

UNITY

herman de vries

About the exhibition

unity is a presentation of all the works by herman de vries (1931, Alkmaar) in the Kröller-Müller Museum collection. The exhibition gives you a sense of the many different approaches and working methods that de vries has utilized over the past fifty years. In the four exhibition rooms you will find nature collages, graphics, texts, artist's booklets, a relief work, a painting, three-dimensional works, video and audio works and exhibition posters. A number of recurrent themes runs throughout this diverse collection. In this booklet the themes are further elaborated, and background information on the life of the artist is also included.

Researcher and artist

herman de vries did not begin his artistic career at an art academy but at the National Horticultural School in Hoorn. From there he went to France, where he spent two years working as an agricultural labourer. Then in 1952 he took a job with the Botanical Service in Wageningen.

de vries has always felt a strong tie with nature. Even as a child he enjoyed going for long walks through the dunes. Yet doing research at the Botanical Service did not entirely coincide with his experience of nature. Analysing plants and animals and reducing them to statistics clashed with the riches of nature that he had come to know. Nevertheless, this disciplined, statistical approach would ultimately have an interesting effect on de vries's art.

In 1953 de vries began making drawings and collages of found objects (the so-called **collages trouvés**) in his spare time. This work was non-representational: it 'is what it is', without references or symbolism. Where is the border between art and rubbish? de vries wondered as he scraped a thick layer of posters off a wall and mounted it in a frame.

At the end of the fifties de vries moved on to painting, starting out with greys and blacks and ending up with pure white, as in the case of **wit schilderij** from 1960. With a fine structure of silver sand mixed with white paint, it is an example of material painting that is akin to the work of other Dutch artists from that period, such as Armando, Bram Bogart and Jaap Wagemaker. Like de vries's earlier work, the paintings are non-representational; the structure and the whiteness of the material are the only visual information they provide.

In the meantime, de vries's double life as a researcher and artist continued. By the time he traded in his job as botanist for a position as a biological researcher in Arnhem in 1961, he had

already exhibited his work a number of times and had written several pieces on art and philosophy. In a book published in 1957 he wrote, 'art is philosophical reflection in visual form'. That statement is typical of the deliberation with which de vries approaches his work. He expanded his writing activities by founding the journal **nul = 0** with Armando and Henk Peeters in 1961. Together they put out two issues, but then the editorial board split up due to mutual differences and de vries continued producing the journal alone. This break coincided with the increasing individuality of his art.

Accident and perspective

In 1962 de vries began making the first of his **random objectivations**. He used this term to describe a large series of works consisting mainly of reliefs, printed matter and graphics, whose visual elements are arranged in random order. A good example of this is the relief **V70-22B** from 1970.



V70-22B 1970

The title of the work refers to a table of random numbers that de vries used when conducting spot checks in his research work as a botanist. These random numbers determine the positions of the squares on the visual plane: the first number, for example, determines the position of the X axis and the second number the position of the Y axis. In like manner he made works with dots, bars and letters, several of which are on display in the exhibition. In all these works, de vries presents the phenomenon of accident in a deliberate, dispassionate way. This focused attention on accident and chance stems from his view of life. In 1968 de vries wrote that certainties are really an illusion, and that chance must be accepted as an important aspect of our culture. Aren't the people you meet in life, the books you're exposed to, et cetera, just a matter of chance? Isn't it absurd, then, to imagine that life can be completely controlled? Yet, de vries also wrote that chance can be an 'enriching, differentiating and especially a confrontational element'. A consequence of the acceptance of chance, he believes, is that you must remain open to new ideas and opinions, because assumptions sometimes have to be adjusted in the light of new, more or less accidentally acquired knowledge.

This idea of seeing things in perspective is something that de vries also applies to himself: because his ideas and opinions are subject to the workings of chance they are not necessarily correct. This explains why he makes such 'impersonal' work: by not letting his images be determined by personal ideas and preferences, but by submitting to the impersonal workings of chance, he endeavours to make art that is universal. de vries's **random objectivations** are determined by chance (just as life is to a certain extent) and can be experienced differently by everyone.

Travel and nature

de vries wrote his appeal for an open attitude towards life during a turbulent period. At the end of the sixties he travelled to

Eastern Europe and later to Turkey and parts of Asia. He also spent a number of months in total seclusion in the Biesbosch, a large freshwater tide area and natural park in the south of the Netherlands. Finally he abandoned his family and gave up his research job. Since 1970 his life has been completely devoted to art. This upheaval brought change in his work.

