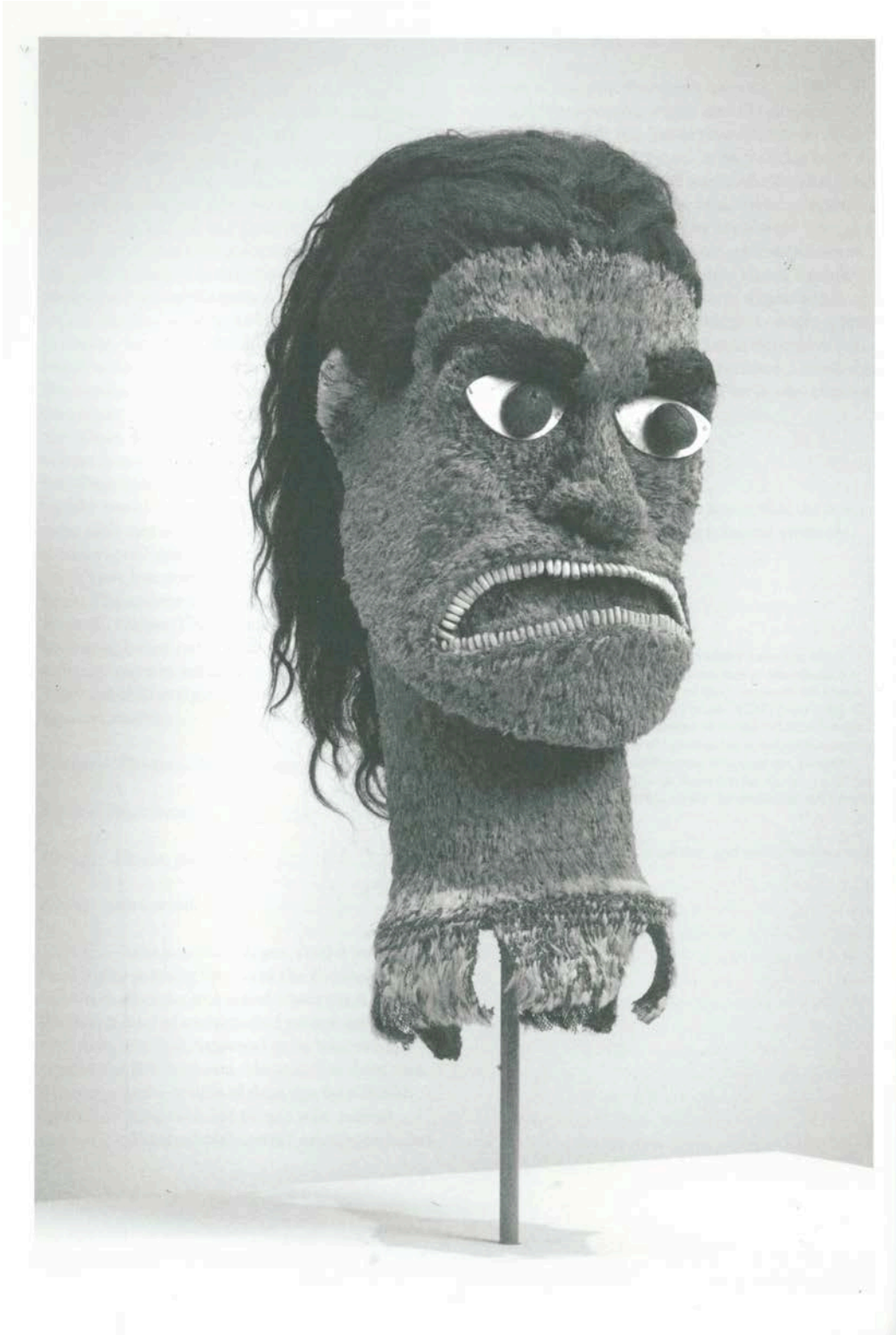


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Willem de Rooij & Anna-Sophie Springer

Colonizing the Exhibition Space

Before sitting down for an interview in his near empty living room, artist Willem de Rooij steps out onto the balcony of his *Gründerzeit* residence in Berlin-Schöneberg. At -10°C it is one of the first truly sunny days of winter, the cloudless afternoon sky a radiant blue, and de Rooij quickly points out how important he finds an undisturbed view of the open sky. As a Dutchman he comes from a country famous for a tradition of landscape painting with prominent skies. Early films such as *I'm coming home in forty days* (1997) or *Of three men* (1998)—made in collaboration with his former partner, Jeroen de Rijke¹—in part offer slow meditations on the shifting of colours and light. But what at first might appear as a largely formalist film rests upon a critical foundation. For instance, the romantic impression of the rising sun in *Bantar Gebang* (2000) dissolves as soon as the location of the scene emerges from the dawn: a slum within a dump on the outskirts of Jakarta. Such tensions have remained a distinctive feature throughout de Rooij's later works, which eventually exceeded the cinematic frame in favour of complex installations implicating not only exhibition architecture but also objects from museum collections and artworks by other artists. In the following interview, de Rooij himself refers to this expansive strategy as a technique to increasingly “colonize” the exhibition space—a phrase that refers, by extension, to a putative power struggle between artist and curator or artist and institution, among others.

