

articles, essays and papers

Paul Nesbitt, 'from white to perfect. herman de vries - the real works', in exhibition catalogue *herman de vries : meine poesie ist die welt. aus der heimat von den pflanzen* (Städtische Sammlungen : Schweinfurt/Städtische Galerie : Würzburg/galerie d+c, mueller-roth : stuttgart 1993) 27-32 (ill.).
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Whether or not we believe that artists are 'made not born', and establish that most have received tuition of some sort, many of art's most original contributions have undoubtedly come from those with either no formal artistic training, or a different one entirely. Joseph Beuys was a pilot before crashing his Stuka into deep snow in the Crimea; Cezanne was a banker; Gabo studied medicine, natural science and engineering; Gauguin was a stockbroker; Yves Klein played jazz and taught judo; Matisse worked in law, and a life-long job in customs provided Henri 'Le Douanier' Rousseau with his middle name. herman de vries belongs to this tradition, having trained and worked for many years as a biologist before turning professional artist at the age of almost forty. The substance of his early career was not however abandoned but transformed to live on through his art and life.

It was this characteristic which brought about our first meeting, after I received a telephone call from a curator at the Scottish Arts Council imploring my assistance. He was working on a group exhibition which included de vries, who was visiting Scotland for the first time and wanted to locate certain plant species of interest. The curator's singular knowledge of art history, so useful under normal circumstances, rendered him helpless. herman and I met, and later at the Royal Botanic Garden we enthused over maps, and discussed the distribution of the native Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and the World's smallest Birch tree (*Betula nana*); in the company of a bewildered but grateful curator.

As with many who enjoy a deep love of nature, herman's factual knowledge began as a small child, learning from illustrated books and walks in the north Holland countryside with his parents. By the age of five he knew the names of most common plants growing near his home and this interest led him to study Horticulture in Hoorn at the age of eighteen. Three years later, in 1952, he joined the Plant Protection service in Wageningen, where he worked for the next nine years. By day he would investigate and report upon the ecology of crop damage by pests, or the nesting habits of rodents; but he also had a great love for art, and in 1953 he began to teach himself to paint, rapidly developing a non-figurative style in the manner of the American Abstract Expressionists Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock. This was a time of artistic experimentation in Europe as well as in America; by the mid 1950's Yves Klein was exhibiting his non-objective 'Monochromes' and in 1958 he created the landmark 'exhibition of emptiness', *Le Vide*, in which the Parisian 'Galerie Iris Clert' was painted white. At this time, Piero Manzoni was producing his 'Achromes' white paintings, and in 1959 de vries made his first 'white painting'; but characteristically this resulted more from his reading of philosophy and mysticism, than the happenings of the artistic avant garde.

It was the texts of Zen Buddhism and the Hindu verses of the Upanishads that he first began to study, later encountering the writings of the Mediaeval philosopher Meister Eckhart in 1957. Eckhart made the case for 'puritas essendi' - a purity of being which is affirmed by a denial of being itself in the face of 'God' (meaning that which lies beyond the human beyond being). He also discussed the limitation of language, and recognized the need to transcend language in the search for 'God'. Eckhart identified the terms 'Being' and 'Nothing', as dependent upon each other and herman de vries embraced and explored Eckhart's concept of 'mystical unity', and the language of hindu mysticism which allows

'perfect to come from perfect'.¹ This apparent tautology and the use of double meaning surfaces in de vries' 1974 text 'to be all ways to be' which invites the reader 'all ways', to be 'all ways to be', allowing any expansion, reduction or rearrangement of its constituent parts. This was first printed as a little booklet in Kathmandu under the artist's 'temporary travelling press' imprint (during one of his many Asian journeys to places more culturally suited to the work's message than the German 'Heimat'). In his love of both life and language, de vries shares the identity of Meister Eckhart as both LEBEMEISTER and LESEMEISTER.

de vries' sense of unity is not only mystical but functional, a fact summed up by his way of writing which has not seen the use of a capital letter for almost forty years. What may to some appear an irritating affectation is reasoned with typical clarity 'it is a kind of anti-hierarchical expression. It's the same in nature; every part has its own function, so why should a tree be more important than a diatom?' When presented with a version of his name in which capital letters appear, he replies 'you may use it of course - but it is not my name'. This recalls the enigmatic Claude Monet at Giverny when, after being found in a most distressed state by an enquiring visitor in his beloved garden cried; 'It's awful! There was a storm yesterday. Two trees in my garden were destroyed. You understand: two trees! Well there you are - it isn't my garden any more! It isn't my garden!'²

