

**Arnon Ben-Dror****Nature in Context: A Situated Study of herman de vries's  
*Sanctuaries*****Abstract**

Since the early 1990s, the Dutch artist herman de vries has installed several works in public space with the title *sanctuarium* (or sanctuary)—empty plots of land, surrounded by a fence, where nature is left to grow uninterrupted. For the artist, these sanctuaries communicate a consistent universal plea: that of rediscovering and reconnecting with nature in its pure, unspoilt form, from which modern life has alienated us. By resituating the sanctuaries in their actual environments and looking at their evolutions throughout the years, this paper shows how the ideas and affects instigated by the sanctuaries are actually contingent, and differ significantly from one place to another. These works are continuously reshaped, both physically and symbolically, by ongoing negotiations between the “object”, its (social, environmental, and geographic) context, and varied interventions by local actors. This brings to the fore a couple of broader issues as well: first, the impossibility of perceiving the human–nature relationship merely in phenomenological and universalistic terms, since this relationship is always locally embedded. Secondly, the understanding that, from a semiotic perspective, a work of public art is a radically dynamic entity—owing both to its installation in the politically charged public space, and to the possibility of local publics to experience and interact with the work in a myriad of spontaneous ways.

**Keywords**

Public Art, herman de vries, Environmental Art, Natureculture, Site-specificity, Semiotics, Skulptur Projekte.

# Nature in Context: A Situated Study of herman de vries's *Sanctuaries*<sup>1</sup>

Arnon Ben-Dror

Since the early 1990s, the Dutch artist herman de vries (b. 1931) has erected several sculptures in public space with the title *sanctuarium* (or *sanctuary*)—empty plots of land, surrounded by a fence, where seeds brought in randomly by the wind and by insects are left to grow uninterrupted. Three of these sanctuaries will be discussed in this paper: in Stuttgart, Germany (1993), in Münster, Germany (1997), and in Zeewolde, Netherlands (1999–2001).<sup>2</sup>

The artist and art scholars alike commonly treat these sculptures as different versions of essentially the same work, whose meaning, endowed by the artist, remains more or less the same wherever it stands: a site for people to contemplate nature in its pure, wild form, protected from the human obsession to shape it.<sup>3</sup> Can the meanings and effects generated by a public work of art, though, remain unchanged when it moves across borders and times? When it is placed within various geographical, cultural, and, most importantly here, environmental contexts? Can nature really evolve in isolation from the social habitat? Outside of the sterile environment of the museum, with its “protective” hermeneutic contextualisation, these public sculptures, as we will soon see, find themselves in a turbulent semiotic field.

And what of these sculptures' audiences? As Bryson and Bal famously stressed, every work of art “enters networks of semiotic transformation as

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Throughout this paper I comply with the artist's wish that his name, the titles of his works, and all texts related to them, be spelled in lowercase letters only, to avoid the hierarchies he associates with the practice of capitalisation.

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As this paper focuses on the relations between the works and their publics, I will focus on sanctuaries that are located in urban public areas. Accordingly, the recent *sanctuarium* erected in the HEART Museum in Denmark (2017) will not be addressed. Neither will similar works by de vries which are located in the wilderness or which differ from the round sanctuaries in significant formal aspects. These include: *le sanctuaire de la nature* (Museum Gassendi, Digne, France 2000), *sanctuarium: natura, mater* (Venice Biennale, Italy, 2015), *hortus liberatus* (Merzig-Saar, Germany, 2000), *wynfrith me caesit, herman me recreavit* (Düsseldorf, Germany, 2002), *the meadow* (Eschenau, Germany, 1986). Documentations and descriptions of all works by de vries mentioned in this paper are available in the comprehensive catalogue on the artist's official website. See “catalogue”, hermandevries.org, <http://www.hermandevries.org/timeline.php>, accessed January 2021.

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herman de vries, “sanctuarium”, in *Contemporary Sculpture: Projects in Münster 1997*, eds. Klaus Bussmann, Kasper König, Florian Matzner, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 1997), 434.

volatile and as tangled as the glances of a crowd in any given minute of its life”.<sup>4</sup> If one then wishes to study a work of art from a semiotic perspective, one should not be satisfied with the ideas put forward by the artist nor by the impressions left by “official” critics. Instead, one should pay attention to the myriad of “empirical”, non-professional spectators, whose voices usually remain unheard.<sup>5</sup>

Nikos Hadjinicolaou, cited by Bryce and Bal, goes so far as to say that these different instances of reception actually transform the work. He thus offers a relational definition of art:

We must put forth another conception that sees the work of art as a relationship [...] between an object and all the ways it has been perceived through history down to the present day; ways of perceiving that have untiringly transformed the work in a thousand and one ways. The work of art we have before us is the history of its consumption [...].<sup>6</sup>

Nowhere is this assertion more pertinent than in the realm of public art. Instead of the highly conventionalised spectatorial choreography museums demand (read the wall caption, step back, observe, reflect, say something to your companion, take a picture, continue walking), the possibilities of engaging with a public work of art are almost limitless. This normative void opens the door for a myriad of personal ways of appropriating and repurposing the work. In this sense, public art is interactive almost by definition.

My analysis, therefore, puts great emphasis precisely on these “histories of consumption”. It pays close attention to actual manifestations; to the relations between the works and their specific contexts and publics; to the “actual traces left by actual encounters”, to quote Bryce and Bal once more.<sup>7</sup> I have been able to trace such encounters by visiting the projects in person, conducting interviews with local actors, looking at vernacular documentation, going through local press and blog entries, and studying the eco-political specificities of each locale.

The aim of this paper is thus to examine how each sanctuary is constantly being reshaped, both actually and conceptually, through ongoing negotiations between the work, its social and geographical contexts, and the actions of the public and local authorities. I shall ask: What happens in the dialogue between artistic intentions and human interventions? How do environmental histories interlace with aesthetic forms to create site-specific significations? And more specifically, what happens to the ideal of “pure” nature when it travels from one locale to another?

I will start by presenting de vries’s own approach to nature and his conceptualisation of his sanctuaries, which, as we shall see, is often echoed in the readings of his work and of those particular sanctuaries offered by art scholars and curators. Then, through a close analysis of each of the sanctuaries, we shall see how local contexts as well as varied ways of interacting generate site-specific significations that expand, or even subvert, the dominant understanding of these works.

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See Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotic and Art History”, *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (1991): 187.

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Bal and Bryson make the distinction between these living, “empirical” spectators, and the “ideal” spectator, which is an abstract entity. See *ibid.*: 185.

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Nikos Hadjinicolaou, “Art History and the History of the Appreciation of Works of Art”, in *Proceedings of the Caucus for Marxism and Art at the College Art Association*, no. 3–4 (1978), 12–13. Quoted from Bal and Bryson, “Semiotic and Art”: 185.

7

*Ibid.*

## Sanctifying Nature

Born in Alkmaar, the Netherlands, in 1931, herman de vries's was invested in nature from a young age. He studied horticulture and worked as an assistant researcher in the field before turning to art practice in the mid-1950s. In the early 1960s he joined the Dutch artists group Nul (a branch of the international Zero movement), whose members rejected the subjective trends in post-war expressionist art, and often integrated everyday materials into their works.<sup>8</sup> Nul's impersonal style has remained a staple of de vries's practice throughout his career, but unlike his fellow Nul members his focus turned, in the 1960s, almost exclusively towards natural matter and phenomena.

