

DOWN
THE
RABBIT
HOLE

Lucia Tkáčová in
conversation with
Anouk Kruthof

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Lucia: Hey dear Anouk, where are you? That sounds like the most ordinary conversation opener but, in your case, there is never an expected answer :) I wouldn't be surprised to get a reply from Amsterdam or New York, a bungalow by the North Sea, your studio in Brussels or a self-built house in the jungle of Suriname. You are just as likely to be installing a show in an art museum, or diving in a cave lake in Yucatan, bargaining for treasures at a flea market in Mexico City, organizing an award for artist books or downloading the twelve-thousandth dance video. Having homes in both hemispheres, living in between cultures and biotopes, traveling worlds, one can never predict your answer. You're always on the move: physically, intellectually, emotionally, artistically. So, my question is at the same time figurative and real, geographical and mental.

It is a technology-related question, too. We both still remember times when there was no need to ask it at all, since the answer was obvious: we were at home, either pressing the receiver to the ear or taking the letter out of the mailbox. Now, in these times of flux, we have many homes, virtual and physical. The mind and the body don't even have to be in the same place at the same time, they can simultaneously dwell in very different worlds. Where are yours?

Anouk: Hi, dear Lucia. Well, my body is soon to be in the Suriname River and my mind most likely still in this book... or thinking about the new work that I will develop over the next five months in Suriname and Curaçao, where I will be an artist in residence at the Instituto Buena Bista.

Next week, I'll arrive in Botopasi, a village in the 'inlands' of Suriname. I have a small house in the jungle there, which feels like one of my homes now. For me, home does not necessarily mean one place – actually, it is not even about place. Home means various things: different in Botopasi, different with my parents in Dordrecht, in my studio in Brussels, or with my love in Berlin. My identity is formed by being at home in all those different places, as well as of the moments of moving freely between them.

Soon, I will be chatting with you on the laptop, stirring my brain cells by writing this text and frantically using 'track and trace', while sitting on a stone in the Suriname River. Most likely, I will be distracted by Lesley, who will want to sell me plantains that he's just harvested from his farm. You know Lesley, aka Whiteboy, from when we were here together with Nico (Krebs) in early 2020. I'll buy a huge stem of plantains and think about how to swim them over to the other side of the river and where to find someone who'll fry them into a bucket of banana chips that I can share with the kids later on. Then, I'll hear gunshots not far away and a while later some kids will throw a dead iguana next to me, 'for fun'. Eventually, I'll be back on the laptop again and continue working with you on this text, long distance.

Being in flux is both uplifting and necessary for my life and work. Movement cracks my mind open and prevents me from getting rusty. It's better not to give in to the fear of the unknown and cling to what one has, but to allow oneself to move towards a more vibrant and enlightened way of life. I believe we should all embrace change as the fundamental essence of life and celebrate it with complete awareness of the inevitable losses.

My preferred state is malleability. I like to work on various projects simultaneously, which does not mean I can't focus – I can focus very well, especially if I push myself hard. Rather it means that my mind can handle multiple complex things at the same time and my body loves to be in contrasting environments. The ceaseless shapeshifting is what feeds me; by not being fully embedded in just one thing, I create openness in everything I do. Change is the only constant in life.

Lucia: It seems that coping with change is indeed in your DNA, as an artist and as a human. Looks like it doesn't bring you fear and uncertainty, but rather stimulation and strength. As far as I remember, you were always changing places, effortlessly planting and uprooting yourself – your body, your mind and your practice...

Anouk: I've lived in various cities around the world – Rotterdam, Berlin, New York, Mexico City and now Brussels. I have worked in even more places for shorter periods during art residencies in Prague, Paris, Banská Štiavnica, Puerto Escondido. On top of that, I've also traveled the world a lot. My endless curiosity and the urge to be somewhere other than where I am from brings me an enormous wealth. I have built friendships with people of many different nationalities and cultural backgrounds all over the world. These connections have taught me a lot and they have changed me into someone quite cosmopolitan.

For as long as I can recall, I have been busy getting to know people and bringing them together. As a small child, I started 'clubs' for kids where we would work on crafts together. When we went on holidays abroad in our family caravan, I'd always communicate easily with children who spoke another language, I never hesitated to approach anyone. The more otherness I observed within someone, the more I was drawn towards that person. I wanted to find out about our differences and at the same time I was looking for our similarities. I observed, but I also asked a lot of questions, maybe even annoyingly too many, until people would say: 'Anouk, no interview please'. I wanted to figure out everything: how the other one ate, played, slept, dreamt, celebrated and went to school.

In high school, I was already interested in cultures other than my own. I organized an annual festival inviting people from migration backgrounds to tell us about their cultures. Later, I heard somewhere that if students collected signatures against racism, their school could get the badge 'School Without Racism', which would show that the kids respected and embraced cultural plurality and resisted discrimination and racism. I convinced friends to visit each classroom and we explained the principle and gathered the signatures. Although our school did become the first School Without Racism, now I think of it as quite naive because my high school was super white and pretty elite.

Besides being interested in the history of Dutch Golden Age painting and eating a herring or a bitterbal once in a while, I've never really indulged in what could be called a 'typical Dutch culture'. In fact, for a long time I didn't even know that such a thing exists. The struggle to define a 'typical Dutch culture' happens on the national level, too – as long as I lived in the Netherlands, there has always been a diverse culture which I perceive as something to be proud of. More than 200 different nationalities live in this country and one person out of nine was not born in the Netherlands.

The extremely complex, abusive and painful histories of most diasporas are based in colonialism (including that of the Netherlands) and economic migration and, from the perspective of a person living in 2023, it is impossibly hard to find any positive side to this. However, I still think we should try. A positive consequence is the cultural diversity that is brought and kept alive by the diasporas. I prefer to focus on the richness of cultural diversity instead of pointing fingers at the differences that cause disunity and bring social, political and psychological unrest to society.

Soon, one natural disaster after the other will force all of us to move elsewhere, migration will become the norm. Will we then still be busy with the forced integration of migrants? I don't think so. Reflecting and drawing on the culture I grew up in, as an artist, I try to come up with cures for the current state of affairs and with propositions for a world ruled by mutual respect.

