



BERNARD VILLERS

# BERNARD VILLERS

UN PEU, BEAUCOUP...



HET APOLLOHUIS

## INTRODUCTION

For years the painter Bernard Villers has reported his surprise at the impact of light and colour as perceived by him in his surroundings. His work is solely preoccupied with perceiving and witnessing light and colour. This is a joyful experience. It adds light and colour to the lives of those who wish to see that. Light changes the colour of one's surroundings and of all the objects it contains. Light is reflected and casts shadows. This continually alters the same universe. The colours have many names which, in turn, change colour experience. All of this is the exclusive domain of painting. Whatever light and colour may induce in human beings is what painting is primarily about. The public can not expect more, nor can the painter wish for more: *un peu, beaucoup...* The quality of the work of the

painter Bernard Villers is determined by his concentration on what is essential in painting.

Het Apollohuis has presented Villers' work in a number of exhibitions, *Tout Bien Réfléchi* 1987, *Figure Marine Paysage* 1988, *Vingt ans de peinture* 1991. The last exhibition was arranged with the intention of providing a survey of the artist's work, which hitherto had not been attempted.

It is as a result of this exhibition at Het Apollohuis and on occasion of the exhibition at the Centre d'Art Nicolas de Staël in Braine-l'Alleud that now appears this monograph, which gives an account of Bernard Villers' adventures.

**Paul Panhuysen**

## THE EXCEPTION AMUSES THE RULE

Jo Dustin

Many artists want their works to last for ever. Signs cut in stone. Compositions locked in permanence.

For Bernard Villers, what is felt intensely is the fragility of existence. Colour floods his entire oeuvre, far removed from seasons of gloom. Immanent colour, stripped of any symbolic intent. Colour that plays games with the transparency of canvas, with words from magic-lanterns, with shadow complementaries. Violet lamp... yellow shadow. Magenta lamp... green shadow.

Among the rules he has invented, prompted by the power of words or the rebounds of chance, this painter proposes, the site disposes.

All the earth colours... Sienna, Cassel, Umbria, burnt or raw. All the earth colours, but not arranged in obvious gradations or pat contrasts. Instead, on one wall they form a sentence, on another a ladder. Chance, surreptitiously, is rolling the dice.

Though Villers has said *Back is as good as front* and though he usually reveals all the stages involved in producing the work, he sometimes ignores his own injunctions. The exception amuses the rule.

He finds discarded objects in derelict houses,

or in building skips, in the litter of damaged urban fabric. These serve as painting supports which have been shaped in the cadences of everyday life. Some anonymous craftsman or factory worker has produced shapes that appeal to the artist, that he has some affinity with.

Villers does not retain the original texture of the object. There is first a whole ritual for taming the new captive. A chair seat is restored by filling and sanding. Next, coat after coat of paint is brushed on, saturating and metamorphosing the object, ridding it of all traces of its utilitarian function.

Thus, on a wall in the artist's studio, one above the other, are several curved receptacles. Velvety mauve. Palpitating green. Regal orange. Sea blue. They have ceased to be chair-backs. Instead they are signs sharing the same typology and marking a strong chromatic beat, underlined by their fluctuating shadows, while the spaces between and around them also play their part.

But this crashing chant of pure colour can be modulated in other ways: grouped together, archipelago-like; or lined up horizontally... An oblique formation seems impossible, because some internal law against it seems to emanate from these chair-backs revisited.

Today, their rhythmic movement is in perfect accord with the space they occupy.

Violet, lemon yellow, marigold, Prussian blue, another family of rounded shapes (wooden chair-seats) evokes a quartered shield, rhythmically polychrome. But the attentive eye can also isolate the elements by coming closer, enjoying each in singular monochrome.

While everyday objects provide the painter with material, Villers may also act directly on his surroundings, transforming their moroseness.

