

# herman de vries: be here

Short texts to introduce the themes  
- Cees de Boer

**1** Starting out making **informal** works of art, herman de vries, a botanist and an assistant of scientific research, simultaneously explores what kind of artist he wants to become. In *Notebook 0* (1956-1957) his writing means thinking about how he can give shape to his individual existence and contribute to society on the basis of his artistry. He enters into discussion with the austere work of Mondrian, with Constant's utopian project *New Babylon*, with Albert Camus' existentialism, and with concepts that play a role in Zen and in classical Japanese art.

**2** With white paintings and sculptures and with white, empty books, de vries makes his position **nul=0** tangible. In this position - beyond language, image and object - an infinite number of possibilities are present (as in nature). The paradoxes of the silent speaking, the showing of a mere possibility, the number that does not indicate a quantity and the word that is semantically empty, recur throughout his oeuvre. de vries remains faithful to this position, which he calls **zero**, even when, around 1975, he steps out of art into nature.

**3,4** In his **text-based works** herman de vries develops four ways of performatively unraveling the network that language casts over reality:

- . texts are subjected to the principle of random objectification; their elements are scattered in space;
- . one word such as **all** or a couple of words such as **different / identic** or **chance / change**, are written down so often that a field (read: an ecology) of individual, interconnected realizations arises; this field can be read as well as be viewed;
- . a text by an author who fascinates him is read cursorily by de vries and the fragments catching his eye are written down in succession, thus creating a new text that presents unexpected connections and alternative meanings;
- . names of similar landscape elements are written down one after the other so that a field emerges that can be seen, read and interpreted. Names of flowers form a flowering meadow, names of rivers form a sea, the field names within a landscape form a panoramic text that refers to the history of the landscape, since field names very often bear traces of functions and of human use of landscape elements.

**5** In his **random objectifications** de vries makes autonomous use of the statistical methods he knows well from his biological research practice. He uses it in a wide variety of media: drawings, reliefs, sculptures, texts, photo projects, series of screenprints, artist's books. At first glance, the random objectifications are autonomous, concrete art; yet they refer to the essence of nature. With his non-personal creations, de vries wants to communicate what to him is the essence of nature: a freedom that is open, that has no beginning, no end and no direction. For de vries, Wittgenstein's thesis that everything also could have been different points to the wonder of that which **is**, and how **it is**. Partly for this reason, the world view that fits man best is an open rather than a closed way of experiencing and thinking.

**6,7** In the **real works**, elements of natural and of human reality appear as documents-of-itself. The flow of reality is experienced and presented as directly and concretely as possible. In fact, the audience is invited to leave the artwork behind and go outside, to take a walk, to immerse themselves in the smells, colors and sounds of a landscape, a market, a city. An invitation to open one's eyes as if for the first time.

**8** herman de vries defines **natural relations** as all the relationships that our bodies maintain with nature in order to live, breathe, and enjoy, to experience joy, pleasure, and freedom. This also includes the substances that nature offers to nurture and expand our consciousness. Knowledge of the plant kingdom in particular is important for our health and, in the form of mind-moving plants, for our spirit. During his travels de vries has collected large amounts of data and materials from various cultures about these natural connections.

**8** A central text in the oeuvre of herman de vries is 'physik und metaphysik sind eins' (physics and metaphysics are one). In addition to recalling Spinoza's 'deus sive natura' (nature and god are the same), concepts from cultures other than the West also play a role in this statement. On his travels herman de vries learned that parts of the living environment can be sacred or taboo, for example the forest around a temple, or a certain mountain in the jungle. These are areas that are not to be entered by humans, where no crops are to be harvested, ever. In practice, such areas become sanctuaries for flora and fauna and nurture their environment with their species richness. By including the concept of the **sanctuary** in his work, herman de vries brings together and intertwines perspectives which in Western knowledge culture are separate from each other: physics, biology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, religion. The sanctuaries that he realized in various places anticipate developments in ecology and art that are now highly topical.

**9,10,11,12,13** After his random objectifications, de vries developed the concept of **chance & change / change & chance**. Structures are no longer central, but rather the processes of nature in which chances and changes realize, transform and destroy each other. The art works of de vries become more process-oriented and performative: photo series that show a changing phenomenon every few seconds, or installations displaying the transience of nature. Travelling, together with susanne, has always been the ultimate process of **chance & change** for herman de vries.

**14,15** the **earth museum** is the title of a collection of soils from around the world. Each soil sample rubbed out on paper is a physical statement about a place on earth. As in other works, here too the theme of the endlessness of nature is put into focus; to collect all the colors of the earth completely would mean collecting the entire earth. A paradox like this is beyond any logic and thus can never serve as a basis for scientific discourse. This does not mean that one could not address the color that makes each location on earth unique. On the contrary, each hand of soil from

a field, roadside, mountainside, forest floor, meadow, riverbank, peat bog, garden, desert, volcanic slope, and so on, has its own unique composition. Although rubbing the soil like a pigment into paper does add a ge-sture to the material, it also reveals its unique qualities and is a commentary on the pur-ism of modernist monochrome painting.

## Outdoor program

The **sporen / traces / spuren** left behind by herman de vries in a landscape that he loves are minimal texts, loose words, signs, symbols, an old cosmic riddle. He calls them "philosophical fragments - fragmentary philosophy. no system! that would be a prison. freedom is a precondition for knowledge. relations are there to be discovered, to be creat-ed by a free reader her/himself. it is not without reason that these texts are to be found in nature, in the woods: there are relationships from place to place everywhere [or: all over]. the woods as a suitable space, biotope, for contemplation. walking, moving, searching, finding as a way of getting to know and perhaps along the way you discover something more important than what you are looking for."

During **be here**, the **herman de vries guerrilla art group** will be active in Groningen that, in consultation with herman de vries, will realize all kinds of **traces** in the city and in the province. These traces appear outside of the actual exhibition space and invite **to be here**. They ap-pear and disappear, are discovered or go unnoticed, perhaps only discovered and seen much later, by different people each time. herman de vries indicates and invites any per-son to a poetic moment in the here and now, a moment in a stream, a point of attention within an ever-moving whole.

It is also possible to visit the exhibition by taking a walk in the open country near the Groningen village of Kleine Huisjes.



van Bijleveltstichting



mondriaan  
fund

 **kunstraad groningen**