

Stepping into the earth of a fox:  
one of the entrances to the work of Adriaan Verwée  
Adriaan Verwée in conversation with Asta Vaiciulyte

Considering how to approach your work, I initially thought of two ways that at first sight might seem incompatible. One is to think of your works from the point of view of a vacancy or gap; that is, I am thinking of your works as structures that squeeze themselves into the place of something that is absent, into a fracture. But it is also possible to look at your work as dealing with what is already present. In this instance I am referring to the idea of things found – be it a material or a strategy – and to building with what is available. However these two approaches can paradoxically be viewed as belonging to the same whole.

This paradoxical effect is exactly what triggers the kind of concentration that operates more on the level of imagination than of logic. It is true though that there is a whole host of relationships made visible that seem to play a significant role in the reproductions that I have been making over the past years. The architecture in relation to the sculptures, the seemingly redundant objects in relation to the construction-like shapes. The details, or even the constraints of a place, helped a lot in defining these works, stretching it to a certain point where it could easily collapse as a readable image. So it is possible to see some contradiction in an ontological sense between things found and these structures that are made, produced. The latter are descriptions of functional objects that refer to the world of utility, the former are clearly immanent to the world of everyday objects deprived of any use. These installations as a whole are talking about coming back to sculpture, about going to the studio and trying at least not to bring in more clutter.

You have used the word reproductions, and I don't know if you meant it the way I understand it, but I find it very liberating how disparate elements of your constellations move from one work to another. They are continuously morphing. Despite the structure-built-for-the-site appearance, your works seem to me to be site-resistant. By the way, what do you think of site-specificity? Can we still use this term today?

Last year I started working with what was at hand or with things or pieces that had stayed behind in the studio. Moving, placing and reproducing them by photographing them. Since these series of works don't have a fixed position and some parts have indeed been migrating from one piece to another, a lot of these images function as a kind of archive of actions that happened during this time. I became involved with photography by focusing on the more ephemeral aspects of the pieces. The images in this book are from that time. As for the historic term site-specific, it doesn't seem to cover the original idea and surely not to its rebellious intention of working outside the conventional art circuits such as museums and galleries. You can still use it as a term although its initial intention seems to have faded, and the original content is misleadingly repeated, romanticized. What are the real intention of, let's say, these municipal exhibitions or other outdoor events? Lots of the works you may encounter in these situations are simply site-adjusted and function as a décor that supports and hides the real mercantile intentions of the boys and girls from the local marketing department. Dennis Oppenheim had remarked on this subject that in the sixties artists were no longer stimulated by the protective shield offered by museums or galleries: 'It felt like a conservative arena.' This shift was not so much against physical spaces but rather an attempt to subvert the system itself. Since then, working outside, repeated over and over again, has become a sort of a parody of the initial idea.

I like the term site-adjusted, I think it much better sums up the actual relationship such works often establish with their temporal environments. And continuing on the topic of what is given, a couple of possibly relevant comparisons made by two musicians come to my mind. Laurie Spiegel has said that the character of the instrument is related to the way that it is limited. In a similar vein Blixa Bargeld learns things from things – he refers to his method as 'finding a strategy to convince materials to reveal something to me.' Thus my question is: What is the

limit for you? And what is the material or matter that you encounter in your work?

I think your first quote is very much true if one is a master of his instrument. The limitations will indeed define the character of the instrument and perhaps disclose it. It is quite the same when dealing with available space and when it comes to materials or dealing with them and knowing them. So this limit will be inherent to the material but it will also depend highly on the artist who is working with it. When at the end of 2010 I started making these structure-like sculptures, I restricted my choice of materials to plaster, wood and glass, which are traditionally in a way subsidiary in the production of sculptures. At that time I was looking for materials that were fairly inexpensive, relatively easy to work with and could be handled without a lot of tools. The idea was to produce sculptures without any assistance, to work out an A to Z method, without looking over the shoulder of a more skilled worker. So in a way I employed myself and spent a lot of time thinking about this. But finding your own limits or constraints has something to do with taking risks and making decisions as well.