With large-scale installations or “three-dimensional collages” such as *Intolerance* (2010/11) at the Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin, today de Rooij is acclaimed for addressing territorial conflict as a phenomenon of global politics and the art institution alike. In this particular work, de Rooij carefully staged an exhibition by installing a series of bird paintings from seventeenth-century Dutch painter Melchior d'Hondecoeter alongside

a number of eighteenth-century Hawaiian feather-covered objects on loan from several ethnological museums around the world. The title of *Intolerance* is a reference to D. W. Griffith's silent film of the same name from 1916, which is itself an avant-garde montage examining ideological feuds throughout history. A palimpsest-like endeavour of referentiality and a challenging gesture towards the traditions of museology, *Intolerance* interwove conceptual, visual, (art) historical, and ethnographic narratives into a complex story. Below, we discuss the problematics of curating as a medium of artistic practice and look at the transformation of notions such as the “readymade” and “collaboration” in the context of non-consensual participation and appropriation—i.e., situations in which objects or artworks from individuals who have been dead for a century or more are subject to appropriation and arrangement into a new artwork. While maintaining that the roles of artist and curator are distinct, de Rooij has claimed the exhibition as one of his primary artistic mediums.

Anna-Sophie Springer – Given that you were originally enrolled as a student in graphic design at the Rietveld Academy and then switched to the art department, how did you start making films?

Willem de Rooij – I started making all sorts of things. I like flatness. The two-dimensional image inspires me. I like depictions because I see them as conceptual constructs, as translations. So I really wanted to be a painter, but I found out that I don't like to paint. Then for some years I thought the only logical conclusion any artist can come to after some time is to not make any work at all. I first got out of this mode of thought when I discovered collaborating with friends and colleagues. Jeroen de Rijke was my closest friend at the time, and when we started working together it felt like we had never done anything else. We started to make films, which was a great discovery for me because it enabled me to produce flat images, which could also be absent. I loved that if you don't project a film, it's simply not there. I am often much more comfortable with the memory of something than with the actual presence of it.

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Springer – Is this why you decided to alternate between half-hour screenings and half-hour breaks as an element of the exhibition *Mandarin Ducks*, which you and de Rijke originally produced for the Dutch Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005? Showing it again at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam later that year, you displayed it alongside several objects that you had selected from the museum's collection. Both times you designed a particular setting for the film element to be screened in, but from time to time the film itself remained absent.

de Rooij – Exactly. We developed a format for installing and screening our films that allows for the image to be visible and for the space to be visible separately.

Springer – Thus possibly also leaving a trace of the film in the space whenever it has just ended or, respectively, filling the space with a certain expectation before the film starts playing again.

de Rooij – Yes, both anticipation and memory become part of the work. And it enables me to exhibit empty space.

Springer – Even though your partnership with de Rijke suddenly ended, levels of collaboration still continue to play a role in your art, which includes objects produced with the help of professional craftspeople such as florists or, as in the recent series of textile wall pieces from 2011 and 2012, weavers. You have even created gallery exhibitions where you select and arrange pieces by other artists under your name, so to speak. For instance, while the aforementioned *Intolerance* was based on the temporary installation of historical artifacts, for your exhibition *The Floating Feather* (2006) at Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, you brought together contemporary works by Isa Genzken, Keren Cytter, and fashion designer Fong-Leng. What is your view on shared authorship?

de Rooij – Other people have always been part of my work. Co-authors, collaborators, craftsmen, technicians, but also gallerists, critics, curators, viewers. No artist works alone. Lately I have been

testing to what extent appropriation can be seen as collaboration: collaboration as a form of mutual appropriation. Melchior d'Hondecoeter was not around to help me install his works in my installation *Intolerance* at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. That was not always easy. At the same time, much of my work was produced in collaboration with someone who is not there anymore. So in that sense, too, absence has become an important factor in my work.

There are so many sorts and degrees of collaboration. When I commission a weaving, my weaver has a key influence, but the authorship still lies with me. I am comfortable with having other people present in my work, but meeting someone with whom you're willing to share authorship is extremely rare. Shared authorship requires an immense amount of trust—like in a love relationship.