Lucia: It is a bit tricky to converse publicly with someone you know and love. What to ask? What not to ask? Things that are apparent for me would still need to be asked for the sake of the reader. That brings in a certain performative-ness, like those cos plays that couples recourse to in an attempt to resuscitate their sex life :) On the other hand, I might skip things that seem to me too obvious to be brought up, although they might be crucial for understand your work. Hard task!

In an attempt to loosen my concerns, I'll play a game with myself. I will try to un-know you and then get to know you, as if. I'll try to look at your work as if I haven't seen it before, with the curious, unburdened-by-experience gaze of a traveler observing a city in the distance she is about to enter.

Squinting at your work from afar, what strikes me the most is the abundance and the diversity. There are images in various states: moving, frozen, superimposed, soft and unstable, digital, analog, found, never taken. Then there are objects: assembled, gaunt, supporting, clumsy, squirming with pictorial surfaces, hybrid, cuddly. And performances. And books, OMG all the books: curated, authored, awarded, printed, caught in the moment of collapsing, hoarded, venerated or cut apart. All these usually appear in clusters, either in orderly catalogues or in fluctuating gatherings. Individual parts support each other in arranged kinships – their singular features, weaknesses and strengths become irrelevant. There is repetition, variation, exuberance, bingeing, there's a lot, a lot, a lot. Where does this need for many-ness come from? Why so much?

Anouk: Abundance, I love. A situation where there is plenty of something can be either frightening or gloriously fulfilling. When I am diving in the ocean, surrounded by the abundance of water, I feel whole and tiny at the same time. Diving makes me aware of the nothingness of human existence. It directs my smallness and guides me into being part of this humongous surrounding, where I am just a little fragment, floating by. Water humbles me with its limitlessness.

Abundance can also be scary. When your mind is troubled or exhausted and you are part of a crowd in a demonstration, you can feel as if you can't breathe anymore. Crushing. But when you're in love, a thousand kisses are not enough.

When it comes to making art, it's almost never too much for me. People have always called me a centipede. When I was overwhelmed by having too many ideas at the same time, my mum said: 'If only you could divide yourself into pieces'. I wish I could be multifaceted, I wish I could constantly change. I always like to go a bit further and dive deep, not only as an adventure but as a creative process, too.

Lucia: When encountering the visual richness and stylistic heterogeneousness of your work as a whole, I feel a certain anxiety – everything becomes overflowing, ungraspable, slippery, metamorphosing with a dizzying effect. Being a neurotic viewer, I get the sense of walking on quicksand. As a counter-reaction, I look for firmness, for a fixed point. I need a hand to hold on to.

There is a similarity between my search for a core in your oeuvre with the way one looks at autostereograms: two-dimensional images with repeating patterns that hide an underlying three-dimensional image. A picture within a picture, so to speak. The hidden image can be seen with just

the naked eye, as long as the correct focus can be achieved. The correct focus is the tricky part... It's essential to focus the eyes behind the pattern, until one starts to see it from a slightly different angle. At this point, the stereopsis kicks in and the brain is able to construct the image at depth.

If I visualize your work as a plant, it would be a peculiar one: a stem with many branches, each of them distinctive, as if from a different plant. Some have leaves, others spikes, there are flowers here and there, some beautiful and exotic, other small and modest. Some branches bear fruits, each of them a different one: sweet and juicy or hidden in a hard nut. It's rare to see a plant like that: a giant cactus-leafy-pine-fruit cluster tree.

Looking at such an uncommon plant, I have an urge that is in essence Aristotelian: to name it, to classify it. I imagine a botanist feels such an impulse in front of a new find that at first glance evades existing categories. In this sense, you and I are almost at different ends of the spectrum – while the unfamiliar entices you, it makes me insecure.

This taxonomic automatism surprised me... I consider the appetite for classification to be a dangerous one and, historically, it has a lot on its tally sheet: it established a rift between the observer and its object and cemented the delusion of the superiority of the anthropocentric subject. It poisoned how we perceive the world, others, nature and art. Essentially, it is a problem of the ego, which resists being dissolved in otherness and fears the unknown. It's a sublimated need to keep control through naming, which breeds distance and hierarchy.

Instead of letting such nomenclatural malady grow, I'll try to invent other ways of getting to know your curious tree – I could patiently observe it, curiously poke it, ask a lot of questions or, if I come too close, lose myself in it. Do you ever fear losing distance and getting lost in the strangeness and the volume of the things/subjects/topics you observe, collect and process?



Anouk: Strangely, perhaps, I am attracted to getting lost at times. I like falling into a rabbit hole and letting go of everything, until uncommon things from the unconscious space rise up to the surface. But I also have the need to sort, name and classify, which you consider dangerous because of its rapport with patriarchy. Indeed, I do have it. I love searching, gathering and ordering, a lot of my works have a collection as their foundation. These can be collections of photos, videos, objects, sounds or trash... In order to make sense of these gatherings, I need to sort them, although I try to work against the conventional ideas of classification and boxing.

In my project *AHEAD* (2015-2017), I took 1080 'anti-selfies', which were in fact iPhone pictures of backs of people's heads. I call them anonymous portraits. Looking at the back of someone's head, one cannot recognize gender, nationality or age of that person. In addition, facial recognition algorithms are unable to identify or verify the person's identity from such a picture. In *AHEAD*, my critique was deliberately showing a flaw in human encyclopaedic tendency by means of anti-labeling and anti-classification. These portraits of various humans are presented in a grid on huge site-specific wallpapers.

When you look at it from a distance, it's almost like all these heads become pixels, forming one large colorful abstract image, into which you, as a spectator, can project your own thoughts. When you come close, you can still see details of the backs of human heads and you get a glimpse into the many-ness and human diversity, which I embrace.

