

articles, essays and papers

Cees de Boer, "'the world is my poetry". Some moments from life = work of herman de vries', in exhibition catalogue *Oeuvreprijs 1998. Beeldende kunst : herman de vries* (Stichting Fonds voor de beeldende kunsten, vormgeving en bouwkunst : Amsterdam 1998) 8-53.

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What a wonderful tree! And so old! it has survived so many centuries! How could it have become this thousand-year old tree? Well, because the tree was completely useless. Its wood was not suitable for making wagon wheels or furniture, not suitable for making charcoal to keep someone warm or cook food. And now that it is old, it is really not worth cutting down. It is a completely useless tree.
(After Chuang Tzu)¹

During the preparations for the great retrospective of his work in 1980 at the Groninger Museum, herman de vries wrote to the then director Frans Haks, that he was looking forward to his first group exhibition. Haks observed de vries' ironic remark to be very meaningful: "the outer forms of de vries' work change, but 'it is clearly based on a number of principles." There is indeed a great diversity of forms in de vries' work: informal art, monochrome art, concrete art, concrete poetry, conceptual art and artist's books. Haks: "the drawback is that these are names which in fact bear on the external features of the work, which say nothing about the intention of its maker. the above-mentioned terms are therefore only illuminating for a short period of time: truly important artists do not repeat themselves but develop and renew themselves. This can particularly be said of herman de vries."²

Apart from a few cognoscenti (and the very few collectors in the Netherlands who incorporate a historic perspective in their collection), the name of herman de vries will chiefly bring to mind those

¹ I would like to thank herman de vries, susanne jacob de vries, Dick Veeze, Antoinette de Stigter and Roy Bicknell for their support in the making of this essay.

² Frans Haks, 'introduction' in exhibition catalogue *herman de vries. werken 1954-1980* (Groningen 1980) 5-7, quotations p. 5.

works which present elements from the natural world such as the leaves of a *phillyrea plant* or deer droppings. An example of this is the *journal de el hierro*: a journal of his stay on El Hierro (one of the Canary Islands) in the form of a series of 47 sheets with rubbings of earth samples from the island, photographs of cloud formations, ferns which are to be found there, leaves of trees and shrubs, and so-called artefacts, man-made objects which, for a time, have been taken up in the natural metabolism of the island.

Nevertheless, this aspect should not determine one's image of his work, exactly because the themes of nature and ecology are at present so much at the centre of attention. A perspective of this kind very much misrepresents herman de vries' work. However strange this may seem, initially de vries' oeuvre does not involve these topical themes. The actuality of the oeuvre, and its relevance, is a different one.

This has, among other things, to do with the character of the artist. In the 60s, herman de vries had already explicitly distanced himself from the groups and movements in art, to which he, for a time, had belonged or in which he had been classified by the outside world. This artist in distancing himself took a further step. He repeatedly stated that art is renewed from the borders of art and that it hardly makes sense to strive as an artist to be at the centre of such a social construct. Accordingly, de vries puts forward that he and susanne have lived since 1970 in the country, in the little village of Eschenau at the edge of the Steigerwald.

This landscape is his studio, and at the edge of this forest, which is one of the few remaining large-scale areas covered by forest in Europe, lies one of his most important works: die wiese - a meadow of about 4,000 m², which is tended by the artist and susanne. The meadow is a small holy of holies, a sanctuary where nature, surrounded by farmlands, can freely take her course; a part of the landscape but still clearly distinguishable from its surroundings. de vries claims that there are hardly any natural landscapes still left because nature has been occupied and cultivated by man. He considers parks to be:

culturally impoverished nature. the botanical garden, on the other hand, is art: elements from nature (plants, trees) which have been consciously gathered, which are very rich in sort and therefore in experience, but still

unequivocally culture, for without tending by human hand the botanical garden cannot be maintained.

The artist gave this text from 1993, written for a symposium on 'the natural imagination' at the University of Twente, the meaningful title the form of the landscape is a testimony of our culture:

*landscape is more than what we can describe in language.
we can no longer interfere in nature, in a natura landscape unless this is to protect her from outside influences (which is then once more culture art in nature is entirely superfluous! nature is sufficient to itself and should also be to us - with art we can neither enrich nature nor improve it. one can intervene in a cultured landscape but the character of old, developed, cultured landscape must then be respected. art in the landscape can only function today, when it is integrated in the landscape to form a unified whole. just as in visual art, when, as in jackson pollock's painting, the central perspective was eliminated to make way for a democratic understanding of the image in which all the components have their own, equal value, the dominant monument which focuses one's gaze on itself is no longer relevant today. we no longer need hierarchies.*

Within the framework of an art assignment for the Weerribben nature reserve (Overijssel), de vries indicates in his proposal *het watergoed* (the water estate, 1998), how a number of connected interventions, at a pace determined by nature, can grow into a landscape. That is for him a possible artistic act, "for art comes out of knowledge and ability and is linked to consciousness and consciousness-raising."³

The dialogue between culture and nature is for herman de vries more than just a theme. Many artists profess that their art and life coincide - a statement the truth of which is sometimes difficult to judge. herman de vries is not one to hastily make a similar

³ herman de vries, *to be. texte - textarbeiten - textbilder*, published by Andreas Meier (Ostfildern 1995) 166-169 (further cited as *to be*). de vries' remark that there is no longer a need for hierarchy but definitely one for more democracy, is expressed in his orthography, in which no capital letters are used.

claim but his work does prove it in spirit! A visit to Eschenau means that you step into another world.⁴ The house is full of work and artworks, small exhibitions, it is full of material gathered from nature in herbaria, there is the earth museum (a collection of, at present, 6,499 earth samples from all over the world with which de vries makes his earth rubbings and there is a library with thousands of books on subjects such as botany, communities of plants and animals, drugs, natural medicine, mythology, folklore, Eastern philosophies and religions, anarchism, historical landscapes and communal living etc., which all have to do with herman de vries' art. A visit to the studio is a visit to herman's meadow, or a long walk along the Eisbach river bed, or a trip along the various topographical peculiarities of the landscape around Eschenau, after which you sit down and eat, on a bench at a path crossing, until the surrounding forest grows cold and falls asleep. de vries also has a special permit from the forest rangers on the front car window, so that he can go, 'for artistic activities', to places where others are not allowed access. Little wonder that herman de vries' oeuvre transcends categories such as the one-man's exhibition or group exhibition and other classifications which belong to the conventions of the art world. A good example of this is his presentation of facts and data which an artist (whether he wants to or not) weaves around himself in the course of his life. Here too, de vries breaks free from convention. Take the example of a bibliography of his publications: this can never be unequivocal as de vries not only wrote texts but also issued a large number of artist's books. Furthermore, many of these were made for, about or in collaboration with other artists with whom he has an affinity. They were published in de vries' own *eschenau summer press* or *temporary travelling press* - depending on whether he was at home or on the road. This too is essentially a distinction which is barely relevant: de vries travels just as intensively in Eschenau as in Europe and Asia. The publications in this series can be presentations of nature, ones of the workings of nature, as well as human observations on these phenomena. Volume 25 of this series is a cardboard binder, filled with dried roses, titled *rosa damascena* (1984 2nd print 1990). Volume 33 is titled *remember gustav theodor fechner* (1994) and includes two texts by this 19th century physicist and philosopher. In one text,