Springer – I am interested in the relationship between books and exhibitions, and particularly where the book becomes a site in which artistic, editorial, and curatorial practice coalesce. In which ways do the book and gallery, as platforms, grant you distinctive spaces for presenting your work?

de Rooij – All works are different and all books are different. But making a book feels like making a work to me. When Jeroen de Rijke, our good friend Christopher Williams, and myself were invited to show simultaneously at Secession in Vienna in 2005 we decided—instead of making two separate shows—to create a “group show” of two positions. Mathias Poledna designed two catalogues, one for each of us, which looked the same on the outside and different on the inside. These books are intrinsically linked to the concept of the show.

For *Intolerance* the three books I produced were necessary for a couple of reasons. A catalogue raisonné of Hawaiian feathered objects did not exist, nor a comprehensive overview of Melchior d'Hondecoeter's work. However, I really needed these books in preparation for the installation I was planning. So I ended up producing the books I wished I had had when I began my work on *Intolerance*. Also, it was important for me

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to make a distinction between my own expertise and the expertise of scholars. I didn't want to suggest that I had become an art historian, or an ethnographer, or a curator. I wanted to clarify that my expertise lies in the act of combining and recontextualizing images and objects in order to produce a new synergy or a new narrative. At the same time I wanted to produce (until then largely absent and/or unclustered) knowledge about these objects, and for this I needed experts. So these books were thought to be useful for experts in the respective fields.

Springer – Knowing this is a notion you have previously opposed, I'd be particularly interested in hearing how or where you situate the *Intolerance* publication in relation to "artistic research."

de Rooij – I want to contribute to the production of knowledge, but "artistic research" I feel is a buzzword that was cooked up under political pressure. As such, I have no interest in it. No work of art was ever made without some form of research being part of the process.

Springer – Speaking of the preliminary work of making a piece, let's talk about the archive. With the work of Marcel Duchamp and later Marcel Broodthaers, there has been a trajectory in art of positioning the artwork itself as an archive. You, too, work with several archives and image collections that you keep in your studio. What is your relationship to the archive?

de Rooij – There is a degree of self-reflexivity in my work. There is a feedback loop between the archive and the works. All works are family, and when a new work is made it's going to have to be able to live with all the others and they are all going to inform each other. It's a network.

Springer – What is the physical quality of your archive? I imagine it consisting of boxes and boxes of stuff like newspaper clippings, postcards, etc.? How do you organize it?

de Rooij – Part of it has an order but I got lazy seven or eight years ago. So the first part is in

folders and the rest is a big mess in boxes. And yes, it consists of newspaper clippings, postcards, objects, artworks, sketches, books, slides, photographs, negatives, digital data. Tons of notes. It's important for me, actually. It feels like the spine of the work even though I know it's impenetrable even to me.

Springer – The act of combining and recontextualizing artifacts and other objects in a space, which you mentioned before as the key characteristic of your artistic work, corresponds quite well with my idea of *curating*—that is, even in the more conservative sense. And yet, in spite of your approach to making work, I know you are quite skeptical of being misunderstood as a curator. There is an intense debate about authorship in exhibition making, with certain voices criticizing the curator for increasingly assuming the status of a powerful meta-artist.² I'm very interested in how you distinguish the two roles of artist and curator.

de Rooij – The terms "curator" and "curatorial" are another set of buzzwords for nearly anything that involves a selection. I have had the luck to work with extremely intelligent, inspired, and precise curators, and they are as rare as good artists. I like to work with the people who used to be called curators in the old days, the ones that work in museums, have institutional, historical, and practical knowledge and support the production of a work or an installation without becoming possessive over its authorship; who do the dirty, unsexy work and produce focus, one of the most difficult things to produce. It's immensely important and absolutely fantastic when somebody does that well.

When I began to exhibit 16 mm films, I realized that these works did not function well in a room with other pieces. I started to design entire rooms, reclaiming both the physical and the conceptual space. The rise of the "curator superstar" in the early 1990s really informed this process. It was a way to reclaim territory over curatorial terror: the beginning of a sort of "colonizing" of the space around our work, a process of making it part of the work.

From here my involvement with the context surrounding my work grew further and further.

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For an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2005 I surrounded *Mandarin Ducks* with objects from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum that had served as influential source materials for the film. For these kinds of presentations Jeroen de Rijke and I would end up making or deciding everything ourselves: the architecture, the hanging, the choice of the objects, the combination and constellation, the communication about it, the timing of it. I also included fractions of earlier installations of the films. The work expanded beyond the frame of the actual film more and more. By now the exhibition has become one of my mediums.

