Armando’s Reset
A Second Opus I or the Artist’s Reinvention

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Armando as Spokesman for Avant-Garde Movements

At the end of the 1970s the Dutch poet, writer and visual artist Armando (b. 1929) made a sweeping change of track in his creative practice. Though previously a spokesman for avant-garde movements in both literary and visual art circles, from that moment on he turned into an increasingly solitary artist whose work defied easy categorization in one or other of the movements and trends of his time. He reinvented himself, proceeding thenceforth as an artist whose work was devoted to the Second World War, or more generally, to destruction and violence per se.

In the 1950s and 1960s Armando had been active as a poet, writer and painter, but his reputations within these various disciplines were fairly independent of each other. For some he was an experimental poet, known for his contributions to avant-garde reviews such as Gard Sivik and De Nieuwe Stijl. Initially he inspired the literary public more with revulsion than anything else — a reaction he consciously engineered. In the early 1960s, when acting as spokesman for new, experimental movements in literature, he had no qualms in adopting a kind of mobster persona — a nozem, as such a character was called at the time. In a 1960 text entitled ‘Armando’ and published in the Belgian literary magazine Gard Sivik, he describes his arrival ‘on scene’ like this:

A tall and slender man entered a colossal building in one of the world’s megalopolises. He was strong and lithe of body and his dark-moustachioed face was strikingly handsome. His cold contemptuous gaze slid over the silent crowd who eyed his entry with fixed attention. Following close behind him came his three beautiful women together with four heavily-muscled men of sinister aspect who, as those on the inside knew, concealed weapons as well as brawn beneath their expensive suits. They were the loyal, highly-paid bodyguards of the tall, slender man, who — though a formidable street-fighter himself, expert with fist and knife — had too many enemies.

It was that phenomenon ‘Armando’, entering with his entourage to hold one of his exclusive shows for a select audience: new forms, new words, new murders...

In those same years during which Armando began to make a name with a new kind of literature, he also occupied a prominent position in new visual art movements. First he became part of the so-called Informele Groep, along with Bram Bogart, Kees van Bohemen, Henk Peeters, Jan Schoonhoven and Jan Henderikse. His earliest exhibited paintings are the so-called Peintures criminelles, which he began to produce in 1954. That same year and also in 1957 he had exhibitions at the Galerie Le Canard in Amsterdam, but in the 1954 edition he

showed only drawings. In 1955 he made his first *Paysages criminels*,
which unlike the earlier *Peintures criminelles* consisted of monochrome
paintings in either red or black. Those were shown at Le Canard in
1957. This cluster of works, the *Peintures* and *Paysages criminels*,
can be seen as Armando's Opus 1 and is sometimes associated with
COBRA. Armando respects the COBRA painters and poets, and finds
writers like Elburg, Kouwenaar and Vinkenoog prepared to open his
first exhibitions. Armando's first work and the COBRA paintings are
indeed both roughly characterized by a heavily worked paint layer
with a good deal of impasto. But whereas COBRA artists were still
strong proponents of figuration, even if the figuration of children's
drawings, such was emphatically not the case in Armando's work.
Apart from a single black head, his *Peintures criminelles* contain no
representational images.

Having been part of the *Informele Groep* since 1958, in 1960 he
became one of the founding members of the Dutch *Nul* collective. Its
memberships mirrored that of the *Informele Groep*, with the addition
of Kees van Bohemen. The image Armando now created for himself
and his fellow group members was somewhat less aggressive and
gangsterish than the one he'd built up in the literary world, yet it
was similar. As reaction against the still prevailing romantic image
of the artist as an expressive and sensitive being, the *Nul* artist
was, above all, cool and businesslike, his demeanour characterized
by detachment. This artist wore not a beret but a suit, in a guise
comparable to that of the businessman.

In 1964, once again in the *Gard Sivik* magazine, Armando
published a manifesto in which he sets out the principles of both the
*Nul* movement and 'total poetry'. This frequently-cited text, entitled
*Een Internationale Primeur* [An International Debut], is of fundamental
relevance to an understanding of his work from the *Nul* period (from
which he later distanced himself). He sees the role of the artist and
poet as follows:

Not to be-moralized or interpret (artificialize)

realism but to intensify it. Starting point: a

consistent acceptance of Reality. Interest in

a more autonomous appearance of Reality,

already noticeable in journalism, TV reports


Thus authenticity. Not of the maker, but of the

information. The artist, who is no longer an artist:

a cool, businesslike eye.  