The austere **random objectivations** gradually gave way to works of art consisting of objects from nature. He does this with as little interference as possible; by simply mounting certain types of shells or leaves side by side on a sheet of paper, for example. In this way he further develops the concept of literally allowing objects to be seen. Not only does he display found objects, as he did in his early collages, but he also emphasises the uniqueness of each object by placing samples of the same type of object next to each other. What is striking about these somewhat scientific-looking collages is that each leaf and each stalk has peculiarities that make it unique. By drawing attention to the uniqueness of each object in this way, de vries consciously undermines scientific categorisation, by which objects lost their individuality.



from earth 2007

By using objects from nature, de vries has found a working method that unites nature and art. He makes grateful use of scien-

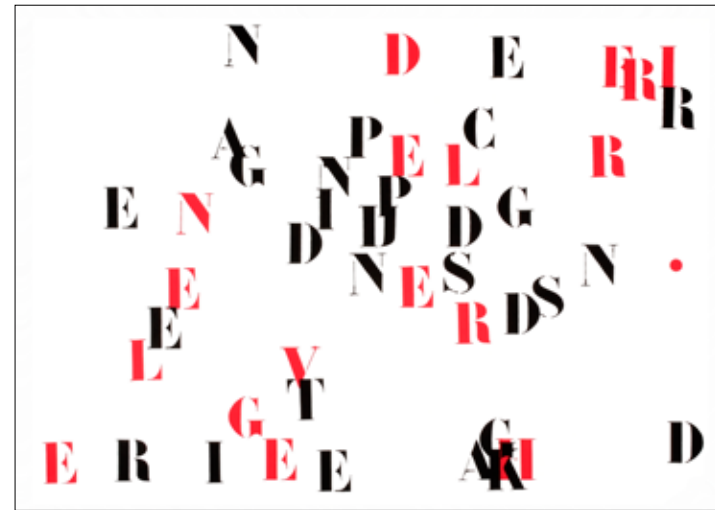
tific methods, despite his aversion to certain aspects of science. He uses his experience as a botanist, for instance, in preparing plant material, just as he applied the knowledge of statistics he had once acquired when creating his **random objectivations**. As the years have passed, he has built up very extensive collections of plants (some of them psychoactive), types of soil and various other finds. His discipline and structured working method are unquestionably connected with his earlier biological research.

Although de vries derives his methods from science, he is averse to its conventions. A great deal of knowledge is lost, he believes, because of science's strict, selective way of working. For this reason he focuses on collecting and preserving knowledge (particularly in the area of plants) that is at risk of being lost. The collections mentioned earlier are part of this effort, but just as important are the many books and stories he has accumulated. Psychoactive plants are particularly interesting to him because of the controversial, sometimes illegal status of these species. Much of his written work contains not only information on psychedelic drugs but also fervent appeals for free accessibility to such plants and to information about them.

Western and eastern philosophy

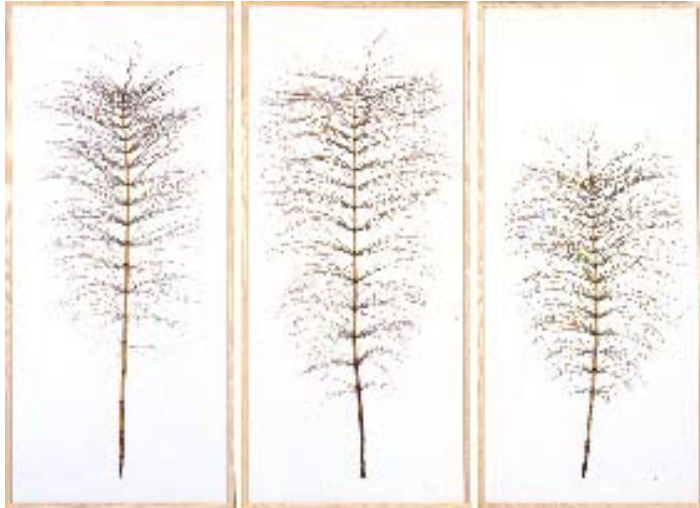
Besides nature and certain aspects of science, herman de vries also incorporates philosophy in his work. In the first half of the seventies he became deeply absorbed in the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly the famous **Tractatus**. This philosopher's very precise use of language and his profound questions about language and logic are reflected in de vries's own writings and works of art. The actual letters from a number of Wittgenstein's writings are used in **random objectivations** – a nod, perhaps, to de vries's earlier statement that art is philosophical reflection in visual form. The rigour of Wittgenstein's thinking began to weigh heavily on de vries, however, and he decided to leave his philosophy for what it is. As a kind of farewell gesture he made **hommage aan de chaoten** (1969-1981), not using the letters

from a sentence from Wittgenstein this time, however, but from the Russian anarchist Michail Bakhtin.