In *Universal Tongue* (2018-2021), my research assistants and I collected one thousand dance styles from all over the world shared on the internet. In the catalogue accompanying the work, we organized these styles alphabetically by the first letter of each dance to deliberately mix them up and emphasize the horizontality of this collection by erasing typical encyclopaedic categories such as country, continent or culture. By doing this, the project looks at our era of fluidity, hybridity and non-stop connectedness, while respecting the value of our historical backgrounds, cultural differences and individuality.

Lucia: Collecting is indeed one of the principal roots that feed your practice. I have a feeling in your case it's not about the collected objects themselves, rather it's about the process of collecting as a way of being. It is a way of looking at, or better looking into oneself. In order to know what to collect, a collector has to discover what triggers them, acknowledge their own pleasures and refine their sensitivities. In this sense, collecting cultivates their identity by means of 'metonymic extension', it expresses their quirks and deviations. Is this self-defining aspect important for your collecting?

Anouk: My collections are like a cabinet of curiosities and as diverse as possible. One can surely discover my quirky and ever-changing identity by looking at all the assemblages. A growing and shifting identity is harder to be recognized and therefore it can possibly soften the ego.

Lucia: Collecting, too, is a way of looking at the world: passionately, obsessively and possessively (all words with double 's' :) A collector perceives the world as something like a buffet, as an assortment of options and offerings to choose from, as something 'to be had'. By selecting and gathering objects, they create their own mini-cosmos and invent rules of what fits and what not. A collection is an island located between 'yes' and 'no': it valorizes the chosen objects and discriminates against the rest. It not only recognizes value, it bestows it.

Now that I think of it, there are a few interesting contradictions sprouting between the essence of your work and the spirit of collecting. These could be observed further, I'll just sketch them out briefly here. By its nature, collecting is a conservative endeavor – a collector affectionately assembles and safeguards treasures and protects them from oblivion. In a way, it goes precisely against flow and limitlessness, it tries to build a dam. It is a fairly solitary and competitive activity, too – no one else loves another's collection enough. The intensities it brings are of a rivalrous nature: the primal heat of the hunt, the pressure to see what others don't and snatch it before they can, the drive to possess and to be possessed. How do you deal with these paradoxes?

Anouk: Order and chaos. Dark and light. Digital and analog. It may seem that contradictions are incompatible, but embracing opposites brings flexibility and energy. Having a paradoxical mentality shows the opposing sides that often form the base of complex issues. Unraveling the un-understandable can be done more effectively, not with 'either-or' thinking but rather with an 'and-and' perspective.

Lucia: However extensive a collection might be, it is always incomplete – it is defined and driven by what's missing. A sense of lack is a powerful and deep motivation for collecting. I am thinking about a void that is subconscious, ontological, existential, of the id. What is the connection between

collecting and mortality? What drives you to collect? If there is a lack at the bottom of your collecting, how does it feel, look or taste?

Anouk: When I am busy with my collections, I feel like being in a large school of fish, moving together in the currents of the sea. Feeling small and strong at the same time. Sitting on top of my thousands of colorful books, slowly floating in my ocean of photographic images, or calling and texting with all the amazing assistants that were, as myself, madly searching dance videos from all around the world, I feel 'connected', I feel like I am more than just one being. This is where the inner multi-faceted many-ness comes to life.

Collecting is also related to memory and the necessity of the human brain to organize and register information and to give meaning to actions. The moment of getting lost in the process of collecting, even getting possessed by it, is what drives me. I don't have the urge to safeguard collections as treasures. Getting out of the vortex, climbing to a clearer surface in order to find a meaning that can make sense to someone else besides myself, is crucial to me. I only allow myself to obsessively collect in order to make art. Indeed, there is the question whether the process of transforming a collection into a piece of art still carries the same spirit, thoughtfulness and fun for the outside world as it does for me?

My desire to collect and hoard humongous amounts of things is probably my way of dealing with a deep-seated loneliness. It is something deep-rooted, which is linked to human existence, clamped onto the inner human tectonic plate. Collecting is the remedy that fills up the void of 'being'. Everyone is busy fighting, struggling, and eventually perhaps accepting, even embracing loneliness during their lifetime. If one manages to find meaningfulness manifested in the feelings of completeness, fullness, happiness and substantiality, that's what makes life worth living.

How we achieve this varies from one person to another, obviously. The pleasure I get from sorting my collections in order to bring their essence to the surface might be called neurotic. Now I am wondering whether my process of collecting in order to fill up my void is really so unhealthy? If a person has a neurosis that pushes them to collect things and create something fun, beautiful or thoughtful from them, it is a healthier process than to let the neurosis manifest itself in the body or mind through physical pains, migraines and infections or fear, anger, depression and insomnia.

We can argue that juggling with the void is a modern syndrome, fuelled by the aspect of looking forward, being busy, #fomo, increasing growth, competition, and 'keeping the eyes on the prize', which are all rooted in capitalism. Deep inside I think embracing the void, living calmly and simply 'being here and now', which almost became the ultimate IKEA slogan, is in fact anything but simple :) However, I can 'do' it when I sit with my ass on a rock in the Suriname River. No phone, no music, no book. Just being. It's soooooo hard though! It is way easier to feed my emotional longing for plentitude that generates connectedness.

My gatherings-up resonate with my own inner fragmentation. As the world seems to be falling apart, it feels unpredictable. So I am digging into them, finding harmony and disharmony, unity and diversity, in a constant attempt at changing loneliness into connectedness and finding ease, comfort, fun and joy in the process.

Lucia: Throughout the years of our friendship, I have become familiar with the intensity with which you live and make work. By looking at the sheer amount of art and the speed you work at, I sense the gargantuan amounts of energy spent, the determination and stamina you put into the artistic process. Words like manic, superabundance, binge and frenzy come to mind. You are able to do a lot, fast. Does this take its toll?

Anouk: The tendency always to do a bit more, to go a bit further is present in many of my projects and in myself. Being borderless means not realising when something becomes too much, becomes toxic, starts to slowly eat you from the inside out and eventually brings you to dark places that aren't actually good for you, but often are very good for art. And this is the exact location of something pretty discordant about being an artist. It seems that being an artist means being free, that an artist can build their own universe and write their own rules. There isn't anyone breathing loudly down their neck. But an artist's life can be demanding, stressful and emotionally (over)loaded. I hear so often from other artists that they are overwhelmed, burned out, exhausted, insecure, afraid and freaking out. As well as being creative, smart and funny, one needs bucketsful of discipline, a relatively stable mind and endless stamina.