In 1989, at 10 rue Fond Saint-Servais in Liège, for the project *Windows in View.*, Bernard Villers interrupted the litany of drab windows by turning an entire window-frame upside down and replacing its dirty curtain with a coat of sunny yellow paint. A bright note in the tired old order. An ephemeral but salutary anomaly, a reminder of colour's saving grace.

Vermilion, emerald, ultramarine. Villers says no to the palette of ashes.

September 1992

Translation Michael Novy

Un objet rencontre son image, un objet rencontre son nom.  
Il arrive que l'image et le nom se rencontrent.

René Magritte

# BERNARD VILLERS

## *Twenty Years of Painting*

Bregtje van der Haak

When in 1991 he was asked to write a concise biography for an exhibition in Japan, Bernard Villers wrote:

1939 the war  
1949 the forest  
1959 poetry  
1969 politics  
1979 transparency  
1989 painting

With these six dates and headings he said the essential: the list is characteristic of his preference for stripping things to their bare essence and allowing them to speak in their purest form. *When you say what you do, you don't do what you say*, he wrote in 1988 as a conclusion to one of his texts. And yet words in the first instance raised his interest in the plastic arts and even today it is often words which give rise to a work. When young he was interested more in literature than in painting; he thought he was a poet. It is through books rather than museums that he familiarized himself with modern painting. Baudelaire introduced him to Manet and Apollinaire to Picasso. When he reads an anthology of Dada poetry at the age of seventeen-eighteen, he discovers Kurt Schwitters and makes his first collage on a piece of cardboard, in his mother's kitchen. After a brief stay at the university he enrolled as a student of monumental

painting at 'École de La Cambre', founded by Van de Velde in the tradition of Bauhaus. The students enjoyed plenty of freedom. Villers was taught by Paul Delvaux and afterwards by Jo Delahaut, but learned more from his fellow students.

Literature's impact on his work has nevertheless remained. It is still in evidence as an intellectual stimulus and particularly as a working method. Yet, fortunately his painting is not literary. He feels a strong affinity with writers like Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino and Georges Perec. In a work from 1982, *Livres de Bois*, twenty boards have been attached to the wall perpendicularly and at the same height. They have been painted in forty different colours on both sides. Their dimensions correspond to the books in his bookcase.

Analogous with his paintings and installations Villers makes and prints artist's books in which his interest in the visual can be recognized.

*The artist's books constitute a different way of painting for me. They are distinct from paintings, however, in that you can instantly survey them, at a glance, as a result of their dimensions in space and time. A book invites you to accomplish a journey. Moreover, it is tangible.*





In many of Villers' artist's books the texts give rise to a poetic dialogue between word and image. A line from the French poet Mallarmé is the starting point for the volume *Mallarmé 1897-1979*, which suggests another reading by the way the pages have been folded. In *d'ou* (1980) a short passage from Musil directs a blue line which runs throughout the book, across the pages. A letter by Vincent van Gogh, which describes the colours of the scenery to his brother Theo, constitutes the basis of *Correspondance* (1992). In this book Villers adopts the same series and order of colours, lending to them an individual tone.

The relation between colour and its definition through spoken and written language is raised explicitly and implicitly. Sometimes the attraction of a colour exists in the sound of a word. Villers quotes a statement by Roland Barthes: *When I buy paints, it is entirely on the basis of their names*. In *L'ombre des couleurs* (1983-1991) Villers paints names of colours (like 'outrémer') on glass plates in the colour of the name chosen. The glass plates have been attached to the walls at some distance. A bulb projects the word's shadow on the wall.

In other cases, the naming of colours functions as the organizing principle in a work. In *Earths* (1991) for instance, twenty-four boards have been mounted on a big wall framed by two rows of columns. They have the same area as the stones of which the wall is composed and they can be regarded as specimens of the various 'naturel' pigments that Villers managed to find: terre de Sienne, terre d'Ombrie, etc.

