

Hands of Time

*Pars pro toto*





## The Shadow Time of $\pi$ , *Requiem* and *Pars pro toto* On Johan De Wilde's work

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Yesterday we sat together again, two visibly ageing, brooding men, hiding the darkest corners of our souls from one another, building bridges to meet the other, the secret brother, referring to books, pieces of music or works of art, some of which we both know. I've often talked with Johan De Wilde (b. 1964), whom I first met eleven or twelve years ago. Yet I have never converted one of our conversations into a readable report for outsiders, commonly referred to as an "interview". Why not? Because conversations containing references to difficult books look conceited on paper and can hardly reflect the fact that we have actually read these things, and that we do not quote them to make an impression, but because they are the building blocks of our thoughts and feelings. Yesterday, for example, we were talking about a book I had never heard of, in which the German philologist Victor Klemperer dissects the language of the Nazis (and of the journalists and politicians of the day, who in their familiar and vulgar way, conceal, refuse to name or twist things in an attempt to hide the fact that the world is actually uncontrollable). We also spoke about *The End of the World Through Black Magic* by Karl Kraus; a book by Max Frisch that consists entirely of questions; *Jasper and his Servant* by Gerbrand Bakker, which is published by Privé-domein; and the free jazz record *Free Fall* by Jimmy Giuffre. I haven't read these books and do not know Giuffre's music, but De Wilde can convincingly describe what these works mean to him. And as I listen, my loneliness evaporates.

