

QUESTIONS WITHOUT JUDGEMENT

On the recent oeuvre of Kris Van Dessel

If you load up Kris Van Dessel's website, you'll see a soundless, slow-motion video of people walking down a street in New York. This image is characteristic of the artist's work: a seemingly random snapshot of daily life – a constant stream of information – a coincidental encounter – an endless loop of passers-by – a network of ideas and meanings. The video is somewhat reminiscent of scenes from the legendary 'Koyaanisqatsi' (Godfrey Reggio with music by Philip Glass, 1982), which evokes a remarkably uncanny feeling in the viewer with its slowed images and trance-inducing soundtrack.

Since bidding his physical atelier a definitive farewell in 2018, Van Dessel's website has become his everyday working space and digital storage room. Here he keeps a meticulous and ordered archive that is freely accessible to the public. This radical step serves to challenge the artist, to keep him alert. It allows him to keep questioning his position and his concept of the atelier, an important factor in any artist's practice.

In an earlier stage of Van Dessel's career, the studio served as a sort of test space, where he developed prototypes and models. Now he simply doesn't need one. He works increasingly in the digital space. For him, the internet serves as a studio as well as a source and a medium. Often he will send his ideas off to be realised by online services. His website could be considered a work in itself; its favicon, based on his self-designed logo, certainly is.

In 2010 Van Dessel put away his easel for good (and consigned a large number of his paintings to the scrapheap). Finding painting to be too limiting as a medium, he decided to blow his practice wide open. Anything – really, anything – can be incorporated in an artistic act. For instance, who hasn't written a note to themselves on their hand about an errand to be run or a person to be called? This was the inspiration for the artist's 'Memory Tattoos', an ongoing series of small and ostensibly banal memos on his hand, of which all that is kept are photographs. His smartphone is an indispensable tool in the creation of this series and in that of a growing number of his other works.

Good conditions

More and more frequently, Van Dessel's works are created in the space for which they are intended – not only 'in situ' but 'propter situm': taking the space into account. In De Garage in Mechelen he conducted artistic research into the space, which at that time was being renovated. For 22 months, he collected all the dust that was unsettled during the renovations, a sample of the whole history of the building. He divided the dust into 22 stripes for the subsequent exhibition, 'Sampled History', after which a metal measuring stick was the only remaining artefact.

Van Dessel was commissioned by Rooilijn Architectuur to transform the firm's offices into an all-encompassing installation, which he called 'Wild City'. Not only did he intervene in the daily working lives of the architects – giving them assignments, hiding folders and books among their own – he initiated a dialogue between the entire space and his works. The line between indoors and outdoors was also blurred with a sound installation audible from the street and the New York video described above reflecting the Antwerpian passers-by like a mirror.

With 'Conditions and Opportunities' and 'Good Conditions', Van Dessel recently questioned a number of conventions relating to the exhibition and sale of art. Together with artist Tom Van Malderen he explored the parameters and conditions of a good (commercial) exhibition, considering everything from the saleability of design objects to the perfect mise en scène, lighting and price list. Via Facebook and his newsletter he distributed discount vouchers, which remained valid until the end of the exhibition.

Can this practice – the exploitation of the economic reality of the art market – be called perverse? Perhaps the ascription of economic value to art is always perverse. Van Dessel's game is not cynical criticism. Rather, in a playful way, he reveals the existing (and, indeed, occasionally perverse) mechanisms of the art world, without passing stern judgement.

In the case of all these projects, we can speak of the space-as-artwork, the remaining artefacts being 'mere' residues – mementos of an installation or a project, but not always autonomous works in and of themselves. In contrast with the simpler notion that everything an artist makes is art, Van Dessel does not consider everything he produces to be an autonomous artwork.

Components

The project 'Good Conditions' marks a distinction in Van Dessel's practice between autonomous artworks and components. In a sense, the entire installation as a whole can be considered an autonomous artwork. The constituent components require this context in order to function. Components are objects of the kind that arise more or less coincidentally through an almost arbitrary manipulation of an existing object: a grape branch dipped in paint; a painted whiskey bottle; a pillow with a print designed online; a commissioned Plexiglas cube; a set of bronze-coloured earplugs. Each a reasonably saleable and novel item, numbered and listed in the accompanying catalogue.

The creation of autonomous works is usually informed by conscious decisions: an object is conceived of and produced almost out of thin air. As the creator, Van Dessel must make certain decisions regarding the size, materials and colour, for instance. In the case of components, such decisions usually make themselves, based on the nature of the materials. And although coincidence is always a factor in the development of his ideas, his components often result from it more directly.

