

REGEN PROJECTS*

Herbert, Martin, "the glossy untruth," tema celeste, September/October 2002, pp. 58-63, ill., cover



the glossy untruth

martin herbert

To enter the church named De Zaaier ("The Sower") in Amsterdam is to feel the sands of history shifting beneath one's feet. Built between 1927 and 1929 by the architect H. W. Valk as a Catholic house of worship in the Romanesque style, it has had a checkered life: Used as a carpet showroom in the 1970s, in the following decade the building began its current life as a mosque; in place of the altar is a tiled prayer niche known as a *mibrab*, and a pair of chandeliers dangles from the ceiling. The muffled roar of traffic outside offers a constant counterpoint to contemplation, either of the building's smartly vaulted architecture or of one's chosen deity. This zone of spiritual schizophrenia is surrounded by indifferent urbanism.

The Dutch artists Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij chose to set their film *Of Three Men* (1998) in this location because it recalled one of their favorite paintings, Pieter Jansz Saenredam's *Interior of the Church of St. Odulphus at Assendelft, Seen from the Choir to the West* (1649), which hangs in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. The film echoes the composition of that image—a view that travels the length of the church, seeking to take in as much of its cool, pale stone structure as possible—and, maintaining a fixed viewpoint for the whole of its ten-minute duration, it has the quality of a living painting. The time-based medium makes change over time its implicit subject, yet there is a tension between the film's conservative, painterly concerns and the surprising shifts of faith that figure in its iconography. Indeed, this frictional interplay between subject matter and aesthetics is at the heart of De Rijke/De Rooij's small but densely constructed oeuvre. What happens in *Of Three Men*? Not much. Three figures (presumably Muslims) crouch down (presumably facing Mecca) at the far right of the church. A breeze twirls the chandeliers; vehicles outside make themselves heard

(presumably a door or window is open). After a certain point—ten minutes, the maximum length of a single reel of 35mm film, making the cut-off point arbitrary and yet predefined—the screen goes blank.

We have been offered something, a singularity removed gently from the world with its polyvalence intact. What do we do with it? Lacking editorial cues, perhaps we become attuned to the few things that move, possibly deciding that if anything is underlining the historical narrative here it is the interior's temperamental light. The chandeliers do not throw around much luminosity; rather, the church brightens and darkens depending on whether clouds are passing an unseen source of illumination, a window, or open door. The gift of light, long a metaphor in religious painting for spiritual illumination, is here chancy and apathetic, and life goes on regardless. OK, if you want to think that; but it's in your head, not in the film.

One might draw similar conclusions, and for similar reasons of narrative attenuation, from De Rijke/De Rooij's *Bantar Gebang* (2000), a ten-minute-long, static view of a shantytown built on a rubbish dump near Jakarta. Shot from a slightly elevated position, the film begins just before dawn, when this cluster of sorry shacks is veiled in silvery, misty light. Again there is little in the way of action, although there is a constant, seemingly choreographed process of low-level activity. Men in coolie hats pull handcarts down the paths that bound the settlement; hens peck at the dirt; white pigeons flap up and down; mothers lead their children out of frame . . .

