



Interview with Sanne Vaassen
by Marjolein van der Loo

The artistic practice of Sanne Vaassen is characterised by her handling of time perspectives. From a contemporary perspective, her work reflects on structures, relationships and behaviours that seem self-evident. She jumps between creation, development, influence and outcome and manages to translate these stages into aesthetic, olfactory, poetic and original forms. Through a deconstruction of narrative and material, she holds up a mirror to us. This dance between time, research and material also characterises the artist residency, in which location, isolation and working period zoom in and out of the artist's practice, creating a valuable dynamic between production, reflection and experimentation.

During the interview with Sanne Vaassen, she gradually reveals how she experienced her period in Neuss and what influence the residency had on her artistic practice.

MVDL / Could you first tell us about your interests, where you as an artist find your fascinations and drives? What could be an idea or issue on which a project is based?

SV / In the beginning of my art practice, I was mainly interested in expressing natural processes and transience, systems that we know but that also cause wonder, such as the hydrological cycle. Now, my work and research are more about human constructions that are actually seen as just as factual as the biological and physical systems, but at the same time are quite changeable and subjective. I want to not only express but also question these systems. For example, I work with communication such as body language, symbols, actions, rituals, but also identity, power relations, and non-religious belief constructs such as economy, borders, and nationalities. Seemingly

objective and almost natural processes serve as a starting point, then I look for what human and often invisible systems and constructions lie behind them. By doing so, I deconstruct things that feel factual or natural and then expose what turns out to be rather arbitrary or harmful.

MVDL / We have already got an idea of the subjects you work with, how do you make a practical translation and when do these ideas become physical? In other words, how do you proceed?

SV / I usually work on several projects at once that start from a research or question. The works are often in relation to each other and I see how they flow from one to the other. Inspiration, fascination but also practical insights influence each other. For example, I recently worked on a study in which archaeology played an important role. This led to a fascination with the construction of the yardstick and units of measurement, and this interest has subsequently worked its way into other projects.

A work can originate from a material but just as well from an issue; both elements are necessary for the creation of a project. When these two elements come together, they enter into a dialogue with each other, and I then investigate this relationship.

The material I work with varies widely, but it must in any case be related to the idea or issue. I select with that in mind, because every materiality already carries a meaning that plays a part in the work. How this grows depends on each project; sometimes it starts very intuitively, by simply doing something in my studio, such as cutting out the borders from old atlases that I have collected.

The chosen material can also be a deconstruction of existing materials, such as globes, atlases, music pieces, flags and so on, whereby I can

make invisible things visible with the material itself. The material is therefore often (partly) in the service of the idea. The fact that I regularly work with new or different material therefore happens automatically.

MVDL / In your work, contemporary thoughts seem to be reflected by ghosts from the past. What role does the future play in your work?

SV / My practice strongly reflects on the past and time scales and looks at poetic, natural and individual relationships. I am making observations and invite reflection in order to put things into perspective.

For example, I wonder how things came to be or ask questions such as 'why does one wear a big black hat when defending a palace?' It is not necessarily an opinion about the value of these customs. I especially want to find out how traditions originated, that is where I find special stories. It is an invitation to think but there is no outline for the future.

MVDL / Most residencies ask for a plan or proposal in advance, which ideas did you start working on in Neuss?

SV / The proposal I submitted is about the relationship between food production, export, nationalist sentiment and infrastructure. It arose from the question of where the food I get from the supermarket comes from; ingredients for one dish often come from different parts of the world and are sometimes processed in even different countries. Also, seasons or daylight still hardly play a role in much of the food production in the Netherlands. A reversal seems to have taken place whereby previously the possibilities of agriculture were determined by natural influences such as the seasons, tides and weather. Now we bypass or influence these through technology and

international transport. As a result, an enormous amount is available and determined by human actions. From the idea of control, I investigate this change.

Part of this is a study into pollinators and specifically bees. In China, the pollination of plants is already done by hand a lot because there is a shortage of insects. This made me read a lot about the role of bees in the food industry, and how excessive fertilisation of monocultures has thrown soil life out of balance.