Talking about outsourcing manual skills, it is interesting how contemporary art is increasingly sharing its operational modes with design, both in making objects and also in situating and displaying them within their destined environments, be it a living space or an exhibition. But since you have mentioned risk, can we talk about it a bit more? What can an artist potentially risk today?

A lot, I suppose. Social failure, for example, by not achieving one's objectives. The continuous precarious situation and the fact of being highly dependent on the appreciation by other people may at some point become an expensive price to pay for a minimum of autonomy. Nevertheless, this reminds me of a witty remark by Marcel Broodthaers, who for his first solo exhibition at Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels in 1964 made the invitation cards that said something like 'I also asked myself whether I could sell something and be successful in life. I've already been a good-for-nothing for quite a while. I'm forty years old... I finally got the idea to invent something insincere. So I immediately set out to create it.' When he showed some of the objects in question to the gallery owner Ph. Edouard Toussaint, the latter said 'but this is art' and offered him a show. Of course Broodthaers was clever and it was not without irony he claimed that now he had become a friend of society and 'now I see that her enemies are numerous, stupid and vicious.'

Since you work with large-scale pieces, I presume, having a studio is a very basic thing for you. But somehow it seems relevant to talk about it exactly because of the reasons you have given earlier – making things yourself. It seems that studio practice is becoming a sort of old-turned-new thing – at least it looks like that from the proliferation of various art courses at different art schools called as straightforward as that: studio practice. It is probably, as you have pointed out, because of the legacy of conceptual art and also because of today's outsourcing economy, that it requires a conscious decision to produce one's work oneself.

In a way it is about conceptualizing. The studio has become a concept. Making things oneself becomes a concept and there seems to be no escape from these dynamics. Besides it is quite expensive to have a studio and spaces to work are hard to find, so it is only logical that artists find other ways to produce. Apart from painting, which seems to have a special status and thus is an exception, most of the work produced today is outsourced in some way or another. I can understand why the outsourcing economy functions efficiently, but I also believe this kind of economy can generate a form of control of what to make and how it is done. Anyway, bureaucracy and art seem to me like cold lovers. But the production of a work can also be approached from a cultural, social, political and economic perspective. In a way there is a connection between available space and labour in the context of shortage.

Many of the photographs you have been making feature in this book, but they are also on view at the exhibition. In my view, these images are more of a continuation (reproductions as new versions) of your earlier works (as their sources and prototypes), and less of a documentation. Photographs and objects act as equal

interconnected partners. Thus this also brings me to the titles of your works. Some of them seem to be almost self-sufficient, like poems. A Thin Air Spoil Tip, for example. How do you approach this verbal aspect of your work? Where do these titles come from? And to broaden the question, how do you relate to verbal communication in general, especially since artists today, more than ever before, are expected to comment on and contextualize their work?

In recent years I have used different ways to approach titles. The ones that can be called poetic are rare. Apart from a lot of works without title, there are also titles that refer to a method – such as Composition or Variation – and that are combined with a reference to a specific place, such as Bedroom, Bathroom or Studio.

Another title is Toca da Raposa, which actually means foxhole. The latter, too, is a place, but a place with various entrances and exits – in my view a place that is a particularly suitable metaphor for commenting on the practice of the artist.

In his book Introduction to Antiphilosophy, Boris Groys writes that today, when an artist is criticized for the theory that underlies his or her work, the artist can simply reply, ‘Yes you’re right, it is a stupid theory, but I have made good use of it.’

That is the truth business, which in today’s market economy cannot detach itself from its commodity status... Thus, for the latter there are multiple truths available that can be used as ready-mades to contextualize works of art and critical texts.

Guy Debord goes even further. For him, there are only experts, who, when people lose the ability to see things for themselves, are ready to contextualize things, their final goal being either the consolidation or even simply the falsification of the speculative value of the work of art. The artist is therefore under pressure to act quickly, to take position, using product identification and intellectual property as a leitmotif.

As for the withholding of information, doesn’t this inevitably lead to misunderstanding as a creative act, at least on the part of the viewer or reader? Do various misreadings and errors inform your own work?

