag. Een
ladder verbindt aarde en hemel, belichaamt het reikhalzen naar datgene wat hoger
is dan het menselijke. De ladder als troost, als vluchtweg. Een ladder kan hulp van boven brengen. Velen hoopten toentertijd op hulp van boven, sommigen gaf hulp van boven kracht.

Voor mij heeft de ladder van het kamp nog een andere betekenis.

Zelfs de vijand, in de gedaante van een bewaker, had een ladder nodig om op de plaats te komen waar hij thuishoorde en huishield: de wachttoren. Daar kon hij op de gevangenen neerkijken, hij hield ze vandaaruit in toom, omdat hij een wapen en de macht had. Maar hier is slechts sprake van het armzalige laddertje dat bestemd was voor de knechten van de plek, de knechten van de kerfstok.

De gevangenen hadden geen wapens, maar ze hadden een veel hogere ladder tot hun beschikking dan de vijand, al was het dan een denkbeeldige ladder. Het was de ladder van de gedachten, want de gedachten zijn vrij. Via deze ladder vertrokken de wensen en verlangens der gevangenen en er kwamen ongetwijfeld gedachten en wensen van elders terug. De ladder was er dus al. De ladder is juist in die barse jaren ontstaan. Maar hij was tot nu toe niet zichtbaar.

Ook deze ladder is geen echte ladder. Het is een kunstwerk dat aan een ladder doet denken. Het is de ladder van het kamp, de ladder van de plek. Hij is groot en hoog, en, naar ik hoop, trots en ongenaakbaar. Hij is van brons.

Armando.'

‘The Ladder of the Camp (Translation by author)
opinions, let alone those that acted on these, were locked away in places, where they were keenly humiliated.

There was such a place in Amersfoort, better said, by Amersfoort. It was called “the camp”. Camp Amersfoort.

I happened to have been in the neighbourhood at the time. Regularly I would see the prisoners pass by and I didn’t just see them, I looked at them as well.

When I was asked to think about a sculpture for the camp, this came as an exceptionally profound question, because the camp has never left my thoughts a day since.

The request came at a peculiar moment, because exactly that year I had been occupied with the motif of the ladder, and there is, in my opinion, for this spot not a better motif imaginable than a gigantic ladder.

Why a ladder

A ladder connects low with high, but probably equally high with low. A ladder connects heaven and earth, embodies the yearning for that which lies higher than the humane. The ladder as solace, as escape. A ladder can send help from above. Many then were hoping for help from above, for some help from above gave strength.

For me the ladder of the camp has an additional meaning

Even the enemy, in the appearance of a guard, needed a ladder to arrive at the place where he belonged and operated: the watchtower. From there he could look down upon the prisoners, from there he kept them in check, because he had a weapon and the power. But here we only speak of a meagre little ladder that was merely destined for the servants of ‘the spot’, the servants of the reckoning.
The prisoners did not have weapons, but they had a much higher ladder in their possession than the enemy, albeit an imaginary ladder. It was the ladder of thoughts, because thoughts are free. Via this ladder, the wishes and desires of the prisoners travelled and thoughts and wishes undoubtedly came back from elsewhere and thoughts and wishes undoubtedly came back from somewhere else. The ladder thus already existed. The ladder was in fact created in those barse years. But until now it was not visible.

This ladder also is not a real ladder. It is an artwork that reminds one of a ladder. It is the ladder of the camp, the ladder of the spot. It is large and high and, I hope, proud and unyielding. It is made of bronze.

Armando.’
Appendix 2

Armando’s artistic chronology, exhibition and publication history.\textsuperscript{161}

\textbf{1929-1958}

1929: Born 18 September in Amsterdam.

1935: Moves to Amersfoort. The family lives near the German’s police transit camp in Amersfoort, which was opened in 1941.

1945-1949: Plays first violin in various (gypsy) orchestras. Performs at liberation celebrations and other events. At the age of 18, he stops playing the violin.

1949: Begins to draw, mostly in the woods surrounding Amersfoort.

1950: Moves to Amsterdam. Follows classes at the University of Amsterdam. Writes his first poems. Starts painting in the early 1950s.

1954: First individual exhibition of his drawings in Le Canard, an Amsterdam avant-garde gallery. Makes his poetic debut in the literary magazine Podium (Stage).


1958: Together with Kees van Bohemen (1928-1985), Jan Henderikse (1937), Henk Peeters (1925) and Jan Schoonhoven (1914-1994) he founds the Nederlandse Informele Groep (Dutch Informel Group). Starts to take part in exhibitions of the Informelen in the Netherlands and Germany.

