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What is the point of putting Anouk Kruithof's work in order? This is the first question I asked myself as I set out to write this text. Because looking at it as a whole, from within a book that for the first time brings together AK's entire artistic production from the very beginning right up to the present day, her practice would appear to be based on quite the opposite principle. Which is not merely one of disorder, but rather the expression of her omnivorous tendency to include as many subjects and points to ponder as possible, garnished with her peremptory refusal to deploy any hierarchical distinction between them. It is a pure form of mixing. Amalgamation. Like dough. Like a recipe in which the (many) ingredients are all thrown into the pot at the same time. Alchemy. Fusion, yet bereft of the thickest fogs of confusion. AK knows where she wants to go, albeit via a bitterly twisted and tormented yet thrilling path. Clear-minded chaos. It is a matter of complexity, one which AK doesn't intend to do away with by any means. Right from the very language she uses: the Dutch artist starts off with photography but she doesn't stop there. She then adds sculpture, installation, video, sound, performance, and animation. In some projects, she keeps these disciplines separate; in others she juxtaposes them, grafting them together, spawning an indefinite number of intermediate forms. The same goes for the themes she approaches. From psychology to globalization, from jungles to the North Sea, from archives to public safety and to the very nature of the photographic medium, AK accumulates information and reflections in her works concerning the most far-flung fields. She takes Eggleston's *democratic forest*<sup>1</sup> and elevates it to the nth degree, discarding uniqueness in favor of multitude, coherence in favor of urgency. Such lists could of course continue and be extended at great length. They will do so below to a certain point, for this is the only way I could think of to respond to the opening question in this text: AK's work cannot be ordered, for it would undermine the very combinatorial system on which it is based. Thus a list of keywords follows. A primer that points out certain recurring aspects of her work, the order of which does not, however, correspond to any given hierarchy but, if anything, constitutes another opportunity to shuffle the cards and come up with new combinations. An incomplete and provisional abecedarius, in which some letters are missing and others are repeated. After all, AK does not speak a language we know, but a kind of Esperanto that mixes diverse, structurally heterogeneous idioms, some dominant and some subordinate. Her work is indeed a form of writing. So let's start with an alphabet.

#### A – Alteration

In AK's work, anything is possible. This does not mean that it is based on the invention of something that does not exist. Quite the opposite: her works are strongly rooted in reality; they flow from her very innards. There is nothing in her production that is not bound up with us and our world. It's just that all of this is not generally presented to us as we know it, but rather in an altered form: either through an action performed by the artist herself or as a result of other factors. AK challenges prejudice, fights it, hates it: what we see never corresponds to what we know. Memory and perception collide. Everything there lies in

a state of agitation. There are people reacting to sudden stimuli, sweat-stained clothes, melting ice, stacks of books crashing to the ground... It is not merely a matter of a change in perspective (the litany of photography revealing reality in an unexpected and surprising instant), but it is a far more substantial alteration, affecting the subjects themselves and not just the way we observe them. All it takes is the slightest deviation, an invisible virus, to make the system run amok. AK's work confronts us with the results of this act of sabotage.

#### B – Body

The bond between AK's works and the body is twofold. First of all, there are the bodies of the women and men within her works, which serve as genuine containers of flesh, blood, bones and all. Her portraits are not produced so as to outline the figure of her subjects, but rather to capture their physical presence, their weight, smells, and moods. They give a sense of proximity, as if we were pressed up against one other on the dancefloor in the middle of the night. Far from being masses of inert matter, in AK's work, bodies live, move, act and react. We may sense their quivering, their biology, their physiology. *Becoming Blue* (2006) is an emblematic project in this sense: subjects are photographed a moment after receiving an unexpected external sensory solicitation. Images come to mind by the French neurologist Duchenne de Boulogne:<sup>2</sup> an absolute champion of research on the relationship between stimuli and reactions in the nineteenth century. With the difference that AK does not intend to carry out any scientific inventory (Duchenne, on the other hand, aimed to catalogue human expressions), but she is content with recording a reaction, a pure sign of out-of-control vitality, at once moving and disturbing. This is the body.

