The hidden strangeness of ordinary things: Co Westerik's early diaries
James Cahill © wrote this essay on the early years of Co's handbooks.
This text will be enclosed in the 2023 edition of all the diaries.

One day I will paint paintings that everyone loves, even people's grandmothers. Expressive but full of human sympathy and experience, that's what they'll be.

Co Westerik, 12 February 1948

Co Westerik began to write a diary at age of twenty-three, on an uneventful Sunday in January 1948. The decision had no particular stimulus beyond the pleasure of writing "just for the sake of writing." But the activity persisted, turning into a lifelong project. His final entry, written in the same meticulous hand, dates from 19 July 2018, two months before his death. Westerik wrote on an almost daily basis. Usually it was late at night, alone in his studio, accompanied by music (Bach, Shostakovich, medieval music, or jazz: Coleman Hawkins was a favourite). The notebooks that he filled with neat script – broken up by sketches and diagrams – developed into an analogue of his mind, not unlike the letters of Vincent van Gogh to his brother. But in contrast to Van Gogh's letters, Westerik's diaries remained a largely private exercise – a long sequence of missives to himself.[1]

To read Westerik's diaries is to enter a stream of insights, aspirations, frustrations, joys and – at many places – forensic analyses of his methods. This essay examines his writing alongside his artistic output, concentrating on the earliest entries – written between 1948 and 1950 in his attic studio at Parkstraat 17, The Hague. Through a series of themes – Beginnings, Process, Society, Self, Seeing – the essay approaches Westerik's early diaries as a cumulative self-portrait, both a record of the artist's life at a seminal moment and a manifesto that throws meaning onto the later chapters of his career. Perhaps there is always a temptation, with artists' early statements, to look for flashes of prophecy; but in Westerik's case the impetus comes from the artist himself. As much as he looked back at his earlier paintings and drawings, he was always looking forwards – to his next series of experiments, to the long course of his career.

Beginnings

I reckon that I am now at the beginning of the beginning of doing something serious.

Vincent van Gogh, c. 21 December 1881

[1] Only in his later years did he allow friends and family to read them.

Westerik's entry into the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, came about through disguised good luck.[2] His father, a salesman for General Motors, had been against his attending art school. But by 1943, with Holland under Nazi occupation, Adolf Hitler had ordered students into factory work – and only a limited number were permitted to complete their courses. Among the exceptions were art students. The path of an artist suddenly became, for Westerik's father, an attractive proposition, and – for Westerik – a realisable possibility.

It was in 1947, the year he left the Academy – and not long before he commenced his diary – that Westerik started to paint the works he considered the beginning his oeuvre. In *Self-portrait with pipe*, the young artist gazes out at an oblique angle. The setting he inhabits is dreary and dreamlike – a bald stretch of pavement rendered in shades of grey, or perhaps a sparse landscape. It seems closer to a stage set than a real place. In the background is a lopped tree, its naked stumps resembling the ends of drainpipes, and a figure who bends over to dab one eye (peculiarly childlike, he resembles the primitive characters of the CoBrA painters – Westerik's Dutch contemporaries).[3] An antique hat hovers above Westerik's head and a translucent ruff fans out from his neck, a phantom of a costume. Balanced upon his fingers is a curved wooden pipe. It seems to float rather than to rest in position: the dark shape cuts across the lower half of the picture in the same sinuous 'pose' as the pipe in René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929).

In this picture, we witness the artist at a point of origin. He presents himself – confronts himself – in a moment of self-reckoning.[4] He is trying on a role, sizing himself up; and yet what might be a piece of playful escapism is complicated by the face at the picture's centre. Echoing the melancholia of Watteau's *Pierrot* (1718-19), Westerik's expression belongs to a different world from the spectres surrounding it. A soberer, more solid world. His face is like that of a Tudor potentate at the centre of a portrait: an island of lucidity hemmed in by props and pattern.

It is possible to discern a tension, in *Self-portrait with pipe*, between downbeat realism (reflected in play of light on the artist's pale face) and a symbolic, even fanciful inclination. In the decades that followed, this tension endured – never to be fully resolved. If anything, it became a guiding impetus. According to Fenna de Vries, Westerik's widow (and his dealer since 1968): "In every painting he had a conflict between 'real reality' and *his* reality."[5]

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[2] He studied at the Royal Academy of Art (Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten), The Hague, from 1942 to 1947. Among his teachers were Rein Draijer (1899-1986), and Willem Schrofer (1898-1968), each of whom had turned, in the 1940s, from geometric abstraction to a schematic mode of figuration. Westerik taught life drawing at the Academy from 1958 to 1971.

[3] CoBrA formed in 1948 and was active until 1951.

[4] Compare the self-confidence of *Self-portrait with white door* (1962), in which Westerik confronts the viewer with a level gaze, holding in his upraised hand not a weightless pipe but a reed-fine paintbrush.

