

Life on the boundary between land and water

When people ask me what I think the most beautiful landscape in the Netherlands is, I invariably say the Hoge Land in Groningen. I got to know this area in the nineteen seventies. In 1973, after completing my studies at Wageningen, I was appointed head of the Groningen provincial office of the Government Service for Land and Water Use (*Landinrichtingsdienst*). The Sauwerd rural land development project was my first big job. In this centuries old wierden landscape to the north of the city of Groningen (wierden or terpen are artificial mounds thrown up in the landscape as refuges in times of flooding and as sites for farmsteads), the agricultural improvements had to be designed with respect for the cultural heritage. We needed a thorough study of the historical development of the landscape, and this was done by Louwrens Hacquebord. With him, I travelled through the area and learned to understand it. It lent meaning to the famous text by Pliny, the Roman historian: 'There the ocean throws itself, two times a day, daily and nightly, in a tremendous stream over a wide country, so one doubts if the ground belongs to the land or to the sea. There lives a miserable people at the highest known levels of the tide and here they have built their huts, living like sailors when the water covers their environment and as if shipwrecked when the water has gone.' By mastering the waters and bringing the land into cultivation, this poverty-stricken tribe eventually became prosperous and created a very characteristic landscape. I became familiar with words like *wierden*, *valgen*, *mieden*, *maren* and *kerspels*.

At the beginning of the eighties I returned as a painter. I had left the Government Service for Land and Water Use and was studying at the Academie Minerva in Groningen. I saw the landscape through different eyes. No longer was I concerned primarily with knowing, but with experiencing. I looked for places where I could view the landscape in its totality, and found them on the dikes along the Reitdiep. Standing there, three metres

above the surroundings, I saw the landscape in all its grandeur: the lazy meanders of the river, the misty horizon, the monumental farmhouses, surrounded by thick clumps of trees, set amid the vast arable fields, and the magnificent skies above. The higher you get, the more majestic the landscape becomes, and there was no better spot than the locks at Aduarderzijl.

The photographs Peter van Bolhuis took for the exhibition *Kustlijn – Zicht op stad en land*, held at the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, illustrate what happens when you adopt a much higher position in this landscape. The title *Kustlijn* (coastline) stands for a notional line drawn through the minister's corridor in the ministry and extending outwards to the north and the south. The photographs illustrate this line, from Cadzand in the far southwest of the Netherlands to the island of Ameland in the Wadden Sea. The exhibition catalogue contains a series of photographs that take you from the Frisian lakes via Dokkum and Het Bildt to the salt marshes of the Wadden Sea and the island of Ameland. A fascinating series of landscapes, swathed in winter light, where people become scarcer the further north you go. Sandfjyrden in the Frisian lakes region shows the hamlet with a church, a few houses and two large farmsteads. The land, picked out with reed borders tinged orange, appears to float in the big lakes which surround it. Further to the north stands a traditional Frisian *kop-hals-romp* (head-neck-trunk) farmstead, surrounded by meadows with a ditch pattern reminiscent of a cubist painting, and in the foreground a winding ditch betrays the proximity of the Wadden Sea. At the top of the photograph of Het Bildt, the Wadden Sea can be seen as a steel blue strip. The farmstead behind the fresh green dike fits neatly into the metric system of land parcels in the polder. Between the dike and the tidal flat you can see the green and brown tints of the

salt marsh. The next photograph shows the salt marsh in more detail, the green and brown tints now present in all possible shades. The pattern of ditches is picked out by a delicate fringe of white ice. Just before the main ditch flows into the tidal flat it shakes free of its rigid lines, as if it is tempting the sea to flow inland. Once we arrive at the Oerdt on Ameland, all traces of human activity have been left behind. The water in the Wadden Sea shapes the land and vice versa, the contrast between land and water intensified by the sparkling white patterns of ice on the mud flat. How little is needed to change the shape of this island?

Land and water is a frequently recurring theme in the work of Peter van Bolhuis. Having been a landscape architect, he had a highly developed feeling for places where that typically Dutch 'living with water' can be seen. This took him not to the all too familiar attractions like Kinderdijk and the Afsluitdijk, but to places that offer a much subtler impression. Take the photograph of the salt marshes. It reveals the intense care with which the landscape has been shaped, with all its thin drainage trenches, dikes and ditches, graphically illustrating the system of endiking and reclaiming the marshlands. But it is not the informative value of the photograph that makes you look long and hard; what is more important is the way it has been composed. In the bottom left of the photograph you can see two forms that immediately grab your attention: the perfectly round shape of a watering hole for the cattle that graze on the marshes in the summer, and a simple little bridge over the widest ditch. The perspective of the ditches irresistible draws the eye from the bottom left to the top right of the picture before it comes to rest on two bright, yellowish areas just in front of the mud flats. The composition of this photograph compels you to keep on gazing at it, the eye moving from foreground to horizon and back.

In the Netherlands we are used to seeing our surroundings in the horizontal plane. You almost never get a panoramic view. But if you climb any church tower you are rewarded with the most magnificent views. Take, for example, the tower at Ransdorp, where Waterland, Amsterdam, the IJsselmeer, Almere and Het Gooi lie spread out before you. Peter van Bolhuis's photographs give you the same enchanting experience. It is as if you have climbed a church tower. With the whole landscape before you, you see the details of the world close up. Keeping these in mind while you fix your gaze on the horizon, you feast your eyes on everything that attracts your attention, without losing sight of the whole. I can share his view. I am not conscious of the fact that he sat in a helicopter, so in that sense I consider the photographs of Peter van Bolhuis to be humane photographs. One of my favourite photographs in the *Kustlijn* series is the one of Grootchermer. It is a perfect illustration of what I mean by a human view of the landscape. In the foreground running from left to right you can see part of the village of Grootchermer, a ribbon of typically Dutch cottages. Behind these attractive little houses the damp world of waterways and agricultural plots begins. In this aptly named Eilandspolder (Island Polder), wave action has nibbled away at the edges of the once rectangular plots to create haphazard borderlines. Again, the composition of this photograph is perfect. You can almost touch the houses in the foreground, the cars on the road and the beached boats on the land. There are even a few locals to be seen. The waterways draw the eye towards the horizon, blue lines in a sea of green and yellow, and far in the distance the inkling of another world: the Beemster.

The photograph depicts our flair for living with water, but it also exposes our vulnerability, embodied in that seemingly complacent snugness amid all that water. How little is needed to disturb this balance? The photo-

graph could be used as a logo for the challenges water will present this century.

0 ever took any photographs of the Reitdiepdal, where I loved to stay as a painter in the early eighties. If such pictures exist, would they recall the experience of those years? And would I also find in this so self-assured landscape something of the vulnerability that I saw in the photograph of Grootchermer? Or of the manifest proximity of the sea, as in the photographs of the salt marsh and of Ameland? By asking the question I have as good as answered it. Even the images summoned up by the quote from Pliny would be visible.