Secondly, AK's works *are* bodies. Even when she uses photography, the artist does not stop at images, but translates them into objects each time. Photographer, video maker, sculptor, and performer, AK produces works that have one common characteristic: they inhabit the space in which they are placed. The many installation shots included in this book testify to their intimate relationship with the environment. Rather than detaching themselves from their surroundings, they take possession of them from the moment they rest their artificial limbs on the floor or against the wall. Paper, metal, plaster, polystyrene, latex, PVC, or fabric: AK studies the characteristics of all these materials in detail – the way they react to light, the quality of the detail they manage to retain on their own skin, the folds they make under their own weight, giving rise to a fauna of objects that adapt differently to the environment they inhabit. AK's works are not just looked at but rather they are felt with all the senses. They trigger an experience of confrontation.

#### C – Color

A parrot in the heart of the jungle. A painting by Helen Frankenthaler. A film by Wes Anderson. An ayahuasca hallucination. None of this could exist without color, just like AK's works. Here color is not an embellishment, an accessory element or an inevitable given, but a necessity. It is the powerhouse that makes everything else turn. "In

color, everything is alive,"<sup>3</sup> said Rudolf Steiner in one of the most enigmatic speeches on this subject ever delivered. AK's work is equally visionary. It combines science and magic. The visible and the invisible. The colors it contains are the result of the inspiration of reality, the response of technology and the imagination of the artist. They are one of the most obvious signs of her extraordinary exuberance. In her works, everything happens (or doesn't happen) within a carnivalesque and festive atmosphere, whether it is a walk along Wall Street or the end of the world. Her career is punctuated by a series of rainbow-installations, formed from the union of smaller particles. Among others, *Enclosed content chatting away in the colour invisibility* (2009) is a wall of more than 3,500 books written in the GDR, dismissed after the fall of the Berlin Wall and reused as colored bricks in abstract patterns, while <CONNECTION> (2016) is a performance in which pigments spread onto actors' bodies serve as an agent of cohesion rather than of separation. AK doesn't hide, she doesn't camouflage herself – her garish colors are those of the ones who, while fighting on the front lines, decide to show themselves.

#### C – Collaboration / Community

Right from the very start, AK's work has been linked to themes of collaboration and community. Her first project, *The Black Hole* (2006), was made four-handedly with Jaap Scheeren, with whom she shared both the ideational and imaging phases. Not only that: the subject of *The Black Hole* is the community of recent graduates surrounding the two artists, explored in relation to the sense of emptiness that accompanies the end of a study path and the often-complex entry into the world of work and economic independence. It is the paradigmatic start of a journey that takes society (and socialization) as its object of study and a fundamental driver of its own development. AK is the conductor of relational processes involving individuals of all kinds, of various cultures, backgrounds, and ages. She calls on colleagues and friends, strangers with whom she establishes a relationship that lasts no more than the time it takes to make the works, and individuals with whom she has no direct relationship, as happens whenever she reuses archival images. In some cases, she addresses small groups of people, while at other times she triggers extensive collaborative circuits that take the form of genuine social networks. Works such as *RUHE* (a performance in 2012 featuring 18 actors recruited off the street and through acquaintances), *Universal Tongue* in 2022 (made with the help of more than 65 collaborators) and *Niet Meer Normaal* (developed in 2022 after gathering input from over 300 people) brought together numerous individuals, none of whom knew anyone else, squeezing them into a common space, be it real or virtual. They are orgiastic rituals. They are the transposition into space of the art of the *Sense*<sup>4</sup> television fantasy. They are epics.