[5] Interview with Fenna de Vries, 20 November 2019. De Vries and Westerik married in 1970. Compare Westerik's own observation that: "The guiding principle of my work has been to create a sensible image that would encapsulate a state of mind, averse to any decorative intent. Probing ever further, deeper than visually perceptible." Co Westerik, 'Foreword', in Fenna de Vries, Co Westerik (eds.), *Co Westerik: Schilderijen / Notities* (Rotterdam: Galerie Fenna de Vries, 2014), p. 5. Realism, by this logic, exceeds fidelity to appearances.

Westerik appears, in the self-portrait, to try on the mantles of artistic predecessors: the Surrealism of Magritte, the lush Symbolism of Jan Toorop, the realism (profound and serene) of the Dutch Old Masters. At the same time, he situates himself in an ambiguous present. The outward gaze of the young artist is also a gaze backwards and inwards.

This split perspective became characteristic of Westerik. Often, his inspirations came from things observed in the here and now, out of the grain of the everyday, in the course of working. "I want to draw Hens nude," he wrote in his diary on 26 June 1949 (referring to Hens de Jong, whom he had married the previous year),[6] going on to praise "the way her belly tapers out between her legs, highly expressive thighs: I have lately been scribbling little sketches in a notebook".

And yet, however spontaneous they seemed, his decisions inevitably had their catalysts in past events – in things he had witnessed or remembered or already begun. It is telling, in this respect, that the diary itself marked the continuation of an earlier project: he referred in the first line of that entry from January 1948 to "my last journal", a project that he regretted breaking off so soon: "A certain faith in that kind of writing remained […] and it has blossomed into the energy to start writing this book again."

The theme of tentative blossoming – of artistic 'becoming' – is at the heart the painting *Baby in front of an early morning landscape* (1948). In Westerik's accounts of making this picture, as much as in the final result, it is easy to detect the same ambivalence – seen already in *Self-portrait with pipe* – between naturalistic effect and stylised symbolism. In this instance, the latter won out. The picture has a fable-like quality; the baby's head is as pink and furrowed as a hazelnut – it looks like a carved totem, more hieratic than human. The closed eyes and mouth are conveyed by blunt red strokes while the tubular body – sleeved in a stripy suit – extends into petite hands like those of an articulated doll. In the background, which dominates the left-hand section of the picture, a wraithlike figure punts a boat along a channel through a field of pale green.

In this strange scene – an allegory without a knowable subtext – a sense of actual place is overlaid by the workings of memory and imagination. And yet the quality of transparency that would come to characterise Westerik's work, that sense of clear unimpeded vision, is also apparent. The effect is of an imaginary spectacle that has acquired real dimensions and physical shape, like a dream experienced while awake – with open eyes. Westerik treads back and forth over the threshold between the world of tangible things (a vase of flowers placed on a hard ledge, a snug-suited child) and the phantasmal territory of the imagination.

Process

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[6] The painter Hens de Jong (1927-2003) was Westerik's wife from 1948 to 1970. The early years of his diary record the trials of their relationship. "In the last few weeks," he wrote on 5 July 1949, "there has been a lot of talk between us about the idea of getting divorced. […] She would have liked to travel and to have more money than the miserable pittance that *I'm* about to conjure up for her. She repeatedly collapses in tears for days at a time…".

If, in that early picture, the act of treading back and forth seems tentative, then ambivalence was to become a defining aspect of Westerik's creative process. His method of painting was, from the outset, one of addition and subtraction – a sustained testing of possibilities. In the creation of each painting, layers of pigment and tone accumulated gradually, often being removed upon a fresh viewing. In the end, paintings were never quite finished. According to De Vries, he used to add to canvases even when they were hanging in exhibitions.[7]

The diaries stand as a record of Westerik's technical trials and experiments, as well as the self-critiquing mentality that lay behind them. Indeed, the difficulties of producing the baby painting exemplify the process – and the psychology – out which so many of his works arose. At length, he pondered questions such as the moulding of the infant's head ("a strange, bluish soap-bubble-like baby") or the "yellowish green" light of the background landscape (2 February 1948). He used his sister's baby, at one point, as a model – albeit to no effect: "My efforts were wasted. I didn't get enough information from my baby-model to make anything." (3 February). The following day's entry reported better news: "Today, I glazed the most important bit of the 'baby', the hands, with cadmium red and a touch of white. I'm satisfied: it's the first time I've tried the mixed technique with good result." The following week, he observed: "In total it strikes me as still too picturesque. It needs to have something edgier if the baby is to be any good."

This kind of fluctuation was the essence of Westerik's working process. Underlying it was an unflinching, ongoing act of self-appraisal, to which the diaries bear intimate witness. Day by day, he undertook a methodical (almost ritualistic) revelation of his own actions to himself;[8] and at an early stage, he began to photograph the successive phases of his paintings in order to assist with this.[9] The process of assessing and modifying his work was, he admitted, "a duel with myself" (28 August 1949). On many occasions, that duel left him dejected: "The baby now wears a striped jersey and is worse than ever" (26 February 1948); "The result of the day's work was that I scrubbed away the head erasing it down to the ink line" (2 July 1949, in reference to a self-portrait). But at other times, the struggle paid off – giving rise to creative breakthroughs.