Since then, for more than half a century, de vries has been creating works of art made from materials taken directly from nature and used in their rudimentary state, sometimes as complete ready-mades. At the Venice Biennale of 2015, for instance, he represented the Netherlands with an installation that included a series of rubbings of earth from different locations (*from earth: everywhere*), as well as stones collected by the artist in nature (*the stones*), and a pile of tiny roses arranged in a perfect circle (*108 pound rosa damascene*). "Nature is art",<sup>9</sup> the artist asserts, and thus all that is left for him to do is to *present*, rather than *represent*, it. "I have nothing to add, nothing to change, only respect".<sup>10</sup> His practice, thus, comprises in many instances of merely *reframing nature as a work of art*, rather than creating something new from natural substances. In the sanctuaries, this frame becomes physical—a fence.

de vries's approach towards nature could be regarded as romantic and universalistic. Nature is nature, humans are humans, and the fundamental relation between the two is thus understood in essentialist phenomenological terms—a certain "being-with-nature"—which also entails an existential resonance. The artist orchestrates physical encounters with nature, whether in the gallery or outside of it, in an attempt to raise awareness of the primary significance of nature to human life,<sup>11</sup> an awareness we have lost in modern life, according to him. Natural reality, he asserts, precedes cultural reality.<sup>12</sup> This approach sets de vries's body of work apart from much of what we call today ecological art, which addresses more specifically to politically charged "ecological emergencies", as T.J. Demos puts it.<sup>13</sup>

This holistic phenomenology is also what different art scholars and critics often stress in their analyses of de vries's work. Art historian Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, for instance, focuses on the experiential immediacy of the artist's site-specific installations in nature, describing them as possessing primordial physical

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de vries served as co-editor, together with artist Henk Peeters, of the group's journal, *la revue nul = 0* (1961–64). For more on de vries's involvement with Zero, see Mel Gooding, *herman de vries: Chance and Change* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 10, 27–29.

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de vries repeats this dictum often. See, for instance, Cees de Boer, Colin Huizing, "here & everywhere", in *herman de vries: to be always to be*, eds. Cees de Boer, Colin Huizing, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Valiz, Mondrian Fund, 2015), 19; and herman de vries, "je deteste l'art dans la nature", in *herman de vries* (Arceuil, Paris: Anthese, Galerie Aline Videt, 2000), 18.

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herman de vries, "the world we live in is a revelation", in *Nature*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner, *Documents of Contemporary Art* series (London and Cambridge [MA]: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2012), 163.

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herman de vries, "what, why, wherefore", in *Public Art: A Reader*, ed. Florian Matzner (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 81–82.

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For more on de vries's ideas on nature's superiority over culture, see Birgit Donker, "Foreword", *herman de vries: to be always to be*, eds. Cees de Boer, Colin Huizing, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Valiz, Mondrian Fund, 2015), 10. de vries stresses that while human-made things can be significant for human life, elements like plants, water and trees "are of more general significance because they form part of our primary reality, nature". See de vries, "the world", 163.

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See T.J. Demos, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology: An Introduction", *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (2013): 1.

qualities, which restore something of the unity humans once had with nature.<sup>14</sup> Art critic and curator Cees de Boer connects de vries's creations with the bodily phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>15</sup> Art historian Mel Gooding talks about his works in terms of an "exemplary enactment of being-in-the-world",<sup>16</sup> which again enables us to reconnect with our physical environment.<sup>17</sup>

In the sanctuaries as well, the sense-based encounter with nature—mainly visual, in this case—is supposed to lead, according to de vries, to existential "reflection, revelation and contemplation",<sup>18</sup> where one asks oneself: "what am I? what am I part of? what is my life?"<sup>19</sup> The perfect circular form of the sanctuaries is meant to evoke in the viewer the feeling of the "the essential unity of existence".<sup>20</sup> This notion of a universally applicable experience of nature, unmediated and holistic, is one that I will problematise throughout my analyses in the following paragraphs.

de vries is highly critical of several attitudes towards nature he regards as reificatory. For instance, the scientific attitude, which approaches nature as an object of study through the mediation of language or numbers; or the aestheticising attitude, which strives to reshape nature to fit human tastes. To highlight the contrast between what he calls "domesticated", designed nature, on the one hand, and wild nature, on the other, he places his sanctuaries in public parks, which he defines as "nature impoverished by culture".<sup>21</sup> He wants to help us "imagine how things would look if wild growth were to take possession of [parks]", and tamed nature no longer existed.<sup>22</sup> We will soon see, however, how both the scientific and the "cultural" attitudes creep into the sanctuaries through the backdoor.

For de vries, in any case, the sanctuaries are utopic constellations, and therefore essentially replicable in different geographical locations. They function like microcosmic heterotopias—enclosed counter-sites which project a utopic vision.<sup>23</sup> The following ode de vries wrote for the inauguration of the sanctuary in Stuttgart, reflects this arcadian sentiment:

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Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, "Proximité dans la distance: l'art et la nature chez herman de vries", in *le point: herman de vries* (Lyon: Fage éditions, Musée Gassendi, 2009), 22, 24. Moeglin-Delcroix frames de vries's criticism of mediated relations with nature and his championing of direct experience instead, within an anti-Cartesians philosophical discourse. See *ibid.*, 14–20. All translations in this paper are my own.

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Cees de Boer, "herman de vries: my poetry is the world", *Antennae*, no. 51 (2020): esp. 102, 174–182.

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Gooding, *herman de vries*, 84.

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*Ibid.*, 130.

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herman de vries, "chance & change", interview by John K. Grande, in *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists*, ed. John K. Grande (Albany [NY]: State University of New York Press, 2004), 232.

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de vries, "sanctuarium", 432.

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Gooding, *herman de vries*, 20. One of the paradoxes of de vries's oeuvre which deserves more attention is that while the artist always speaks passionately about wild nature, his installations almost unequivocally apply rigid order and symmetry in the tradition of Minimalist aesthetics. It is thus difficult to accept that de vries only "presents" natural materials without changing or adding anything. Rather, he meticulously organises these materials to conform with an historically specific aesthetic language.

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herman de vries, "what, why", 82.

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de vries, "what, why", 82. He adds: "if nobody interferes [...] the area would become a forest: forest—the most complicated living community that once almost completely covered our earth. a park: a culturally impoverished nature." See Gooding, *herman de vries*, 125. de vries choice to introduce nature into the city and work within the context of international survey exhibitions can be seen as characteristic of the shift, described by art historian Suzaan Boettger, by which nature-based art has moved from the wilderness to the cityscape and to more institutionalised exhibitions. See Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 238–39.

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This concept is developed in Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres", *Empan* 2, no. 54 (2004): esp. 15.