An autonomous work may lead to new autonomous works, although it can be hard to say where one ends and the other begins. Over a period of seven years, Van Dessel used a pencil to draw lines on his kitchen wall, giving each line a number. A mess of 1,700 lines now criss-crosses the wall. This work, titled 'Quality Time', was made into an unlimited digital edition that can now be downloaded for free from the artist's website in .TIFF format. A 3D scale model followed, made of little iron rods, as well as a sound work. The question of which is considered the original or 'real' work in this story misses the point: the multiple iterations grow together into one idea. Van Dessel's oeuvre is a tightly knitted network, a cluster of all his artistic acts, which may at times be closer to or further away from each other.

The right to exist

Van Dessel is constantly producing. Whether it is in the virtual or physical world, he is always occupied with the collection or transformation of materials; whether applying to a dangling rope the residues from empty paint pots and tubes to create a big, sculptural mass or conducting electronic sound experiments that he then stores in a box. All this work happens spontaneously, organically.

Serendipity is a keyword in the oeuvre of this artist, whose work is perhaps best described as 'conceptual', for lack of a better label. One question leads to another, one iteration leads to another work, and so on. Certain endeavours may lead to an autonomous artwork. Others won't, but that doesn't bother him; he's happy to let the work lead a life of its own.

An artist or maker will usually, without a second thought, impose on an object the right or even the obligation to exist. Such as a carpenter assigns a piece of wood the obligation to exist by calling it a chair, even before it takes on the recognisable form of a chair. Things get a bit more complicated when it comes to an artwork. When is an object an artwork? Didn't someone once say 'art is that which one calls art'? The defining parameters are fluid. Is an artwork such by virtue of its material qualities? Its authenticity? Its economic value and saleability?

What defines an artwork? Is it only an artwork if it is seen and declared such? What if no one can see it? Can a vernissage be considered such if no one attends? Van Dessel regularly creates objects or situations whose existence does not depend on an observer. The most striking examples are perhaps his interventions with glow-in-the-dark powder, such as 'Specters'.

In the light, these works are barely-visible mounds. When the light goes out: a nigh-on spectacular, fluorescent presence. At a location such as the Rooilijn Architectuur offices, the irony is that the work is only fully on display in the absence of employees or visitors. Furthermore, the powder is unknowingly spread throughout the whole building by the shuffling shoes of the building's users. This is not the artist's only work whose title alludes to an ambiguity between absence and presence: other such works include 'Apparition', 'Poltergeist', 'Ectoplasm', 'Phantom' and 'Zeitgeist'.

Generous exchanges

What makes someone an artist? How do you give yourself the right to exist as an artist? One acceptable criterion might be that an artist 'lives off their art'. It is precisely such an ambition that Van Dessel calls into question. There is always the alternative answer that the artist should commit to the artistic side of things, to the exclusion of economic or pragmatic factors. A choice that every artist makes sooner or later, due to many external factors. For Van Dessel, being open to the economic side of art is not a lesser choice, not a taboo. He does, however, make the distinction between economic, aesthetic and artistically motivated choices.

The generosity that can be observed in the distribution of Van Dessel's works – with discounts, editions, publications – is characteristic of his practice and can also be observed in his relationship with other artists. Such as when, during Antwerp Art Weekend, he decided to offer a taxi service, simply because there was none available. During this performance he played a loop of various sound works in his car, creations by himself and other artists, such as Dennis Tyfus, Bettina Hutschek, Gijs Waterschoot, Ria Pacquée and Pieterjan Ginckels. A performance or a sound exhibition on wheels? Does Van Dessel fulfil here the role of artist, curator or chauffeur? A valuable exchange is on offer – that much is certain.

His home in Ekeren houses an extensive collection of swapped, received and purchased works by artists he admires, supports or has collaborated with. There is also an impressive number of records: a wide variety of music as well as a great many more rarities and sound work recordings. Van Dessel himself also toys with music and sound; that which occupies him in his daily life is naturally reflected in his practice.

In the same home he organises presentations of his work and that of other artists under the name 'Enslaved Risks' (an anagram of his name). Only a small space is designated for this purpose: the storage room, where the origin and result of his works meet. With regard to the presentations and artworks shown in this space, we can ask the same question as before: if they are not seen, do they still exist? Can the maker still identify as an artist?

As an artist, Van Dessel is himself the point of reference for his whole practice. When questioning art, the artist and the economy surrounding it all, his point of departure is his own entire world – all his deeds, relationships and so on. His is not a critical voice, per se: he is neither negative nor sceptical with regard to the mechanisms of the art world. He does, however, examine the daily occurrences around him with a heightened, intensified awareness. Like an archaeologist – albeit one with both feet firmly in the present – he digs down to the core and asks how things work. His work invites us – artists, critics, viewers – to adopt a scrutinising gaze, too, to look in the mirror and examine the world through a magnifying glass.

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