In this work the artist has imposed two rules upon himself: firstly, to restrict himself to the use of 'earth colours' and secondly, to work exclusively in a format which corresponds with the format of the stones. These rules of the game emerge in the course of the working process but are not an end in itself. The way in which the boards have been spread across the wall, for example, is not determined by these rules, nor the number of colours (still unknown at the outset) and their mutual relation. A limited space remains in which Villers can operate in complete freedom.

This working method is characteristic of Villers' oeuvre: defining his scope for investigation while leaving it open at the same time. As work progresses, various possibilities emerge, and the choice in favour of one logic rather than another is actually relatively arbitrary. The important thing is not the choice, but the constraints that it will impose. *Things are what they are but might have been otherwise. As it is like this, it is not otherwise.*

Neither coincidence in its purest form, nor complete determinism interest Villers. His work takes place within the field of tension between these two extremes. He sets conditions to his own actions and regards these conditions as spurs to creation. *When something has been thought out properly, there will be many possible solutions and these will all be valid. The law of chance determines which of these possibilities it is going to be. It is therefore not my anxiety to find a harmony or composition which induces me, for instance, to place that particular shade of green between a red and*

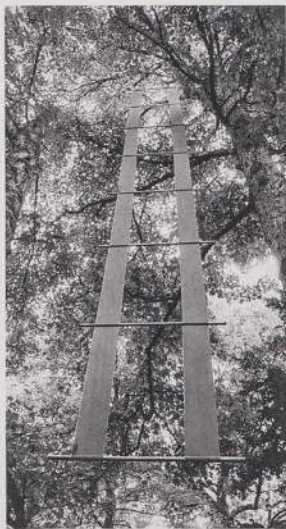


a yellow one. It is curious that many people, in front of the presented work, forget that the final outcome is in part the result of chance.

After the Renaissance, Academism imposed on painters certain conventions corresponding with the various themes of painting: an upright rectangle for a portrait, a recumbent oblong for a landscape, and an extended recumbent oblong for a seascape. These three traditional formats constituted the point of departure for *Figure Marine Paysage* at Het Apollohuis in 1988, which has been developed in a book as well as in paintings, and in objects - usually in a series of three. In accordance with this principle, Villers links each format with a randomly chosen colour: the seascapes are blue, the landscapes green, and the portraits are flesh-coloured. These elements return in different compositions. *It is a game with measures, proportions and colours. In the book, for example, the thin paper that I have used suggests a 'seascape' meeting a 'landscape', with a 'portrait' still vaguely discernible behind it. These 'unforeseen' encounters rather please me. While printing I discover unexpected effects again and again. I enjoy explaining - or rather explaining to myself what I am doing - that is why I look for a certain logic - but it is the surprises above all which give the work its poetic dimension. I used to be very strict and*

*logical: now I allow more for the playful element..... I often say that I am doomed to be forever torn between Schwitters' nostalgia and Judd's strictness. I love both equally.*

The pleasure that he derives from painting is very vital to Villers. *Expressionist painting contains a message which should be sent out, communicated. In my work emotion is the result rather of my playing with the rules which I have imposed upon myself. Thus, in the case of Lewis Carroll, for instance, humour and poetry are engendered, as it were, by the logic and the word play.*



3

Villers asked artist friends to participate in two artist's books. *Périodique* (1979-1980) consists of four leaflets, containing four artistic contributions in black and white, in a given format.

While creating a colourful 'cover' for it, Villers ignored the contents. In *Fais-moi un dessin* (1986) nine coloured pages alternate with nine drawings of animals made by friends. The colours and the images are connected through language. *I do not look for cooperation in the strictest sense of the word. I define the concept and invite others to become involved. We are unaware of one another's intentions beforehand. So it is a hazardous encounter. The risk involved I find very appealing.*

In some paintings Villers applies a similar process. He appeals to 'the outside',

arranging found elements which he can not control entirely. *Dix-neuf Bois trouvés* (exhibition *Bois trouvés*, Guy Ledune gallery, 1989) are painted in the nineteen colours offered by a Belgian paint manufacturer. Neither the forms nor the colour schemes were modified. Villers' intervention is confined to bringing these two elements closer and classifying them. *I fashion material that accidentally crosses my path, but of course you do not just collect anything. To a certain extent, you are on the look-out for whatever you may happen to find.*

The whole oeuvre is an ode to colour and its multiple manifestations.