[...] new life would grow on left-over rubble, blackbirds and nightingales sing evenings and mornings, butterflies and wild bees are there, we hear frogs and toads croaking from the damp ruins of cellars. freedom has returned. the scent of flowering elderberry bushes penetrates houses through open windows, inviting us to realism: the television is tuned off, superfluous. terrain vague is the future of cities; new worlds of experience, which guide our consciousness to a different order, away from the chaos of planning. the terrains vagues are the avant-garde of nature.<sup>24</sup>

The sanctuaries then serve, for the artist, as shelters, but also as visionary, emancipatory sites, with an almost religious significance. de vries likens them to places of worship, where free-evolving nature is protected, contemplated and venerated.<sup>25</sup> “[T]o sanctify”, he writes in this context, is “to make inviolable through religious consecration”.<sup>26</sup> Moeglin-Delcroix sees the sanctuaries in similar terms, comparing them to holy altars. In both, she writes, “the sacred demands separation, which distinguishes and protects it from the profane”.<sup>27</sup> The use of Latin for the work’s title *sanctuarium* obviously serves to magnify this “aura” of sanctity. The kind of contemplation de vries wishes to instigate can thus recall specifically Christian “contemplation”—a deep, silent prayer in which the believer is able to “see” the divine with his inner eyes and to raise their awareness to the presence of divinity in all that surrounds them.<sup>28</sup> This awe-laden devotional attitude towards nature runs the risk of missing, as will shortly be established, the more grounded significance “nature” holds for different communities and individuals.

A certain spirituality also underlies de vries’s profound interest in the principle of randomness, another strategy that comes to the fore in the sanctuaries. For the artist, randomness is the core principle of the natural world, to which the work of art should be subjected.<sup>29</sup> Influenced by Eastern philosophies and religions that call for self-attunement with nature’s rhythms,<sup>30</sup> he adopted, in the 1970s, the creative motto “chance and change”.<sup>31</sup> In the sanctuaries, indeed, the variables of nature—direction and speed of the wind, bee pollination times, bird feces, tempera-

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Gooding, *herman de vries*, 125.

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See de vries, “sanctuarium”, 431. In Münster, this religious connotation would have been made more conspicuous had de vries implemented his original plan to place this *sanctuarium* in front of a Church in the city. See de vries, “what, why”, 82.

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de vries, “sanctuarium”, 431.

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Moeglin-Delcroix, “Proximité,” 23. Indeed, the Latin term “sanctuarium” relates both to a shelter and to a sacred place.

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Moeglin-Delcroix also notes that the word “contemplation” derives from *templum*, a sacred space from which one must stay at a certain distance in order to become absorbed by the sublimity of a higher power. See Moeglin-Delcroix, “Proximité”, 31.

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“Chance”, of course, was one of the tropes of the avant-garde, and especially the neo-avant-garde, explored in such works as Marcel Duchamp’s *3 Stoppages étalon* (1913–1914), Daniel Spoerri’s *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1966) or John Cage’s *Music of Changes* (1951). The classic text on the subject is George Brecht’s *Chance-Imagery* (New York: A Great Bear Pamphlet, 1966). For a recent brief anthology of key texts discussing the use of chance in art, see Margaret Iversen, ed., *Chance, Documents of Contemporary Art* series (London and Cambridge [MA]: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2010).

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For more on the influence of Eastern philosophies on de vries’s thought, see Gooding, *herman de vries*, 19–29, 172. Multiple neo-avant-garde artists were influenced by Eastern thought, particularly with regards to the notion of chance, most famous of whom was John Cage. The relation between chance and Eastern philosophies in his thought and art is explored in Margaret Iversen, “Introduction: The Aesthetic of Chance”, in *Chance*, 12–15. For more on Cage’s interest in chance, see Marc J. Jensen, “John Cage, Chance Operations and the Chaos Game: Cage and the I Ching”, *The Musical Times* 150, no. 1907 (Summer 2009): 97–102.

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See Gooding, *herman de vries*, 49.

ture, precipitation—change the work incessantly. The sanctuaries are, we could say, somewhat oxymoronically, “monuments of change”. But are these changes only botanical? Can “sacred” processes (in nature) truly be separated from “profane” ones (in culture)? Can a *terrain* really be *vague*—vacant—from the traces of the social context that surrounds it? And how does de vries’s romantic poetics of nature translate into real life encounters and materialisations? By resituating the sanctuaries in their *actual contexts* and examining their *actual relations* with their publics, I will try to provide some answers to these questions.

### Stuttgart: The Spectre of Institutional Eco-Vandalism

de vries’s first *sanctuarium* was commissioned by the city of Stuttgart in 1993 for the International Horticultural Exhibition (IGA).<sup>32</sup> Its fence is made of 2.85 metre-high steel stakes with golden spearheads, which allow complete visibility to the inside (initially, at least). The militant spearheads emphasise that nature is being guarded here against unwelcome intruders. They form a golden ring around nature, like an *aureola* surrounding a saint’s head.<sup>33</sup>

This sanctuary is located on a far and isolated corner of the Leibfriedscher Garden, crushed between two bustling roads at the city’s entrance. The main audience of the work are thus the drivers—quite fitting for Germany’s city of cars, home to Mercedes-Benz and Porsche. de vries wanted this *sanctuarium* to provide “a shelter for the manifestation of nature in an extreme environment [...] even in this toxic atmosphere”.<sup>34</sup>

This sanctuary had grown beautifully for 25 years [fig. 1], until in March 2018, without any notice, the Maintenance Department of the city of Stuttgart wiped out the microcosmic “forest”. The mature trees, which had already far outgrown the fence, were now completely gone. The incident instigated strong reactions and made headlines, even nationally. de vries insisted that he had never authorised any trimming, called this a “cultural crime”,<sup>35</sup> and considered legal action. He was particularly disappointed that this had happened under the reign of Mayor Fritz Kuhn from the German Green Party.<sup>36</sup> The head of the Maintenance Department claimed that essentially his department had done nothing wrong, as the agreement with the artist allows the city to cut the plants when they block the view to the road,<sup>37</sup> a claim de vries denied by referring to the original IGA catalogue. “If I had wanted something to be done inside, then the fence would have a door”, he said.<sup>38</sup> The environmentalist political faction SÖS/LINKE-PLuS filed an

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As part of this large exhibition, German and international artists and landscape architects were invited to create site-specific works in the Leibfriedscher garden. Eleven of those works became permanent installations, including works by Dan Graham and Hans Luz. For more information on the different projects, see Helga Panten ed., *IGA Stuttgart Expo 1993* (April 23, 1993 - October 17, 1993) exh. cat. (Stuttgart: Zentralverband Gartenbau, 1993).

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The word *aureola* comes from *aurea*, which is Latin for golden.

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de vries, *texte—textarbeiten—textbilder*, c. 175.

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Marcus Woeller, “Stuttgart rodet Gartenkunstwerk von Herman de Vries”, *Welt*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/kunst/article175226463/Stuttgart-rodet-Gartenkunst-von-Herman-de-Vries.html>, accessed January 2021.

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See Susanne Müller-Baji, “Trauer um die Kunst”, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.sanctuarium-in-stuttgart-feuerbach-trauer-um-die-kunst.aae8a9f9-fd56-4ecb-8d2b-9409b4221627.html>, accessed January 2021.

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Schriner bases his claims on a plan made for the IGA Exhibition 1993 by the landscape architects Luz+Partner, who were responsible for the new design of the Leibfriedscher garden. According to this plan, the trees should be trimmed when they overgrow the fence, so that the view to the Heilbronner Strasse would be preserved. It is still unclear why the trimming, however, was not done more delicately. See “Herman de Vries: Sanctuarium, 1993”, *Stuttgart.de*, [stuttgart.de/item/show/350945](http://stuttgart.de/item/show/350945), accessed July 2020.