⁴ This is also expressed in Wilma Sütö's article, 'Mijn band met de meidoorn is sterk' in *De Volkskrant* July 31 1998, p. 16.

he describes his observation of a water lily and formulates the thought that it too enjoys the water and sun as its existence would otherwise be meaningless; in the other, Fechner tries to express the overwhelming impression his blooming garden makes on him when, after suffering from an eye disease for many years, he walks from his dark room and goes outside for the first time without a blindfold.

herman de vries even tackles the convention of how an artist sets up a biography in a different way. Only in the beginning do we get very casual references to normal biographical facts: 1931, born in Alkmaar; 1950-1951, Gardening school, Hoorn; 1952-1961, member of the Institute for Research in Plant Diseases, Wageningen; 1961-1968, member of the Institute for Applied Biological Research in Nature, in Arnhem. But among these sober facts, the year 1953 qualifies the image of a career as a research biologist: 'beginning of my life as an artist'. And the year 1969 notes that de vries leaves his wife and children to travel.

All further information which fills up the biography deals almost exclusively with herman de vries' work. A list is given of titles of works, of editions, of countries his travels took him to, of projects which sometimes occupied him for many years, of titles of texts which herman wrote about his own work or parts of it. Mostly, such names and titles coincide with the titles he gave to his exhibitions, such as *no name, this*, and *terre, vie et poësie*. So the circle is closed: although de vries could set up his own group exhibition in 1980, when we take stock of his entire work, it is a different matter. It is absolutely uncertain whether a retrospective should take the form of a bookcase, a museum room, an archive, a cabinet of naturalia, a congress on anthropology, an installation of films, a *trip durch die welt* - or yet again that walk along the bed of one of the streams in his beloved Steigerwald, where de vries picked up much of his work.

In other words, what 'work' (artwork, artistic labour) means to herman de vries also remains very much in doubt. It is therefore a challenge to both the art lover and the author who comes into contact with his work, to become engrossed in it and to 'think along' with the artist. In the work of herman de vries, the presentation of nature, of his observations of natural situations, shifts both the reality of the world and of his/our conceptual starting points.

herman de vries makes the conceptual equation 'nature is art'. As de vries indicates in his own biography, for him 'life is art' too: the phases of his

life are the phases in his art; the names he gives to his works and thoughts stand for phases of life, reflection, travel, contemplation, activity, working and not working.

In this essay, some years will be listed along with titles which are, as it were, direction indicators which have been planted by the artist during his long, committed journey through the complex 'landscapes that are testimonies of our culture'.

Do not forget, that de vries himself is part of this landscape; for sometimes he becomes entirely one with it, as in the story about the chinese painter who escapes execution by the emperor by stepping into the landscape he has just created and sailing away in the little boat on the river.

1960 'manifest of castrated reality'

Together with the publication of the booklet *wit is overdaad* (white is profusion), the *manifest of castrated reality* marks the year 1960. de vries himself dates the beginning of his life as an artist from 1953, but he has his first solo exhibitions around 1960. It is also the period in which he turned his education as a horticulturist into a professional career as biologist so that scientific research and the artistic practice coexist. This situation would last until 1969, but it is in particular the manifest of castrate d reality from 1960 which shows in essence where de vries' heart belonged. He announces this not in word but in deed: he takes a number of copies from his study on the distribution in the Netherlands of small mammals like the rat and the mouse, published in the scientific magazine *Mammalia*; he removes the covers from these copies, types on the blank inner cover the words *manifest of castrated reality*, turns it inside out and fastens it again as a new cover for his article.

The message is clear: using the framework of his scientific knowledge in the field of biology, however without slavishly adopting its language, de vries indicates that, in his view, science castrates reality and makes it infertile.

The manifest says one thing, the booklet *wit is overdaad* (white is profusion) with its 22 white pages and on the inside of the cover the text 'wit / wit is overdaad / blanc est surabondance / white is superabundance / weiss ist ubermässig / wit / wit / wit is overdaad' says another. The manifest shows the deficiency of thought, the white booklet - in itself a manifest - shows the profusion which art can put in its place: in the silence of these white pages, de vries literally and figuratively makes a *tabula rasa* of the world and of his own position in the world. He was

partly inspired to do this by central concepts from zen⁵ and tao: emptiness is plenitude, silence is eloquent, doing nothing is the best act, the total (material and mental) absence of world expresses the most completely its possibilities. 'white' was for de vries the most appropriate image for the inexpressible fact that he (and we) do not only live in a universe of realities but also in one of possibilities. There will be several opportunities to return to this theme which is important for de vries.

1956 'what is rubbish'

In addition to his field work as a biologist, which mainly concerns the protection of field plants from small rodents, a constant stream of work has developed from 1953. de vries starts to make informal paintings and drawings, a little later the first monochrome works make their appearance (grey, black and white paintings on canvas or wood, white paper collages) in addition to a great number of informal collages. Especially in the latter works, de vries interprets the programme which is contained in the name *informal art* in a headstrong and, as it were, much more literal way than others such as Bram Bogart, Armando and Jaap Wagemaker, who can be counted among the artists belonging to this movement.⁶

de vries seems mainly to have taken the not-acting of tao as a guide. He does not feel the need to make anti-art, he makes non-art. de vries apparently is keenly aware of the paradox, that an informal method of working always requires formal principles or leads to such principles - even when you do not want to. In 1956, he gives a collage the title *what is rubbish?* This title stands for de vries' own informal programme: his informal art comes from the reality which surrounds him. Many collages from the period 1956-1962 have been found or composed through a

⁵ During this period, many western artists, such as John Cage in America and Günther Uecker in Germany, read just like herman de vries the books which D.T. Suzuki had published on Japanese zen-buddhism and culture since 1927.

⁶ See Frank Gribling, 'Een intermezzo. Informele kunst tussen Cobra en Nul. Van onstuimigheid tot bezinning' and Janneke Wesseling, 'De Nulbeweging' in: Geurt Imanse (ed.), *De Nederlandse identiteit in de kunst na 1945* (Meulenhoff/Landshoff/Stedelijk Museum : Amsterdam) 62-79 and 80-96 respectively. A precise positioning of herman de vries' work in relation to the 0 movement in the Netherlands and the Zero movement in Germany, still has to be done.

minimal act: de vries tears pieces from a wall which has been covered with layers of posters; the wastebaskets in the offices and laboratories at his work provide material of all sorts and sizes, in random combinations: paper, fabric, plastic, wire, printed matter, felt, nutshells, bitumen, etc. de vries still keeps in the archive with his early work some threadbare white tea cloths with their peculiar pattern of holes and frayed edges.