p. 653  
pp. 574–575  
p. 616

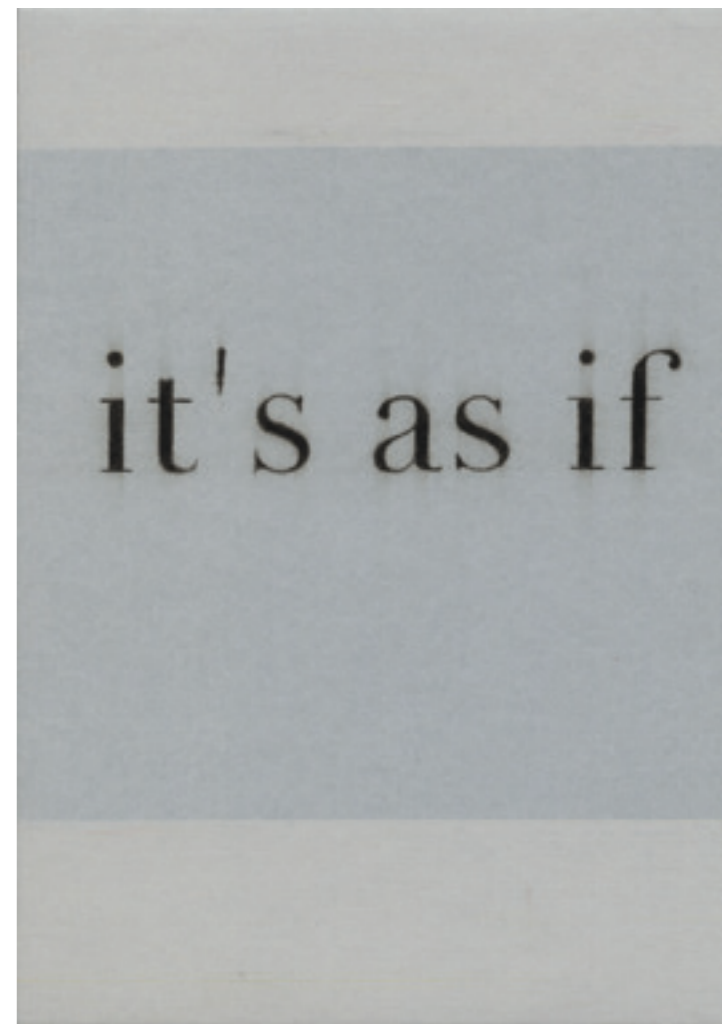
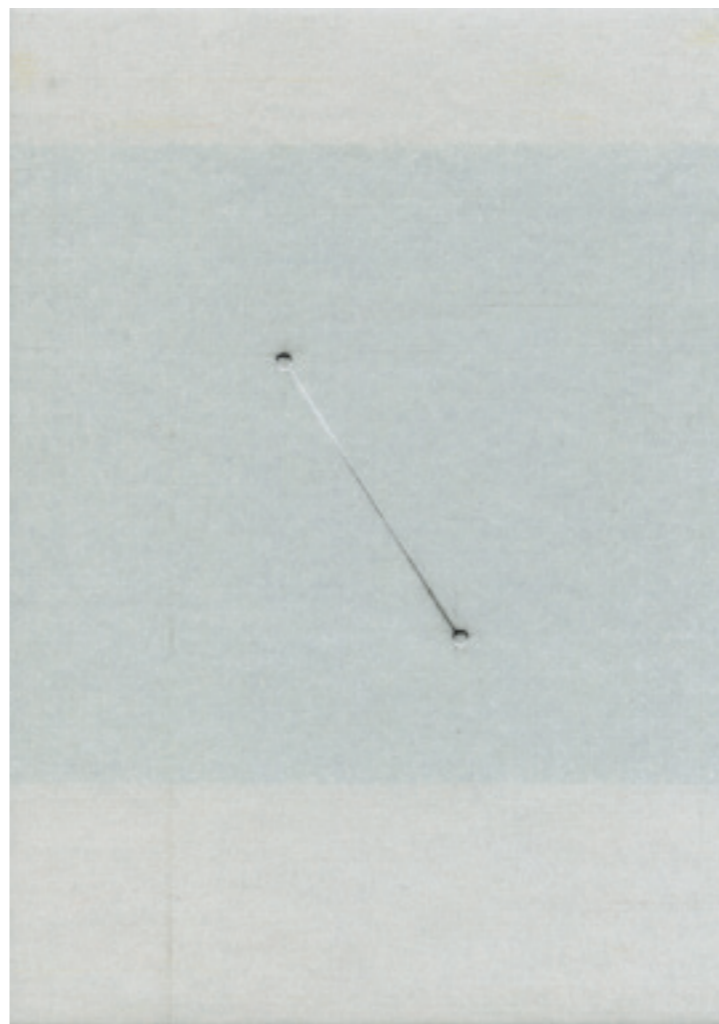
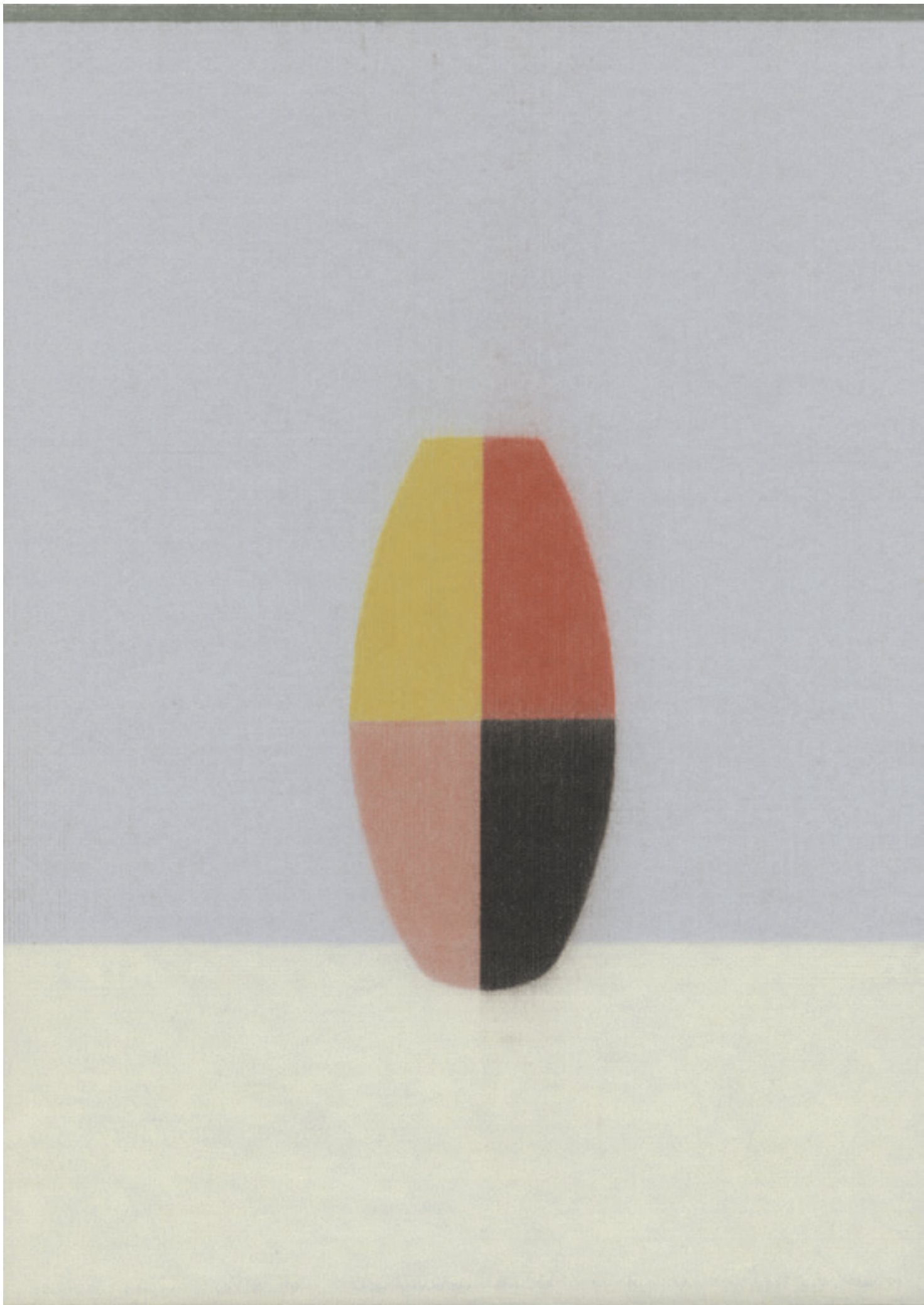
I experienced the same feeling when I saw his most recent works, some of which are continuations of series that date back years. One ensemble is based on haunting dream images. Today, a drawing has tumbled out that represents the hips of an earth-green Jesus wearing striped underpants. These stripes are also present in a work from 1994, comprising dozens of seascapes painted in horizontal lines of oil paint (changing views of a Norwegian fjord). And they also occur, again in an adapted form, in the endless score made up of coloured bars, which is a direct translation of the number  $\pi$  (the colours of the lines are derived from a sunset: presumably an image that everyone loves). Looking