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Müller-Baji, “Trauer”.

fig. 1  
herman de vries. *sanctuarium*,  
1993. Steel, gold leaf, earth, Ø12  
× 2.85m. Stuttgart, Germany.  
Photo: Wolfram Freutel (2014).



official request for clarification with the city council for this “ruthless” action,<sup>39</sup> and finally the mayor apologised and promised it would not happen again. Only members of the conservative Christian Democrats said that the work “screamed” for this cut and that it actually did the artist a service by increasing his market value.<sup>40</sup>

The legal aspect, however, is not what I wish to focus on here. More relevant for this study is the response of the local community. First to react was local art historian Andrea Welz, who, after hearing about the incident, led a group of art lovers, loaded up with new seeds, which they threw into the *sanctuarium*. de vries, nevertheless, deemed these “bombings” unproductive, considering them equivalently interventionist acts, even if well intentioned ones.<sup>41</sup>

A more notable protest was initiated by two local artists, Anna Ohno and Justyna Koeke. After having filed a police complaint against the head of the Maintenance Department on account of vandalism of art, they approached de vries with the idea of arranging a performative protest on site where the public would be invited to participate. It was a way for them to show that “there is another, beautiful side of Stuttgart”.<sup>42</sup> de vries was willing to cooperate, and even laid out the script for a “funeral to nature”. On the day of the event, a few dozen local residents, art students, and environmental activists arrived at the *sanctuarium*, dressed in black. As live sombre chamber music played, the participants circled around the work and tied black ribbons onto the stakes. Memorial candles were left on site, along with a note telling the city of Stuttgart: “Shame on you!” Finally, de vries decided that the ribbons would stay as a permanent part of the work, as a reminder of the destruction of nature [fig. 2].<sup>43</sup>

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“Kahlschlag statt Kunst—Sanctuarium auf dem Pragsattel wurde zerstört”, *SÖS/LINKE-PLuS*, March 28, 2018, <http://soeslinkeplus.de/2018/03/kahlschlag-statt-kunst-sanctuarium-auf-dem-pragsattel-wurde-zerstoert>, accessed January 2021.

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Elke Rutschmann und Jan Sellner, “CDU gefällt gestutztes Sanctuarium”, *Esslinger Zeitung*, 24 April, 2018. <https://www.esslinger-zeitung.de/inhalt.em-dummytext-ortsmarke-der-kahlschlag-des-kunstwerks-am-pragsattel-spaltet-den-gemeinderat-kuhn-entschuldigt-sich-fuer-gartenbauamt-cdu-gefaellt-gestutztes-sanctuarium.9b358d3a-54e8-460a-a868-d65b2d6bc91c.html>, accessed January 2021.

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Woeller, “Stuttgart rodet”.

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Müller-Baji, “Trauer”.

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Justyna Koeke, interview by the author, July 6, 2018.



fig. 2  
herman de vries. *sanctuarium*,  
1993. Steel, gold leaf, earth, Ø12  
× 2.85m. Stuttgart, Germany.  
Photo: Justyna Koeke (2018).



To understand why this vandalism by the local authorities was met with such outrage, we need to realise how the issues that lie at the heart of the sanctuary—as an intervention in nature—relate to the local socio-political context. Local residents have been growing more and more outraged in recent years with Stuttgart authorities’ mishandling of the environment and their adoption of pro-vehicle policies. The biggest issue at stake is the controversial project “Stuttgart 21”, a comprehensive plan to replace the aboveground terminus station in Stuttgart with an underground transit station, which includes the construction of dozens of additional kilometres of railroads and tunnels. Construction works started in 2010, followed by weekly demonstrations. The protesters raised many environmental concerns: the disruption to the city’s “green U” of natural parks, the uprooting of trees, the endangerment of mineral water resources, and the inconsideration of pedestrians and cyclists, among others. The watershed moment came in September 2010, when protesters arrived to protest against the uprooting of old trees, and were met with excessive police force, including the use of water cannons, pepper spray and batons.<sup>44</sup> Hundreds were injured in what later became known as “Black Thursday”, for which three police officers were later found guilty of serious battery.<sup>45</sup> The day after this incident, more than 50,000 demonstrators flooded the streets. It was on the wave of this local unrest that Stuttgart elected a mayor from the German Green Party in 2012—the first major German city and state capital to do so.<sup>46</sup>

We now see how the trimming of the *sanctuarium* by the local Green government touched a raw nerve, and how this action symbolised much more than a simple quarrel about creative rights. As one local newspaper put it, since Black Thursday “one has become particularly sensitised to the rude handling of nature, which is, incidentally, exactly what the sanctuary had already prophetically

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David Gordon Smith and Josie Le Blond, “Germany Shocked by ‘Disproportionate’ Police Action in Stuttgart”, *Spiegel*, October 10, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-world-from-berlin-germany-shocked-by-disproportionate-police-action-in-stuttgart-a-720735.html>, accessed January 2021.

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“Stuttgart 21: Strafbefehle gegen Polizisten nach Einsatz”, *Welt*, August 27, 2013, <https://www.welt.de/newsticker/news1/article119429014/Stuttgart-21-Strafbefehle-gegen-Polizisten-nach-Einsatz.html>, accessed January 2021.

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See “Stuttgart 21”, *Wikipedia*, last modified December 4, 2020, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Stuttgart\\_21](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Stuttgart_21), accessed January 2021.

denounced”.<sup>47</sup> The reaction was that of “Not again!” says Koeke. “This act by the Maintenance Department was symbolic of how the politicians treat not only art but nature in the city”, she explains, noting that “The government did not foresee the people’s reaction and the embarrassment its actions would draw”.<sup>48</sup>

Koeke, who is originally from Poland, sees the trimming as characteristic of the prevalent handling of nature in Germany: “Everything here has to be so tidy, even small plants or weeds in the street are immediately trimmed”.<sup>49</sup> She is not the only one who connects the vandalisation of the work with broader cultural tendencies. One local newspaper wrote that the operation was carried out with a “Swabian thoroughness”,<sup>50</sup> and a SÖS/Linke-plus representative called the act a “complete Swabian shave”.<sup>51</sup> Another local resident said it reflects the fact that “Stuttgart cannot do anything with nature. The fact that you are unable to let nature grow on a little piece of earth has something to do with the German sense of order”.<sup>52</sup>

Local art historian Andrea Welz, who co-edited a book on one hundred years of public art in Stuttgart,<sup>53</sup> notes that the 1993 IGA exhibition, for which the *sanctuary* was commissioned, was the last time Stuttgart acquired major public art works, after many decades of great investment in this field. It was also as part of this exhibition that Stuttgart’s Green-U was built. The IGA was, therefore, a historical high point in the city’s commitment to both nature and art. Twenty-five years later, it seems, the authorities in Stuttgart have “no respect towards nature and no respect towards art”,<sup>54</sup> Welz concludes.

What I wish to stress here is that the reception of the Stuttgart sanctuary is deeply embedded within and preconditioned by a polemical local history concerning the human–nature relationship, which is site-specific and time-specific. When the *sanctuary* was built in 1993, this relationship was much less contentious, but as years went by and Stuttgart became a focal point of environmental battles, the work gained new pressing resonances. The interventions by local authorities and publics, which together alter the work’s appearance, contribute further to this process of semiotic renegotiation. This sanctuary, we see, does not merely interact with its *natural* surroundings, as curator Jean-Hubert Martin for instance reckons,<sup>55</sup> but also with its *social one*.

### Münster: Appropriating against the Grain

Nothing as violent or radical as that which happened in Stuttgart has occurred in Münster, where de vries made his second *sanctuary* in 1997, as part of the third edition of Skulptur Projekte, the international public art exhibition held in this German city every ten years. But here we find more traces; more varied ways of

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Müller-Baji, “Trauer”.