The working method that Armando promotes here, 'isolation and
annexation', is based on principles that are common to war. It's
a method Nazi Germany also employed. Population groups were
isolated, countries annexed. He also asserts something similar in an
interview given in 1971: 'I hated the war so much that I'd started to
identify with it. I became the war itself.' The poetes he espouses in
this text is much less recognizable as a methodology in his work from
the late 1970s. From that time onward, war and destruction are indeed
among the themes taken up in his work. In the previous period, that
creative principle determined the subject less overtly. In his Opus 1

2 *Gard Sivik*, January
February 1964;
reprinted in: *De
Nieuwe Stijl* 1959-1
Amsterdam, 1989,
pp. 18-20.

3 Betty van Garrel,`
dagje met Armand
*NRC Handelsblad*,
17 April 1971.
cluster, the *Peintures* and *Paysages criminels*, it is the titles and the vigorously worked, tormented surface of the paintings that draw attention to violence and destruction, and not the particular motifs that are represented. The paintings and poems from the *Nul* period evoke violence by isolating and annexing.

A poem from the *Karl May* cycle provides a good example:

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He’d spat blood and lost two teeth,  
Proof indeed 
That the clout with his rifle butt had not exactly  
been a caress. 
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In fact, this poem is a readymade à la Marcel Duchamp. Armando annexes one of Karl May’s children’s books, isolates a passage and presents it as a poem. The strategy lies in breaking open the storyline of the original tale so that the violence harboured within it sails into plain sight. This is necessary because storylines operate in the same way as time. The historical narrative leads us away from the violence described in it because it drives us on to the end. By employing his isolate-and-annex method, Armando is able to reveal the violence that is otherwise glossed over.

What a story is and does in a temporal respect applies in a spatial sense to the context. So Armando breaks that open as well, particularly in the *Agrarian Cycle*, in which he presents passages taken from farm machinery manuals as poetry. The text no longer serves any pragmatic purpose and is presented as a thing in itself.

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13  
With steel teeth  
The roots of the sown crop are not damaged.  
The weed is killed in the seed  
With steel teeth  
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The ‘clean land’ effect should be astonishing.

In these poems destruction and violence are implied firstly as a result of the work process — annexation and isolation — and secondly by the subject matter that this way of working brings to the fore. Armando’s visual work from this period can be understood in exactly the same way. At that time he was making works from steel plates or canvas: collages or reliefs of nuts, bolts or barbed wire on a monochrome ground. He did not make these materials himself either, but isolated and annexed them. By presenting them as autonomous, preferably in monochrome black or red, their implicit violence rises to the surface. Together with that transition from his Opus 1, *Peintures* and *Paysages criminels*, to the works of the *Nul* period, Armando’s image also changes. While in his Opus 1 days he still posed as passionate, violent and emotional (romantic, some said), he now bore a sober and businesslike guise.

In the late 1970s Armando’s way of working changed dramatically and his image changed with it. In 1978 he, together with author and television producer Hans Verhagen, made a television documentary — *Geschiedenis van een plek* [History of a Place] — about the concentration
camp at Amersfoort. It features a large number of people who describe what went on there before, during and after 1941 to 1945, when it was used as a transit camp. In 1980 a book of the same title appeared based on the TV film, in which many of the interviews were reproduced. In terms of its structure the film can be compared to the famous Shoah, made in 1985, in which Claude Lanzmann filmed the testimonies of victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust.

For Armando the TV film represented a new direction, and he steadily continued to explore it after moving to Berlin in September 1979. From then on he was no longer part of one or other group in the literary and visual art world. He wrote no more manifestos setting out the principles of new artistic movements. From that date on, Armando was a loner. His critics could no longer rely on statements by the man himself. From then on both his literary and visual work was increasingly read as biographical. Connections were made to his youth in Amersfoort and the impressions the transit camp had made on the adolescent Armando.