Villers can not conceive of a thing without colour. His uncle, Thierry de Villers, an abstract painter to whom he regularly submitted his first investigations, taught him all the subtleties of colour. He also admits owing a debt to James Ensor.

In the course of time colour has become the guiding principle of his painting. In the last few years he has made complex polychrome works, magical groups of islands which consist of a collection of unique monochrome elements, in wood or on canvas, like a theatre set. The process of mounting - 'accrochage' - seems to merit more attention than the problem of composition. *I used to combine various colours on a canvas. Some years ago I was scarcely interested in pure, isolated colours. I needed all colours, but I gave each thing only one single colour. The immense pleasure I derive from monochrome canvases didn't actually arise until I was introduced to the American art of the fifties*

*and sixties: Rothko, Newman, Kelly... For me they meant a radical change in my painting.*

Time and time again, colour is investigated in the works of Villers, and differently each time. Colour is substance, in its purest form, a pigment without bonding. In an installation, *Outremer* (Tokyo, 1991) the Japanese sign for blue in a carpet of blue pigment is formed by a blue bulb hanging from the ceiling. What really is blue? you wonder, a word, a sign, a small heap of dust, an infinite number of shades?

Yet when in 1991 he paints his *Jaunes* and *Ferts*, series which consist of nine and six false squares (exhibition *Un peu, Beaucoup, Tendrement*, gallery Etienne Ficherouille), Villers provides specimens of various shades of yellow and green whose tones are fairly closely connected. In *Formes Flottantes* (1990-1991), as in older works, Villers spreads out one and the same colour, the impact of which is enhanced by applying it to unfinished and unprepared backgrounds. In further instances, it is while working on the texture or the number of layers that he allows the variations to become visible.

*At times you can see the brush stroke very clearly, but in other instances there is a perfectly smooth surface. One transparent colour shows more of the underlying structure...*

The investigation into colour returns in a different form in a series of boxes, partly found and partly home-made, which have been painted in one colour (exhibition *Colour Box*, gallery Etienne Ficherouille, 1987). The colours change owing to the play





of light and shadow. The same colour looks different on the inside from the outside of the box. In 1991 Villers constructs a number of boxes which he dismantles in order to mount the parts flatly against the wall, resulting in a kind monochrome of map.

Also, reflection - literally, by introducing glass or cellophane into his work - gives a new quality to the reflected colour and thus compels reflection (figuratively) about colour. In *Tout Bien Réfléchi* (Het Apollohuis, 1987) painted objects have been placed on top of plate-glass resting on a prop of the same colour. The effect is threefold: there is the colour of the object, its reflection and the glitter that it instals in the glass-plate. So many different colours in one single tube !

In *La couleur des ombres* the inter-play between light, shadow and colour is at stake, whereby Villers refers to the laws of additional colour mixing. As with pigment without bonding, light is a pure form of colour. In the installations with coloured bulbs Villers shows us installations whose coloured shadows are complementary: a green light casts a red shadow on a brown tree-leaf.

Utilizing translucent props for his books and paintings, Villers renders visible all the facets of a colour. *By the end of the sixties I no longer felt like painting more and more pictures which took up space, and accumulated in my studio. I dreamt of ephemeral, weightless works of art. Then I started using very light materials: all kinds of translucent canras and paper, which I prepared on the front and the back to*

*enhance the impact of the colour. This exceedingly exclusive investigation into the effect of transparency started to become my 'academism'; I then returned once again to opaque backgrounds and thicker brands, kinds of paper which have a distinctive verso and recto. One side does not take into account what is on the other. They are strictly distinguished, but there is no such thing as priority of one side over the other, no hierarchy. Front and back, inside and outside are, as in 'Livres de bois', all of equal importance...*