Throughout the diaries, Westerik recorded in fastidious detail his experiments concerning colour, glazes, imprimatura grounds, highlights, varnishes, the preparation of casein solution and other technical minutiae. We learn early on of his procedure for translating his drawings into paintings using the traditional method of grid enlargement. He also described the process of scrubbing away layers of previous work, and documented with exquisite precision the properties of casein as a binding agent and the combination of pigments and varnish with which he was grounding his canvases (with reference to the stipulations of Max Doerner –

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[7] Interview with Fenna de Vries, 20 November 2019.

[8] "I am modifying my archive so as to note the ground process used for each stretched canvas individually, including photos of successive stages. This will add confidence to my hand in subsequent paintings." 21 March 1949.

[9] "My intention is to get an old plate camera (or box for the while) to take photos of paintings in various stages […] An old plate camera still costs about 30 guilders, and I made a simple portable apparatus for developing and printing because the kitchen is my darkroom." 7 October 1949.

the German artist and theorist). On one occasion, he even picked away at a painting with a penknife, to expose (and then to document in a list) its layers of tempera and imprimatura.

If Westerik's paintings were sites of uncertainty, the diaries were – by contrast – a place where he could assert control, distilling his work into its basic constituents. The effects of his practical experiments were frankly analysed:

> This afternoon, I continued work on the big canvas, the 'seventeen year-old boy with bicycle.' […] I laid a blue-green varnish glaze over the white highlighting of the saddle springs and added the deepest shadows. The result is beautifully exact but the saddle isn't prominent enough in the overall composition. I'll probably lighten the deepest shadows or the main highlights.[10]

Westerik's simultaneous delight and dissatisfaction – his balancing of a beautiful effect against a perceived inadequacy ("the saddle isn't prominent enough") – was characteristic. His self-critiques tended towards the sceptical, the exacting – making his moments of genuine satisfaction all the more radiant.

Process was not linear for Westerik; it was cyclical. Looking back repeatedly at existing paintings and sketches, he measured his present endeavours against previous ones. He also revisited old ideas, finding in them the seeds of new projects – however unpromising they might appear: "In Camphuysstraat yesterday, I discovered that the fountain pen ink lines in my US travel sketches are completely faded. In some areas the think line is almost invisible. I'll try to restore these sketches with a better ink than the Americans apparently make." (20 January 1950).

Westerik's creative process consisted not only of technical experimentation but of intellectual enquiry.[11] His mind delved into the works of other artists, contemporary and historical, and his diaries referred at various times to artists he considered important: "I tore a lovely reproduction of a [Gino] Severini out of the book *Painting Since 1850* by Jos de Gruyter. I'll hang it up because I find it very beautiful." (17 February 1948). His entry for 14 July 1949 states a plan to see an exhibition of the Flemish master Gerard David in Bruges; the following spring, he noted that – prevented from working by a headache – "I went to the Gemeentemuseum and looked at [Henricus Peter] Bremmer and Japanese art." (24 March 1950).

Over time, the work of Renaissance artists such as Gerard David, Masaccio, Grünewald and Piero della Francesca would become Westerik's primary and enduring points of reference: for years, he had a poster in his studio of the faces of Piero's angels. Not that he was unaware of, of uninterested in, contemporary developments. His long-term friend, the curator and writer Hans Locher, has observed:

> If you look at his early paintings, you have a painter who knew what was happening – very well – and yet still had his own style, completely. There were some pictures that mattered to him, but he

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[10] 6 March 1950, in reference to *Boy with bicycle* (1950).

[11] Compare Van Gogh in a letter of 7/8 January 1882: "Now I am once again passing through a similar period of struggle and dejection, of patience and impatience, of hope and despair. But I have to struggle on and, well, in good time I shall understand watercolours better."

> wasn't using the way those other artists painted. You can see Picasso's influence, although everyone was inspired a little bit by Picasso at that time. If you look carefully, you can find details of other artists' work. But as a rule, his work is very far from that of Picasso or anyone else.[12]

While he refrained from overt emulation of other artists, looking at art was a vital component of Westerik's creative growth. So too was his sense, as a young man, of being part of artistic society – both that of the Netherlands and the wider international scene.