MVDL / That is a concrete example of an interest and thought process. Can you reveal more about how you think about possible materials from this research and what considerations you make?

SV / In Neuss, I was indeed looking for the form and material to pour insights into. I am still searching for that. I did come a long way during the residency because experimentation can take place. I worked with bee pollen and cast it in transparent plastic bars, the shapes of which were inspired by the choreography of the 'Waggle Dance'. Bees use these movements to communicate

where to find nectar. This project is not yet finished and needs more time to make the material, the shape and the concept fit together better.

I also met with an archaeologist to investigate formation and evolution in soil types and qualities. Based on the meeting, I got soil samples and during the residency I read a lot about the theme, which I still want to elaborate on.

MVDL / Besides working on new plans, you mentioned that the residency has also been productive in elaborating existing concepts, can you explain how you arrive at a new version and how the residency plays a role in forming a new work of art?

SV / There are a number of works that provide a kind of framework as a concept, specifically exploring the local, natural or national context.

Last summer, for example, I studied a private garden in the South Limburg village of Terblijt. I extracted the colours of all the plants in the garden by putting them in alcohol and then filtering them after fourteen days. Each plant gives off a specific colour. I keep these extracts in transparent containers, similar to

a test tube. I stack a dozen of these tubes horizontally in a transparent tube, creating a coloured striped pattern. The fixed sizes of the tubes and sleeves also create a unit of measurement to which the collection of colours relates. This format is inspired by the standards used in archaeology, among other things. In this way, a physical and insightful structure is created that represents the garden in an abstract way by means of the pigments that form the vegetation.

In Neuss, I worked with the owner of a vegetable and wild flower garden near the residence. Meeting the gardener gave me the opportunity to develop a new work. It is a very different environment than the first version of the work, the new context therefore teaches me a lot about the production and possibilities of the previously created structure but also about the composition and plants in the garden.

In addition, since 2019 I have been working on the work *Verbloemen/Nosegay* for which I translate political speeches into perfumes using *Floral Dictionaries*. These dictionaries were used during Victorian times to convey secret messages using flowers



and plants. For each word used in the speech, I search for the corresponding flora and then collect the essential oils to create a perfume. I have translated speeches by Donald Trump, Theresa May and Jair Bolsonaro, among others. During my stay in Neuss, I translated Alok Sharma's speech, *Tearful Apology*.

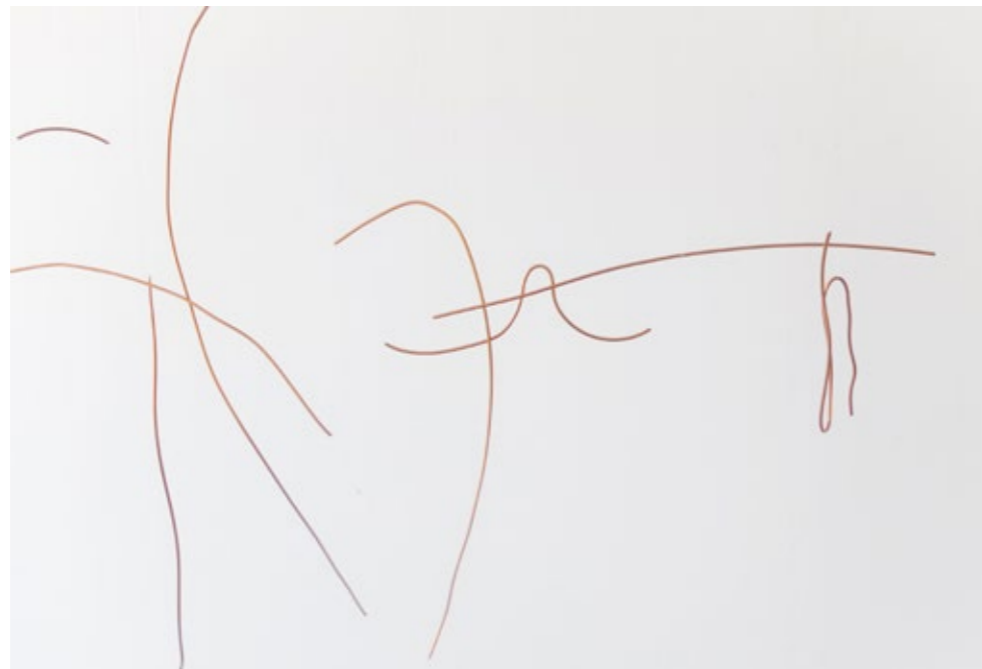
MVDL / You mentioned earlier the cooperation with archaeologists and the interest in units of measurement, can you elaborate on that?