The line between found and made collages is not a clear one - and is not really relevant since the central questions are: what is rubbish? what is art? what is the role of presenting material within a context from which it does not originate? In other words, in these collages de vries deals with the questions which, during the 20th century, have again and again been posed to the artist, from Duchamp to de vries' much admired contemporary Manzoni.

Collage experiments with modern materials such as plastic but also with paper and old documents fascinate him. Sometimes he attributes an important place in the image to found texts, which means the beginning of a sizeable body of works in his oeuvre which include letters, words and texts as material. There is even a birth certificate of the Zero or 0 (Nul) movement: on an old calligraphy exercise with names of people and accompanying data, de vries found the funny nonsense line 'Born in the year zero'. de vries attached felt and bitumen as a kind of seal or stamp to the underside.

In the period in which he made these rubbish works, de vries took part in exhibitions of the 0 movement in the Netherlands and the Zero movement in Germany and was the co-publisher of the first two issues of the magazine *revue nul=0*. He also gave the magazine its title. Informal, Zero and 0 art are quickly taken up in *De Nieuwe Stijl* (The New Style), in which Armando, Peeters, Schoonhoven and Henderikse (his allies from the 0 movement) manifest themselves. herman de vries, however, takes another direction. In his world, neither new realism nor everyday life in the consumer society is central, but he stays true to his concept of non-art. He then publishes independently a further two of *revue nul=0*.

'what is rubbish' contained the seed which would turn out to be fruitful in the later work. de vries actually showed in these collages how things in our cultural world are subject to a peculiar digestive process; in this way, mainly the process like aspects of our culture could be handled. The found collages, therefore, reappear later in his work as what he calls 'artefacts', objects which man has left behind in

nature and which for some time have been absorbed in her metabolism. He picks up these artefacts from nature and presents them next to plants, leaves, shells, and photos of natural processes (compare *journal de el hierro*). The early use of found text, returns as random arrangements to which he subjects texts by Huizinga, Wittgenstein and Bakunin. When herman de vries does not follow the developments in *De Nieuwe Stijl*, he actually takes leave of style concepts for good. In his entire work, the tension between the person and the impersonal of the artist and the artist practice will become an important guideline.

1959 'white'

I have already pointed out the significance of 'white' for herman de vries. From 1958, the first white paper collages are created and in 1959 we see the first monochrome paintings in white, grey and black. Whatever the oeuvre and the artist, a strange tension between the personal and the impersonal is always inherent to monochrome paintings. Monochrome paintings are impersonal because we are still used to reading the identity of the maker in the 'make' of the painting - monochromes are, however, in this respect mainly hermetic, unreadable objects.

Monochrome works are at the same time also strongly personal, precisely because their hermetic character hides the intention of the maker and makes them not susceptible to interpretation. However, in 1961, de vries makes his intentions clear in the first issue of *revue nul=0* (edited in collaboration with Armando and Henk Peeters):

the change, which took place within the informals, has received, as a result, a new concept. [...] the objective, namely, personal reactions are eliminated as much as possible. it is the normlessness of the outcome. stupidity: art has reached a point, at which it no longer needs to express itself through technology or the intellect because it can be made by anyone. as far as i am concerned, this is where art stops being art. expression is no longer visible, it is turned inward and hermetically closed off. zero; everything is unity, everything happens at a standstill. there are no oppositions. zero is not a starting point but a level of existence.

Then a text by Takuan follows:

in each of us there is something, which is called unmoved understanding.

*unmoved understanding is the liveliest thing in the world: it is prepared to move in every possible direction and yet does not have a terminal point. No longer thoughts of i and you - everything is empty. from such an absolute void, a most wonderful unfolding of action springs forth.*⁷

'white' is, in all respects, the programme⁸ here. In the statements 'zero is a way of existing' and 'everything is emptiness', the conceptual world of herman de vries unmistakably comes to the foreground. Accordingly, it is interesting to see, in retrospect, that within the concept 'white' and the concept 'there are no contradictions', so much of what is characteristic of herman de vries is seen to develop. This has very much to do with the singular path he has chosen and which has evolved in a different way to his contemporaries Armando, Peeters, Schoonhoven, and Henderikse. de vries has remained faithful to the statement 'zero is a way of existing'. The continual discarding of meaning from the artwork as cultural object, so that 'the work' can more and more play a mediatory role - for example, in relation to nature - has created a space for de vries, where personal acts and general existence, where work and life can start a 'dialogue' with each other and finally converge; where the identity of the artist turns out to be that of a monochrome painting, at one and the same time personal and impersonal.

The way that herman de vries transforms these intentions in work in the following phase of his oeuvre is quite unique, finding a new method to eliminate the opposition between science and art - by means of which he once again says that his art is his way of existing.

1962 'random objectivation'

The statement that there are no oppositions, is worked out in an artistic praxis which the artist calls 'random objectivation'. From 1962 to 1975, a large

⁷ to be p. 26.

⁸ de vries will repeatedly come back to this programme and more white works are made, for example in 1962 *wit*, with an introduction by J.C. van Schagen (1967, 1980); in 1967 'weiss (poem)', in the magazine *vers/univers* number 4; in 1972 *relativ leere blätter*, olten: le cadre; and in 1976 *some early change projects / einige frühe änderungsprojekte, 1963-1967*, a cassette with 34 white collages, some published earlier in the magazines *revue nul=0* and *revue integration*.

series of works evolves on the basis of a method, in which the integration⁹ of artistic creation and scientific systematic is central. In the second issue of the *revue nul = 0* magazine, de vries justifies the use of this method, with which he made e.g. white reliefs, dot drawings and colour square collages. herman de vries wants to exclude the personal signature, important in CoBrA and Informal art, as much as possible from his compositions. For these works, he uses the name 'visual information', a term which at the time was much in vogue and which was meant to replace the term 'art'. As artists in earlier avant garde movements have done, he also arrives at the concept of chance. His concept of randomness is partly based on the statistic definition of chance, such as used in scientific experiments: random sequences of numbers - which are actually borrowed from a book on statistical methods for biology! - are now used as a starting point to make random drawings and reliefs:¹⁰

*carrying out my compositions called 'random objectivations', i started reading the numbers from a haphazardly chosen point of the table, and gave a 'value' to each digit. value here means: a colour, glueing on a square or leaving it out, etc. in this way i obtained results which were acceptable for the spectator and gave the impression that they were intended as art. i would like to point out that all compositions are of equal quality if they are sufficiently large, i.e. made with more than 20 or 30 numbers.*¹¹

The tables used by de vries are statistical guarantees for making objective measurements, tests and calculations. de vries, however, interprets the

⁹ This intention is also clear from the title of the magazine which de vries will publish after *revue nul=0: the revue integration* (1961-1972).

¹⁰ During that period, many artists used similar concrete, non-personal principles. Famous is the example of François Morellet, who opens the Paris telephone book at random and uses the columns of telephone numbers for the positioning and development of elements in a certain work.

