

On **André de Jong** – a translated synopsis of an essay by writer and media theorist **Arjen Mulder**, published in Dutch in *De Gids*, Issue 5, Oct 2017, p. 30-33

## The Lines of the Landscape

*The Dutch landscape consists of straight lines, contrasting planes, ratios instead of volumes. How do you approach such two-dimensionality? Inevitably, this question leads to artists like Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, and André de Jong.*

If you look at the Dutch landscape, what do you see? And, if you want to draw it, then how do you do that?

**Piet Mondrian** answers most sharply. In 1919, he discovered in the Dutch night landscape what he called a *primordial relationality*, an essential, two-dimensional abstraction of lines. According to Mondrian, the flat horizon of the vast Dutch agricultural grasslands is met by a perfect perpendicular, an imagined vertical drawn straight down from the bright, white, hovering moon. This image breathes quietude, simplicity—the truest state of man. From then on, he chose only these truest, most universal lines: perfect straight perpendiculars. Together they capture every possible round, crooked, or swaying line and compress them into one.

So that is one way. The Dutch landscape—grassland, heath, field, reclaimed land from the sea—is made up of abstract lines, mental ratios instead of volumes.

**Paul Klee** used these universal lines to invent new landscapes. In 1925, he set out how such lines function visually. An active line is one that viewers keep following with their eyes. It could go anywhere, it has the freedom to curve or change direction, searching for a connection. When a second active line crosses it, tension builds: the two engage in Mondrian's *primordial relationality*. Then two more lines cross the first two, and suddenly a plane arises. These planes can be active, too—can move, shift, and turn in the mind of the viewer—or cool down into a pattern, subsuming them into harmony.

This is another way of capturing the landscape. Klee takes lines and planes and draws new worlds. He does not depict nature, he depicts its alternative, squeezes all types of worlds into one. His catchphrase: "I am God."

The Dutch landscape was made by man. The Dutch are proud of this, rather than being ashamed for having destroyed the swampy soil that existed before. The straight lines of dikes, of canals—men carved them and our eyes follow them.



André de Jong, *Landscape*, 2016. Charcoal on Steinbach paper (300 g), 103 x 73 cm

But then there is a third line. Certainly, the Dutch landscape is without mountains, without volume, but despite man's best efforts, irregularity persists. However solid a dense, planted forest might seem, a meandering path always makes its way through. And above the space of the wide gray sky float massive mountain ranges of clouds, billowing in a changing, fleeting expanse that mocks Mondrian's rational, well-organized landscape.

This third type of line is characteristic of the work of an artist whom I consider to be the Netherlands' most important contemporary draftsman: André de Jong.

**André de Jong** draws organic lines, lines that flow straight from the hand of the draftsman and that, along with a temporal, "active" element, contain real bodily power. His organic line is never perfectly straight, but trembles—not loaded with the force of other lines, or of alternative worlds, but with the tension of muscles, and the resistance of chalk on paper. These lines breathe, take up space, contain a primordial force.

De Jong does not draw the essence of a landscape, nor its alternative. He reveals its archetype—that which came before and was destroyed, yet can never be erased. It is a universally European, precivilized landscape: merciless swellings and wide lines that resist peacefulness or homeliness. It is a wild, bare, untamed nature that frightens you, yet makes you want to disappear within it.