Society

A formative phase in Westerik's career was his four-month trip to the east coast of the USA in the spring and summer of 1948. Shortly after he arrived in New York, someone offered to introduce him to a Dutch artist. They went over to the man's studio, stood outside, and whistled. Willem de Kooning looked out of the window and came to let them in. Westerik later recalled that De Kooning was working on large paintings – nudes. He stayed for the whole afternoon.[13]

Westerik's diaries ceased for the duration of the trip. He mentioned certain minor details in retrospect – such as the fact that he stayed with relatives in Carlstadt, New Jersey, "sleeping in a pink girl's bedroom full of tasteless American furniture." Seemingly trivial, the reference is nonetheless telling – it hints at the kinds of insignificant, incidental sources that filtered into his work. But otherwise he declined to record what he had seen and whom he had met: "I won't write about New York itself, courting the danger that my memories will fade in time." The omission is a reminder of how Westerik's diary was, especially in the early years, a private undertaking – intended for no one's eyes except his own. No doubt he felt that the experiences and events of his trip to America were sufficiently vivid in his memory.

Even without a written account, Westerik's trip to America – and that fortuitous visit to de Kooning's studio – tell us something of his sense of standing, his aspirations. His outlook was modern and international (he also travelled, in his youth, through Germany and Italy – encountering the works of Renaissance masters from north and south of the Alps). His aliveness to the international art scene was reflected in his inclusion, in 1964, in the 'New Realists' exhibition curated by Wim Beeren at the Gemeentemuseum, alongside figures such as Francis Bacon, David Hockney, Yves Klein, Edoardo Paolozzi and Claes Oldenburg – a display that underlined his affinity with (and participation in) some of the dominant aspects of post-war figurative painting. In 1964, he curated (with Hans Locher) an exhibition of modern Italian art, featuring – among others – Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni.[14]

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[12] Interview with Hans Locher, 20 November 2019.

[13] Conversation with Willem Westerik, 25 April 2020.

[14] Locher recalls: "Co could look in a completely fresh way at those modern works of art – he made an excellent selection from works that were completely different from what he was doing himself, artists such as Manzoni and Fontana." Interview with Hans Locher, 20 November 2019.

And yet, while Westerik met with and befriended other artists, and in many cases admired their work, he rarely aligned himself with artistic movements. Throughout his career, he took a singular, picaresque route. According to Locher, he always stood apart self-consciously from artistic tribes or credos:

> He was neither one of the traditionalists, nor of the new movements. He was Co, from the first moment. At that time, modern art in the Netherlands consisted of CoBrA figures such as Karel Appel or Constant, or the Zero movement, or Pop Art. There was a lot happening, but Co was not part of it – he was something special. And people recognised him immediately as something very bad or very good. [15]

Westerik's independence of spirit was, if anything, a concentration of the post-war moment in which he came of age – a moment in which different, opposing ideas about what painting should look like were circulating, from the aftershocks of De Stijl to the vein of quixotic figuration that was increasingly popular in the Academy in the late 1940s. [16] Arguably, Westerik absorbed and internalised those ideas in the development of a personal artistic idiom that pushed figuration into radically ambiguous territory, dismantling the rules of proportion and perspective in order to arrive at a new – psychologically attuned – form of realism.

Westerik was a contradictory being – a social outsider. A photograph taken in 1947, the year of his final examination at the Royal Academy of Art, shows him kneeling alongside five contemporaries – Toon Wegner, Cees Zitman, Klaas van Biezen and (lying in front) Jan Huffener; in the background are multiple easels, each showing the same seated woman (presumably a model from a life class). Their teacher, Henk Meijer, stands behind them in a long gown, as stern as Savonarola, looking down at his pupils and spreading hands in a gesture of benediction.[17]

Westerik's artistic friendships and associations – emblematized in that photograph – form a large dimension of his early diaries. On 11 October 1949, he recounted going to a dinner for the Federation of Artists Congress, where he and Hens danced and drank with artists and writers including the poet Anna Blaman (1905-1960), Charley Toorop (1891-1955, a painter best remembered for her graphic, abrasive mode of realism), and the painter Theo Bitter (1916-1994), who co-founded the 'Hague Verve' group of the 1950s, a short-lived Dutch answer to the innovations of the School of Paris in figurative art. (Westerik was, for a time, a

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[15] His early painting *The fishwife* (1951) came in for particular criticism in Dutch newspapers, having been awarded the Jacob Maris Prize for painting in 1951.

[16] The Dutch artist Cor Blok has evoked this post-war moment in terms that make clear its resonance with Westerik's own equivocations: "If 'the times' were to be consulted, Mondrian's serene abstractions and Beckmann's visions of torture appeared equally justified as models for painting." He adds that "[artistic groups] were formed in the heat of battle, but they proved usually short-lived, witness Cobra and the Dutch anti-abstractionists, who called themselves 'De Realisten.' See Cor Blok, 'Looking at pictures', in Fenna de Vries (ed.), *Co Westerik: Paintings* (Baarn, Netherlands: De Prom, 1999), pp. 41-52, p. 42.