By now, I have quite a lot of experience with stress and burnouts. In 2006, from one day to another, I was not able to sleep anymore. It lasted more than a year. I had hallucinations, not knowing if I was asleep or not. These happen when the subconscious is overworked and you don't know if you're dreaming or awake. There were emotional flushes like Niagara Falls. I laugh about it now, but it's pretty insane to imagine that making art can lead to total numbness. When I look back, I can see my best work was made when I was in a very bad state myself.

There were other moments when I ignored various alarms, kept working and pushed so hard that my body just seized up and I could not move anymore. The most extreme manifestation was at the time that *Universal Tongue* was on view in October 2018 and I could not move at all. My back was seized up and I was locked by myself in a room on the fourth floor of a building in Amsterdam. I had to pee into a pillow. Later, my friend Maria Kley came and put a yogurt container between my legs to pee into. In hindsight, it seems that peeing and the battery of my phone were my only concerns, but what about this unbearable pain? When the doctors arrived, they gave me a huge morphine injection, but I still did not feel any difference... Well, I was super high in my mind, which was wonderful, but my body was still saying 'no' and behaved like rusty sunken ship stuck on the ocean floor. They had to call firemen to pull me out of the window and take to the hospital on a stretcher. It was so insane. Paradoxically, all this happened just as this eight-channel video installation with the whole world dancing was switched on at the MediaLab, which was part of Cinekid Festival.

Lucia: Yes, unfortunately, although our bodies keep sending us messages, we usually lack the dictionary to decipher them before they get too loud and we cross the boundary.

The borderless-ness that you talk about is also one of the features of your practice. I imagine the various branches of the hybrid cactus-leafy-pine-fruit cluster plant all growing from one stem – we could call it your method or your approach. The longer I observe it, the more it behaves like a quantum particle: it's shapeshifting. The fluidity of your work is stylistic, as well as methodological, it goes beyond formal decisions or choice of medium. The particular outcomes/branches are sprouting from a eclectic mycelium of approaches: sometimes you research, sometimes you react; in some works you probe into depths, in others you just touch a surface and fly to the next flower. At times your work is conceptual and grows along a logical 'bean stalk', other times it exhausts the offerings of a specific medium, bounces on the optical or springs out of the emotional.

I see your departure from consistency and your resignation from a 'signature style' as a goodbye to the chimeric purity of modernism, which feeds the mercantilist notion of a 'brand'. In this sense, your fluidity neglects the notion of a decipherable 'visual grammar' and impairs the semantic autonomy of your work. It keeps your art attached to you as the artist – the heterogeneous positions of your work are justified through the various facets of your personality. I see your art as an extension of you, rather than a stand-alone and self-explanatory body of work.

Anouk: My art is an extension of myself, yes. The way I perceive my works confirms this, it is similar to how I relate to myself in the mirror. Sometimes, when I am insecure, I hate my body. I have this exact same feeling towards some works, often right after they are finished or being shown for the first time. I can barely watch them, and during the opening I want to lock myself in the toilet and just cry. Other times, when I am happy and self-confident, I like to look at my works and sometimes I am even proud of them. The weird thing is that my reaction to the exact same works can change over time.

My chameleon attitude possibly functions as a critique of the commercial signature style/brand and I am flattered by the way you describe my way of working. To me it makes total sense, yes! The stem/my method is a 'pore bearer', a multicellular organism full of circulation channels, through which it takes in food and oxygen and gets rid of waste. It is a sponge, absorbing information and sensations like water. It is porous, always open to new meanings and the unknown. The curiosity that drives me yearns for everything I don't yet taste, see, feel, grasp. In the processes of thinking and working, I am open and welcoming. By being so, I allow the complexity to arrive.

I am open to absorb whatever is outside of me – plants, earth, plastics, other people's energies, environments, the news, shared problems, faces, bodies, molds, shit, the universe. I see everything as a complex interdependent web and I love to let my surroundings influence me. I do not like being just myself, I prefer to be more-than-one-self, other-selves, various selves, you know? I am not interested in what is inside of myself already, therefore I have this need to exercise flexibility and multidimensionality.

Lucia: Besides your renouncing of 'style', there is another liberated abandonment that I see in your work – the resignation from 'mastery' and 'bestness'. You make numerous versions of a certain idea or motif and you somehow abstain from choosing the best ones. It is intriguing why you don't seem to be interested in refining a method or an idea to the point when there would be only a few accomplished 'delegates' left. Your series of works vary in size, there is no apparent rule by which they grow and where they end. Is it because you love all you children equally, or is there another reason behind it?

Anouk: This is because the plant is the boss and I let it grow the way it wants. I know that when I respect the plant, I'll be surprised by the way it grows. But if I am annoyed by it, I interfere in the growing process and trim it. Sometimes the branches bother me and I feel the need to tie them up, direct them

differently. It makes me think I am more than the plant and I feel a bit guilty about that because I want to be equal with the plant.

There are times I do control the plant, for example in the work *AHEAD*. The exact number of 1080 portraits symbolizes and refers to the measurement in pixels of a standard image size for a screen.

I want to say that I absolutely don't like all my children equally. I often let the amount of source material decide how the branch will grow. The number of sculptures that were part of the exhibition *¡Agua!* in 2017 at Foam, Amsterdam, was defined by the number of polystyrene theatre-prop rocks that I hustled in exchange for an *Automagic* book in Mexico City. I was also able to use the tools and the workshop of the theater's owner, where I reshaped the rocks with a chainsaw. It was a fun exchange. A set of deliberately clumsy but seductive and funny sculptures was shaped and painted. Later I draped them in loose skins of latex and plastic prints of stock-photos of water pollution.