hommage aan de chaoten 1969-1981

Wittgenstein is certainly not the only philosopher whose ideas have had an impact on de vries. Questions that were tackled by Plato and Aristotle have also been elaborated in his work. The collages mentioned above, in which several specimen of one plant species are presented side by side, bring to mind classical problems. The work **equisetum maximum** (1995) can serve as an example. It is clear that each of the three giant horsetails (the common English name for this plant) is unique, but there are also obvious similarities otherwise we wouldn't call them a 'species'. But is the 'giant horsetail species' something that exists in reality, or does it exist only in the human mind? And if the 'giant horsetail species' exists only as an idea, is it one idea that is exactly the same for everyone, or does each person have his own idea? There are many questions to ponder based on de vries's work, as long as his work is approached as a philosophical reflection in visual form.

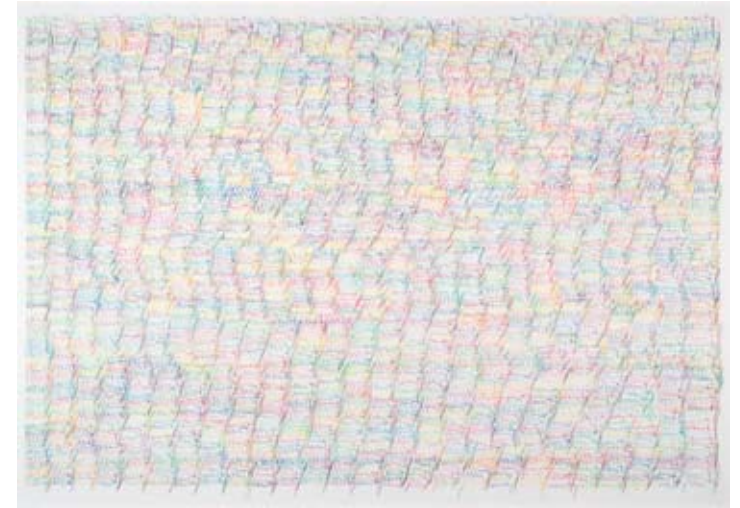


equisetum maximum 1995

de vries's thought has been shaped not only by Western philosophy but also by the wisdom of the East. During his journey through Asia in the late sixties, de vries became acquainted with Buddhist teaching. Various elements of this teaching, especially notions about the perception of reality and the acquisition of knowledge, were very appealing to him. The emphasis that Buddhism places on the concrete experience of the world was a welcome relief to the often highly abstract ideas of Wittgenstein. The Buddhist experience of unity, whether induced by mind-expanding drugs or not, also made a deep impression on him and is expressed in many ways in his work.

Unity

Unity and the absence of borders constitute an important theme in the work of de vries. In the work **der weg ist wieder frei** (1985) this theme is present in both the title and the form of the work. It consists of fragments of a discarded, broken roadway barrier that de vries found somewhere along the roadside. The theme is more subtly present in the recent work **unity** (2006), made by writing the word 'unity' thousands of times in



unity 2006

different colours on a sheet of paper. Each word differs from the others in terms of both handwriting and colour, but the words together form a visual unity, giving rise to a remarkable tension between unity and individuality.

It's just these kinds of contrasts between different ideas and influences that make de vries's oeuvre so interesting. Diverse art historical concepts, scientific methods, philosophies and views of nature intersect each other, both in the individual works and within the oeuvre as a whole. Despite this diversity, de vries has always been able to preserve the conceptual unity of his oeuvre by consistently working with the themes side by side and mixed up together. This creates clear connections between the works, even those made in different periods. The **collages trouvés** from the fifties, for example, can be regarded as an artificial counterpart to later work that makes use of found objects from nature. The **random objectivations** are another example. They depicted the phenomenon of the workings of chance even before de vries went on to explore the differences between plants, which are also determined by chance.

Those who take the time to consider the works of herman de vries, not only individually but also in relation to each other, will discover a great many connections like these. Or to put it another way: let us philosophize in visual form.

Daniël van der Poel

February 2009

KRÖLLER
MÜLLER
MUSEUM

Kröller-Müller
Museum
Houtkampweg 6
6731 AW Otterlo
www.kmm.nl