[17] Henk Meijer (1884-1970) taught at the Royal Academy until 1950.

member of Verve when the group of twenty-five artists formed in 1951 – one of the rare occasions on which he aligned himself with an artistic coterie.[18])

Certain names recur, whether in Westerik's private musings or in his accounts of meetings and conversations. "I wonder what Cees Zitman is doing now," he wrote on 28 January 1948, in reference to his closest friend from the Academy, who had recently emigrated to Venezuela. "I expect he is walking through cactuses in the sunshine. I sometimes envy him."[19] The painter Henk Peeters was a regular visitor to the studio, of whom Westerik remarked with devastating sangfroid: "He was ahead of us all in the junior classes at school, but then he seemed to come to a standstill and all his classmates bypassed him in their performance. […] His latest paintings are weak too and always have a whiff of Braque, Matisse or Picasso, even though he doesn't try to imitate them." (20 November 1948).[20]Another friend was the poet Jan Arends, although their conversations weren't without discord: Westerik confessed (on 9 March 1948) that "I am no longer all that fond of the fellow, and was glad when he went away […] when I do listen to him it's as though he is forever talking about me as if I was at some miserable time in the past!"[21]

At times, undoubtedly, Westerik's friendships tipped into rivalry. When he was awarded second prize in an exhibition at the Haagsche Kunstkring (HKK) for his painting *Boy with bicycle* (1950), he remarked: "I was in second place with an honourable mention for my [painting], and H. Berserik came third. It's nice to get in ahead of Berserik for a change!" (2 July 1950).[22] Recounting a meeting with an artist called Piet van der Poll, he complained: "He has made a painting that looks damnably similar to my […] *boy with bicycle*. He has indiscriminately – or in his case mindlessly – taken over all aspects of my painting." (3 August 1950).[23]

Some friendships endured for decades, becoming integral to Westerik's sense of self. "Rein Draijer was one artist he really loved", Hans Locher recalls, "although Co had nothing to do, stylistically, with what Draijer was doing." Westerik was shocked when Draijer decided, in

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[18] The group's tendency towards abstraction caused uneasiness among its figurative contingent, producing a schism. In 1960, the avowedly non-figurative Fugare group took the place of Verve. See Blok, op. cit., p. 43. Other prominent members of Verve included Herman Berserik (1921-2002), Jan van Heel (1898-1990), Willem Hussem (1900-1974) and Jaap Nanninga (1904-1962).

[19] Cornelis (Cees) Zitman (1916-2016) was a Dutch figurative sculptor who spent most of his life in Venezuela.

[20] Henk Peeters (1925-2013) was a founding member of the NUL group (the Dutch version of Düsseldorf's ZERO group), which he formed in the 1960s with Jan Henderikse (b. 1937), Armando (Herman Dirk van Dodeweerd, 1929-2018) and Jan Schoonhoven (1914-1994). Materialist and minimalist in sensibility, this movement defined itself in opposition to the CoBrA movement.

[21] Jan Arends (1925-1974) was a poet and writer and short stories. He committed suicide in 1974, just before the publication of his final collection *Lunchpauze gedichten* ('Lunch-break Poems').

[22] The painting was exhibited under the title *Voorjaar 1950* ('Spring 1950').

[23] Westerik was keenly aware of the critical attention that both he and his contemporaries received. Around the time that he began his diaries, he started to collect newspaper cuttings containing references to his work – accumulating a scrapbook that spans several decades.

the late 1980s, to retire from art – having lost inspiration. “Co really struggled himself with the question, ‘should I stop?’ But he couldn’t. He was also impressed also by Draijer’s great clarity of mind – his sense that he couldn’t do anything better.”[24]

Society, of course, had its mercenary and mundane aspects. We learn from the diaries of Westerik’s frequent struggles with bureaucracy and committeedom. At the start of 1948, the Institute of Management in The Hague was chasing him over financial irregularities (“I wrote back that I didn’t have any money but I intended to pay”, 30 January). He failed to gain access, in May 1949, to the Pulchri Studio – the famous society of artists in The Hague – blaming the organisation’s reactionary old guard: “It’s probably a great loss to the Pulchri Studio not to have accepted me as a member. Actually, I had at no moment believed it would be possible to creep past the old teachers and other phonies with their ulterior motives.”[25]

Westerik’s basic subsistence – his economic life – was another running theme of his early diaries, in which he recorded the tribulations and minor successes of commissions, grants, loans and odd jobs. An important source of revenue from the late 1940s was the Social Art Commissions, a governmental initiative in The Hague which acquired works by living artists for the Dutch state. Not that Westerik’s submissions were guaranteed success: he complained that a landscape of Westland in the rain “wasn’t sunny enough for the Superficiality Committee.” (26 June 1949).

Money was a continual source of anxiety. Aside from the sporadic payments he received from the Social Art Commissions, the young Westerik found employment of various other kinds. “This evening I was expecting someone who is going to furnish a house and wants something for the wall,” he wrote on 31 January 1950. “That kind of hunger for culture is never too serious, however; he didn’t come and never will.” In mid-1949, he undertook the restoration of a plaster sculpture of King Willem II for the Royal Chain Factory in Leiden, a task that included the addition of a new nose and sword. He also accepted portrait commissions, including one from a public official who had initially declined to pay him: “Tomorrow I’m going to Meys and I’ll invite him to come and admire the painting. Then I’ll give him my conditions: the painting will cost 250 guilders less than the 20 he lent me. I expect him to turn blue from stinginess.” (6 September 1949).