#### D – Discomfort

Despite the bright colors and imaginative shapes, AK's works are by no means reassuring. This is also the role of art: to make us uncomfortable, to undermine the certainties that accompany our everyday lives, to pull the carpet from under our feet. AK puts what we would

not otherwise go looking for right before our eyes. It is not only about the world's distortions but also about our own aberrations and weaknesses, those of the species we belong to and the history we drag behind us. AK digs down into our very deepest seams of fear and disgust. The ungainly expressions of *Becoming Blue* remind us that we have limited control over our bodies. The sweat stains on t-shirts, immortalized in *Sweat-stress* (2013) – transformed into desirable abstract works with a formidable leap of interpretation – have the same effect. Then there is a vast plethora of vaguely anthropomorphic objects: AK's photo-sculptures resemble dissected shreds of bodies lying on elegant metal stands. Flaps of skin and organs of all kinds. Like the works of Annette Messager,<sup>5</sup> they constantly force us to reformulate our idea of beauty. As if it were an operating theater: it feels like looking inside ourselves.

#### E – Excess

It's a matter of numbers. Over twenty years, AK has carried out a large number of projects. Many among them are the result of collaboration with a large number of people. Equally numerous are those consisting of a large number of images and objects. AK challenges the entertainment society, the post-Fordist economy, mass communication, the internet and social media on their own turf: that of hyper-productivity. She reflects on the bulimia of the contemporary by replicating the same excesses in her own practice. She goes in search of peace and quiet by exceeding all limits. As James G. Ballard wrote: "The ultimate concept car will move so fast, even at rest, as to be invisible."<sup>6</sup>

#### F – Fragility

AK's works are to be approached with bated breath. Despite the strength of their visual impact, both the subjects they deal with and their physical structures are extremely fragile. Fragile is the balance of nature (as the jungle retreats and the ice caps melt), that of society (the foundations of the entire Western paradigm creak), as well as that of the minds and bodies of human beings. As a result, works dealing with these topics teeter on the edge. *Enclosed content chatting away in the colour invisibility* is a wall of books sliding over each other; *Pee in peace* (2018) is a room with paper walls; the installations in the *Transformagic* series (2018-2019) are made of PVC sheets resting precariously on supports of various kinds. In the face of the solidity generally required of artworks, which as a form of investment must provide assurance of their own durability, AK counters a plethora of tremendously delicate objects. Ones that must be taken care of.

#### G – Gesture

AK is a gestural artist. In the sense that she never stands still, and her works also express the same hyperkinetic tendency. It is a matter of action and movement. The first term indicates an assumption of responsibility: to act means to step out into the field and cause an effect. The second has to do with a liberating need: observed as a whole, her work forms one grand choreography.

## H – Hoarding

AK’s work feeds on her initial activity of hoarding images and objects that are later reused as the building blocks of new constructions. These are not systematic collections but the constitution of a reservoir of her own and others’ materials, both physical and digital, selected on the basis of varying assumptions. What lies inside this warm belly is not simply stored away but at the same time examined over and over, thought and rethought about, chewed up and digested before being selected and expelled once again. It is a recycling process. AK belongs to the widespread group of artists who, ever since Marcel Duchamp, have granted a second chance to pre-existing materials by triggering some of their latent meanings. Only in her case, this practice of re-contextualization is also linked to a profound ecological awareness. Rather than polluting a world now saturated with all kinds of representations, AK assumes that what she needs already exists and sets out to find it. Her hoarding activity thus anticipates this need, securing a vast quantity of materials for the moment they may come in handy. In the publication *Automagic* (2016), AK investigates her own relationship with images, acknowledging herself without naïveté in the multiple roles of producer, consumer, manipulator, and re-user. It is a series of nine books based exclusively on an archive of thousands of images that the artist took over more than twelve years on her phone and small digital cameras. Her notes, her private life, her personal diary are thus absorbed, after a metabolic path that alters and distorts them, within her work. In AK’s world, the very notion of waste is absent. And an excess is often an excess of reuse.