¹¹ *to be* p. 29.

random sequence of numbers as spatial and temporal coordinates: he reads the build up and the dimensions of a work in these deadly dull numbers. The impersonal remarks of de vries that these works give the impression of being art and under which conditions their respective qualities turn out to be equal, do not detract from the fascination which the visual complexities of these works still hold for us. For example, in comparison with Schoonhoven's reliefs, we see that we are dealing with two entirely different notions of complexity. Schoonhoven's work deals with the tension between the grid and the make. In de vries' work, the grid becomes less and less important and one is finally left with the presence of image-elements in empty space. For de vries demonstrates that in his random objectivations, he is not merely showing chance at play, but also a personal, decisive moment, which is founded on his ascribing values, his coding of the numbers from the random tables. The random coordinates materialize into a wide range of forms such as sticks, cubes, squares, triangles, and in the drawings for colour squares, circles, colour dots, combinations of large and small black dots, lines, etc. A number of three-dimensional works are also realized. de vries shows constellations, concrete structures, *situations*, to use a word that was in vogue in art circles around 1970 and which, among other things, was associated with a (personal, social, political, and also artistic) structure which allows for the making of choices. The visual possibilities which are realized in such works as impersonal choices, meant a maximum in freedom of perception for the spectator.¹² Each random objectivation was, again and again, a first realization out of 'white'. For de vries' further work, it is important that they all seem to be visual cross-sections of multidimensional processes, where it does not matter whether they have a minimal character - one line between two random points in space - or a maximal character. Their peculiar internal tension has perhaps to do with something that can be formulated in terms of time. Something that is random, is random only at a specific moment, at a following moment this is no longer the case since it then becomes part of a constellation or situation (and can itself become a condition for other random moments). A work of de vries is random work, for the spectator it is 'visual information' or 'art'. This amounts to the internal, temporal tension between process and

¹² Compare *to be* pp. 26, 30.

result. In de vries' random objectivations, we receive perhaps in visual terms the equivalent of the tension which was formulated by the philosopher Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* as 'Whatever we see could be other than it is. Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is. There is no a priori order of things'.¹³ In his random works, de vries has seen this as a declaration of freedom.

With the reference to Wittgenstein, once more a new domain in de vries' oeuvre is indicated. First however I want to round off by pointing out the significance which this concept has also had after 1975. For example, there is de vries' interest in the process-like aspects of nature, which he also presents as cross-sections of complex situations, as in the three-part work *1, 2 and 3 hours under my apple tree* (1975). In this work, three sheets have registered the falling of leaves during 1, 2 and 3 hours respectively. Nature does the work here, the statistical tables are no longer needed. The conditions for the work are an equivalent of the conditions which, on the existence level, determine how processes develop. In work of this kind, de vries takes a further step away from art, in favour of non-art, of what he calls the 'actual poetry' of nature. Finally, however, he finds art in both, and integrates chaos and order in, for example, a highly charged diptych like *salix I & II* (1986).

1968 'the world is all that is the case'

During two longer periods in 1965, de vries withdrew to the Biesbosch - then the last remnants of the estuary landscape which originally covered Holland - and thought about how to further organize his life. This year also marks the beginning of his interest in Wittgenstein's philosophical works. In particular he reads his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* from 1921, intensively.

From 1968, we find experiments with texts from the *Tractatus*: de vries makes, for example, a random distribution on the basis of the first proposition 'the world is all that is the case'. That is to say, he distributes the letters which make up the text over a surface, according to random principles described for his reliefs above. It should be clear that a homage to Wittgenstein of this nature puts the original message of the text in a completely different perspective, since

¹³ Proposition 5.634 in the Pears & McGuinness translation, quoted in German by de vries in *the wittgenstein papers*, 1975 (exhibition catalogue Groningen 1980, p. 179). This quotation immediately is qualified by de vries in two footnotes: 'is there no a priori order of things?' and 'what meaning does it have here?'

Wittgenstein attempts in his *Tractatus* to say what a logically structured language can say about the actual structure of the world.

Works of this kind by de vries are considered to be examples of concrete poetry, with the understanding that they have very little to do with the often insipid experiments which add word to image or image to word. His visual poetry goes beyond this and is, in my opinion, true poetry in the literary sense of the word; this is partly so because de vries' concept of random objectivation plays its role here. Perhaps de vries' interest in Wittgenstein is an indication why this is so, and why de vries' random objectivations have less an objective nature than one which seems uniquely 'herman de vries'.

de vries makes a constellation of elements by applying his random principles to the first line of the *Tractatus*. This implies that the following proposition by Wittgenstein must have been of crucial importance to herman de vries: 'Propositions show the logical form of reality. They display it.' (4.121) This statement says that it is not only language which describes the actual structure of the world, but that the world itself also shows what 'is the case'.¹⁴ This 'showing itself' of reality and the possibility that everything we see can be something different, must have appealed to the analytical Wittgenstein's opposite in de vries' thinking, the anarchist Bakunin. To leave Wittgenstein behind him, de vries becomes, after 1975, more an adherent of Bakunin's statement 'the desire to destroy is at the same time a creative desire'. And so, in 1975, he concludes his series of Wittgenstein-works by writing down the famous last line of the *Tractatus* 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' and then erasing it.¹⁵ What de vries here says and shows, he already demonstrated in 1972 in his work *on language*. A special issue of the magazine *subvers* contained: a white page, texts, random distributions of texts and points, photo collages and a final page with a small bundle of dried grass. An essay on language that ends with a plant! de vries shows us the language of nature which functions beside our language and, what is more, independently of it; he shows us a concrete 'something' that is 'the case' and that is 'actually so' even though it could 'also have been different.' A plant does not need to be represented because it is a document of itself, of its own process, of its own

¹⁴ Compare *this*, eschenau summer press 37, 1996.

¹⁵ Exhibition catalogue, Groningen 1980 (see note 2), 34.

identity.

This opens, after the series of random objectivations, a new domain in the oeuvre, which de vries will explore in the following years. On March 20 1980, de vries sends a postcard to Hans Sohm, German collector and archivist of Fluxus, Happening and Zero, with a representation of the Drago de Alajero, the thousand year old dragon tree, which is to be found on La Gomera (one of the Canary Islands). de vries, apparently deeply impressed by this artwork, writes on the postcard: 'yesterday started no art'.¹⁶ This dragon-tree stands for all the artworks which nature shows us, and the tree becomes the touchstone for the continuation of an oeuvre which, more and more, is moving in the direction of 'non-art': showing reality, nature as its own document.¹⁷

1972 'the world is my poetry'

Nature, the world as a document of itself. The works which - in the beginning besides his random works - from 1970 are made, using this starting point, are therefore called by de vries 'the real works'. This starting point, this fusion of art and life is pithily expressed in the poem *the world is my poetry*, which since its first publication has been translated into more than 60 living and dead languages. At the beginning of May 1976, de vries publishes his statement on the occasion of an exhibition at the Lydia Megert Gallery, in the *Anzeiger für die Stadt Bern* with a circulation of 77,641 copies. In 1974, during an arts symposium, he lays a stone with the text in the pavement in front of the entrance of the Badhuis (Bathhouse) Art Centre in Gorinchem. That he has translated this poem into so many languages, into so many 'tones', which have been and are used throughout the world to communicate, has specifically to do with the travels herman de vries has made since 1969 and which form an essential part of his oeuvre. Recently, Lisette Pelsers published parts from a manuscript in which he describes his travels, titled *ein trip durch die Welt*. She reaches the conclusion that this travel journal, which remains unfinished and ends in the middle of the 70s, is not a classic travel story:

¹⁶ Catalogue Groningen, p. 139.