at all the works on display in the studio today, my suspicions are once again confirmed: artists do not need to look for a style of their own, because they already possess a "form vision" (as Henry Moore coined it), which, actually, they cannot escape. We see numerous breakout movements and new stories, but the ultimate form cannot be steered.

And our images and ideas, do they allow themselves to be steered? Jimmy Giuffre's album *Free Fall* was originally going to be called *Yggdrasil*. "Yggdrasil" is the Norwegian tree of life, which is perhaps based on the yew (*taxus*). Yew trees are incredibly long-lived. Sometimes, their trunks become hollow and a new shoot grows in this space, sheltered by the old bark. A phenomenon that makes the tree seem immortal. The tree is also evergreen, which is why we call it *sempervirens*. Eternally alive, but also poisonous. And because of its toxicity, it can also be used as a medicine. In the past, bows were made of yew wood. According to Wikipedia, the name *taxus* (yew) is derived from the Greek τόξο (*toxos*) which means 'bow' (and from which the word "toxic" is also derived). But perhaps it was the other way around, and the bow was named after the tree, which was also lethal? Giorgio Colli (in *The Birth of Philosophy*) notes that the Greek words for "bow" (βίος) and "life" (βίος) consist of the same sounds (only the emphasis differs). The God with the bow (Apollo) therefore becomes the God of life, but also of death. In Fragment 51, Herakleitos talks about "a combination of opposing forces, as in the case of the bow and the lyre". The lyre is the second of Apollo's attributes. We can see why: because the words for "bow" and "life" sound the same, and the formal resemblance between a bow and a lyre generates a useful, ambiguous image, one in which life, death and art converge.

For *Requiem*, an enchanting series of drawings that began as a form of healing and protection for the ailing art historian Tanguy Eeckhout, De Wilde made drawings that started out as traces of yew twigs or bamboo shoots. Something unexpected happens here, because just by printing these precise, recognisable objects, soaked in acrylic paint, a shapeless form arises, a stain. In numerous later drawings, we also see how this stain or blob takes on a life of its own and even appears in a dreamscape. p. 488

The *Pars pro toto* series is based on Fra Angelico's frescoes in the San Marco Monastery in Florence. Each drawing represents a particle of colour from one of the frescoes. The colour is represented as an enlarged pixel, framed by the four edges of the adjacent pixels. The pixel has the same ratio as the original fresco. But because the murals don't have the same proportions as p. 522



## Requiem

*Requiem* is the crystallisation of a series of fifty-one drawings of the same name, all executed on A4 or A2 paper. Two plants stand side by side: the bamboo (imperious, rampant, barely containable) and the yew (refined, poisonous, mysterious and used in the fight against cancer).

The drawings and the book are a tribute to Tanguy Eeckhout, late curator of the Dhondt-Dhaenens Museum in Deurle, a passionate art historian and lover of the Belgian interbellum period. But above all else, he was a faithful and equally ardent 'compagnon de route' to many artists. *Requiem* is the artist's personal response to Tanguy's incurable illness. The works were created intermittently and in coloured series, propelled by the meetings between curator and artist in the intervening moments. It is an undertaking that recalls the film-maker Werner Herzog's journey across the Alps in 1974 in an attempt to stave off the illness of Lotte Eisner, his own "companion on the road". He was adamant that it would prevent her from dying.