Definitely... But without the cliché of the misunderstood artist.

How do you usually begin making a work? And how do you know when the work is finished?

Beginnings are always appealing, and what follows next is more like painstaking labour. Completing a work, for that matter, is completely different: it is the adult version of the idea. Generally, placing it in the exhibition does it; I let go and don’t interfere. But I don’t care that much about the individual work. For me it is about the juxtaposition of works, the architecture of the room, and sometimes its history—a broader context in which these combinations are possible and where the moment arises when all this fits together. Knowing when a series of works or a period is finished, is probably the most difficult. It involves a decision that isn’t without a risk, despite the pressure of (keeping on) producing a work that may be considered a signature piece.

What you have just mentioned, makes me think of the continuous interconnection of action (or process) and form (as fixed manifestation) within creative work in general—when a work of art or an exhibition is more like a point in time or a stage, rather than a result or something that is finished. Therefore the traveling parts in your work make this perception even stronger. They juxtapose as it were various levels of time and space.

In case of this exhibition, my first approach of what would be possible was inspired by a photograph of an open-air classroom that was designed by Henry van de Velde. This construction next to the Book Tower of the University of Ghent was demolished in the 1960s. As I looked at this photograph, I wondered what it would have been like to be there, perhaps sitting at a school desk, or on the ground, or standing there. Paying attention, yet also close to the city, the traffic, the exhaust fumes. Concentrated and distracted. A construction similar to van de Velde’s is on the roof of Museum M. Part of the museum once belonged to the Academy of Fine Arts, and Leuven is a university city too, just like Ghent. It was precisely this surprise architectural quote that struck me in Museum M. I wondered if I could approach

my own work in a similar way: quote works from the past, non-existent works, or works still in progress... I also thought of a youth memory of György Konrád: looking through the window of his classroom, he saw a sign on which was written bakery. He reminisces: 'It was nothing special, but it was better than this ghastly classroom.' It is precisely this need to be outside, to free oneself from social constraints and from conventions, that could be seen as synonymous with the longing for beauty. A type of thinking that is always outside, situated elsewhere, somewhere distant.

Thinking of perception by a possible viewer, I remember something art historian Alexander Alberro has recently said in a talk he gave, namely that one of the changes defining contemporary art and the contemporary is that we are living in a culture that values certain types of experiences, and that meaning and interpretation is replaced by experience and affect. Would you agree with that?

Sounds like a dangerous evolution, but I think he is right. The first contact a child has with something new indeed is not on the level of meaning and interpretation, and these are nonetheless important moments. With time, a need for meaning and interpretation emerges. So in a way these are not contradictions and I think they work complementarily. It is clear however, that a society that prefers only experience and affect will be less critical.

In passing you have touched upon the subjects of commodity, precariousness, economy and labour. Are these issues important to you in your work? I am presuming they are, since you have already mentioned not producing more clutter. Also to quote Martin Kippenberger, 'What's an artist got to be political for in today's unpolitical times?'

This is probably the best political statement to be made today. I have always liked the work of Kippenberger, his humour and boundlessness. And he is right, an artist shouldn't be involved in politics too much... it is absolutely superfluous. I don't want to lament too much but it is clear, I hope, that even politics are badgered by their self-promoted model of unbound merchandise.

Have you ever speculated about what you would be doing if you weren't doing what you are? And what do you think art can do what other languages and means cannot?

I think about it all the time. But the older you get, the more difficult it is to change your ways. It finally comes down to being a friend of society by paying taxes, contributing to healthcare, education and culture. In a recent conversation with the artist Royden Rabinowitch, he told me he didn't believe art could change anything and 'Art has no power.' And he is absolutely right.

I think art has something else than power, something related to its trace-like quality.

But then, what keeps you going?

Appreciation.

I would like to direct my last question to the future. In your view, what will today's art, as well as the world we are presently living in, be remembered for?

What art that was made today will still be there in the future? Hard to say... It is a lottery! Duchamp was right: 'Men are mortal, pictures too.'