¹⁷ de vries does not choose for what Wittgenstein calls facts (the actual structures of the world) but for things of which Wittgenstein, following Kant's example, says that they cannot be described (*Tractatus* 1.1). The Ding-an-sich determines more and more de vries' way of looking: not the map, but the landscape itself shows me where I am.

*It is much more a document that bears witness to a necessary personal process of transformation, which herman de vries undergoes in the period 1967-1970. During these years, he managed to break free from what can be seen as his 'former life'. The breakup of his marriage, his resignation from his post as a researcher at the Institute for Applied Biology Research in Arnhem, and the definitive choice for a life as a free, independent artist are, albeit radical decisions, perhaps only the outer signs of the process which is taking place. herman de vries is in search of a radical change not only of his living and working circumstances but also of his personality.*¹⁸

A crucial moment in this very personal process, is when de vries once again comes to the conclusion that his observations of what nature shows also belong to his concept:

*it is principally the direct contact with asiatic-buddhistic culture and his experiments with mind-expanding drugs which in the years to come are of decisive influence in his world view and thinking. we notice this influence even now and it still goes on: '... what the artist sees - observes - belongs just as much to his concept as what he makes...' (note written december 23/24 1970).*¹⁹

Through the insight that 'my observations belong to my concept', de vries coordinates his life and art irrevocably with the processes of the world and nature.²⁰ Travelling becomes his way of life: the Sahara, Turkey, Persia, India are stops during his first

¹⁸ Lisette Pelsers, *herman de vries. ein trip durch die welt* (exhibition catalogue) Enschede : Rijksmuseum Twenthe, 1998, p. 3.

¹⁹ Urs and Rös Graf, 'over herman de vries. een inleiding tot zijn werk en het concept dat hieraan ten grondslag ligt' (about herman de vries. an introduction to his work and the concept on which it is based) in: Catalogue Groningen 1980: pp. 8-55, quotation p. 37.

²⁰ See de vries' *a random sample of the seeings of my beings*, a large photo project from 1973; according to a pre-determined random protocol, pairs of photos were made of a. what de vries was looking at, and of b. de vries himself, observing. See note 27 of this essay. [In 2010 this project was published by the CDLA in France - CS]

travels. In particular, he will often return with susanne to India. The Greek and Canary islands also are on the programme in the following years. In 1982, de vries, during a stay on the island of La Gomera - much beloved by de vries because of the unique nature - elevates the island to the status of an artwork by using the simple word 'here'; this is a continuation of the statement from 1980 'today started no art' which he also sent into the world from La Gomera.

de vries declares the world to be his studio, his poetry, the artwork to which he too belongs:

*my poetry is the world
i write it every day
i rewrite it every day
i see it every day
i read it every day
i eat it every day
i sleep it every day*

*the world is my chance
it changes me every day
my chance is my poetry*

In the first instance, this declaration of love specifically addresses the natural life in the world. The first time that de vries shows nature as a document of itself, and consequently realise the identification 'nature is art',²¹ the work springs directly forth from his travels: *collected mahé*. In August 1970, he collects on the beach of the Seychelles island of Mahé 24 shells of the same type; each shell is unique, shows another mottle pattern. The scientist de vries makes a note of the place and time of collecting, the artist de vries shows the small shells in three rows of eight, in a beautiful wooden

²¹ To make his intention more clear, herman de vries always says that reality is primary, that nature does not need the label art: 'i made this remark, which has, unfortunately, been often one-sidedly used as a catch phrase, because i find that art is an expression of consciousness, of being conscious, or is a document of a process of consciousness. the manifestations of nature are this for me too! but 'art' is a human concept. transferring it to nature can be elucidating but at the same time also create new conceptual problems. (i therefore cannot say that our tomcat 'thinks', but i can perceive that something similar happens to him)' [fax to the author, dated 19 October 1998]. 'art and nature are both manifestations of being conscious' and 'art is a spiritual discipline' are also statements which have been made by de vries.

cabinet.

This work is the first of what de vries calls 'the real works', through which he wants to demonstrate²² that in nature law and chance, regularity and variation are not opposites but together realize the identity of each 'thing'. Participation in the whole does not cancel the identity of the individual. Seen from the perspective of 'the real works', there is therefore no opposition between the artist and his studio. What de vries says can thus also assume the form 'art is non-art', since the intention to make art is substituted by the intention to show the art of the world. In 1975, he says:

a fruitful walk

*went into the wood to think something,
but forgot to think and didn't find it
necessary to draw any conclusions
from this.*²³

1970 'chance & change'

Looking out of the window of a moving train, de vries writes in 1971:

*chance and change situations out of a
complicated chance and change
structure. some observed situations
from an infinite series: each time, each
place, all. fields and drawings, trees
and sculptures, sculptures and fields,
there are no oppositions. chance is
everywhere, which conditions
determine. **chance & change**, i wrote
in my notebook on july 4 1970 in
teheran, on the way from arnhem to
bombay and the seychelles, to buy
together with friends an island and live
there. the island was not bought,
chance and change - change and
chance.*²⁴

The programme that lies within the word pair 'chance & change' can be seen as a successor to the

²² The way in which herman de vries presents what he finds and observes in nature has many aspects; see for a further discussion of this theme Cees de Boer, 'from earth - noms de pays. herman de vries' erdausreibungen' (text in German and English) in: *herman de vries. from earth. von der erde* (exhibition catalogue), Schwäbisch Hall: Städtische Galerie, 1997: pp. 26-49.

²³ . *to be*, pp. 80-81.

²⁴ *to be*, p. 73.

concept of 'random objectivations.' Already in 1957, de vries affirmed:

*abstraction has only value for me, when it returns again to earthly reality. in other words: when it contributes to our relation to the world, in which we live (or can live).*²⁵

For the artist, it was each time about the role an, the freedom of the one who absorbed this 'visual information.' In his concept of 'chance & change' de vries realizes, for the first time, the complete joining of his works with the natural and cultural reality of the world in which we live.