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Koeke, interview by the author.

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Ibid.

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Woeller, “Stuttgart rodet”.

51

Rutschmann und Sellner, “CDU gefällt”.

52

Silke Arning, “Naturkunstwerk—abrsiert”, *SWR2*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.swr.de/swr2/kultur-info/kunstwerk-sanctuarium-von-herman-de-vries-in-stuttgart-abrsiert/-/id=9597116/did=21452092/nid=9597116/6vmw0b/index.html>, accessed January 2021.

53

Bärbel Küster, Andrea Welz, Wolfram Janzer, *Skulpturen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Stuttgart* (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2006).

54

Andrea Welz, interview by the author, August 25, 2018.

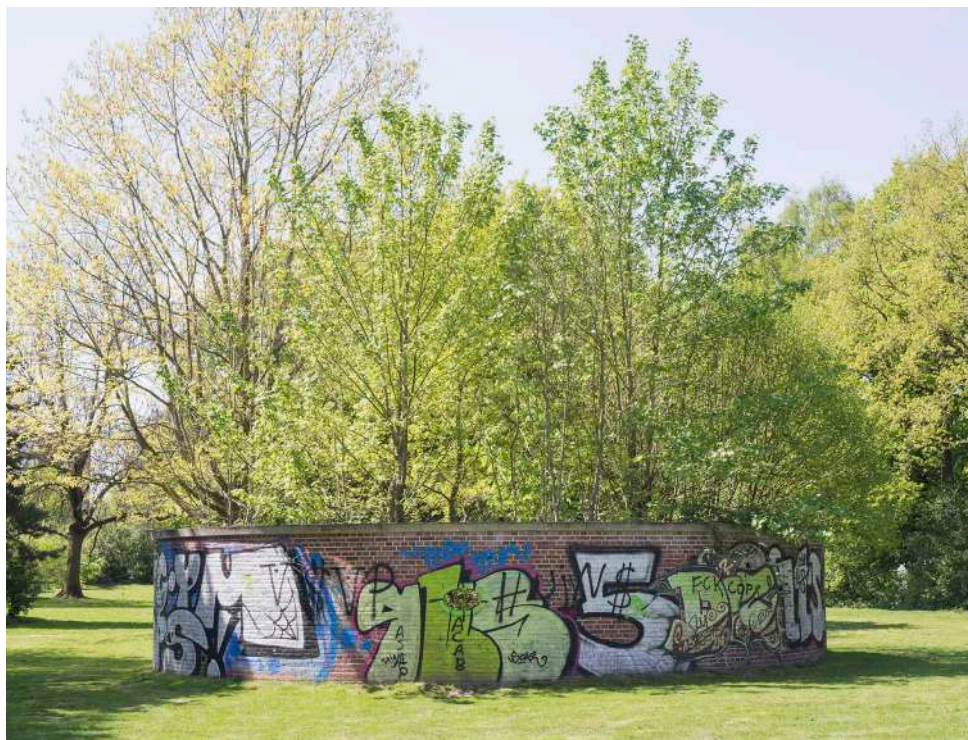
55

See herman de vries, “dialogue”, interview by Jean-Hubert Martin, in *herman de vries: to be always to be*, eds. Cees de Boer, Colin Huizing (Venice Biennale, May 09 - November 22, 2015) exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Valiz, Mondrian Fund, 2015), 234.

appropriating and experiencing the work, by individuals that seem reluctant to take the role of passive observers and admirers of free-evolving nature. The proliferation of interactions is probably down, at least in part, to the highly accessible location chosen for this sanctuary—a popular spot in Schlossgarten, a park in a residential area of the city.

de vries went one step further here in blocking the public, moving from vertical stakes to a brick wall, measuring 3 metres in height and 14 metres in diameter, topped by a ring of local grey sandstone.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the artist had felt that in such a central spot of the park, more protection was needed. In any case, one is immediately struck here by the fortified, hermetic appearance [fig. 3]. Unlike the transparency of the Stuttgart sanctuary, here only four oval holes, situated at eye-level, allow people to peep inside, meaning that only from a very close distance one can fully appreciate the vegetation inside—an experience for pedestrians rather than drivers. Inscribed above each hole is a sentence in Sanskrit, quoted from the ancient Hindu *Upanishads*. It translates as follows: “om. this is perfect; that is perfect; perfect comes from perfect; take perfect from perfect and the remainder is perfect”.<sup>57</sup> Like the Latin in the title *sanctuarium*, the use of the ancient liturgical language of Sanskrit contributes to the air of sanctity and primordiality.<sup>58</sup> Again, we see how de vries alludes to nature’s immanent immaculateness, from which humankind must be kept at a safe distance—as viewers only.

fig. 3  
herman de vries. *sanctuarium*,  
1997. Brick, sandstone, gold  
leaf, earth, Ø12 × 2.85m.  
Münster, Germany. Image  
courtesy of LWL-Museum  
für Kunst und Kultur,  
Westfälisches Landesmuseum,  
Münster / Skulptur Projekte  
1997. Photograph: Hubertus  
Huvermann (2017).




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Skulptur Projekte, *Skulptur. Projekte in Münster, 1977–1987–1997* (Münster: 1998), brochure.

57

See herman de vries, “sanctuary Münster”, hermandevries.org, <http://www.hermandevries.org/digital-catalogue/1997/1997-00-00-1100.php>, accessed October 2020.

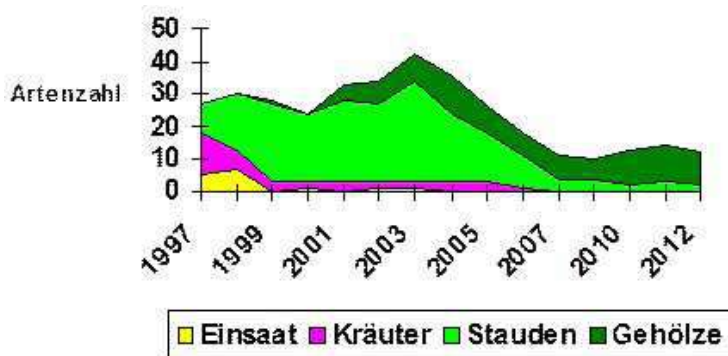
58

Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005 [1870]), 1120.

Like in Stuttgart, the ideal of non-intervention was violated—in this case, right from the get-go. Only a few months after the construction of the sanctuary, a “seed attack” occurred: some people threw a mixture of wildflower seeds over the fence, and “designed”, as de vries would put it, the first sprouts that grew out from the soil.<sup>59</sup>

We know of these “seed bombings” only because the vegetation inside this sanctuary has been tracked right from the start by a group of volunteer researchers from a local branch of NABU, Germany’s largest nature conservation organisation. Once a year, they look inside the sanctuary, document exactly which plants have emerged and which have vanished, and arrange the corresponding data in clear graphs. This research project was initiated by a professor at the local University of Münster, with the aim of gathering as much information as possible on the local biotope. It operates completely independently of de vries.<sup>60</sup> The detailed information NABU researchers have gathered thus far offers a comprehensive analysis of the botanic development of the site. We know, for instance, that in 2003 there was a record amount of forty plant species, mostly types of weed, but soon after the first trees appeared and caused many plant species to disappear (as trees and shrubs are stronger than weeds) [fig. 4].<sup>61</sup> This current state of affairs is expected to remain relatively stable, according to NABU, unless some unpredictable incident, like a falling tree or a human intervention, takes place.<sup>62</sup>

fig. 4  
A graph by NABU Münster showing the number and types of species in the sanctuary by year. Image courtesy: NABU.