SV / In an earlier collaboration with archaeologists in Etzenrade I learned that archaeologists investigate the past by means of physical remains, for example jars and coins. These objects provide the tools to write and speculate about the most interesting things: namely, what we do not see but has a great influence on our culture; behaviours, events, developments. The objects we find are therefore connected with a lot of knowledge, perception and imagination.

MVDL / I also see a woven textile that looks familiar as part of your ongoing project *Flags*, did you continue this in Neuss?

SV / Indeed, in the work *Flags* that I started in 2015 I take the flag as a national symbol and deconstruct it by taking the threads of the woven fabric apart and using them as new material. I give the threads to a person experienced in weaving techniques who then weaves a new cloth with them. The symbols and colour order of the flag change in this way and the emphasis is on the personal handiwork. I have done this with various international flags, including Hungary, Germany, India, Australia, but also with flags of small provinces or cities. For example, I now have a flag from Neuss that I will be working on.

From my own perspective, there is scepticism towards





flags; the fear of nationalism and the relationship to WWII play a role. At the same time, the same object is approached differently in the United States, where patriotism is seen as more common. The relationship to a piece of fabric can be so strong and intense that it fascinates me and I want to explore it.

A residency is an ideal way to enter into conversation with local residents and weavers.

When I was in Australia for a residency, that context gave me a new perspective on the work. Settler colonialism plays an important role in how the original and colonial parts of the population live together.

Australia has a flag that also shows the flag of the United Kingdom. The indigenous people's flag was introduced later because they also adopted that form of communication

to express their presence and relationship to the land in the communication form of the settler. As a result, a lot of pride and importance, but also pain and trauma, is attached to their flag. That flag and its meaning comes from a very different narrative than, for example, the Western European nation-states.

MVDL / Meanwhile, you've been back in your studio in Maastricht for a couple of weeks. Have things fallen into place here that you researched during your residency?

SV / In the past weeks I have been working on different forms of world maps. Because the earth is round, cartographers are constantly looking for ways to translate this three-dimensional sphere into a flat surface. Smearing the spatial information in a rectangle,

as is the case with most maps that we are familiar with, results in a very distorted image of the earth. For example, the most familiar forms of world map used have a European perspective: Europe is centrally located and shown above other continents. This positioning is, of course, not an objective condition, but has arisen from a Eurocentric world view. Also, the proportions between the continents are strongly distorted; the African continent is greatly reduced and Europe is greatly enlarged; these proportions do not match reality. I find the subjectivity and choices surrounding image formation, communication, units of measurement and what we see as general knowledge very interesting.

In Neuss, I worked with clay in the ceramics workshop and am now using this spatial material to translate these alternative maps back into spatial forms. In Maastricht, I made a larger number of forms and I am looking further for ways to present them.

For a few years now, I have also had the idea of transforming hand gestures that are unconsciously made during conversations into images. During my stay in Neuss, the penny dropped and I was finally able to visualise the work. The work originated from an interest in the influence of language. This is the basis of our daily lives and determines the identity of a community or country. Non-verbal communication between people, such as facial expressions, voice, pitch and micro-expressions, hand gestures and body movements can influence social interactions; it can unite or alienate people and communities. When we speak, we shape our thoughts into language, and when we gesture, we shape them into the space in front of us. To capture the hand gestures unconsciously made during a conversation between two people, I formed these movements into copper wire, making the conversation tangible in the air.