He continues to make random objectivations until 1975; seen from the perspective of the concept of 'chance & change', each of these works is a realized choice, a possible image that transforms the silence of the 'white' into speech. I have already observed that these random objectivations can also be seen as cross-sections of a process. de vries also brings, through the concept of 'chance & change', this aspect more to the foreground. A crucial point is that de vries feels less and less the need to *create*²⁶ constellations of chances and processes, and more to choose this concrete tree in this landscape, to show how these leaves of this apple tree flutter down, to make this cutout from the landscape.

The photograph, as a reproduction of reality, as a document which makes visible both the chance and the process of a specific moment of reality, occupies in this respect a special position within de vries' oeuvre. Some of his photo-projects seem to be travel documents, some a series of snapshots, but there is obviously more to it. de vries travels and photographs both far and near. First, an example of a faraway place. On one of his travels, the project *l'exposition complète de luang-prabang* is initiated. In 1975, de vries, using a series of photos and a simple poster, proclaimed the entire city of Luang Prabang to be the poetry of reality (in English, he has used the term 'actual poetry'). This work may seem entirely

²⁵ *to be*, p. 22.

²⁶ In doing this, de vries takes a direction which is radically different to that of other movements in art in the 70s, which profess - or at least say they profess - social commitment, or which develop performances as forms of social sculpture.

conceptual, but in the end de vries' statement is that the city or environment in which the spectator lives, is sculpture, is poetry and is a never-ending exhibition. An example of a place nearby (in this case, from Eschenau where de vries lives) is *les très riches heures de herman de vries* (1981). de vries read somewhere of the publication of a facsimile edition of *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry*, a book of hours and one of the most beautiful manuscripts from the late Middle Ages, which also owes it fame to its 134 miniatures. In a play of concepts such as miniature, richness, time, representation and the individual, from whom such a book or artwork gets its name, de vries developed his own *très riches heures*: during a day of meditation in an open space in the wood, he made 134 black and white photos of what struck or attracted him in his direct surroundings (the work in its entirety is still unpublished [published in 2004 - CS]).²⁷

herman de vries gives a new content and function to what is the essential modern visual document, the photograph, by energetically divesting it of its conventional meaning as a memento of something else which was reality somewhere else or at another time. Also in his photo-projects, the world appears as a document of itself.

1974 'to be all ways to be'

All elements from nature which are presented by de vries are soundings of a process, 'documents of a stream'.²⁸ This stream is the world, into which the river of his oeuvre finally will flow, and into which each work now is flowing. These documents take on many forms, as was indicated at the beginning of this overview. de vries is not an artist for whom a certain medium is image-defining for the oeuvre. The aim is to make observations manifest in reality. Consequently, he replaces the word *bewußtsein* (being conscious) by *gewahrsein* (being aware); de vries is therefor not dependent on his visual means as these have to provide additional possibilities or meanings to make reality manifest. An element from

²⁷ See for other examples of photo projects by de vries, Michael Fehr's Fehr's interesting analysis, 'herman de vries : artifex arboris inversae', in Jörg-Heiko Bruns (ed.), *herman de vries. aus der wirklichkeit*, Ulm : Stadthaus, 1998: pp. 8-29.

²⁸ This is the title of an exhibition held in 1981 in the Apollo House in Eindhoven and the Van Reekum Museum in Apeldoorn, in which the work *documents of a stream. schetsboek I en II* (1976-1981) was shown (now in the collection of the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart).

a sounding of reality is (also in the material sense) a sign of itself; presentation is his central method. Whether it is about photos, plants, names, earth samples, or the knowledge which a respectful handling of nature reveals (I will come back to this point later), or words which concisely express what de vries sees to be essential.

A good example in this connection is the development which his use and presentation of language has undergone. Earlier, the special random objectivations were dealt with on the basis of existing texts. The destruction of language and the deconstruction of concepts which are formulated by words and phrases, are a central issue here, and in retrospect it seems as if de vries then so intensively worked on language because he wanted to draw something else from it. In his later works with language, this otherness turns out to be the contemplative aspect of the human means of communication par excellence. In a language work as the word group *to be all ways to be*, it is not so much about the primary message, nor does it have really anything to do with poetry - although de vries does make use of poetical principles - but it concerns rather the power of language to transform into *mantras*.

Such incantations can be found in all religions, but for de vries hinduism and buddhism are important sources of inspiration. In a mantra the meanings sing themselves free from their signs. In de vries' work, more and more often texts appear which repeat themselves endlessly; small, abstract words like 'this' or 'here' or 'all' function as details in which a universe can be encountered. de vries' mantras often assume the form of the message they communicate. This places them in the tradition of concrete poetry although de vries adds something which is new: their form is fundamentally that of Shiva's dance of creation and destruction, of the wheel of becoming and dying to the world, of the ripple in the water which is followed by another ripple, of the stamp that will never twice leave the same impression. In herman de vries' mail, the round stamp with the endless text 'this is different when you receive this is different when ...' can often be found on the cover or the writing paper.

In this connection, the works should also be mentioned, in which names provide the material. Using this method, de vries made, in the period 1995-1997, a series of eight sheets with repetitions of words. With a coloured pencil, he wrote alternately the words *one* and *many*, or thousands of times the word *is*. Thus rainbows of words come into being,

blossoming meadows with plant names. in which differences and similarities are taken up into a greater whole.

Also belonging to this series is a couple of sheets on which the words *identic* and *different* respectively are written. Neither is *change* missing in this series of visual mantras. Some years ago, de vries made a series of even bigger sheets, for instance with thousands of names of rivers which together form an *ocean of streams* (1992); and with 7,000 plant names, which together sketch a blooming landscape (1985). How personal and physical this work-of-names is, is apparent from the publication *i am what i am. flora incorporata*. On each of the 484 pages of this book, there is a name of a plant which de vries remembers having eaten or experimented with to experience a specific effect on his organism. *in memory of the scottish forests*, which is now in preparation [*in memory of the scottish forests* (Centre des livres d'artistes : Saint-Yrieix-la-Perche 2007) - CS], is an ecologically and politically committed book: it shall include all the names of places in Scotland which have been named after the woods and forests which once stood there, woods and forests which were cut down to make charcoal, for the mining of iron from ore.

Names are important for de vries, since their etymological and mythical aspects often retain the history of a region, or how a field or stretch of water was used. Furthermore, one can see the use of names, their etymology and their concrete function for the memory and orientation as a form of concrete and conceptual poetry respectively. Place and field names have both change and chance aspects which can be read as poetry. In terms of the history of language, the history of a name often turns out to be one which is full of misunderstandings, corruptions, associations which have little grounding in fact, or one in which the history of the place appears to have actually been retained under a completely different form. Names can in this sense just as well be signs for the concrete experience of the here and now as for the complex cultural processes which take place in space and time. de vries' *in memory of the scottish forest* begins to sketch the present and absent landscape as follows: 'reay forest glendhu forest inchnadamph forest glencanisp forest benmore forest ...'²⁹

When de vries makes a note where he has collected a certain element from nature, then this functional use

²⁹ *to be*, pp. 136-137.

of language reminds one faintly of his academic background. But when he presents the names of lost Scottish woods as poetry, or writes a sea of rivers, then language becomes the trace of nature, and nature itself the trace of a language.