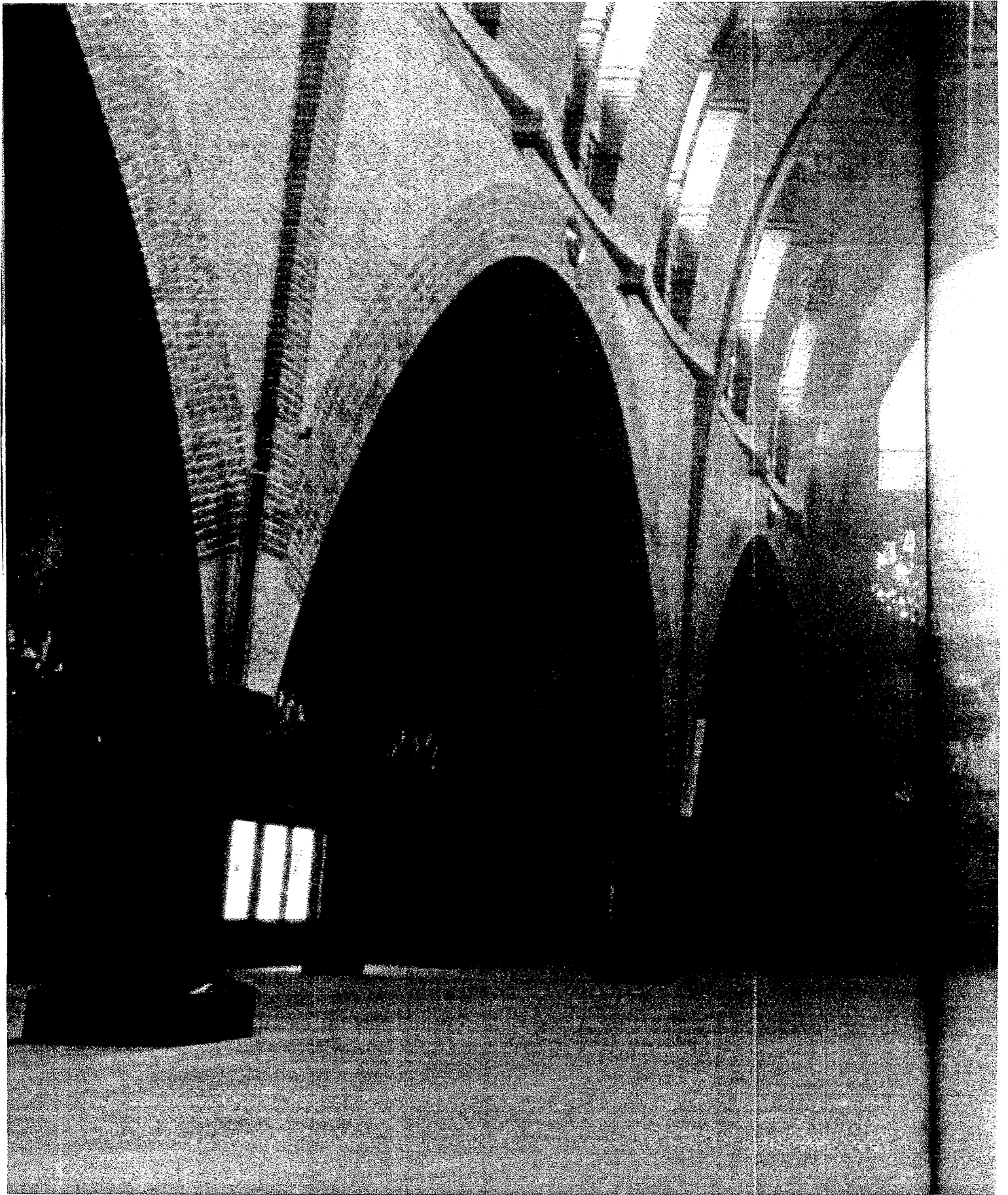
But there is a slower movement going on here, too. The sun is coming up, and as the first rays of sunlight strike the roofs of the houses, the previously monochromatic piles of debris in the foreground begin to bloom with color until, finally, the

輝きを増して、新世紀へ



TASAKI SHINJU

www.tasaki.co.jp



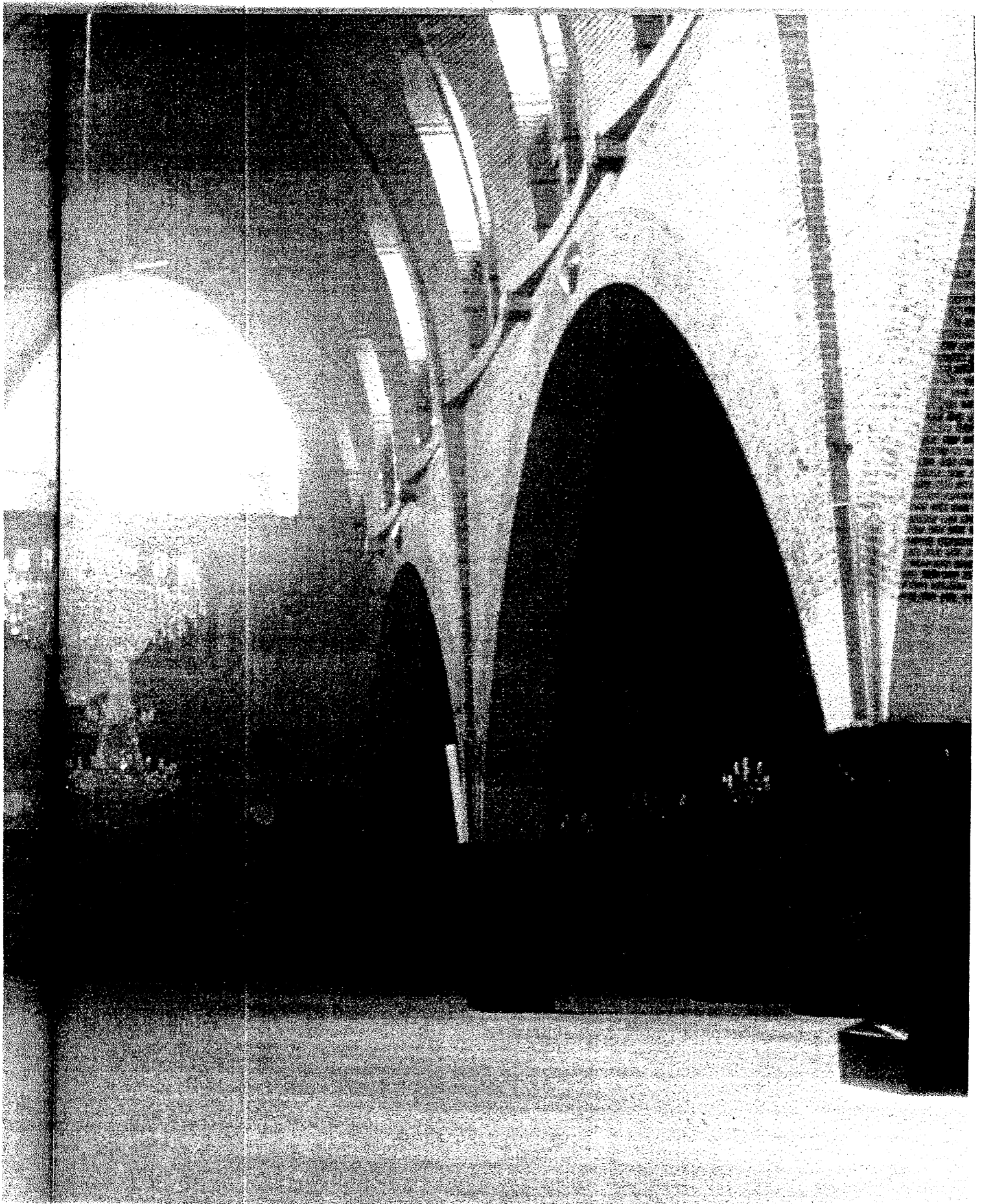
▼ Jeroen de Rijke / Willem de Rooij *Chun Tian* as installed in Casino Luxembourg, Luxembourg, 1998.