\textbf{1960-1967}

1960: Together with Henderikse, Schoonhoven and Peeters he founds the Nul Groep (Zero Group). Writes several manifestos. Joins the weekly \textit{Haagse Post} as a

\textsuperscript{161} As collated and translated by the author from the website of the Dutch Royal Library (Nederlandse Koninklijke Bibliotheek): http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/?/nl/collecties/armando/leven_en_werk_van_Armand, and the recent publication A. Melissen (ed.), \textit{Armando 85: Tussen Weten en Begrijpen} (Rotterdam, 2015)
journalist (later becomes head of the art staff).

**1960-1965**: No longer writes poems inspired by the baroque poetry of the Vijftigers (group of experimental Dutch poets in the 1950s), but realistic poetry ('ready-mades'), which he publishes in the Flemish and Dutch magazine *Gard Sivik*, named after a jazz café in Antwerp. Joins the editorial staff of this avant-garde magazine. Following its final issue, the magazine *De Nieuwe Stijl* ('The New Style') is set up, with practically the same editors, including Armando. In this new magazine, which is published only twice (April 1965 and 1966), Armando publishes his 'ready-mades', such as the *Agrarische Cyclus* ('Agrarian cycle'), *1964* and *De Mongolen* ('The Mongols'), *1965*


**1964**: Publishes his first volume of collected poems. Exhibits in *Zero-0-Nul* at the Haags Gemeentemuseum together with the German Zero group

**1965**: Dissociates himself from the Nul Groep during their second exhibition at the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum, *Nul 1965*, which included a wide range of international artists, such as German Zero and Japanese Gutai artists.


- **1971-1979**

**1971**: Publishes the volume of romantic poetry *Hemel en aarde* ('Heaven and earth'), an epic cycle in three volumes. First television broadcast of *Herenleed* ('Gentlemen’s sorrow'), absurd stage plays he writes together with Cherry Duyns. Together with Johnny van Doorn and Duyns, he performs *Herenleed* in the Amsterdam playhouse *De Kleine Komedie*. In 1985, 1986 and 1990 they tour the country. *Herenleed* is also staged in Germany (Berlin and Münster) in the 1990s.

**1971**: Makes drawings and paintings with titles referring to war and violence, like *De onbekende soldaat* ('The unknown soldier'), *Beschuldigd landschap* ('Accused landscape') and *Schuldig landschap* ('Guilty landscape'); in the early
1970s he makes seventy drawings in which he integrates photographs of landscapes.

**1973:** Makes his first sculpture in stone, *De geheime trap* ('The secret stairs'), which is located in Uithoorn. Publishes the *Dagboek van een Dader* ('Diary of a Perpetrator'), reprinted in 1990, and the collection of poems *De denkende, denkende doden. Herinneringen* ('The thinking, thinking dead. Recollections').

**1976:** Publishes *Het gevecht, een gedicht* ('The fight, a poem'), reprinted in 1987.


**1978:** Publishes his first volume of short stories: *De ruwe heren. 9 benarde verhalen* ('The rough gentlemen. 9 awkward stories'). The television company VPRO broadcasts *Geschiedenis van een Plek* ('History of a spot'), a long documentary film Armando made together with Hans Verhagen about Camp Amersfoort.

**1979:** Moves to West-Berlin upon receiving the prestigious one-year DAAD grant for 'The Berliner Künstlerprogramm', but stays there from then on. The first two years he creates series of large paintings, such as *Fahne* (Flag), as well as drawings like *Studien zur Dekadenz* (Studies in decadence), *Sehnsucht nach der Bourgeoisie* ('Yearning for the bourgeoisie') and *Ode an Novalis* ('Tribute to Novalis'). Is awarded the Sikkens Prize for his visual work.

• **1980-1988**

**Starting 1980:** Writes the column *Armando uit Berlijn* ('Armando from Berlin') for the Dutch quality paper *NRC Handelsblad*. Publishes *Tucht, gedichten 1971-1978* ('Discipline, poems 1971-1878').

**1980-1981:** Makes drawings in which he integrates old portrait photographs found at rummage sales: *Anmerkungen zur Vergangenheit* ('Remarks about the past').

**1981:** *Aantekeningen over de vijand* ('Notes on the enemy') appears (2nd edition 1985).

1983: Publishes volume of *NRC Handelsblad* column essays entitled *Toscane* (‘Tuscany’)

1984: Exhibits *Armando: Fahnen* at the Nationalgalerie Berlin, the Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz and the Westfälischer Kunstverein

1985: Receives the Multatuli Prize from the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts for *Machthebbers* and the Jacobus van Looy Prize for his visual and literary work.


1987: Is awarded the Golden Quill by the Royal Netherlands Association of Publishers.

1988: Creates his first bronze sculpture, *Fahne*, which is given a place in Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw concert hall. Also publishes his most autobiographical book, *De Straat en het Struikgewas* (‘The Street and the Shrubbery’) of which the 2nd edition appears in 1989, the 3rd in 1990, the 4th in 1992, the 5th in 1993, the 6th in 2000 and the 7th in 2006, as well as *De Veldtocht. Gedichten* (‘The Campaign. Poems’).

*De Straat en het Struikgewas* receives the Multatuli Prize from the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts.

Starts to play the violin again. Plays in the Netherlands and abroad with the Tata Mirando Dutch Royal Gypsy Orchestra.

• 1990-1998

1990: Publishes his first volume of children’s stories *De Sprookjes* (‘The fairy tales’). *De prinses met de dikke bibs* (‘The princess with the fat bottom’) follows in 1997 and *Dierenpraat* (‘Animal talk’) is published in 1999 (2nd and 3rd editions in 2000, 4th edition in 2006). A German translation of the three volumes appears in 2005 under the title *Sämtliche Märchen* (Collected fairy tales).

1992: The bronze sculpture *Das Rad* (‘The Bicycle’) is unveiled in Rosmalen.
1993: Founds his own orchestra, The Armando Quartet (later Armando and his Quartet), in which he plays the first violin. In 1995 he receives an Edison Award for the CD *Armando, The Violinist*.

1994: His 14-meter-tall bronze sculpture *De ladder* ('The ladder'), commissioned by the municipality, is unveiled in Amersfoort. Publishes *Voorvallen in de Wildernis* ('Events in the wilderness') and *Mensenpraat* ('People's talk').

1995: Publishes the collection of poems *De hand en de stem* (The hand and the voice) and makes *Der Baum* ('The Tree'), a monument commissioned by the municipality of Groningen in memory of the artist H.N. Werkman, who was executed during World War II.

1996: Becomes member of the Berlin Akademie der Künste (Academy of Arts). Is awarded the Jerg-Ratgeb-Preis by the HAP Grieshaber Stiftung Reutlingen for his visual work.

1997: Opening of the Armando Museum, entirely devoted to Armando's work, in the former Roman Catholic church Elleboogkerk in Amersfoort.


**1999-2006**

1999: Publishes *Verzamelde gedichten* ('Collected poems'), reprinted in 2003, and *We waren zo heerlijk jong. Duitse herinneringen* ('We were so wonderfully young. German recollections').

1999-2007: Creates many bronze sculptures, mainly large ones, bearing names like *Torso* ('Torso'), *Gestalt* ('Figure'), *Liegende Gestalt* ('Figure in repose'), *Kopf* ('Head'), *Die Hand* ('The Hand'), *Der Krieger* ('The Warrior'), *Fahne* ('Flag'), *Der Kelch* ('The Beaker'), *De Urn* ('The Urn'), *Das Tier* ('The Animal') and *Der Vogel* ('The Bird').


2001: Retrospective exhibition of drawings, *Armando als Zeichner* in the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett

2002: Extensive retrospective exhibition of his oeuvre in the Neurenberg Neues
Museum, entitled ‘Armando’.


**2004**: Exhibition *Armando te gast bij Constant Permeke* ('Armando visiting Constant Permeke'), Permeke museum, Jabbeke, Belgium

Solo-exhibition *De Verzameling II* ('The collection II'), Armando Museum, Amersfoort

**2005**: Extensive retrospective exhibition of his visual oeuvre in the Cobra Museum of Modern Art in Amstelveen: *Armando 1955-2005*


Solo-exhibition *Armando 1952-2005* in the Cobra Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Amstelveen and *Ooggetuigen* ('Eye witnesses') in the Armando Museum, Amersfoort

• **2007-2015**

**2007**: On October 22, a fierce fire raged in the Armando Museum housed in the historic Elleboog Church in Amersfoort. Most of the museum's collection was lost, including dozens of Armando's words as well as archival materials.

**2008**: Presentation of the new book *Nee* ('No') with ultra-short stories.

On 4 July, Armando unveiled the more than 8 meter long sculpture *Boot 2006*
(‘Boat 2006’) in the Vathorst district of Amersfoort.

The Mondrian House in Amersfoort hosted the educative exhibition *Landschap van herinneringen* (‘Landscape of Memories’) of the Armando Museum.

**2009:** On 16 May, Henk Peeters opened the exhibition *De glans van het Alledaagse Armando in de jaren zestig* (The splendor of everyday, Armando in the 1960s), at the Armando Museum Bureau.

Opening of the exhibition *Armando en de Melancholie van het Scheppen* (‘Armando and the Melancholy of Creation’) at the Armando Museum Bureau, Amersfoort, on the occasion of the artist’s 80th birthday.

Raffael Rheinsberg, fellow artist and friend, made ‘Schwarzes Wasser’/ ‘Black Water’ from what remained of the Elleboog Church. The installation was on view from 18 November 2008 to 3 May 2009 in the Armando Museum Bureau and was subsequently shown in other museums abroad.