Continuing to work as a scientist throughout the 1960's, de vries moved to his second post as a researcher at the Institute of Applied Biology in Nature in Arnheim in 1961, which he held until 1968. Throughout this time he continued to work on white paintings and also randomness, using white painted wooden reliefs and constructions. He had begun to exhibit in 1959 and these abstract, minimal works

¹. 'That is perfect. This is perfect. Perfect comes from Perfect. Take perfect from perfect, the remainder is perfect. May peace and peace be everywhere'. Eesha Upanishad, from 'The Ten Principal Upanishads' (1990) transl. Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats, published by Faber & Faber, London.

². 'La vie de Claude Monet' (1929) Marthe de Fels, Paris.

earned for him an association with the 'Zero' artists such as Klein and Manzoni, and from 'Fluxus', the artist Joe Jones (who remained a friend of de vries until his sad death this year). To this day de vries is still identified with 'Zero' group artists, not only through exhibitions but through publications, which he began to make in 1960 with 'wit is overdaad', and 'wit' (1962), a book of two hundred blank, white pages. His artistic output of this period appears to have existed entirely separately from his scientific work, although randomness and chance, which appeared as a major theme in his art, would have been encountered through the use of random number tables and the statistical design of biological experiments.

Artists and scientist emerge distinctively from a common fascination in the natural world and de vries' relentless commitment to art whilst still working as a scientist for much of the 1950's and 1960's demonstrated not only his involvement in both, but his belief in the unique ability of art to communicate. One of his great influences has been the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), whom he began to read in 1967. Wittgenstein understood the power of science (having moved from Manchester, England, where he designed a jet engine to Cambridge, to be with Bertrand Russell, whose 'Principio Mathematico' had greatly impressed him); but he was aware also of its limitations. He stated: 'We feel that even when ALL POSSIBLE scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched'.³ A contemporary of Wittgenstein, the Nobel laureate physicist Erwin Schrödinger observed in 1958; '... in the picture or model we form of the outside world, guided by our scientific discoveries, all sensual qualities are absent'.⁴ Unaware of Schrödinger's views, de vries

³. 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus' 6.52 (1921), Ludwig Wittgenstein, transl. D.F. Pears. & B.F. McGuinness, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, (1961).

⁴ 'The Mystery of the Sensual Qualities', from 'Mind and Matter' Schrödinger, published by Cambridge University Press.

remarked during an interview some twenty five years later: '... it's of course very interesting to see how science analyses the way certain processes are happening and functioning. that's great. but it can't explain the wonder of it.'

Throughout the 1960's and 1970's the artist's growing awareness of the limitations of science to express a unified view the world was accompanied by another realization about the limitations of philosophy, also dealt with by Wittgenstein; philosophical problems are solved by looking into the workings of our language, 'not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.' de vries took language and increased its usefulness as a means of expression beyond its literal use in for example, scientific description of observations or phenomena.

1969, after sixteen years working fulltime as a scientist, herman de vries left the Institute of Applied Biology in Nature; knowing only that he wanted to travel, and experience a complete change of circumstance (he had also become separated from his first wife and family). Within one year of visiting Asia and Africa, four major changes took place in his life which set a course for the emergence of the 'real works' of this exhibition.

First, in the process of travelling through the Bavarian Steigerwald - the result of a complicated itinerary to visit the west coast of Ireland, he saw the tiny village of Eschenau and decided to move there. He was not only attracted by its location on the edge of the oldest Beech forest in Germany, but by its anonymity; there was no 'art scene' in Eschenau unlike Holland, and he had never experienced the need for one.

Upon moving to Eschenau, the second and most enduring change took place; he met Susanne Jacob Goepfert with whom he began to live and later married. Together they made a new life in Eschenau where they now have a house, garden and a beautiful

meadow. She assists in the creation of his art in many ways, not least because it is often Susanne who curates, dries and applies the leaves which the artist collects, to paper. She does this not only out of love for her partner, but also 'because I love leaves'. I have met many botanists, but I have never yet heard them repeat such a sentiment, in any language!