whole squalid scene is richly illuminated. This transformation occurs slowly, and if it didn't constitute an enlightening of one's sense of degradation it would be beautiful. Instead it functions like a patch test for an allergy you didn't know you had, bringing to the surface our society's disconcerting ability to take a touristy, filtering, voyeuristic look at any dismal subject while keeping it at arm's length via technology. Although the differentiated play of human events across this glowing screen might involuntarily remind the art-educated viewer of, say, Pieter Brueghel's paintings, for the occupants of the shantytown it is just the sun rising on another desperate day. The aesthetic, the filmic surface, is and has always been a kind of shield. De Rijke/De Rooij, by

placing us in front of such images for what in a gallery feels like a substantial period of time, make this shield the subject of their work.

For such films are not "moving paintings." They are not shown on a loop, allowing continual access; as writer Sven Lütticken has pointed out, the artists ensure that their works are seen as linear films by staggering viewing times, isolating works from each other, and showing them in bare spaces denuded of other artworks. Their shows lead the audience from viewing room to viewing room, and the films are announced and started manually. Appreciating them demands concentration, and this is especially crucial when the films are longer in duration, such as the twenty-minute *Forever and*





Jeroen de Rijke / Willem de Rooij Bantar Gebang, Bekasi, East Java, May 2000.

Ever (1995). Made around the time that de Rijke and de Rooij were students at Amsterdam's Gerrit Rietveld Academy, the film was shot in Bombay and employs actors who work in the "Bollywood" cinematic industry. There is no movie-style narrative, however, only disconnected scenes: an opulent villa in which a ringing telephone is never answered, a woman standing by a window, and, finally, a cosmic conversation between two boys sitting around a campfire.

In early works like this and the 16mm short *Chun Tian* (1994), the artists used scenarios redolent of artifice to explore the potential of fragmented narrative and the radical condensation of information to underscore the mechanisms of filmmaking. Barely three minutes long, set in the botanical gardens in Amsterdam, and named after the Chinese for "spring," *Chun Tian* unfolds a perfumed, pseudo-Oriental aesthetic. A close-up of a cluster of pink rhododendrons pans to an image of a young, fresh-faced Asian couple, she staring at his profile in a theatrically loving way before the film cuts to a view of him gazing in similar fashion at her. Mixed into a soundtrack of melodious birdsong is a voiceover of phrases in Chinese—a male voice says, "You're really very

beautiful"; a female voice says, "I love you," a line reiterated by an out-of-sync subtitle. The camera dollies back, wobbling slightly. We are being led toward a romantic conclusion, yet all is careful inference in this staged vision of exoticism and new love.

If, in contrast to such constructs, De Rijke/De Rooij have recently favored a certain degree of transparency, the analytical conditions that bracket their practice remain in place. One must always bear in mind, their work suggests, that this is film—a medium that, since D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, has long shown a taste for the glossy untruth—and that one should never confuse the seemingly direct representation with the thing represented. Theirs is not a purely deconstructive project, but increasingly it is one that, while offering choice subjects for perusal, constantly entreats us not to be too trustful, too inventive, too easily seduced, or too distracted by art-historical echoes.

Jeroen de Rijke was born in 1970 in Brouwershaven; Willem de Rooij was born in 1969 in Beverwijk. Both live and work in Amsterdam. Photo Credit: Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne.