Democracy and Intuition.

A conversation between Matthias van Arkel, Sigrid Sandström and Magnus Bons

Sigrid Sandström: The first association I make is with the Baroque expression.

Matthias van Arkel: That's a period I feel a strong affinity with. But more when it comes to furniture and objects as opposed to Baroque painting. I feel, for example, that the frames possess a kind of three-dimensional corporeality.

SS: Here we get right to the physicality that is so central to your art. How you approach the painting as object. I'd be interested to hear more about how you relate to the paint, not as substance but as colour.

MvA: At first I worked in a monochrome and rather low-key colour scale. There is this notion within the art world, that the darker and greyer your painting is, the more interesting and deep you must be. But I wanted to go against that and do something with an incredible amount of colour. A grey painting almost never looks bad, it always ends up being beautiful. Some people find using lots of colour to be a form of pandering, but I think – a little brazenly – that it's more ingratiating to use low-key colours.

SS: It's where the colour comes from that is the important thing. You make it sound as if it's somehow about positioning yourself in the art world. Did you paint in a saturated, more earthy palette because that's what was expected of you? Because that's the kind of painting that you saw around you?

MvA: When I used that colour scale, it was really all about how I applied the paint. It became more visible in a more dampened colour scale.

SS: Your approach is quite analytical, but perhaps your use of colour is more intuitive. I think many painters, including myself, can relate to that. Where you can't really explain how you ended up with that particular shade of blue, for example.

Magnus Bons: But you've also employed colour symbolically, too. That was very clear in *Bedroom* with the different shades of red.

MvA: I constructed our bedroom at a scale of 1:1 according to standard building specifications. And dealt with all the components that make up a relationship. One type of red was rubbed onto the wall using a piece of rag, like a kind of haze; another was made using big dollops of English red. Another was painted in rose madder, which is a false red, and a smaller wall was done in light cadmium red, which for me is a salacious colour. But otherwise my strategy has been to try and choose colours without analysing them that much. It can easily put a damper on the enthusiasm and energy you need to see your projects through.

MB: Yet your big rubber paintings are the result of lots of different choices. What motivates you to make those specific choices? And how do you want the image to work?

MvA: When I was working on abstract brush paintings at the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, I eventually became overly polished. My decision to start painting with my knees and fingertips was a reaction to that. When I later began working on the rubber pieces, lots of random things began to happen instead. Painting is very intuitive and you can feel it in your body when it's not working. When it's good, I just can't stop looking. I guess that's what informs my decisions.

MB: How does it look when it's not working?

MvA: I'm not sure I can say exactly. Maybe it's an issue of composition after all. But there has to be some disturbing element to it, and yet it should still feel like it has a flow or a vibrating quality.

SS: At first I thought the fact that the paintings are so corporeal, despite there being no visible trace of the hand's involvement in creating them, was a flaw. Now I realise that you like to work with your hands. You have an intuitive core that grants you a freedom of action, coupled with a restlessness that also drives you forward. The paintings are extremely expressive, but also clinical, and reflect your personal attitude very clearly. How do you work when it comes to your public commissions? To what extent are they made by somebody else?

MvA: I build up the pieces myself, but assistants help with all the related work. I photograph and assemble each section so that I know where I am. There, too, I work intuitively, but have a sense of the colours. In *Micro/Macro World* in Jakobsberg one of the walls is warm and the other cold. One is striped and the other spotted, and looks like a photograph of a disaster zone in which you can see traces of a direction.

SS: I don’t view your approach as clinical, but feel that the material itself is. I see the paintings as pretty democratic. There’s about the same amount of all the various colours, and it’s not a composition made up of different sized elements. The focus isn’t on one particular part of the painting.

MvA: That’s probably connected to my experience working in monochrome. The paintings are just as active out in the corners as in the middle of the image.

SS: Are they always paintings to you, or do you sometimes look upon them as sculptures?

MvA: For me they’re all paintings and sculptures at the same time. When I model my cubes, I’m painting in three dimensions. A sculpture you can move around in a space, but usually there’s only one way for a painting to be hung on the wall. Back when I used to work with paintings that can be turned around, I would make up to four holes in them of an equal distance from each other using a water cutter. I still controlled how the works were going to be displayed. With four holes the choices were completely open, but with three or two holes, the choices were limited. I constructed a wall mounting on which the rectangular pieces could be hung either vertically or horizontally. Or else the paintings could be laid out directly on the floor like objects.

SS: Usually you have to make a decision regarding how something is going to be presented, but here there is a potential range of alternative choices. An emphasis on the performative, that allows for a more open attitude toward the artwork.

MB: As I see it, you both work with the brush stroke, only in completely different ways and from different directions. For me, every tongue of silicon rubber that Matthias lays out is a brush stroke. While Sigrid’s painting is more about creating the illusion of a brush stroke.

SS: Matthias has come from a focus on the process of painting, while I have increasingly been moving in that direction. Now we have met at a point where neither of us uses an external narrative. Instead there is a kind of continuous reflection around what it is we’re doing. I think I always work with a kind of hybrid space. My painterly process is all about what you don’t see. My paintings are sort of like traces of what has taken place.

MB: Sigrid works at conveying a kind of illusion of light and depth after all, while Matthias creates an actual physical space that takes place in the silicon relief.

MvA: The rubber has a depth, but if you compare it to the spray paintings that I've been doing for a few years, they have a greater perspectival depth. And yet they are still just a flat surface. I find it interesting to make images that haven't been seen before. I'm not suggesting that I have an extremely original pictorial world, but if I create an intuitive image, then it can't have been made before.