The humour and transient triumph of such entries are offset by many other moments of depression and foreboding. Westerik’s writings from spring 1950 refer to a mural painted for the Hotel des Indes, The Hague, and his repeated efforts to obtain good photographs of it (“I can’t put it off too long,” he wrote on 8 March, “since the walls are greasy and dirty; it seems that people who dine there throw food at the paintings, just for fun. The mural is now an evil-smelling mess”). Many entries from 1950 reflect his anxiety about being evicted from his studio by the newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, which had acquired the building: “But damn it, must I get thrown out of my home just to please that wretched newspaper, and

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[24] Interview with Hans Locher, 20 November 2019.

[25] “My whole motive of becoming a member of Pulchri was the automatic admission it provided to the Voorzieningsfonds (‘Provident Fund’), which would pay me, as a married member, 45 guilders weekly for 6 months long!” 2 May 1949.

not even get help from them to find another attic?!" (1 August 1950). Society – the world beyond Westerik's studio – was, in many instances, a nemesis to be faced down, the antithesis of his interior world.

Self

Westerik wrote his diary in moments of silent solitude. He regularly documented his immediate thoughts and surroundings: "Now it's 1.30," he recorded in the small hours of 17 February 1948, "the studio is wonderful and it's quiet out in the street. An unknown channel on the radio is playing 'I've got you under my skin'."

"Now I am going to eat smoked herring," he wrote on 1 February 1948. "It's midnight. Soon I'm going to bed and at least I have a bedsheet." Life is reduced, in this expression of modest intent, to its barest essentials. Not all of his statements were so sanguine, however. Elsewhere, he confronted and dissected his own psychological turmoil: "Last Saturday evening, for the first time in ages, I had a breakdown from war neuroses due to the conversation that evening. […] It's horrible that regularly, although sometimes at very long intervals, a war comes along and completely breaks me up! […] I must find a way to expel that empty horror from my body." (6 September 1949). At times, Westerik experienced a sensation of dislocation from himself: "The studio, with paintings on the walls and brushes spread over the work table, feels at this moment as though it doesn't belong to me; as though the guy who really belongs here is dead." (23 April 1950).

Statements such as these draw his reader into the present-tense of long ago. That sense of the present tense – a charged 'here and now' into which past and future have been subsumed, or vanquished – is equally discernible in his paintings. Art was a kind of catharsis – a way, in his own words, of expelling horror. *Figure in moon landscape* (1949), a portrait of Hens, reveals some of the anxiety and conflict that defined their relationship at this time. She appears, wide-eyed and alone, in a dark city street – apparently lost or searching, maybe sleepwalking. Westerik wrote frequently in his diary that year of her desire for a divorce: "We have decided to get a divorce," he related on 7 October, with brevity worthy of Hemingway.[26] "Soon. It's not being worked on yet, but the decision is final." (In fact, the divorce didn't happen until 1970.)

The peculiar psychological charge of this work was observed by a critic who visited the three-week exhibition 'Still Life and Landscape' by members of the HKK, at which Westerik showed *Figure in a moon landscape* and *Baby in front of an early morning landscape* (1948). Cornelis Veth referred to "the curious work of Co Westerik, landscapes in which the tragic, even pathological figures in the foreground dominate the whole mood."

Just as his work was always evolving, accruing or losing layers of pigment, gathering pace or slowing to a maddening impasse, Westerik's subjective mind was often in a dynamic state –

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[26] Ernest Hemingway was one of his favourite authors. He admitted, however, on 1 February 1948: "I made a second start on Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" today, and for the second time I only made a few pages' progress."

receptive, fluid and acutely self-aware. In a revealing passage written on 20 November 1948, he proposed that art and the self were the principal sites where an artist could instigate change. This was a reaction against the principles of his friend Henk Peeters, whom he had seen that day – in particular, against Peeters's belief in art as an agent of social revolution. And yet the entry amounts to a kind of credo (Westerik's own private manifesto) about the need for the artist to negotiate between society and the self.

> He [Peeters] wants to make a more active contribution to breaking down present-day society – in the way of a worker going on strike or taking up arms. In my view this is never the task of a painter […] It's all very well being revolutionary, but you still have to deliver your share of work […] let's not waste our time waiting for a different society to emerge, but let's perfect our skills, technique and expressive possibilities, and at least try to establish the extent of where all the misery has come from in terms of [artistic] form.