In 1968 Villers was a Trotsky sympathizer. Together with artist friends of his he opened a 'people's studio' and was involved in numerous other activities which were meant to narrow the gap between art and the people. In retrospect he has mixed feelings about that period. *I learned a lot in those days. I was greatly preoccupied by political and social issues, often at the expense of (the quality of) my work. Some felt that art should be useful, others that it had to go into the streets. I was attracted toward these notions without being convinced of them all the time. My ideas haven't changed much.*

*I wish contemporary art would be more open and accessible, but I am not under the illusion that I make things for a large public! In 1968 I had just learned serigraphy to have a profession and also from ideological motives. This technique seemed a very direct way of expression, less individualistic than painting. For the sake of legibility I looked for simple, geometric forms. I subscribed to the (political and formal) inheritance of constructivist art. It was bad, far too didactic work, but at the same time it did*

*force me to avoid the rather too easy option of conventional painting, and to use pure colours and simple forms. It was a rich period in terms of theoretical research.* Of this period something has remained in what Villers tends to call 'his spirit', that is in the ambition to allow his interventions to remain visible, so as not to conceal any part of the creative process.

Space has occupied a prominent position in Villers' work, as in *Bolducs* (1977), where Villers paints long cotton cloths which he stretches between floor and ceiling, or in the ensembles of monochrome elements which alter the wall area and define the surrounding space.

Prior to discovering constructivist art or the investigations of a Frank Stella, Villers' interest did not extend beyond the surface of the canvas without taking into account that third dimension involving the frame. The *Boîtes* or some installations, at first sight appear to be sculptures rather than paintings, but the pictorial aspect remains predominant. Villers has always emphasized that he regards himself as a painter. He describes an installation in a park in the vicinity of Ghent, *L'échelle des couleurs* (St. Amands-berg, 1990), where he placed a red, wooden ladder against a tree. The effect of this spatial object is above all pictorial, it functions as stretcher and as frame. Posts and rungs of the ladder isolate sections of the landscape and frame it so that the overall effect is one of a series of photos or paintings.

In the case of the works that he has made for public space he takes into account the

implications of the work for the surrounding space. He aims for a maximum clarity without making concessions to the concept.

*A work in a public space should not require any explanation and be a pleasure for people, without being less 'radical' than a work I produce in my studio. I do not want to provide a lesson, I am not a critical artist. You have to be something of a masochist for that. I consider my own creative pleasure and the joy of watching.*

Although he has created large-scale works for alternative exhibition rooms or public spaces, his paintings - or at least the composite parts - are always of modest proportions. The monumental format intimidates him and does not suit his working method. A work usually arises in a slow, exploratory manner, in various phases which could range over a longer period. When he is guided by a leading principle, he does not know its boundaries. When he finds a box covered with a layer of red paint, this will be mounted in his studio for a year or two. Next he will find a second, which he paints in a different shade of red. This continues until he has collected thirty boxes and thirty shades of red have been listed: *Les boîtes rouges* (exhibition *Colour Box*, gallery Etienne Ficheroulle, 1987).

The exhibition in Eindhoven, *Vingt ans de peinture*, is not a retrospective in the proper sense. Villers has only selected works which isolate questions which he still finds interesting today. Questions chosen in connection with the specific location of Het Apollohuis. It is not the significance of the works at the moment of their creation that matters, but

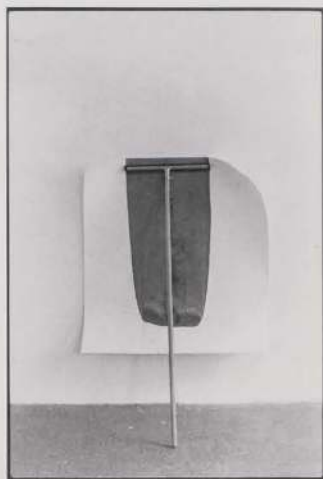
their significance at this moment. He has radically altered many old works for the occasion, because he does not like simply reproducing installations in a new place. He does not show works dating back to before 1968, since he believes *they might have been made by someone else*. Arranging an exhibition is for Villers an important part of his work, because each time he decides, once again, how they are going to be displayed. Arranging is creating once more. Hence the arrangement should also be seen as a work of art.

One should not look for any symbols among Villers' colours and forms, nor any keys to an underlying system of meanings. They refer to nothing except themselves. Red does not stand for love, nor green for hope; in the same way the objects found are empty signs, without reference. A chair-leg is not a ready-made, not more than a memory of a chair,

but a useful form. The colours which Villers has been using for some years are never blended but come right out of the tube, as they are supplied by the manufacturer. *The spectator himself can blend whatever he wants to*, Villers says. The artist chooses from the material as it is offered to him by the world and subsequently arranges it. This arranging is where poetry comes in. But this suggested order is unstable, precarious. There is no such thing as a correct composition. The ensembles can be mounted

in different ways. The works present themselves with a certain casualness and they appear to convey vulnerability rather than authority: it is like this, but it might just as well have been different.

Amsterdam, March 31 1992  
translation Lucas van Beeck





## Colophon/Colophon

### Titre/Title

Bernard Villers  
un peu, beaucoup...

### Texte/Text

Bregtje van der Haak, Jo Dustin, Bernard Villers,  
Centre d'Art Nicolas de Staël, Paul Panhuysen

### Rédaction définitive/General editor

Paul Panhuysen

### Rédaction artistique et technique/Copy editor

Betty Eversdijk

### Traduction/Translation

Lucas van Beeck, Michael Novy (F-A/F-E)  
Nadine Plateau (N-F/D-F)

### Photographie/Photography

Etienne Bernard, Peter Cox, Xavier Dauley,  
Daniel Dutrieux, Bernard Vanden Eynde,  
Etienne Ficheroulle, Marc van Geyte,  
Marie-Pascale Gildemyn, Philippe De Gobert,  
Michel Moffarts, Léopold Oosterlynck,  
Akdo Palazzolo, Nadine Plateau, Luc Schrobiltgen,  
Hasegawa Takeo

### Conception/Design

Ton Homburg (OPERA)

### Impression/Printing

Rosbeek BV, Nuth

### Tirage/Edition

700 exemplaires/copies

### Editeur/Publisher

Het Apollohuis, Eindhoven

Cet ouvrage conçu lors de l'exposition  
*Vingt ans de peinture* organisée à Eindhoven par  
l'Apollohuis en octobre 1991 paraît à l'occasion de  
l'exposition *Couleurs locales* mise sur pied à  
Braine-l'Alleud par le Centre d'Art Nicolas de Staël en  
novembre 1992.

Il est publié conjointement par l'Apollohuis et le  
Centre d'Art Nicolas de Staël avec l'aide du Ministère  
néerlandais de la Culture (WVC) et du Ministère de la  
Culture et des Affaires sociales de la Communauté  
française de Belgique.

This book was conceived during the exhibition  
*Vingt ans de peinture*, organized by Het Apollohuis in  
October 1991 and presented on the occasion of the  
exhibition *Couleurs locales* in Centre d'Art Nicolas de  
Staël, in Braine-l'Alleud, November 1992.

It is a joint publication by Het Apollohuis and the  
Centre d'Art Nicolas de Staël with assistance from the  
Dutch ministry of Culture (WVC) and the ministry of  
Culture and Social Affairs of the French Community of  
Belgium.

Het Apollohuis  
Tongelresestraat 81  
5613 DB Eindhoven  
Tel./Fax (0)40 - 440393

Centre d'Art Nicolas de Staël  
Chaussée de Mont-Saint-Jean 83  
B-1420 Braine-l'Alleud  
Tel. (02) 386 15 52

ISBN 90 71638 17 0