By the way, the Mexican slang expression *¡Agua!* is not about water, although *agua*, of course, means water in Spanish. I heard the expression so often when I was living in Mexico City, as it is being used to tell one to be careful or to watch out. The origin of the *¡Agua!* story goes back to the days before there was a modern sewage system in Mexico, when people would collect 'dirty' water in their home and before tossing it out into the street from their window or door would shout *¡Agua!*, to politely alert passersby. However, despite this word's double meaning and history, this term is still actively used in Mexico today. Dirty water is apparently something to be afraid of for us humans, even though plants like it. The dirty water relates to the stock photos that I used as skins for the sculptures.

Lucia: There is a branch on your tree bearing a lot of books – you often use them as means of expression. I sense a potential for a push-pull relationship here because their material properties bring forth linearity, sequentiality and order, traits that could be potentially limiting or unsuited to your work. Could a book ever carry or represent the fluidity that you talk about? Is the book a medium that can hold your work well? Can a book be like water?

Anouk: I often see the artist books that I am frenetically making as works of art issued in editions. I love the democratic element in artist books, how they are affordable for people who otherwise could not buy art. A book is more accessible in comparison to seeing art in institutions, since it does not have opening hours. An artist book is an intimate meeting between the spectator and the object. It can flow around the world into the hands and eyes of everyone and anyone. Maybe image-based books can be even seen as medicine against the rigorous logocentrism of the patriarchy?

The title of this book primarily refers to my way of being and my way of working. A book is an exercise in possibilities of opening our minds up, it can create space for debate. In this way, a book can be like water. When you open a book and move through it, you can see different things every time you flip through, going back or forward as you wish. Although a book is often created as a sequence of pages to be looked at one by one, page after page, a reader is still free to flip through in whatever way they like.

What frustrates me sometimes about books is their shape: that reoccurring rectangle (arghhh!) which is, indeed, the epitome of order. In a couple of my books I've tried to actively work against this by not binding them. An unbound book requires more time of the viewer, begs for careful attention and sells badly. For example, the publication *Playing Borders (this contemporary state of mind)* (2009), which observes the absurd zeitgeist of tormented Western European men lost and confused in an abandoned and rundown office building. The publication is made of all kinds of leaflets, posters, postcards and papers of various sizes and thicknesses that, taken all together, carry a frenetic energy. That book is so chaotic that it gets annoying, it is physically falling apart in the reader's hands, which echoes the book's subject matter well.

Nevertheless, even the books that fall apart are still rectangle-shaped. Perhaps it means that I have failed in my attempts making them more fluid... Even this one is a firm rectangle again. It is very hard to escape the rectangle, although I have a love-hate relationship with it. I am educated in photography and sculpture but, ever since I was in high school, I have been looking at the world through a lens. My inescapably rectangular life had already started by the time I learned the basic processes of analog photography and printing. Right up until today, I am still a photo-based image junkie and I register almost everything in photographs.

Lucia: That is true, a photograph, a screen or a book turns everything into an image: sculptures, performances, bodies or movement, everything is flattened. As an artist operating between media, you often engage in an 'inter-dimensional transfer' – you bring images back and forth between digital and physical dimensions. A printing machine becomes an important portal, transposing zeroes and ones onto and into various materials, carrying images from one world into another. It's a sort of alchemy, transmuting intangibles into matter, making sculptural photographs or photographic sculptures.

Often, your sculptures have a secondary function, they are holders and braces for deformed, crumpled, folded, unstable images and surfaces. There is a certain unimpeded disregard for the provenance or agency of the materials that guides your choice. It's rather their optical qualities that matter. Why is this inter-dimensional travel important for you? What do you bring from one medium to another that enriches them both?

Anouk: By now, the world is dominated by photos, people function as processors of an ongoing stream of images. For many of us, it has become more normal to look at the world through a screen than seeing it in physical reality. Reality is limited to a rectangle, even though this screen-reality is described as a 'full view'. The real full view, the context, fades away when we take in such large quantities of photographs. Photos have become pieces of evidence: a thing that has been recorded only exists because a photo shows us it's there. For many, a photograph is a proof that a depicted object exists for real, even without seeing it physically in reality. Seeing in the physical sense has been degraded because of this. At the same time, it is the only sensory process remaining, while other sensory experiences – smelling, touching, tasting – play no role the in screen-reality.

Even when I step outside the screen world, I still arrive in the rectangle land. Everywhere I look, I see rectangles: tables, beds, windows, doors, rooms, buildings, bricks, tiles, traffic signs, billboards, posters, papers and, of course, photos. When we change our human eye to the lens of a drone, we see much of the land on this planet is divided into rectangular shapes. That order is everywhere. We live in a grid-shaped world and I feel the need to deconstruct it wherever I can.

I have been breaking with the traditional two-dimensional format of photography since 2006 and I have been approaching the medium from a wide variety of angles. I've always questioned the medium's sincerity and I am fascinated by how easily we willingly embrace it as a means to promote our digital identity and to validate our existence.

I am moving between dimensions because I need to interrogate the ways in which our digital online image consumption influences the meaning and the impact of what we observe in the physical world.

Lucia: Similarly to the cross-pollination between different dimensions, there is a two-way relation between the observer and the artwork, they feed and fill each other. A comparable reciprocal relation exists between the artist and their work – art has the power to change and shape its own maker. I see this as one of the biggest potentials of art: the transformative power that can operate in two directions – inwards to its maker and outwards towards the viewer.

Inwards, the creative process resembles the alchemic magnum opus – it transmutes, transubstantiates and refines the one who conducts it. In this sense, art-making can be seen as inner activism – self-work and self-care that expands the depth and width of the artist's mindbody, strengthens and sensitizes it. The circuit is palindromic: artist makes work, work makes artist. Do you feel such reciprocal influence between you and your work? What parts of yourself do you use to nourish your art? In what ways does your work 'make' you?

Anouk: Yes, I totally do see a reciprocal influence between myself and my work. Sometimes, I don't even see the difference. The process of creating is a lot about the relation between three interdependent entities: the artist, the material they choose, the tools they use. For me, these three ingredients keep changing and morphing all the time.