Springer – You mentioned colonization—that’s a topic that plays a big role in your work in general and *Intolerance* in particular, being about territory, struggle...

de Rooij – It is about hate and aggression.

Springer – Right. So, figuratively this work also sort of addresses your place within the space of the exhibition.

de Rooij – It is about territorial disputes.³

Springer – Thinking about the exhibition as medium—many of your most recent projects focused on issues of display, including *Intolerance*, *Residual* (2012), and *Farafra* (2012). Having co-curated an exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum of Leipzig that critiques ethnographic display practices, the role of the archive, and issues of “showing” and “not-showing,” I was very interested to find out that your recent work *Farafra* as part of *The World Is Not Fair* (2012) at Tempelhof in Berlin dealt with the history of “human zoos.” Most of your projects rely very strongly on visual devices, but *Farafra* was your first explicit sound piece. How did the topic of “human zoos” inform your decision to make something aural rather than visual?

de Rooij – I had wanted to produce *Farafra* for a long time. It is a fourteen-minute composition of camel sounds installed in an otherwise empty auditorium-like space. Since the architecture for

the Weltausstellung was temporary and I did not know how “my” space would look when I started to work on my contribution, I decided to produce a sound work, so as to be less dependent on the visual qualities of the space.

Springer – On the one hand, your exhibitions have a detached and minimalist quality. You displace already encoded artworks into a new context where they seem to be reborn as contemporary aesthetic objects to be looked at with “fresh” eyes; but in our previous conversations I realized that Willem de Rooij is also a compelling storyteller. What initially tends to drive you more: a set of meanings you want to explore or a formal, material consideration?

de Rooij – I have gone through a number of steps in my work that now allow me to read, for instance, colours or flowers as indicators for social situations. I started to attach particular meanings to particular forms, so abstract forms for me can ring of not-so-abstract phenomena, and recognizable forms in turn can relate to quite abstract notions. If I am making a gradual colour change in a weaving, I am not only seeing colours or material, I am also thinking about “change” or “transformation.” And when I make a weaving that looks pink from a distance but on closer inspection turns out to be made out of ten different hues of pink, I am thinking about the conceptual tension between “difference” and “sameness.” I think about my work and those basic concepts in relation to the political reality around me.

Springer – I want to ask another question about this tension between content and form. Regarding his *Death and Disaster* series (1962–63), Andy Warhol explained he wasn’t motivated by death as an individual fate. Rather, he saw pictures of accidents in the media as a cultural phenomenon (“death à l’américain”),⁴ which he observed and recorded with a disengaged attitude. These prints were at first rejected as “perverse.” Your works activate the sociopolitical field by alluding to religion, colonialism, racism, and globalization while at the same time being famous for their formalism and beauty. Theorists love to “unpack”

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them according to postcolonial critique. But even if there is a commentary included in your work, it is notably matter of fact. I therefore wonder how much of an activist agenda you attribute to your work.

de Rooij – I don't set out to make politically engaged work. Politics interest me for many reasons; for instance, because it is reliant on representation and stagecraft, just like me as a producer of images. If a work is good, there will be a political dimension to it. But in the end art is mainly about itself rather than being about something else. As soon as art becomes *about* something, it's usually a problem. At the moment, frustrating "about-ness" is one of my main objectives.

About the Authors

Willem de Rooij lives and works in Berlin. In his work he engages processes of selection and combination of images in a variety of different media, ranging from sculpture to photography, film, and texts. De Rooij analyzes conventions of presentation and representation and constructs tensions between sociopolitical and autonomous productions of meaning. While already his earlier film installations had a sculptural character, his recent exhibitions, which often employ found materials and works of other artists, assert through the gesture of appropriation itself their specific artistic character. De Rooij studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Akademie and at the Rijksakademie, both in Amsterdam. Recent solo shows include *Farafra* at Bergen Kunsthall (2013), *Untilted* at Kunstverein München (2012), *Crazy Repelled Firefight* at Fredrich Petzel Gallery, New York (2011), and *Intolerance* at Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (2010). De Rooij is a tutor at De Ateliers, Amsterdam, and Professor of Fine Art at Staatliche Hochschule fuer Bildende Künste, Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main.

Anna-Sophie Springer co-directs K. Verlag, Berlin, an independent press exploring the book as a site for exhibitions. Holding an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths College London, she has worked for several years as an editor at the pioneering German theory publisher Merve Verlag, where she is editing a forthcoming collection of texts on art by Hélène Cixous. She also works as an independent curator and is a 2013 member of SYNAPSE, the International Curators' Network at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. Besides many contracts as editor and translator in the art field, her essays and interviews have appeared in *C Magazine*, *Rheinsprung11*, and *Scapegoat*.

Notes begin on page 139.