What is especially striking about NABU’s appropriation of the work for their research purposes is how it precisely embodies an attitude towards nature which de vries tries to counteract with his sanctuaries—a scientific approach that treats nature as an object of study through the mediation of numbers and graphs. Instead of *being with* nature and *sensing* it, these researchers *analyse* it. Instead of *feeling*, they *track* and *calculate*. In their research, nature is once again an *object* of study, an *objectus*—that which “lays before” or “in opposite” to a subject (to cite the Latin origin of the word). Hence, the logic of the work is subverted here not only by the early horticultural interventions—those “seed bombings”—but also by secondary procedures of tracking, identifying, categorising, and quantifying. In fact, only in such a unique condition of a “terrain vague”, of a cleared-up and protected piece of soil, can such research take place in the first place. de vries’s utopic vision is thus

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Gerhard H. Kock, “Münsters größter Blumentopf”, *Westfälische Nachrichten*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.wn.de/Muenster/Kultur/3024047-Naturschutzbund-betreut-seit-20-Jahren-das-Sanktuarium-von-Herman-de-Vries-Muensters-groesster-Blumentopf>, accessed January 2021.

60

The group tried to contact de vries and invite him to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *sanctuarium* back in 2017 but got no response from the artist. I received this information from my interview with Thomas Hoevelmann, August 20, 2018.

61

“Natur als Kunst: das sanctuarium”, *AG Botanic*, NABU, <https://www.nabu-muenster.de/ag-botanik/sanktuarium>, accessed September 2020.

62

Kock, “Münsters größter”.

turned on its head. The “wilderness” becomes the perfect controlled laboratory.

NABU’s ongoing and independent involvement in the project also reflects the close attention to nature and its preservation in the city of Münster. The local branch of NABU has over 100 volunteers, a significant number, and the city has been declared Germany’s most sustainable city for 2018.<sup>63</sup> The current head of the botanical section of NABU in Münster, Thomas Hoewelmann, explains that “Münster is very good in protecting the environment, and it also has to do with the fact that we are home to one of Germany’s largest universities, which means that the local population is pretty educated and knowledgeable about the importance of protecting the environment”.<sup>64</sup> The vandalism that took place in industrial Stuttgart, he stresses, could never happen in the environmentally conscious Münster. Two German cities; two very different relationships with nature.

And still, Münster has its vandals as well, or at least this is how many deem the graffiti artists whose spray paintings cover the sanctuary today. The LWL Museum, the owner of the work, has cleaned up the graffiti several times in the past—a rather expensive operation—but not since 2007, when de vries advised to just leave it as it is.<sup>65</sup> For one local newspaper, the graffiti shows exactly what de vries intended—that nature needs to be protected from human beings.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, NABU’s official website explains that “the now wildly proliferating graffiti on the outside underline the contrast between human nature and nature”.<sup>67</sup> A visiting blogger felt the same fracture between inside and outside, nature and humans, beauty and the beast:

Inside the sanctuary, nature has indeed created a beautiful wonder garden without any human intervention. The exterior is a completely different story [...] It is a pity that these graffiti artists apparently only saw a wall, and did not look any further.<sup>68</sup>

The introduction for the work on Skulptur Projekte’s website emphasises the same friction, by pointing to the garbage thrown into the sanctuary, which has to be removed occasionally by local authorities. This illustrates, according to the text, “that the utopia of unspoilt nature has to capitulate before the reality of our throwaway society”.<sup>69</sup>

These accounts teach us that the reception of this sanctuary is far from being harmonious, or from being perceived as harmonious. In reality, in fact, this sanctuary serves as a self-fulfilling prophesy: it presupposes an antagonism between human beings and nature, and thereby reproduces this very antagonism. The brick wall is no longer perceived only in generalised symbolic terms, as a barrier against the human race in toto. Instead, the wall turns into a very concrete barrier against the residents of Münster. The divide between humans and nature is not bridged by the work, but only seems to grow.

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“Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitspreis geht an Münster, Eschweiler und Saerbeck”, *Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitspreis*, August 2, 2018, [https://www.nachhaltigkeitspreis.de/news/news/deutscher-nachhaltigkeitspreis-geht-an-muenster-eschweiler-und-saerbeck/?tx\\_news\\_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx\\_news\\_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&cHash=12e2ce268a8a81105bb256eef5c89cc0](https://www.nachhaltigkeitspreis.de/news/news/deutscher-nachhaltigkeitspreis-geht-an-muenster-eschweiler-und-saerbeck/?tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&cHash=12e2ce268a8a81105bb256eef5c89cc0), accessed January 2021.

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Hoewelmann, interview by the author.

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Based on my conversations with Thomas Hoewelmann from NABU and Katharina Neuberger from Skulptur Projekte Archive.

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Kock, “Münsters größter”.

67

NABU, “Natur als Kunst”. Translation by the author.

68

See Holly Moors, “herman de vries, Sanctuary in münster, na twintig jaar”, *Moors Magazine* (blog), <https://www.moorsmagazine.com/hollys-hoekje/fotoseries/mapping-the-streets-of-Münster/herman-vries-sanctuarium-Münster-twintig-jaar>, accessed July 2018.

69

Eckhard Kluth, “sanctuarium”, Skulptur Projekte Archive, <https://www.skulptur-projekte-archiv.de/en-us/1997/projects/12/>, accessed January 2020.

This divide is vividly felt on the ground. On my last visit to this sanctuary, a few groups of youngsters were enjoying an afternoon picnic in this popular spot of the park. Right beside them stood the *sanctuarium*: bricked, fortified, unapproachable, with a huge skull looking back onto the park—certainly not a place inviting existential contemplation and revelation [fig. 5]. There was something almost violent, certainly defiant, in the way the massive wall obstructed the casual openness of the park. de vries claims that “nature itself is public space”, and that therefore “when we do introduce art into nature, it must be done with great sensitivity”,<sup>70</sup> but this seems out of sync with the heavy barrier he erected in the midst of this park. While the artist plays down the importance of the barrier in his sanctuaries, insisting that the art only happens inside,<sup>71</sup> in this case at least the wall becomes the most salient aspect of the project, and the main locus of meaning and affectivity. Standing in the park, the graffiti covering this separating wall felt like an act of protest—a protest on the part of those who were treated like unwelcome intruders in their own home by an “intruder” himself. Their act is one of reclaiming, which raises the question of agency: Who has the right to shape the public space in Münster—internationally recognised “street artists” or local street artists?

fig. 5  
herman de vries. *sanctuarium*,  
1997. Brick, sandstone, gold  
leaf, earth, Ø12 × 2.85m.  
Münster, Germany. Photo by  
the author (2018).



If in Stuttgart de vries’s universal ideal of non-intervention was charged with site-specific political potency, in Münster we encounter various vernacular appropriations that subvert the very principles that underlie the work, repurpose it, and reshape its affectivity. Local residents design nature by “seed bombing”, scientists “objectify” nature by tracking and quantifying, and graffiti artists infuse the work with a sense of confrontational urgency—a far cry from de vries’s ideal of harmonious, meditative contemplation. Moreover, while in Stuttgart

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de vries, “what, why”, 82.