The reason why 'my plant' looks so diverse and eccentric and does not allow itself to be labeled or classified is because it is rooted in various worlds. As well as the grid-shaped world that I am from and where I spend most of my time, my plant is rooted inside the Earth as a sacred place full of wisdom, in the cosmos, which is a magical world full of wonders, and also in the digital world with its limitless space for transformation and being whatever one wants.

My creative process usually starts with observations, followed by research and collecting material, which can vary from text to photographic images, from sound to videos, from found objects to natural and/or plastic waste. I gather all this in my laboratory, which is a hybrid space both in my inner world and the ever changing physical studio, which can be anything from my studio building in Brussels or the open space below my house in Botopasi, to the Amazon forest, the Suriname River, a sea or an ocean. I can find studio space in every place. I gather all the material, boil it together, hammer it through, swallow it all, binge on it, love and hate it. I chew it until it's transformed and, eventually, spit it out in a surprising shape that found its meaning along the way. My process is a lot like cooking, which you know I love too; stirring matter around in the still unknown brew, a marvellous soup of potentialities with many ingredients, till something which makes sense to me floats automagically to the surface. Automagic, a blend of automatic and magic, refers to an unexplainable behaviour of something, which works like a magnet on me. I like being pulled into the subconscious or towards a higher state of consciousness in order to find altered perceptions of reality.

Psycho-active substances caught my attention when I was still in the art academy. In the Netherlands, we could just walk into a so-called 'smartshop', where you could serve yourself from fridges and choose from dozens of different types of psychedelic mushrooms. It was free and fantastic until some tourists spoilt it for everyone when they ate too much magic-mushroom pizza and drowned in one of Amsterdam's canals. Immediately after that, the drug was restricted.

Later, while living in Mexico, I started attending rituals involving ayahuasca and peyote. Once, I did an eight-day ayahuasca ceremonial workshop in the jungle of Malinalco mountains. In all this time, we got barely anything to eat, except for a portion of yucca or wholegrain rice, topped with a raw Japanese garlic once a day. No salt, no nada. Daily we got a bucket of flowers to bathe ourselves in with cold water, and we were not allowed to use any beauty products, not even toothpaste or deodorant. We could not use our phone, books or a flashlight. Ayahuasca, which is in the rituals called 'the medicine' or 'the mother', is a brew made by soaking or boiling the stems of the tropical vine of B.caapi together with the leaves of the chacruna plant (*Psychotria viridis*). B. caapi is a source of harmine, an alkaloid that inhibits the breakdown in the digestive system of DMT (dimethyltryptamine), the psychoactive substance that the other plant supplies. We also received kambo, which is the secretion of an Amazonian tree frog, burned into the skin. It helps with becoming less anxious and being more mentally clean and clear. It is quite a strange ritual, when the substance gets into your body, you kind of blow up and get a bizarre frog face yourself. It looks like you had a failed plastic surgery and feels like you got the worst flu of your life within sixty seconds, after which you get very tired.

During the ceremonies we also received sananga drops in the eyes, a powerful medicine used to sharpen night vision. Indigenous people in the Amazon used this for hunting in the night. Every other day we would each carry a hot stone into the sweat lodge, the temescal, and we would sing. During the day we would do several mental exercises like meditation and holding deep conversations where we would share our very personal intentions. A deep and long ritual workshop like this is very intense and hard to take in spiritually, mentally and emotionally. At some moments, it gets really difficult. You can't stop crying or have to faint or feel so lost that you think you won't ever return to 'normal'. But everything passes. Always. You just have to trust that what happens inside yourself is magic. There is no proper way to describe what it is. You come out and feel reset, as if you are transformed into exactly that what is needed for you at that moment, as if you entered a new, blissful state.

Workshops like this help you to sharpen your intentions, to cure what you asked to be helped with and to receive answers about stuff you doubted and struggled with before. Lately, many renowned psychologists and neuroscientists have become extremely positive about the ingredients these plant medicines carry because they can change our neurochemistry, which can change a person's mental state. Now, these substances are being used in treatments for conditions from depression to PTSD.

I have learned and grown so much from immersing myself in rituals where we took these substances. They are very powerful, because ayahuasca deconstructs the ego in a particularly strong way. I believe, if everyone used this medicine once in a while and experienced that we are all just little parts of a bigger whole, we might live together in a way more harmonious world. We are one with the earth, oceans, trees, plants, creatures, all other life, non-life and the cosmos. Together, we're a holistic entity where nothing is excluded and everything is one codependent being.

Of course, once the brew is working in your body and in your mind, you experience unbelievably magical visions. This aspect is what most people know about it and such visions have been expressed in art for centuries. I wanted to mention this aspect only at the end, because 'tripping' is only a fragment of the strength of the medicine. It is too pejorative to call these meaningful plant medicines 'drugs'.

In this book, you see the abstract colorful images that divide the chapters: they look glitchy, but the patterns have a hallucinatory effect up close. I scanned and enlarged some holographic papers and made these images that later became the skin of my huge soft sculpture creatures in my project *Niet Meer Normaal* (2022). I want these images to be breaks between the different chapters of this book because they look like how the wondrous and magical space between people, animals, the plants and the sky looks when I am on ayahuasca.

Lucia: I am glad that you brought up the psychedelic influences on your work, these are indeed very powerful, meaningful and necessary sources of knowledge and wisdom. Albeit marginalized, repressed and criminalized by the Patriarchy, the Church and Academia for centuries, plant knowledge re-emerges as an important navigation technique in the disorienting period we, as humankind, are going through. In our bewildered and last-minute search for new directions and orientation points, herbal teachers offer intelligence that is at the same time archaic and futuristic, Terran and other-dimensional. Minds on plants are vast, plastic, omnipotent, out of control.

Unlike human erudition, plant wisdom is experience based – it is ultimately non-theoretical and, since it dwells outside of language, untransferable. It is at the same time hermetic and accessible to all. By offering a direct and free access to the core tissue of the multidimensional reality, it renders the usual tellers and treasurers of knowledge – schools, libraries, churches – jobless and obsolete.