1975 'true philosophy'

In a text from 1975, herman de vries describes, in a way which makes language turn on itself (or to be more precise, has it, as it were, driven round the bend), that no philosophy can match the experience of reality. Just as he highlights perception by substituting the concept *being conscious* by the concept *being aware*, he undermines in this text the concept of truth and substitutes it with the concept of reality: 'true philosophy is immediate actual.' The true philosophy is life and reality, immediacy, the here and now: actuality, not in the sense of Wittgenstein's 'what is the case' but in the sense of the reality surrounding us which, as a process of things, individuals, identities, life forms, figures, manifests itself in a randomly objective way and thus live to us. No, 'I' have not conceived the world; yes, the world is 'my' vision.

In de vries' oeuvre, the artwork often is no more than a trace, a document which has been produced by an act, a reality or a process. The following is typical of his kind of humour. In 1975, he sends from New Delhi a telegram to the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum where, at the time, an exhibition of his work is being opened. It contains a text from the buddhistic *Diamondsutra*:

*this shall ye think of all this
fleeting world: a star at dawn,
a bubble in a stream, a flash of
lightning and a
summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a
phantom and
a dream.³⁰*

In 1976, de vries is invited by Marinus Boezem to contribute to his *Podio del Mondo per l'Arte* - the conceptually transformed grain and cereal trade building on the market in Middelburg. de vries sends by way of reply a telegram with the text 'here & everywhere' which is cut in stone and laid in the platform - *the world is my poetry!*

1979 '16 dm2 - an essay'

In 1960 and 1962, herman de vries publishes his first

³⁰ Catalogue Groningen 1980, p. 52.

artist's books, the above-mentioned editions 'wit is overdaad' (white is profusion) and 'wit' (white). The fact that herman de vries is a fervent reader and book collector, may be one of the reasons why he has chosen the artist's book as an artistic means of expression: exactly because the book is a means of communication, it should, in a manner of speaking, be thrown away just like the proverbial ladder from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up and beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.' (6.54) - by which Wittgenstein means his own *Tractatus*! Once again, herman de vries takes this quite literally: observations, reality, world, nature must be able to, not through the mediation of words or images but directly, leave behind their traces in the book.³¹

Also in this domain, it is the stream of things which chiefly matters to herman de vries, and consequently his publications assume many forms: magazine, pamphlet, postcard, artists' book, multiple, prints, publications for an exhibition, etc. Furthermore, a multiple is in de vries' case never an edition of the same: in the magazine *PTL*, of which de vries was one of the editors, he made white collages which each turned out to be completely different.³² In an edition with leaves of the ginkgo, no leaf can, naturally, be the same. This puts the whole concept of an edition or multiple in perspective! In his *eschenau summer & temporary travelling press*, he publishes both his own projects and work of like-minded artists as Ryszard Winiarski, Dieter Roth, Ewerdt Hilgemann, Sjoerd Buisman, a 'badly bound book' of François Morellet, an impression of a mushroom by Chris Drury, sound tapes by Paul Panhuysen, etc. Furthermore, an artist's book may be an issue of one single copy, for example the work *chance & change - documents comparative*

³¹ For the important role played by herman de vries' artist's books in the development of this artform, see the recent standard work by Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste, 1960-1980* (exhibition catalogue), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris : J.M. Place, 1997. The cover shows de vries' *16 dm2 - an essay*.

³² *PTL* or *Journal for Literature and the Fine Arts Established Arnhem Anno 1962*, was published in 1963/64, five issues, 150 copies. It was edited by herman de vries and Laurens D. Vancrevel. This stencilled magazine was erroneously, not mentioned in the extensive bibliography in *to be*.

communication, I-IV (1974): in these volumes, copies are collected of every newspaper issued on one day in Kathmandu, Bern and Frankfurt together with the newspapers de vries collected on the way from Kathmandu to Dacca, Bangkok and Vientiane. A highlight in the oeuvre is the book *16 dm² - an essay* (1979). de vries did the work for this in 1974 by marking off a piece of meadow the size of a paving slab with four poles. Subsequently, all the plants were pulled out of the soil one by one, dried and fixed on paper as in a classic herbarium. On a plan, the place of each plant was precisely indicated. A number of stages of this process were photographed and documented. The book, as a complete document of this act, contains 473 pages with plants - that is to say 473 plants stood on this small piece (4 × 4 dm) of meadow.

1989 'natural relations' & 'das verschlossene paradies' (the locked paradise)

In 1982, de vries begins a project which seven years later will be presented in its entirety and which is given the name natural relations. It is a project which directly arises from the experiences de vries gathered on his travels with the use of medicinal and (what he prefers to call) mind-moving plants such as marihuana, datura, henbane, syrian rue, belladonna and others. His travels for this project bring him several times in 1982-1986 to Marocco, Senegal and India.

It is not only the defence of the use of these plants against the paternalism of the authorities which is an issue for herman de vries. He views the drugs issue from a very personal standpoint. In the *natural relations* project, he is primarily concerned with the knowledge of the healing and mind-expanding working of these plants, as they were once used as an integral part of cultures, for example through this knowledge being passed on and mediated by shamans and medicine men, who as initiated practitioners could regulate and direct their use in a natural way. In this project, de vries has gone in search of the very specific roots of our civilization which, on the one hand, has determined our intercourse with nature for thousands of years, and which, on the other hand, has been defining for what we now call religion.

On his travels to collect data and specimens, he was assisted everywhere by experts. Sometimes, he issued interim reports in the form of exhibitions, installations and publications such as *natural*

relations I - die marokkanische sammlung (the moroccan collection, 1984) and *vegetable medicines from two shops in bhaktapur and kathmandu* (1989). In 1989, the project is rounded off and given its more or less definitive form. This presentation was made up of two parts. The first was a plant cabinet, installed in a room of the Karl-Ernst-Osthaus-Museum in Hagen (Germany), in which a selection of mind-moving plants, which de vries had examined and collected, could be observed. This work was called *the locked paradise*, a title which obviously alludes to the Fall after the eating of the forbidden fruit, and the expulsion from Paradise, as it is written in the book of Genesis. The director of the Federal Health Office unwittingly contributed to the work, by proving the forbidden, sealed nature of not only the plants but also the knowledge of them. In order to be allowed to exhibit the plants in question (which included datura, cannabis, poppy, nicotiana, petunia, peyote, coffee, tea - coca was forbidden), special authorisation had to be given and the certificate was stuck on the sealed glass cabinet so that it was visible to everyone.