## I – Imperfection

AK’s work is an ode to imperfection. Nothing is symmetrical, clear, orderly, shiny, definitively complete: no frills. Here, failure is a great success. Like in the films of Harmony Korine: Solomon: Do you love me? Cassidy: Yes. Solomon: Do you think I’m attractive? Cassidy: No. You look fine just the way you are. <sup>7</sup>

## M – Mutants

The experiments that AK has been carrying out since 2011, hybridizing photography and sculpture, have given rise to the creation of a series of mutants. They spring from the violent clash between conceptually and technically distant species/disciplines (from the maximum of two-dimensionality to the apotheosis of mass and volume) which enter each another, interpenetrate, and blend together. Having freed itself from the prison of the wall, the photograph here acquires a tangible thickness. Its skin begins to swell, wrinkle, move, and bend. When it comes to digital images and those taken from the web, as in the case of *Perpetual Endless Flow* (2021), then we are faced with the outcomes of a genuine process of materialization. It is a revelation. Mutant demigods. Suspended in the midst of their metamorphosis (morphing), these sensual and frightening creatures face the abyss that separates the real and the virtual, the flesh (matter) and the spirit (metaverse).

## N – Nature

You can sense the call of nature. Despite the close connection with technology and the digital, AK’s works have an organic essence to them. They quiver with a sense of the biological, connecting AK’s reflections on the present and the future to a primitive root. In expressing her visceral interest in humans and nature, however, the artist denounces the dangers both are facing, making her work a cry of despair and protest. From the wearing down of people, affected by the stress intrinsic to ever-increasing work and social pressures, to that of nature, battered by pollution and the consequences of global warming, AK places some of the major critical issues of the contemporary world before us. Photographs, sculptures, videos and performances are not only works of art but also tools of a strategy of political activism that unfolds in the public space of museums and galleries. Like shamanic totems, they remind us of our connection to nature, in the belief that any healing must stem from the recovery of this fundamental awareness. “When a shamaness falls into a trance on the stormy sea, the whole of nature seems to be lost in her vertigo. Seagulls swoop down over the waves and the terns weep.”<sup>8</sup>

## P – Play

Play is a very serious thing. That is why AK does not shy away from making extensive use of it, even in association with challenging and problematic topics. There is no contradiction between play and rigor, irony and drama. On the contrary, AK seeks to amuse and entertain us at all costs, furthermore through work that lends itself to being used for this purpose. We laugh before the contradictions she points out to us: a sweat stain treated as paint (*Sweat-stress*); the bizarre birthday wishes expressed by patients in a mental hospital (*Happy Birthday to You* from 2011); the whimsical forms of sculptures that make a mockery of any notion of classicism (*Transformagic*). It is a matter of vitality, which is never lacking here. “The hedonist is a worshipper of life who knows no weariness,”<sup>9</sup> writes Michel Onfray. According to this principle, the pursuit of enjoyment is a duty.

## R – Recycle

In addition to recycling photographs, in an operation that reflects on overexposure to imagery in contemporary society (see ‘H – Hoarding’), AK does the same thing with objects, combining theoretical reflection and fieldwork. With a gesture that is as symbolic as it is functional, on several occasions she has brought materials collected from landfills into the art space, triggering a short-circuit of monetary and cultural values. The books with which she fabricated the wall of *Enclosed content chatting away in the colour invisibility* came from one-euro bookshops and a paper waste disposal center in Berlin. The works in the *Transformagic* series are displayed by placing prints of archival images onto makeshift media found locally among the trash and in flea markets, replacing aseptic museum displays with chairs and poles. The bodies of the sculptures in *Perpetual Endless Flow* are made of polystyrene salvaged from the packaging of electronic devices such as phones and computers. But it is with *Fragmented Entity* (2011-2012) that AK reaches the highest

point of her obsession with/attraction to recycling, making scraps of photographs left over from the production of a previous work the sole subject of a number of images, a series of posters, a video, and an ephemeral sculpture. (That previous work, *Wall of Fading Memory*, was itself constructed in 2011 of cut-outs from her hoard of darkroom prints.) Like Hito Steyerl, who in 2021 mounted her solo show at the Pompidou<sup>10</sup> by making it entirely part of the set design created for Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s previous exhibition, AK reacts to a problem (that of waste) by developing an adaptation strategy.