It is quite anarchistic in how it contributes to the non-authoritarian dispersal of knowledge and the decentralisation of sacredness.

What makes the psychedelic knowledge special to the cerebral cognizance is that it is somatic – it is received, carried and stored by the body. The psychedelic experience blends information with matter, it shapes and alters not only the mind, but also the brain, the neural and sensory systems and other parts of the physical body. Because of its holistic transformative power, it could become the substrate of a new human embodied consciousness.

Plants are masters in meaningful embodiment. It's awesome how they are not only sage, but pragmatic as well. They are the perfect inhabitants of Terra, needing only sunlight and water to survive, generating their own food. It would actually be great, if besides deep insights into the vastness of our minds they could teach us photosynthesis too :) This could fundamentally transform how we exist within the biosphere and all the other spheres.

Maybe naively, I believe art can have similarly transformative effect on us in the now. If done well, it can pluck its experiencer out of the mundane and cast them into the uncommon. In this shift between two dimensions of the same reality, the observer's dislocated mindbody experiences things which would otherwise and elsewhere be impossible. These experiences can happen on many levels simultaneously – cognitive, physical, emotional, sensory, neural, cellular. In this precarious state lies the potential for metanoia, the change of heart of the viewer.

I imagine artists can work with this transformative force like any other material: they can model it as clay, aim it as a beam, bend it as wicker or tune it as a string, so that the human sensory organs can take it in and let it 'do the magic' on the inside. After all, artists have powerful tools at hand – colors, shapes, surfaces, sounds, emotions, meanings, laughter, awe, beauty. How do you choose your tools?

Anouk: My work raises questions but it does not answer them. My aim is to move people on a mental, emotional and energetic level. My working method is itchy and revealing, personal and universal, liberating and oppressive, light-hearted and dystopian. For instance, when you enter the eight-channel video installation *Universal Tongue*, and you immerse yourself in the work, you see people dancing from all over the physical and digital world, you amaze yourself by the diversity of the dancers, the way they look, move and are dressed, how their environments look, and how the technical quality of the videos varies. This heterogeneity is pure richness. When you keep watching, you realize everyone is dancing to the same rhythm of the beats from the soundtrack and your mind shifts from awe of the diversity to a dream of togetherness. If you watch a bit longer, you have to laugh at some individuals and their confident, extravagant and crazy moves and you embrace their braveness. It's intense, energetic, joyful and fun. But if you stay long enough, yet another layer crawls to the surface, one which is touching, even emotional. In this moment, you get lost in the work and almost forget that out there, beyond the exhibition space, there is still that sad, unbalanced world of humans in conflict.

Color is also a powerful tool for me. The way I use it – as a strategy, even a form of critique – is an attempt to create something more holistic, connected, kind and universal. I filter life through the qualities of multi-coloredness. The manoeuvres of my art process carry a very broad and vibrant color palette that is brimming with strong mental qualities, often with indeterminate hues. For example, in my project *Happy Birthday to You*, the color used for most of the walls of the rooms and isolation cells of the mental institution where I was working was a dirty mint green. Supposedly, this color has a calming effect on patients, although I believe it's just a placebo effect. However, this observation determined the choice of color of the paper in the publication to see whether it has a calming effect on the readers when engaging with this touching publication.

Lucia: You give color a powerful position in this book too, it is the principle by which the visual part of the publication is ordered (*Flow*, pages 1 - 256). This is a bold decision, you let color overrule everything: the content, context, chronology and categories of the individual works. On one hand, it is disquieting to see how the individual works give up or lose their original meaning and effect, how they become fragments and uprooted surfaces. On the other hand, the shuffle exposes them to encounters with other works and provokes them to breed new meanings and resonance with their unexpected neighbors.

Color is a huge theme, we could make a whole conversation just about its semiotic, political and therapeutic qualities. It is a ubiquitous force that has an obvious place in art and its history and a seductive guide that leads us to a spectrum of revelations. By following a shade of pigment and the time and place it was used, we can uncover information about geopolitical situations, trade, explorations and exploitations. Pigments made from various exotic plants and insects testify to the cruel plundering of the natural world and its inhabitants by art-savvy societies.

Then, of course, there are the cultural and symbolic meanings of color, yellow for envy and white for innocence. This is the most boring aspect of color, naive in its turbid anthropocentric pettiness. Colors really start to get interesting on the physical level, with their brainwave entrainment qualities and their

neurosensory impact on the human body. There is a lot of healing potential in the collaboration between light, surfaces, our eyes and brains.

For me, the most magical and mind blowing aspect of color lies in its materiality. Essentially, each color is a sculpture, or rather a relief – a specific material configuration of atoms on the surface of the object makes the light reflect in a orange or violet way. If we could become very very small, we could go for a walk in the labyrinth of vermilion, hike in celadon or repose on mellow yellow.

In your work, varicolored as it is, you use color in many different ways: sometimes it takes the stage and becomes the theme and the protagonist, other times it serves as a backdrop that makes the details stand out. Sometimes colors represent wider universalist ideas, other times they seem to have a purely prettifying task. Sometimes you delegate their choice to participants as a gesture of shared power, other times you seem to choose them on a whim. Your use of color is truly kaleidoscopic: from symbolic to utilitarian, conceptual or arbitrary. What is the agency you give color in your work? How do you use color?

Anouk: Organising by color has a meditative effect on me, it's a sort of visual meditation. We live in a chaotic world and we are trying to cope with this chaos in a variety of ways. Many of us are overwhelmed with information. Ordering things by color has a soothing effect on the brain, since our brain likes efficiency and there is only a minimal effort required to interpolate the visual stimuli. When I am wandering on a beach, I am often still busy in my mind. I am thinking of bellies full of plastic, the swirling seas of waste, ecosystems being destroyed and how these growing threats will evolve in the future. Even though the sea with its sound and movement brings calmness, these thoughts keep worrying me. So I often start scavenging waste. I have made several arrangements out of the ever-growing amount of un-biodegradable plastic lying around, of which I take a picture as memory and later, of course, take all of it to trash. Beach cleaning and creating temporary still lifes without a purpose give me inner peace.