The second part of the exhibition was the publication *natural relations, a sketch*. It is a voluminous book work in which about 2,000 plants are described according to the viewpoints of botany, of philology (their names for different peoples), of the mythologies and the rituals which were created around their preparation and use. In the preface, herman de vries makes significant observations about these plants, which form the source of both our physical being and our consciousness. In the following long passage, herman de vries puts it in his own words, illustrating once again the themes which have already been addressed in relation to other parts of his oeuvre:

natural-relations. in memory of what is forgotten.

experience and knowledge which has been collected over thousands of years has [...] been thoughtlessly lost. the natural relations have largely disappeared. although the materials collected by me appear to be considerable in quantity, they are still only fragments. these relations were once religion, philosophy and a praxis for living at one and the same time. 'superstition' was the name which was given to what was not understood or which rivalled the newly introduced

religion, which was not based on the experience of life but was only belief. [the drugs problem of civilized society appears] in the first place to be a problem of the disintegration of the original nature of man, the separation from his natural relations. in central europe [the witch hunt], the first anti-drugs movement, resulted in the horrible deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. as our natural relations no longer are a part of our culture and thus no longer a part of our social life, drugs cause problems for us, precisely in the social domain. the only solution is to learn again how to handle them [...] to strive for integration. there does not seem to be another way. we, also in this respect, have to change our perverted attitude towards nature. we will have to wait and see if this is still possible. 'natural relations' embraces practically everything from the environment in which we live - the air we breathe, the water we drink and in which we bathe, what we eat, the electromagnetic fields which surround us, the earth on which we walk. what, however, connects us to our life space, are the plants we take in because they contain substances which build up and regulate our organism. when nature is a coherent, self-regulating system, then the existence of many vegetable substances is no mere coincidence, but are part of this system, they have a function, not only for the plants containing them, but even more for other organisms of this complex system, that schwenk once so appropriately called 'the sensible chaos'.³³

The oak, the hemp plant, the coca leaf and the hawthorn have and *are* no longer identities, are no longer *sacred*. There is another scientifically determined belief which has come in its place and this

³³ to be, pp. 119-125.

belief means not-knowing. *experience, insight, cognition* are more meaningful for our lives. the search for a vision of the young no longer exists; they are in peril of becoming dependent on drugs. what was once life space, is now *environment*. the world does not divide into facts, it is a self regulating unit! in this sense, i would conceive my work as a political one too.³⁴

1997 'sanctuary'

The entire work of herman de vries embraces, in my view, an implicit and negative judgement on those art traditions in which representation and indirectness are the dominating factors.

Representation seems for de vries to be infected - compare his rejection of metaphysics as an autonomous philosophical discipline - by an unnaturally conceptual virus, which entails that new experiments are each time needed to find new stimuli for perception, experience and thought. Against this, de vries sets his forms of presenting (natural) reality, in which concentration and contemplation are central. To use a language metaphor: nature is no longer conjugated by the gaze of man, but shown in the immediacy of her presence - *natura naturans*. The processes which constitute nature, can only partially be described by science. It is these processes which de vries attempts to show.

This can be illustrated by using one of the few direct references to the history of art in herman de vries' oeuvre. Several authors have observed that de vries' *rasenstück* (1979) refers to an earlier moment in art history, namely *Das Grosse Rasenstück* from 1503 by Albrecht Dürer, and they valued the reference between de vries and Dürer as proof of the power art has to develop forms of new seeing. In my view, they, however, did not take de vries' mocking remark on his work: 'but mine is more real'³⁵ seriously enough. They did not see enough significance in the presentation of nature as itself, passing over all the aesthetic and stylistic experiments with

³⁴ to be, pp. 128-129.

³⁵ Paul Nesbitt, 'from white to perfect. herman de vries - the real works' in: *herman de vries, meine poesie ist die welt. aus der heimat. von den pflanzen* (exhibition catalogue), Schweinfurt: Städtische Sammlungen/Würzburg: Städtische Galerie/Stuttgart: galerie d+c mueller roth, 1993, p. 32.

representation and perception in modern art. The work of herman de vries does not stand for a renewal but for a farewell to this tradition, which has always satisfied itself with a mediated indirect presence of reality.

The *rasenstück*, the *actual piece of turf* of herman de vries, is in this respect a precursor of two large projects in public space which he realized recently: the *sanctuarium* (sanctuary) in Stuttgart (1993) and the *sanctuarium* in Münster (1997). Here the work of herman de vries steps out of the framework and the frame. These enclosures leave small pieces of nature to their own devices because they prevent the local public park and garden department from tending the ground. Man is thus placed in a new way outside nature: not to manage and control her, but he is allotted the new role of witness of nature. The *sanctuarium* in Stuttgart is still transparent, the *sanctuarium* in Münster is, because of the brick wall, a barely visible space - a *hortus conclusus* for nature. On the upper frame of the in itself impressive object, a text in Sanskrit is written, which translated in English reads: 'this is perfect and that is perfect. perfect comes from perfect. take perfect from perfect and perfect is the remainder'.

herman de vries concentrates on what he calls actual poetry, on the *praesens* nature of his material, on an optimal *presence* of nature in his work. de vries is the principal witness and makes his public an accessory.

The Vedanta brought de vries the insight: 'the whole world is brahma-lila, exists in and through the play of brahma, and brahma is his game'.³⁶ herman de vries too is his game, his art. The text *physics & metaphysics are one* dates from 1995. de vries already states in the title that the concepts which underlie his work do not come from outside art and are thus not metaphysical in relation to art. Nature is art, nature is a document of itself. For the artist, it does not concern the more behind reality but the more in reality. Furthermore, this text says that the most important experience we can have, is that of *joy: freude, vreugde*. Nature, being, the world, I - *to be* is the game of Brahma, the ecstasy of being. Without any inhibitions, de vries says what in the judeo-christian tradition is only said by One: 'i am what i am.'

The telegram sent from New Delhi concisely expresses and shows the ecstasy of the artist. First, de vries shows that, in his shrugging off the social

conventions of the art world, he is, as a person, an outsider. And to stand outside (yourself), is what the word *ecstasy* literally means. Second, through this text, that his art is under the sign of transience, but that this should be read as a positive transience of things, as the play of Brahma and not (viewed from another reality, another metaphysical perspective) as a negative one and as something which should be overcome.

why this demarcation? art and nature still come forth from consciousness.

[...] *do you mean that for the observer it is the same, whether a stone has been formed by a sculptor or has just been found just as it is, that it should contain enough starting-points for his sensitivity? well then, could he just as well pick up a root from the marsh or a leaf in front of the house door?*

naturally, he has to pick up the leaf - and the whole world goes with it - or he can leave it on the ground. it depends on his state of awareness. as far as i'm concerned, i'm just a mediator.³⁷

We can discover herman de vries' mobile play in his entire oeuvre; it is a supreme interpretation of the score of the world as a unity of nature and culture; it is a declaration of love, an *invitation to dance* which invites everyone to his or her own ecstasy: *the world is my poetry!*

Cees de Boer

³⁶ *to be*, p. 187.

³⁷ . 'nackt fühlt man sich freier', in *to be*, interview with Alexander Baier, p. 102.