71

See de vries, “sanctuarium”, 433. This problematic distinction appears also in an earlier text by de vries about Stuttgart’s *sanctuarium*: “[...] art is not the first priority in the design of the steel fence and its execution. That is the frame. The most important thing takes place within this fence”. See herman de vries, *to be: texte—textarbeiten—textbilder, auswahl von schriften und bildern 1954–1995*, ed. Andreas Meier (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1995), c. 175.

an image has emerged of the public as a friend and protector of the sanctuary against the authorities' violence, in Münster the roles are reversed: it is the local public that is deemed the vandal, after whom the authorities must clean up.

### Zeewolde: Free or Colonized Nature?

In the third and final *sanctuarium* I discuss, the “outside” infiltrates the “inside” in a less obvious, but no less crucial, way. Here, the sanctuary is semiotically saturated by the unique environmental history of the place and context of its presentation. Completed in 2001, this *sanctuarium* is located in the small Dutch lake-town of Zeewolde. It sits on the shore of Wolderwijd Lake, right beside the promenade. It is much larger than the previous two sanctuaries I have discussed, measuring 30 metres in diameter. The fence here is made of simple latticed wire, around which de vries planted rosebushes, a surprising choice for a devout non-interventionist. With time, these bushes have formed a thick layer of vegetation, which today makes it nearly impossible to even peep inside the sanctuary. There is only a single point from which one can observe, very partially, the jungle that has matured inside over the past 20 years—a faux gate composed of vertical golden-headed spears pressed by two perpendicular concave brick walls [fig. 6]—a double reference to the earlier sanctuaries in Münster (bricks) and Stuttgart (golden-headed spears). We move then from an open view in 1993, to a few peeping holes in 1997, to a single, very limited angle in 2001—a growing exclusion not only of human bodies, but also of their gaze.

fig. 6  
herman de vries. *sanctuarium*,  
1999–2001. Earth, brick, steel,  
gold leaf, Briar rosebushes  
(*Rosa canina*), stone, Ø30 ×  
3.3 m. Zeewolde, Netherlands.  
Photo: Esther Didden (2020).



Just in front of the opening lies, almost secretly, a small, flat rectangular stone, reminiscent of an entrance rug, on which the artist engraved the words: “to be”—one of his favorite existential mantras, typical of his laconic use of language and his primary philosophy of pure presence: simply “to be” with nature (how can one “be” with nature when one is so thoroughly barred from it? This is one of the problematic paradoxes of the sanctuaries, but its consideration exceeds the scope of this paper). Art historian Claudio Pizzorusso finds a parallel between de vries’s simplified lingo to the teachings of Saint-Francis, who conveyed his

devotional ideas with as few and as simple words as possible.<sup>72</sup>

But let us try and look further beyond these devotional connotations. As in Stuttgart and in Münster, the particular town and the particular location within the town where the sanctuary stands play a crucial role in the symbolic meanings the work assumes. Zeewolde is the youngest municipality in Flevoland, which is the youngest province in the Netherlands (officially inaugurated in 1986). This province is composed of two polders built by the Dutch government during the 1950s and 1960s when reclaiming about 1,000 square kilometers of land from the Zuiderzee (Southern Sea). It is one of the largest projects of land reclamation in world history, and still serves as a symbol of the Dutch ethos of technological ingenuity in the face of natural hardships. Since the late 1970s, Dutch and international artists like Robert Morris (*Observatorium*, 1977), Marinus Boezem (*The Green Cathedral*, 1987) and Richard Serra (*See Level*, 1996) have been invited to erect gigantic permanent constructions in nature in Flevoland, as a way of celebrating this great human achievement. Other public art initiatives followed, and the new province of Flevoland became famous as a hub of monumental art in nature.<sup>73</sup>

I am recounting this history in order to stress that there is a very particular dynamic at play in Flevoland between nature and public art, one which already frames this sanctuary in a certain manner. Public art here is closely intertwined with notions of domination, colonisation and design of nature; of the subjugation of nature to human needs. The monumental sculptures spread throughout the polder stand as monuments to the subjugation of nature. A visit to this sanctuary reveals that just a few metres from it lies one of the artificial dikes whose role was once, quite literally, to block off the sea. One can hardly think of a place more contradictive of de vries's ideal of free-evolving nature.

More specifically, the ARTificial Natural Networks programme, which commissioned the *sanctuarium* alongside ten other public art works for the town of Zeewolde, had for its theme the link “between nature and technology”, between the organic and the artificial.<sup>74</sup> It was inspired by Kevin Kelly's 1994 techno-utopian book *Out of Control*,<sup>75</sup> which explores themes of artificial intelligence and future dedifferentiation between cybernetic and living things. The whole atmosphere that surrounded the commissioning of this sanctuary, then, and that still pervades the trails of Zeewolde today, is that of a certain technological hubris.

Does de vries's critique become ever more poignant within this context? Or rather, does the fact that the work partakes in this celebration of human mastery over nature pull the rug from under its very *raison d'être*? Whatever answer we choose, it is already framed by this regional history. The human–nature relationship in Flevoland means a very different thing, and kindles very different collective memories and ideals, than in Münster or in Stuttgart.

This sanctuary also urges us to rethink the full scope of one of de vries's main aesthetic principles. Instead of culture conquering nature, like we find in Flevoland's history, de vries tries to create in his sanctuaries a situation where nature conquers culture—represented here by the fence.<sup>76</sup> He relates this to the

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See Claudio Pizzorusso, “herman de vries et la religion de la nature”, *Rivista di letteratura moderna e comparate* 70, no. 4 (2017): 407–18.

73

For more on ARTificial Natural Networks, see Trudy van Riemsdijk-Zandee ed., *Artificial Natural Networks: 11 Projects on the Web, in the Forest, along the Dike, in the Water and in the Village of Zeewolde* (Zeewolde: De Verbeelding, 2001).

74

The other artists who participated in ARTificial Natural Networks were: Roman Signer, Krijn Giezen, Atelier van Lieshout, Tobias Rehberger, Annette Weisser-Ingo Vetter, Henrik Håkansson, Mark Dion, N55, Ulf Rollof and David Kremers.

75

Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

76

de vries, “dialogue”, 236. In two works that resemble the sanctuaries—*le sanctuaire de la nature* (Digne-les-Bains, France, 2000), and *sanctuarium: natura mater* (Venice Biennale, 2015)—de vries delineates areas where human-made ruins are in the process of being overgrown by wild nature to illustrate how nature ultimately always wins.



principle of entropy,<sup>77</sup> which designates, for him, the slow, inevitable dissolution of every human trace by the forces of nature.<sup>78</sup> Zeewolde's *sanctuarium* is the youngest of the sanctuaries discussed in this paper, but it is the one that best fulfills this entropic vision. The vegetation here has completely taken over the fence and will soon merge with the nearby forest, if local authorities will let it [fig. 7].

fig. 6  
herman de vries, *sanctuarium*,  
1999–2001. Earth, brick, steel,  
gold leaf, Briar rosebushes  
(*Rosa canina*), stone, Ø30 ×  
3.3m. Zeewolde, Netherlands.  
Photograph by the author  
(2018).