Art, Westerik theorised, must not be divorced from the society of which it is a part: indeed, obliviousness to society results in bad art. But the ultimate role of art is to diagnose "where all the misery has come from" rather than to prescribe a new utopia. Such a statement highlights his belief in the primacy of the self – of the individual endeavour, the personal striving towards 'expressive possibility'. But Westerik's approach was anything but solipsistic. Far from being a retreat into aestheticism, his work constituted a way of looking at the world objectively, undistorted by ideology. Indeed, he stated the following day (21 November 1948) that he had outgrown the insular aestheticism of his earlier work, moving towards a more critical and attuned way of seeing: "The world in which the masses lived is something I never wanted to recognise … I lived [in] the aesthetic realm … How awful were the things I approved of months ago!"

Seeing

Everywhere in Westerik's diaries, we see him reframing everyday sights as artistic images. Sometimes this process was overt – as, for example, when he noted: "For today's dinner, Hens snipped out pictures of oranges and laid them on my plate as dessert – a very constructive dessert with sculptural effects." (3 February 1948). At times, it is possible to see how his transient observations (like the memory of the pink-painted room in New Jersey) fed into his imagination. The design of a Jack of Diamonds card prompted him, one evening, to consider a compositional change:

> I played cards this evening, and it struck me on looking at a Jack of Diamonds how exactly the red was printed on the white background, and how clear-cut the head, indicated only linearly in black, looked against the red. I felt a longing to adopt a white background in a painting soon, and also to try and make a head prominent, if necessary only linearly, in black; could it be clearer or purer?[27]

The intensity of Westerik's gaze seems, at such moments, to have induced a condition of *jamais vu*, akin to the experience of repeating a word until it seems alien or imbued with new power. The same experience is evoked by many of his paintings and drawings, as well as the short videos he made – over the years – using a handheld 16mm camera, of innocuous

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[27] 22 February 1950.

subjects such as manhole covers.[28] As the writer and critic Hans den Hartog Jager has observed: "Defamiliarization is not a trick or style for him, but an integral part of his way of seeing the world."[29] Often, the desire to home in on specific details – the form and texture of a blade of grass, for instance – resulted in heady distortions, reshaping the visible world into an unfamiliar amalgam of organic and inorganic shapes, a conjunction of panoramic space and closely-scrutinised bodies (so close as to appear flattened against the picture plane, like skin pushed up to glass).

Chance observations of the kind he made while playing cards found an immediate counterpart in Westerik's sketches – the starting-point for his paintings. "I made two fountain-pen drawings", he recorded on 28 February 1950. "One of Hens which has all the charm of an extempore drawing; and one a scribble of a chair plus a piece of cloth hanging over it in typical folds, and the cats sitting on it." The fine line between the significant and insignificant was something that preoccupied him in both in art and life. "I don't know if I am writing any really important things here," he wrote in the final line of the same entry, "but for the while that's just how unimportant my life is anyway." Often, it was the mundane aspects of life that arrested him (the "musical rise and fall" of a police car siren, say), and yet out of these came flashes of revelation – insights or feelings that find their mirror image in the iridescent ordinariness of his best pictures.

> Quite a storm has been blowing for the last two days, and the zinc sheets on the roof seem to be trying to tear themselves loose. Our cats are lovely animals and I love the way they smell. Wimpie the tomcat, in particular has such a special scent in his fur; I often push my face into his fur, and when you blow it, it makes a star where you can see his blue-grey skin His eyes are lovely against the tin, taut mass of hairs around them; (infinitely) transparent, wet, gleaming globes.[30]

Paradoxically, the directness of Westerik's observations resulted in pictures that elude specificity, refusing to be fixed in time or place.[31] In many paintings, apparently unimportant things (a record player, a plucked tulip) acquire a heightened charge – coaxing the viewer into the same abstracted sense of wonder with which Westerik beheld his cat. Small-scale experiences become epiphanies.

In 1995, Westerik described how his famous series *Snijden aan gras* ('Cut by grass', started in 1966), came into being:

> An idea is not directly related to actual observation, not with drawing subjects plucked from reality. What it is are things that I experience. For example, *Cut by grass* came about on a gorgeous day when I went bicycling in the countryside and lay down in a field … and them cut myself, whhht!! – in my pink, freshly washed finger. And all of a sudden a large red ruby

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[28] Westerik used a Paillard Bolex 8 and 16mm camera, before moving to digital. In the painting *Man with camera (Man met camera)* (1999), he portrayed the camera as a prosthesis or 'second eye': a giant hand is cupped around a camera lens, which covers (and substitutes) one of the holder's eyes.

[29] Hans den Hartog Jager, 'Can Art Show You a Better World?', in Fenna de Vries, Co Westerik (eds.), *Co Westerik: Schilderijen / Notities* (Rotterdam: Galerie Fenna de Vries, 2014), pp. 7-12, p. 8.

[30] 10 February 1950.

[31] "Even when the refer to people and events in his private life, [his pictures] are about things that might happen to anyone at any time." Blok, op. cit., p. 43.