Color arrangement, besides being aesthetically appealing and comforting for the mind, can also become a meaningful tool. In many cultures the rainbow is a symbol of hope. In Western European culture it is a promise of better times to come. In the Aboriginal Dreamtime culture, which is the oldest continuous religion in the world, the rainbow is a brightly colored snake that can stop rain made by an enemy and is an important and powerful spirit. For Buddhists, it is possible to become a spiritual rainbow body – the rainbow symbolizes the highest state that can be reached before enlightenment. Some Indonesian societies see a rainbow as a bridge used by soul boats as they journey to the spiritual realm. In Japanese myth, the rainbow represents a floating bridge of heaven on which the male and female creators of the world descended to create land from the ocean of chaos. Mayan cultures believed the arch was a crown worn by Ixchel, mother goddess associated with the jaguar and with rain, and a Bulgarian legend has it that walking under a rainbow causes someone to change genders. Now, we know the multicolored rainbow mostly as a symbol for pride. It stands for diversity in sexuality, symbolizes the hope for universal acceptance and respect and stands for equal rights for marginalized groups in our societies. The bittersweet downside of a strong symbol is that recently 'rainbow-washing' is drifting to the surface. It's disquieting to see how the strength of the symbol is stolen and abused in branding, advertising, merchandise or social media. Do we have to start fighting the rainbow now?

Lucia: The influence of art on its viewers through aesthetic means can be destabilising in a constructive way. Colors, shapes and sounds can crack calcified human senses like eggshells and prepare the mindbodies for a potential transformation. Now, when the tectonic plates of normality are shifting, the planetary feng shui is favorable to all kinds of changes – political or personal, deep or shallow, passing or lasting, profound or slight. How does the transformative potentiality of art determinate the relationship between your work and its viewer? Do you have a viewer in mind when making work?

Anouk: While developing ideas and creating art I never actually think about the viewer. It's not necessary, because I am a social being and this aspect will resonate with the viewer once the work is ready to be exhibited. The moment the work becomes public, by this I mean when it gets out of the studio, it becomes art. Hereby I say that the viewer is utterly important to me. Getting up in the morning and being busy with art is natural and relatively easy for me but showing art to the viewer is much more difficult. It comes with a lot of insecurity and vulnerability because of the responsibility it brings and the guts that are needed for showing one's work to the outside world.

I make art in the first place for myself, simply because I love it, but in the second place, for the viewer also. Therefore, all my work is a quest to find, question and show the 'tonic for the nerves of this time'. For that reason, I choose issues of great immediacy that concern all of us and that everyone can relate to. I am fascinated with general burning topics or actualities, especially those concerning life on our planet and the future of humankind. The most pressing ones are the environmental crisis and

human inequality and injustice, which I can hardly comprehend in all their depth and potentially grave consequences. This prompts me to dig deeper.

Of course, due to the immensity of the topic, it is slippery and the art work can become over-generalized. I feel the key to making relevant art is to find a personal approach towards hugely important matters. Perhaps my video *Ice Cry Baby* (2017) is a good example of what I want to say. It is a compilation of found YouTube videos of melting ice and collapsing glaciers, shown as a super-large projection with the sound of applause and laughter of amazed audiences. Thus, it becomes an apocalyptic installation that confronts the viewer with an ongoing catastrophe and emphasizes how a disastrous reality is aestheticized and often thoughtlessly shared on the internet. When I made this work I was in Mexico City, so heart-broken and lost that it felt like the asphalt under my feet was cracking open and I was sinking into it. I could relate to the video footage in a personal way and saw in it a mirror of how the world (of ice) was crying and breaking apart. The video is paradoxical because you see the melting ice as spectacle, as horror, as sadness and as disaster at the same time. It's hard and beautiful and symbolizes the imbalance between human and nature – and the collective moral degradation.

If we could dig into the ground, we would encounter a heterogeneous world, built like a web of mycelium. We could see it as an example of an alternative social system. I see many parallels in the complexities of a human society and the ecosystem under the Earth's surface. It is an interconnected ecosystem where every species, each little being and each identity matters. It is a good example of how our human society could work.

Lucia: I started this conversation with the most clichéd question, so I'll have to end it accordingly :) After all, a monographic book asks for it – it is a sort of a monument, an opportunity for recapitulation and a look back over one's shoulder.

When I follow the trajectory of your work, it draws quite an arc: at the beginning there is the inevitable juvenile testing of limits and offerings of the incubator the artist finds herself in. An investigation of photography as medium, deconstruction of a photographic image, an oedipal destruction.

Then, the sobering realization that there is an outside world: encountering the illnesses of contemporary society and the weight of adulthood: stress, exhaustion, success, surveillance, burnouts. A reconnaissance of the big forces that oppress, the urge to collect evidence, to accuse, to change. Mourning.

Later, peeking beyond the confinements of the human world, looking for other-than-human accomplices, expanding horizons, physically and mentally. Plant teachers. Collaborations, temporary islands of sharing and solidarity. Seeking ways to cohabitate on a planetary level and finding meaningful ways to spend the time we have left well.

Standing in the here and the now and turning the gaze to the future, where does your path lead? How would you like to continue?

Anouk: Let's sit down in the 'here and now' that you are talking about, Lucia. With a glass of wine in Botopasi, Suriname and in Athens, Greece. We have thought, written and exchanged so much over these last months...

I can't describe how much I enjoyed working on this conversation with you. By looking at and thinking about my work through your attention, concentration and observations, I have gained essential knowledge about my own practice and myself. I enjoyed your spirited and limitless dance with thoughts and words, your autonomous view of the world and everything that mingles art, life and love. You write with the same pleasure as I feel while eating a freshly harvested cucumber in Botopasi, when I have been eating canned veggies for weeks.

You imagined and described my work as a hybrid plant, one that grows in various directions. Then you should know that it's a mystery what kind of branches will sprout next. Depending on the weather, let's see how the plant will grow. We will see where the stream takes us, what it brings and what it dissolves.