**2010:** The Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo acquires a small sculpture and commissioned the casting of a large sculpture. This latter work, *Melancholie* (‘Melancholy’), was consigned in the course of 2011 and placed in the sculpture garden.

A new edition of Armando *De Stilte*/'The Silence’. The publication with lithographs and poems in two languages was presented on 17 February 2011 in Passo Porto in Brussels, Belgium.

**2011:** Simultaneously with the Venice Biennale 2011, the Armando Museum Bureau displayed a reconstruction of Armando’s exhibition during the Venice Biennale 1984.

Armando won the VSB Poetry Prize 2011. He was awarded the annual prize for Dutch poetry for his collection of poems *Gedichten 2009* (‘Poems’ 2009).


The 6th edition of *The SS’ers* is published.

**2013:** Solo-exhibition *Armando vs Armando*, Cobra Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Amstelveen.

Publication of poetry collection *Stemmen* ('Voices')

**2014:** Princess Beatrix opens Museum Oud Amelisweerd on the 21st of March and the exhibition *Armando 85. Tussen Weten en Begrijpen* ('Armando 85. Between Knowing and Understanding')

Presentation of *Ter Plekke*, collection of Armando’s short stories since 2003, including new additions.

Participation in *Bad Thoughts. Collectie Martijn en Jeannette Sanders* in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and in *ZERO. Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s-60s* in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

**2015:** Will participate in *ZERO: Let us explore the stars*, this summer in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
Appendix 3

Transcribed extracts of Armando’s writing as included in the catalogue for
*Armando: Damnable Beauty, or Resonances of the Past*, Edinburgh: Fruitmarket
Gallery, 1989:

1. *Flarden/’Snatches’ is a selection from a great number of short monologues
Armando has overheard and noted down in Berlin since 1979. Some of them
appeared in *NRC Handelsblad* and were later published by in *Uit Berlijn* (1980),
*Machthebbers* (1983) and *Krijgsgewoel* (1986). Translation by Arnold J.
Pomerans

2. ‘The Presence’ is a translation of the chapter ‘De aanwezigheid’ from *De Straat
en het Struikgewas*, from *De Straat en het Struikgewas* (Amsterdam, 1988)


Armando, *Voorvallen in de Wildernis*, (Amsterdam 1984),


Armando, *We Waren Nog Zo Jong: Duitse Herinneringen* (Amsterdam, 1999)

Armando, ‘Nieuwe Richting in de Franse Schilderkunst: Georges A. Mathieu, “Action-Painter”, Komedianterie En Ernst’, *Haagse Post, 28/12/’57*

Armando, Duyns, C., *Wat Zegt, wat doet, verzameld Herenleed* (Amsterdam, 1985)


Beeren, W. ‘Signalement. Armando’, *Museumjournaal* no. 5-6, 1964, p.149-153

Beeren, W. *Actie, werkelijkheid en fictie in de kunst van de jaren ’60 in Nederland* exh. cat. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1979


Burke, E. *A philosophical Enquiry into the origin into our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1759] (Chicago, 1968)

Camnitzer, L. *Alexander Alberro in Conversation with Luis Camnitzer* (New York, 2014)

Cockcroft, E. ‘Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War’, *Artforum* 12, no.10, June 1974, pp.43-54


de Haan, I. *Na De Ondergang: De Herinnering Aan De Jodenvervolging In Nederland 1945-1995* (Amsterdam, 1997).

Elburg, J. Opening of exhibition Armando in Galerie Le Canard, Amsterdam, 26-01-’57, typoscript in Armando’s archive

Ferron, L. ‘Armando’, *Vrij Nederland, 4/11/78*

Ferron, L. (ed.), *Armando: Schilder/Schrijver* (Weesp, 1985)


Gribling, F., Belder, L. W. Boers (ed.s), *Amsterdam 60/80: Twintig Jaar Beeldende Kunst / Twenty Years of Fine Arts*, exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Fodor, 1982


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Huizing, C., Visser, T (eds.), *Nul = 0. De Nederlandse Nul groep in een internationale context*, (Rotterdam, 2011)

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Kozloff, M. ‘American Painting During the Cold War’, *Artforum* 11, no.9, May, 1973, pp.43-54


Meershoek, G. *Dienaren van het gezag. De Amsterdamse Politie Tijdens de Bezetting door de Duitsers* (Amsterdam, 1999)

*Moderne Nederlandse Schilderkunst/Modern Dutch painting*, exh. Cat. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1983-84


Osborne, P., *Anywhere Or not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London, 2014)


Petersen, A. *Sandberg: Designer and Director of the Stedelijk* (Rotterdam, 2004)

Presser, J. *Ondergang: De vervolging en verdelging van het Nederlandse jodendom 1940-1945* (Amsterdam, 1965)


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Wilson, S. ‘Jean Fautrier: Orthodoxy and the Outsider’, *Art International*, no.4, Autumn, 1988

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