> sparkled in that light, and there was a reflection in that beautiful red drop, which was swelling amid the green of the grass, and everything was beautiful in that pink summer I came home with this idea in mind and knew: this has to be charted!"[32]

Real-life experiences gave rise, in Westerik's canvases, to spectacles that are larger than life, symbolic in tenor. And yet the physicality of his faces, limbs and inanimate objects persists. They are too literal, too tangible, to be *mere* symbols – just as in the work of Piero della Francesca, allegoric figures appear as knowable individuals: sanctity wears a human face.[33] Compare the pipe in that self-portrait from 1947, which has the semblance of an emblem rather than a real object, and yet also seems too profound – too darkly, heavily palpable – to be a mere Symbolist prop. In Westerik's art, certain details take on a logic, an unarguable 'presentness', all of their own: the hairline furrows in blades of grass, or the creases separating the digits of a finger, or the dark aperture at the end of a cigarette – crammed with stringy tobacco. Sometimes, moreover, the mundane and the symbolic seem to cohere. In the drawing *Hand with pink pill* (*Hand met rose pil)*, dating from 2009, a hand is depicted in watercolour holding out a small pink disk – and echoing, in its tightness of focus, Westerik's many other pictures of cropped bodies parts. The presiding quality of the drawing is one of ordinariness – and yet the unremarkable pink pill also hints at the miracle of the stigmata.[34]

Describing a walk back from Scheveningen (a seaside district of The Hague) to Paakstraat 17 on 26 November 1948, having visited his fiancé Hens, Westerik wrote: "I had no money and no tram ticket with me, and I had to walk all the way home. It was cold and the sky was beautifully light over Scheveningen; a lovely walk. There was sulphur in the air, which I could taste when I breathed in." The sense of freedom and exhilaration that he felt as he absorbed the night air – that sense of the unanticipated beauty of the passing moment – was recaptured, much later, in the painting *Night scene (Avondscène)* (2010). This work exemplifies the paradoxical mode of seeing that underlies all of Westerik's work, whereby the scrutiny of particulars results in a kind of abstraction or dilation of the senses. The normal semblance and scale of things is distorted by the action of the artist's telescopic eye.

In *Night scene*, Westerik imagined the intimate, covert experience of viewing a woman's body – naked from the waist down – under a starry sky, surrounded by long fronds of grass. The closeness of the artist-lover (and by extension, the viewer) to the body transforms that body into a landscape – a system of rolling shapes produced by radical foreshortening of the buttocks, thighs and heels. Extraneous detail disappears: the body is essentialised into contours and planes, with the cleft between the woman's legs becoming a radial point around which the rest of her body spreads out: the orbs of her thighs, the sweeping line of her backbone, and – beyond – the mound of a rucked-up jumper. Westerik conveys a sense of how intent focus on another body monumentalises that body, enlarges it, so that the cosmic elements of the picture – the stars overhead, the faint moon in the top corner – feel

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[32] Westerik in an interview with Max Pam, 1999. Quoted in in Fenna de Vries (ed.), *Co Westerik: Paintings* (Baarn, Netherlands: De Prom, 1999), p. 138, no. 40.

[33] See for example the *Brera Madonna* (1472-4), which Westerik saw in the late 1960s while travelling in Italy with Hans Locher: the paradigmatic figures of the Virgin and Child, together with angels and saints, are realised with joltingly 'modern' lucidity.

[34] On the tentative symbolism of Westerik's images, see Blok, op. cit., p. 45.

contrastingly ephemeral. The stars, conveyed as angular flecks, look like confetti tumbling through the air. “They look almost like pieces of tape,” Westerik noted in his diary. “I want as little naturalism as possible.”[35]

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More than many artists, Westerik was consistent in his outlook and methods. The distinctive style he had developed by the 1960s – involving a gradual layering of oil paint and tempera – persisted until his death in 2018. In the same way, the voice that developed in his early diaries – a combination of minute observation, determined routine, and competing anxiety and humour – grew into a continuum, capable of shifting key without losing its distinctive air, its idiosyncrasy.

Westerik’s diaries present us, in their totality as well as in their myriad parts, with a portrait of the artist: iterative and evolving, often incidental in its details, and yet – at times – abruptly revelatory and poignant. The diaries bear witness to the ideas that redoubled and developed throughout his work: as Hans Locher has pointed out, “the diary is the thing that was private, that is only now becoming part of his oeuvre.” And like his paintings and works on paper, Westerik’s diaries invite us to see things through his eyes: they make us party to his particular, peculiar mode of looking at the world. In so doing, they demonstrate how looking was always, for him, an act of unveiling – a way of bypassing the reflexes by which the brain interprets reality, in order to disclose the hidden strangeness of ordinary things.

Bach’s violin concerto is playing. Hens is asleep. I’ll turn out the light and listen in the dark.[36]

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[35] Westerik quoted in in Fenna de Vries, Co Westerik (eds.), *Co Westerik: Schilderijen / Notities* (Rotterdam: Galerie Fenna de Vries, 2014), p. 170.

[36] 14 July 1949.