If Susanne provided the most enduring change, then the third change was the most miraculous. Having suffered a lifetime of chronic asthma, he became suddenly cured whilst 'tripping' on LSD. This was important for beyond its medical significance; as an asthma sufferer myself I would dearly love to escape its confinement, but de vries not only escaped, but entered a new world - of mind moving plants. For centuries they have been used to expand the realms of consciousness, and they are still used in shamanic rituals and healing by indigenous people all over the world, from the mushroom *Psilocybe* of the northern Europe, to the *Datura* of tropical Asia and South America. Since 1970 de vries has been devoted to the collection of literature on such plants; from their botany and biochemistry to their cultural uses, creating not only a library but also a garden and a new publication for their study as editor of the scientific journal for mind moving plants 'integration', which he founded in 1991. Whereas a plant taxonomist's knowledge might be concentrate upon morphology, de vries also attends to the properties of taste, smell, and the possession of mind-moving (psychotropic) qualities. In 'flora incorporata' (1988), a publication which is introduced with the words 'i am what i am', he lists the common and latin names of all the plants he has ingested, one for each of its 484 species. Here, wildflower species from the meadow such as the Daisy share equal significance with narcotics and hallucinogens such as *Withania*, *Peganum*, *Cannabis*, *Atropa*, *Hyoscyamus*, *Datura* and *Amanita*, and common food plants such as *Maize*.

The fourth event, to which this exhibition resonates, took place in August 1970 in the Indian Ocean. During a walk on the Island of Mahe in the Seychelles, herman de vries stopped to gather twenty five mottled and bonded shells of one species, and putting them in a box, accurately noted their place and date

of collection. Entitled simply 'collected mahé, seychelles, august 1970', this collection represents the first of the 'real works', its simple directness characterizing the artist's subsequent approach for over twenty years - recalling the extended role of fat and felt in the art of Beuys after they were used by the Tartars to save him from death at the hands of extreme cold and terrifying injuries after his plane crash. In making this step, de vries recognized the potential importance of working with the reality of nature, although he prefers the term actuality to reality, 'because what is real?' This 'real work' directly engages the diversity, complexity and beauty of nature, echoing Wittgenstein's recommendation to rearrange 'what we have always known'.⁵ Working successfully with nature's materials and processes is even harder for the artist than the ecologist; an arrangement of shells, branches or leaves may so easily become trivial, pretentious or decorative. de vries avoids this and succeeds where others fail to organize and interpret. Visiting South-East Asia in January 1975 during a short period of peace in the civil war, he printed a poster which declared the exhibition of the whole city of Luang Prabang, the old capitol of Laos, with all its surroundings and inhabitants; so making a concrete statement of the experiential quality of reality and declaring it to be actual poetry.

Visitors to the exhibition 'documents of a stream - the real works 1970-1992' at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (1992) met with the following words on a wall at the entrance; 'look out of any window'; not a statement but an invitation to look anew and experience that made visible; coloured earth rubbed on paper, leaves in arrangements of randomness and order, bark from trees felled by the forester, the artist's blood, a carpet of pungent Lavender flowers; inviting the senses, evoking experience, calling to greater understanding and poetry. What could be more immediate than the scent of Cherry blossom. How often has one stopped (since childhood) to examine the stuff of the earth upon which one walks? While society

anticipates the rewards of 'virtual reality' technology, our awareness of the natural environment (de vries prefers the word 'life space') in which we take part, continues to fade. A clump of earth becomes virtual reality when we are no longer familiar with it. Which is more virtual, more real and octal, the simulation of an experience or the loss of one?

It is not the desire to 'make visible that which has been forgotten' which is either new or unique to herman de vries, but his way of achieving it. The greatest figure of the Renaissance, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), led the crusade for observation and faithful depiction of nature, against the crude and lazy caricature which bore little resemblance to its subject; his painting 'Das Grosse Rasenstück' (The Great Piece of Turf) was revolutionary in its eye-level treatment of its unusual subject matter, a clump of weeds. In 1979, with a sense of playful awareness de vries created his own version by sandwiching vegetation as it grew, between large sheets of card, removing the whole and framing it directly under glass. He admires Dürer's painting very much, but enjoys pointing out that 'mine is more real!

⁵ 'Philosophical Investigations', 109, (1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, published by Blackwell, Oxford.