In fact this is still the situation. In the 1990s the experiences of Armando’s adolescence continued to be the framework for his entire artistic expression. As a consequence, his literary and visual oeuvre is increasingly rarely placed within literary traditions or movements, currents and traditions in the visual arts. He has become a cultural institution in the memorialization of the Second World War. Armando the spokesman for experimental movements and writer of manifestos has gradually transformed into Armando the loner, the universal artist whose entire output is dedicated to the remembrance of the war.

*History of a Place* – the film and the book – was the starting point for this turn in Armando’s reputation. In this sense they form ‘second Opus 1’. But for Armando, Camp Amersfoort is more than a random place that the book and film just happen to be about. Camp Amersfoort acts as a kind of primal scene, in the light of which all his later statements and reflections in both his literary and visual work can be understood. For Armando the camp was a primal scene because its surroundings were his boyhood playground. With a mixture of fascination, excitement and revulsion he had witnessed how the Germans (and Dutch) ran the camp, and he saw the prisoners who were kept there until they were deported to a German concentration camp. A concept such as ‘guilty place’ or ‘guilty landscape’, which began to appear in his visual and literary work in the 1980s, can be traced back to the history of this place, its post-war history included. When I use the term primal scene, however, I also mean that the history of Camp Amersfoort has not only a specific but also a mythic dimension. Even if Armando’s childhood experiences around Camp Amersfoort are the starting point for all his later statements about remembering (and forgetting), those statements increasingly relate to the nature of remembrance as a human ability and inability rather than the particular history of that specific camp. I will therefore examine Armando’s ideas about remembrance as he developed them in his work from the 1980s and 1990s. It could be argued that during those years the method of isolation-and-annexation, which allows implicit violence and destruction to come to the fore, was abandoned in order to make violence and destruction explicit subjects of his work. In the 1990s this resulted in an indictment of man’s inability to remember.
Destruction and violence are no longer exposed and condemned by way of the events of the Second World War, but by means of the human propensity for forgetting.

The Guilt of Time, Place and Nature

Since the 1980s, in both his literary and his visual work, Armando has pronounced the landscape itself as guilty. Paintings and drawings bear the title 'guilty landscape'; in his texts trees, especially those along the edge of a wood, are regarded as guilty parties. What are we to make of this personification of trees? What's the meaning of it? Perhaps the tree should be seen as a metaphor for a perpetrator, since there would be a certain similarity between them, consisting in their both being impassive. Trees go on growing just as the perpetrator proceeds with his violence untouched by the destruction he causes. Pronouncing trees guilty is such an absurd gesture that it must indeed be a metaphor. That would make the personification of trees an indictment against people: they are every bit as impassive as trees.

However, it should be realized that it's not just any old tree that Armando finds guilty, but only those present when violence took place:

They grow and keep their silence. Whatever may happen. And a lot has happened near the trees. Hunting down and shooting, beating and humiliating. So you could say that the trees collude, that they've made themselves guilty. But no: they're just trees. They're not to blame. Take the edge of a wood, for example. The trees at the front — they must have seen plenty. The ones behind — you can't hold anything against them, they were never able to see anything. But the edge of the wood, the forest fringe, they've seen stuff. There are an awful lot of woodland edges, here and there, that I know a thing or two about.7

The presence of trees when violence took place, the fact that wood's edge and perpetrator were right next to each other, are the preconditions for trees to be declared guilty. They are not so much metaphors for the impassive perpetrator, but rather traces of the violence that was enacted there. They were witnesses to it, but now they won't testify. It is precisely in their refusal to testify, to act as traces of the 'war', that their guilt lies.

Look at the pictures showing the enemy in action: there they are, laughing in the background. And not only the pines and firs, the other trees as well.

Shouldn't something be said about that? I thought so, because sometimes they're still standing there, the trees, the wood's edge, the wood, on the same spot they stood back then, you needn't think that they went to stand further off, they're still standing there, indifferent witnesses.8

7 NPC Haardtsblied: 14. 1985
8 De Straat en het Struikgewas, Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 1988, pp. 245-246.
Armando, Schuldig landschap [Guilty Landscape], 1977
The trees are guilty not so much because of their inability or unwillingness to testify, but because they cover up the traces that the violence has left. They grow over the site where the deeds took place.

Eventually, the time came when the trees could talk about the past. How admirable. How noble. But they covered up a lot, if not everything. 9

That ‘tree cover’ should be read both figuratively and literally. By repeatedly coming into leaf, continuously growing, the completely unique and incomprehensible event that occurred there is covered over. In the trees’ growth the action of Time is manifest: with time comes forgetting, just as nature overgrows the site where the deed took place. In Dagboek van een dader [Diary of a Wrongdoer] (1973) Armando had already denounced that pernicious activity of nature and time.

16 August
This landscape has done evil.
I can imagine the armies.
It is quiet here, but beware.
Silence sometimes succeeds noise:
there was pain here, here man beat his fellow man.
Time is guilty, everything regrows
but thinking is forgotten. Treachery!
This battlefield will be with me always,
though I live forever

2 September
Nature has really messed it up.
First She was spineless, then
She constantly deserted me. And aren’t the trees
always letting themselves be pushed around by the wind,
without ever putting up the least resistance?
[...]
And the Ground. The Ground is just right for the fall of heroes.
Places endure first, cover over later. Oh, the place will certainly be covered over.
Yes,
places are
always covered over

The trees’ guilt consists in this: that the violence and evil took place right beside them, and because of them is no longer visible. They betrayed the significance of their presence by continuing to grow, allowing the traces of that violence to disappear.

But it is not only upon nature that Armando passes a verdict of guilty; his research into the causes of forgetfulness also focuses on time per se. His work includes many reflections on his distrust of time. 9
Armado and Victor Nieuwenhuijs, *Der Feldzug (The Expedition)*, 1993
29 July
Time has pressed again.
How will I ever stand?'

8 August
Today, a dismal realization:
survivors grow older.
It is always longer ago.
Centuries, even. And all men do
is tarry and
forget.

The passage of time is constantly taking us further away from the
traumatic moment that has to be remembered.

Armando, Solitary Artist

In the late 1970s Armando undertakes a fundamental reappraisal of
his work. At that point he abandons the isolate-and-annex method
that he had set out not only for himself but also for his fellow artists
of the Informele Groep and the Nul movement. It appears that
methodology was not an end in itself. The important thing was the
implicit violence that was exposed and highlighted by working in this
way. The preoccupation with violence remains, even after Armando
reinvents himself as an artist and writer, but from then on that
violence is explicitly thematic. Now violence is no longer expressed
via the appropriation of materials but through the way that they're
dealt with. Armando’s handling of paint, clay or pencil tends to be
wrongly interpreted. The work he produces after his self-reappraisal
is increasingly seen as expressive, supposedly with the artist’s hand
clearly legible in the impetuous impasto of his paintings. This would
be a way of painting that is more conventional than the methods he
used when he still belonged to the avant-garde movements of the
1960s. The artist’s hand is supposedly also discernible in Armando’s
drawings, which are deliberately contorted, as if done with the left
hand. It seems to me that this is a misunderstanding. The emphatic
contortion of his drawings and the impasto of his paintings indicate
a transition to formlessness. Just as memories are in jeopardy of
being forgotten, forms—those prompters of memory—also run
the danger of melting away and being lost. And so the matter from
which paintings are made is also declared guilty, for the about-turn
from form to formlessness can be read in the paint. The paintings,
drawings and sculptures Armando makes after the 1970s consistently
allow this turning point—at which form changes into formlessness—to be seen.

The loss of form that results in formlessness is most forcefully
addressed in Der Feldzug [The Expedition], the eleven-minute film
Armando made in 1993 with Victor E. Nieuwenhuijs. Apart from the
opening and closing image, it consists entirely of found footage from
war films and documentaries. This material is conspicuously old:
scratches and streaks run across the image so it’s clear that it has not
been restored. The film is put together as a montage. The clips that
Exhibition view 'Armando in het woud' ['Armando in the Forest'] at Museum Oud Amelisweerd, Utrecht, 2014
are used show events and situations every one of which constitutes a part of the phenomenon of war and the violence involved in it. We see artillery, explosions, tank wheels. Only occasionally do we also get soldiers in the picture. The emphasis is on the machinery of war and moments that display destruction as a violent process. Destruction is not shown as a human act.

Sometimes, though not always, the sound in the film is in sync with the images. Sometimes we hear an explosion at the same time as we see one. But it happens that we hear the sound of trains even though they are not implied in or via the image. Now the noise of trains is far from neutral. Much as the sound of helicopters has a Vietnam-effect, as it were, ever since the Second World War the sound of trains has had a Holocaust effect. Even though the utter destruction caused by the Holocaust is not shown directly, it is certainly evoked via the sound of the film.

The old footage is not shown directly, however. Though it’s evident that it has not been restored, we also see it again in a processed form, which is to say slowed down or enlarged. Reduction of the film speed causes the filmed action or movement to lose continuity. It becomes fragmented into jerky movements. Enlargement causes details to disappear and the contours of objects to dissolve. Some scenes show barely recognizable shapes or objects.

What remains is a turmoil of greys and blacks. And if turmoil is evoked in Armando’s paintings by the impasto of solidified paint, in Der Feldzug it takes place in time. In scenes where the image fades and dissolves into an abstraction of greys or blacks, the violence of time acquires embodiment in the film’s materiality. Focus on the violence in the film in the form of explosions and artillery gives way to focus on the violence to which the film as a material representation seems to be subject. Eventually, the memories of the war’s destruction that the film still offers will inevitably disappear, this film seems to suggest. They will dissolve completely in jagged lines and an awful whirl of grey grains.

Armando’s reappraisal of his work and his persona as an artist has had significant consequences for his place in the history of art and literature in both a positive and negative sense. Particularly in the 1980s and 1990s he was seen as a celebrated writer and artist, not only in the Netherlands but throughout Europe, especially so in Germany. The fact that he was a loner, not an exponent of any movement, corresponded perfectly to the image — one that is still operative — of the great artist, however outdated such a romantic image may be. His success has led to an Armando Museum, first in Amersfoort and more recently in Utrecht.

Being a loner, though, also has its drawbacks. His fame in the 1980s and 1990s notwithstanding, Armando is already to some extent at risk of being forgotten. Not because his part is played out, but because the presentation of his work is seen as ‘problematic’. Museums usually opt for currents, movements and tendencies as the environment in which a work of art should be displayed. It’s for that very reason that the works Armando produced before the 1970s are regularly exhibited: as products of the Dutch Nul movement along with works by Jan Schoonhoven and Henk Peeters. The same is true of literature surveys. Armando’s manifestos and poems are invariably
cited as representative of the literary practices of avant-garde magazines such as *Gard Sivik* and *De Nieuwe Stijl*.

But in what context can the work produced after his reappraisal be displayed? This is far from clear. He can be presented outside the context of time or current, with an entire room cleared to accommodate his work, but for many that’s going too far. There isn’t the space, or his reputation is not deemed to warrant it. The alternative is a monographic museum... and that’s what he got. This is indeed an honour, but also a means of isolating him. In a monographic museum an oeuvre is dissociated from the history of the art-historical overview that generally serves as a guideline in art museums. The only other possibility is to from time to time include Armando in a thematic presentation about the Second World War, as is presently the case in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.10

Armando has brought this isolation upon himself, however, by so emphatically reinventing himself as a solitary artist. The great advantage of being part of a group or movement is that you not only represent yourself but the group as well. And vice versa: you’re a representative of the group and of the time in which that group was active. It was in that very way that the Armando of the 1960s was so outstanding. By making a new start and reappraising his oeuvre, he seems to have put himself outside the histories of both art and literature. The consequences could have been foreseen: art- and literary criticism limit him to his Opus 1 and have no room for “second Opus 1”, despite the great success he achieved with it amongst the general public.

Dutch to English translation: Lee Preedy

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10 When they held the exhibition “Het Stedelijk In de oorlo” (27 February – 31 March 2015) the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam also hung a number of works dealing with the Second World War from their own collection in certain rooms, including one of Armando’s paintings from the *Fähnen ser...*