## T – Technology

After nature comes technology. AK’s works are likewise saturated with it. They exploit and investigate it, highlighting both its wonders and terrible aberrations. In particular, photography – AK’s main language – is subjected here to careful observation, starting from its foundations as a technological device and traversing its complexity right up to its most recent uses in security systems, social media, and artificial intelligence. *Subconscious Travelling* (2013), in which the empty sleeves of an old photo album are re-photographed with an iPhone, bears witness to the transition from film to digital, reflecting on the extraordinary socio-anthropological spin-off that a technological upgrade may spawn. *AHEAD* (2015-2017) challenges automatic recognition systems through a series of images of people seen from behind (anti-portraits), the accumulation of which harkens back to the encyclopedic tendency that photography itself helped to promote (with all the flaws of any type of classification system). *Trans Human Nature* (2021) is a series of photographs of other photographs extracted from digital image banks and physically immersed in the environment of the Amazon rainforest, under the muddy water of the Suriname River or in the midst of thick vegetation: the pinnacle of the mingling of technology and nature within a body of work entirely connoted by such contamination. AK looks toward the future and finds herself surrounded by cyborgs. The good news is that there is no longer any discrimination between gender, race, or other such distinctions. The bad news is that we are extinct. Katherine Hayles writes: “Humans can either go gently into that good night, joining the dinosaurs as a species that once ruled the Earth but is now obsolete, or hang on for a while longer by becoming machines themselves.”

## U – Unknown

On the island of Tanna, in the Oceanic Republic of Vanuatu, one of the oldest documented cargo cults is still alive. It is a millenarian-type cult that originated as a result of the vision, in the skies above the archipelago, of unknown flying objects (planes) bringing goods of all kinds to American soldiers during the 1930s, when Vanuatu was an Anglo-French outpost. The cathedral of this religion is a rudimentary reproduction of an airport, complete with dusty runway and control tower made of woven branches, around which the adherents sit in eager anticipation of the landing of one of those marvelous metal birds carrying their messiah (whom they have given in the name of John Frum) and abundant rewards. AK’s works similarly function as catalysts pointed toward the unknown. Beyond any

prejudice, here everything that escapes the boundaries of common knowledge, canon, and experience is regarded as being of the greatest wealth.

## W – Water

AK’s work is liquid. It erects no barriers. It makes no distinction between different spheres of knowledge (defying the tendency toward hyper-specialization that characterizes the contemporary academic approach), between the languages of art (which are hybridized in ever-changing combinations), between high and low culture, between subject and author, between artist and audience. It cancels any distance, immersing everything it contains in a fluid that bridges gaps and creates continuous connections. In its overflowing, carnivalesque variety, AK’s work is paradoxically one and the same: a grand polyphonic composition about the fragility of the human species and its relationship – as exciting as it is now corrupt – with nature and technology. AK’s work is not only about us, it is part of us: like water.

## NOTES

1. Cf. William Eggleston, *The Democratic Forest*, Doubleday, New York 1989.
2. Cf. Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne, *Mecanisme de la Physionomie Humaine ou Analyse Electro-Physiologique de l’Expression des Passions*, Archives générales de médecine, Paris 1862.
3. Rudolf Steiner, “Das Wesen der Farbe,” *Philosophisch-Anthroposophischer Verlag am Goethanum*, Dornach 1929.
4. Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski & J. Michael Straczynski, *Sense8, 2015–2018* (24 episodes, Netflix).
5. In particular, see the work cycle by Annette Messenger, *Penetration*, 1993–1994.
6. J. G. Ballard, *Atrocity Exhibition*, Jonathan Cape, London 1970.
7. Harmony Korine, *Gummo*, 1997.
8. Arto Paasilinna, *Kylmät hermot, kuuma very* (*Cold Nerves, Hot Blood*), WSOY, Helsinki 2006.
9. Michel Onfray, *L’art de jouir. Pour un matérialisme*