SS: It may have existed, only you're not aware of it.

MvA: But I couldn't even do another one like it myself. It's certainly not that I think that the entire expression is new, just that that particular image has never existed before.

SS: I mean the other way around, that we work within a pretty narrow tradition of images that has been handed down to us. But I wonder how intuitive your work method is? It's still quite predetermined, given that you build up your paintings in a mould. You might be free within that space, but if you didn't have the mould then you might have found other ways to organize yourself.

MvA: At first I thought I could only make paintings that were the same size as my moulds, but suddenly I realised that I could put several moulds together and work across the edges as if the seams didn't exist. This technique made it possible for me to create my big public works. I like the fact that there are partitions in the paintings, that they're sectioned, and that the rubber is a material that you're allowed to touch. It's got a lot that classic painting doesn't have.

SS: But it lacks the "daubiness" of oil paints. The silicon rubber conveys a different visual and physical sensation. It's got sort of a meta layer, acting more like a symbol for colour, than the colour itself. What do you think is the most important thing they express?

MvA: I want an exhibition to be an experience that grabs hold of your entire body, and not just the part above the neck. I painted *Confetti* at Galleri Ahnlund in Umeå directly onto the ceiling of the space, and people didn't see the painting when they first came in. When they suddenly discovered it, they sometimes cried out. By the same token, people seldom remain completely unaffected by the silicon paintings.

SS: If you want to put it in theoretical terms, you engage in a kind of phenomenological experimentation. How our bodies relate to the space, how we perceive things with our senses. The moment you realise that you are seeing, when you become conscious of your gaze, is

critical. There is a two-way dynamic between absorption and distancing. The material has a kind of inbuilt distance, more so than with oil paints. There is also a pace in the "brush work", in the stroke that records a motion that has already passed. For me it is very important to distinguish the expressive from the psychologically expositional.

MB: Is it possible to use an abstract expressive appearance, without it having to stem from something specific. Or can it be both?

MvA: I think that abstract art is very self-reflective for the one looking at it. But all I can say is that I recognise myself in my paintings. Otherwise it would be hard to find the motivation to make them.

MB: You have said that your ideas come to you in the mornings?

MvA: They come to me in a state between dream and wake. They're often a stepping stone to the next work. The other morning I saw *Loop,* which I'm working on now, in front of me with gaps in it that you can see through. I wondered if I could create a looped film, only in painting form. A flat painting in which I attach the end to the beginning on the other side of the image.

SS: Painting is a particular kind of investigation. It's a kind of time capsule where you only see the outer surface. You never get to see the painting's underlying layer. I find it very interesting that you're going to create a loop, since a painting is built up very differently from the sequential structure of a film. You watch a film in the same way that you read a book, you bind the story together.

MB: When does the work begin? How does it come into being?

SS: I would say through a combination of urge and irritation. A need to do this particular thing that escalates into an irritation.

MB: Perhaps it's similar to the newly created image you were talking about?

MvA: I think so.

SS: My work process is like playing a game of chess where the painting is my opponent. But who makes the last move is unclear, and that's probably the reason you keep at it.

MB: Are most paintings borne out of previous works?

SS: For me, nearly all of them are hybrids, cousins or relatives of each other.

MvA: I think I'd agree with that. I still do what I did with the brown monochrome paintings. Start up in one corner and try not to steer things too much. I want to develop the image somehow. It's not a ready composition after all, but actually comes into being through the process.

SS: Is there anything that can go wrong?

MvA: I would say that it works best when I get the painting down in one go and don't do any corrections. It can definitely go wrong when I start fiddling and messing around with it. In the spray paintings a line can feel out of place or be too drippy. But I have to respond to the mistakes, and that injects a certain friction into the image. If I work at it for too long, it often becomes too manufactured.

SS: One could say that you almost do the painting in one sitting.

MvA: Sort of like a Japanese calligrapher who sits there mentally preparing himself. And when the time comes, he does the character. Now I have forced myself to deepen my expression with the silicon rubber. I used to feel more like an inventor.

SS: That's a pretty radical shift going from inventing to refining a technique.

MvA: I can of course be criticised for limiting myself to one material. As if the fact that it's specifically silicon were an end in itself. But what motivates me is that I still feel that there are things I can develop.

SS: As an observer, one doesn't realise perhaps just how methodically your paintings are put together. It's interesting to see how the expressive aspects of the idiom contrast with your structured flow.

MvA: Sometimes I want to say more about how the paintings are made, but some people claim that it's demystifying. I find Bernard Frize interesting, for example. You get to see how he's made his own brushes, consisting of several brushes that have been joined together, which he then dips in paint that he applies to the canvas until it runs out. Sometimes there are very practical reasons why something ends up looking the way it does.

SS: Your titles correspond well with your method, or with how the pieces look. Perhaps this harks back to a highly modernistic and minimalist tradition. Robert Ryman used to title his works after the name of the brush he had used to create them. And that's very poetic.

MB: Your method is grounded in a practical understanding of the material. You explore different approaches to the physical paint, while retaining a conceptual overview. The work produces outcomes that are not logical, although the framework is absolutely logical, with reference to Sol LeWitt.

MvA: Do you think I have a conceptual attitude toward painting as well?

SS: More so than you think perhaps, I'd say. You're engaged in a sort of artistic research, since so much of the focus is on the method you employ in your work.

MvA: Some people may see me as a kind of material artist, but I feel more poetic than that. To quote Louise Bourgeois – my art is about ideas *and* emotions.