MVDL / I have heard that an initial proposal for a residency is rarely carried out exactly as planned. Can you tell us a bit about how this worked out for you?

SV / I started working on the proposed projects (around food production, distribution, land formation and evolution), although they have not been finalised yet. I still have to find the form and the material that goes with it. That takes time and you can't force it. And of course things do fail, it is precisely the experiment that is important, so a residency is a safe and important environment in which to try things out. The project on agriculture has not yet succeeded, the forms do not yet match and the content needs more time.

You enter a residence with a certain idea, but then you often find a solution or material for another project or problem that was there. The ceramics workshop, for example, enabled me to start working with clay, which has now become more of a focus point. In this way, I park projects but they can also come back spontaneously. Furthermore, I produced quite a few works there that had already been worked out fairly far conceptually.

Next month, I am going to Düsseldorf to take part in an Artist Residency I was invited for by Borderland. I will be staying at Ateliers Höherweg e.V. for a month, where I will be working on some of the projects I started in Neuss.

MVDL / You already have a number of residencies to your name, short and long, close to home and further afield. What is the importance of residencies for you as an artist and what characterises this residency in Neuss?

SV / Residencies are very interesting because it places my work in a different context, even though the Netherlands and Germany are similar in many



ways. New perspectives arise and new meanings and insights emerge.

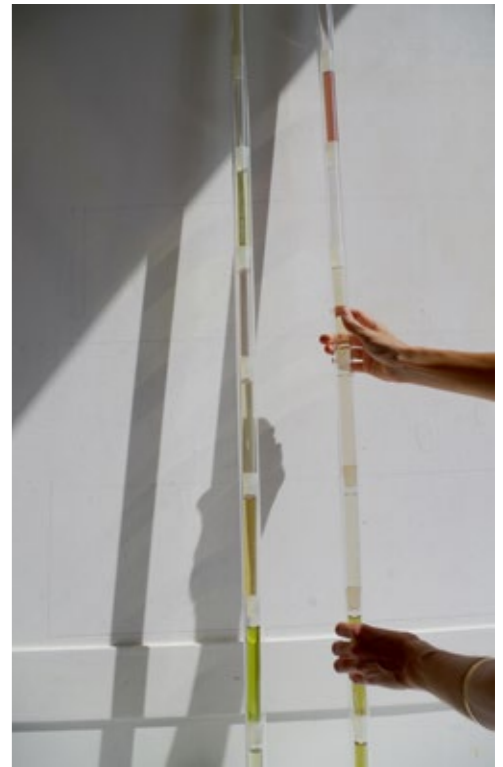
What I find very attractive about the place is that it is part of the bigger picture through the Borderland collaboration. In Neuss, I was the only artist in the residency. But by functioning within a larger programme, I was able to discover many other artists and locations.

The residency offered me concentration, there was a lot of peace and quiet and the possibility to work with sufficient facilities. In the studio I also met other artists from the area, that possibility was very nice. The botanical garden of Neuss, where I enjoyed the plants and birds, is next to the studio, which was lovely. All in all, it has been a fine and productive time.

MVDL / A residency is partly made by the people; locals, artists, curators. Which meetings have you remembered?

SV / The meeting at Schloss Ringenberg was very inspiring. Through corona it was extra special to suddenly get to know many new people.

The other artists work from different angles but I also found similar interests with many of them. I got a lot out of the conversations. It was also interesting to get to know the collaborations between participants such as dancers and choreographers.



Sanne Vaassen lives and works in Maastricht (NL). She completed her bachelor's degree at the Maastricht Institute of Arts in 2013 and was an artist in resident at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht in 2014/2015. She received the Emerging Artist Grant in 2015 and the Established Artist Grant from the Mondriaan Fund in 2019. She was nominated for various awards and received the Henriëtte Hustinxprijs in

2013, the Parkstad Limburg Prize in 2016 as well as the Erfgoedprijs Brabantse Belofte in 2021. Her work has been exhibited in Maastricht, Eindhoven, Tilburg, Dubai, New York and London, among others.

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Place of residency: Kulturamt und Kulturforum Alte Post, Stadt Neuss