This quick growth must be related to the fertile land, but also to the complete lack of intervention by the local municipality. This, ironically, is a result of the failures of public art in Flevoland, not its successes. Curator Martine van Kempen, co-founder of the Land Art in Flevoland organisation, explains that many residents of Zeewolde were displeased with the large-scale installations which suddenly took over their town as part of the ARTificial Natural Networks programme. Sculptures in public space were constantly being vandalised. This tension with the local community, in addition to some budgetary issues, were the reasons for the shutting down of De Verbeelding, the organisation behind ARTificial Natural Networks. The public artworks were left to decay, with no funds found for their maintenance.<sup>79</sup> A website dedicated to art and cultural heritage in Flevoland decries the fact that “[t]he works of art are no longer being maintained and slowly the sanctuary is being overgrown by nature”.<sup>80</sup>

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The principle of entropy is, of course, almost synonymous with the thought and work of Robert Smithson, who elaborates on this principle in Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monument”, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles [CA], London: University of California, 1996), 10–23. Especially relevant to our discussion of the sanctuaries is *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), in which Smithson installed a woodshed in Kent State University, Ohio, piled earth onto it, and waited for the shed’s slow process of decay over the following decades.

78

John K. Grande points to the similarity between de vries’s and Smithson’s notions of entropy in works like *the oak* (1992), where de vries presents a log in the process of decomposing. See: de vries, “chance & change”, 228.

79

Martine van Kempen, interview by the author, September 10, 2018

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“sanctuarium”, Flevoland Erfgoed, last modified August 24, 2018, <https://www.flevolanderfgoed.nl/home/kunst/zuidelijk-flevoland/zeewolde/sanctuarium.html>, accessed January 2021.

What this writer fails to realise, clearly, is that while other public artworks in Zeewolde have, indeed, been damaged by this neglect, the *sanctuarium* only profited. It ensures that no municipal intervention, like the one we saw in Stuttgart, will take place here. The *economic entropy* of a cultural institution ensured the *material entropy* of the sanctuary. The principle of “chance and change”, this reminds us, not only governs the organic domain, but also the socio-economic one. And the processes of the former can never be truly isolated from those of the latter.

### Conclusion: Towards Reterritorialization

We have seen how the contacts between herman de vries’s sanctuaries and their local environments and publics dramatically affect not only the physical appearance of the works, but, even more crucially, the ideas and affects they instigate. Local environmental histories and sensitivities, locational specificities, the actions of local publics, as well as those of local authorities, the status of public art in a particular region—all of these different factors, and others, contribute to an ever-evolving process of semiosis, which is always site-specific and time-specific.

The sanctuaries should thus not be understood as different versions of the same work, which preserve their immanent meaning bestowed by the artist—like “the universality of nature”<sup>81</sup> or “the essential unity of existence”.<sup>82</sup> Instead, they should be read as porous constellations, whose aesthetic and ideational effects are contingent and shaped no less by their consumers and their environments than by their creator.

The sanctuaries have also turned out to be far from merely “place[s] for looking”,<sup>83</sup> where one just needs “to be” with—or, in face of—nature, as de vries sees them. Their audiences refuse to adopt the role of passive onlookers. Instead, they turn the sanctuaries into places for creating, thinking, appropriating, reclaiming, protesting, painting, performing, decorating, documenting, researching. It is not just about “*What will nature do here?*”<sup>84</sup> as de vries frames it, but also about: *What will people do here?*

What also becomes clear from this research is that a “terrain” can never be truly “vague”. There is never a cultural vacuum, never a natural *tabula rasa*. Even in purely botanic terms, the seeds that fall inside the sanctuaries are only there as a result of centuries of human cultivation, and there is no way of reversing this process.<sup>85</sup> But more importantly for this paper, we have seen how social, political and economic processes invade the organic processes of nature and alter meanings and fields of possible relating. The feminist theorist Donna Haraway has tackled the inability to rigorously differentiate nature from culture by using the term “natureculture”,<sup>86</sup> which functions as “a synthesis of nature and culture that recognises their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both bio-

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81

“The nature sanctuary—herman de vries”, Musée Gassendi, <https://www.musee-gassendi.org/en/home/collection-of-contemporary-art-in-the-digne-area/works/herman-de-vries>, accessed September 2020.

82

Gooding, “chance and change”, 20.

83

de vries, “sanctuarium”, 432.

84

Ibid., 431.

85

As Kate Soper notes, the nature we find in our cities and villages “is a product of human cultivation, often over centuries, and would be very different without impact of that management”. And there is no way of returning to any “original” nature. See Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 182.

86

Haraway introduces and develops this term in Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Pirckly Paradigm Press, 2003).

physically and socially formed”.<sup>87</sup> Each articulation of natureculture is, according to Haraway, dependent on “[h]istorical specificity and contingent mutability”. Art that acknowledges this understands that “history is composed out of the polyform relatings of people, animals, soil, water [...]”, and always takes into consideration “agencies both human and in-human, animate and inanimate”.<sup>88</sup>

Most of the “official” written material about the sanctuaries, whether by the artist or by art scholars and curators, has failed to give attention to these aspects, and often over-emphasised authorial intention over actual manifestations and semiotic specificity. Most readings adopt de vries’s romantic notions of nature and his perception of the human–nature relationship in phenomenological, existential, and universal terms—a decontextualising and depoliticising stance. It was only through local press materials, blogs entries, interviews and informal meetings with locals, trips to the sanctuaries, etc., that I was able to trace these vernacular “histor[ies] of consumption”,<sup>89</sup> which provide a fuller picture of how each sanctuary *actually* operates—how it affects and how it is being affected. A picture that reminds us that the human–nature relationship is never universal, but always situated.

To conclude on a broader note, I wish to make a few comments on the notion of site-specificity as it emerges from this paper. In her influential book on the subject, art historian Miwon Kwon identifies a shift in the notion of the “site” in art since the early 1990s—from a physical site to a deterritorialised “discursive site”.<sup>90</sup> The reception of site-specific works of art, she claims, is no longer reliant on the *actual location* of their unfolding, but rather on the *discursive location* of their circulation: a “field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate”. This new site, thus, “is not defined as a *pre*condition. Rather, it is generated by the work (often as ‘content’)”.<sup>91</sup> This change entails, according to Kwon, the “reemergence of the centrality of the artist as the progenitor of meaning”.<sup>92</sup> These claims are at least partial. As my analysis has shown, meaningful and intensive encounters will still unfold in actual sites, and the ideas and affects instigated in these encounters are still very much preconditioned by local contexts, no less than by the artist’s discursive intentions. At least in the realm of public art, so it seems, “place” still has a major place.

87

Nicholas Malone and Kathryn Ovenden, “Natureculture”, in *The International Encyclopedia of Primatology*, ed. Agustin Fuentes (Chichester and Hoboken [NJ]: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781119179313.wbprim0135>, accessed January 2021.

88

Haraway, *Companion Species*, 23. Here Haraway discusses in particular the work of the artist Andrew Goldsworthy.

89

See footnote 6.

90

This idea of a “discursive site” is developed in the first chapter of her book: Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge [MA] and London: MIT Press, 2002), 11–32.

91

Ibid., 26.

92

Ibid., 51.

## Author’s Biography

Arnon Ben-Dror is an art historian, critic, and curator, specialising in the fields of curatorial studies and exhibition history. He is currently a PhD candidate in the art history department at Tel-Aviv University. He has published articles and reviews in multiple art magazines and journals, including *Spike*, *Mousse* and *Kunstlicht*. He is the co-founder and

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