

## i am here, i am this

Representing Holland at the 56th Venice Biennale with a body of work entitled *to be always to be*, herman de vries explores humankind's relationship with nature. **Ric Bower** talks to the man who refuses the tyrannical hierarchy of capitalisation.

After struggling through the dusty heat and petulant crowds of the Biennale opening week, the atmosphere inside the Dutch pavilion is as peaceful as a Buddhist temple. On the wall, to the left, is a grid of 84 framed rubbings on paper called *from earth everywhere*, made using natural pigments collected during the artist's travels. The work resembles a giant Sennelier pastel colour chart; the ordering of the pigments is considered and their arrangement in a grid is intended to facilitate us in distinguishing their different hues. Many of the earth samples are collected from cultivated land and – as with much of

herman de vries' work – they bear witness to humankind's interface with the environment. On the opposing clean, white walls are framed and flattened dioramas, arranged from collected grasses; they are redolent of Dürer's sensitively coloured natural history drawings. After all, de vries employs compositional motifs that find their origins from before the first clamourings of modernity.

Extending beyond *to be always to be*, in the Gerrit Rietveld designed pavilion in the Giardini, de vries' enquiries reach across the Venetian lagoon. Visitors are invited to share the artist's experience of



Lazzaretto Vecchio, an uninhabited island, which was once a quarantine area for plague victims. This offsite engagement, *natura mater*, seems to acknowledge and make peace with the site's painful past.

Running through *to be always to be* is a series of softly spoken invitations, in the form of constructed grids, journal pages and photographs; they are invitations to engage our senses directly with that which is around us. In essence, de vries employs the traditional tools of empirical, scientific enquiry, but first he strips away their modernist, teleological agendas. Around 1975, herman de vries' practice took a significant turn. He became dissatisfied with his capacity to represent the variety of experience presented to us. He chose to make unmediated material existence the only medium through which he sought creative expression. His message is gentle. It is not partisan, didactic or linked to the vagaries of fashion. He is adept too, in his use of beauty as an expressive tool, using it to draw attention to aspects of reality that might otherwise pass us by unnoticed. There is a disarming lack of difficulty in his work; what you see is what you get. In many ways, he is simply sharing his enthusiasm for the world in which we live.

We met at de vries' operational headquarters in Dorsoduro. The heavy door in Palazzo Nani Maocanigo creaked open and I entered a cool, dark Venetian interior and was ushered into the apartment's courtyard garden. Here de vries and his extensive entourage – which included ferociously territorial tortoises – were comfortably settled. He offered to create a *gesture* for a photograph. It was an act of pure generosity and, as with all his dealings, it was uncontrived. I began the conversation by asking him whether artists carry a particular responsibility to the society in which they function:

**herman de vries:** sure they do...

**Ric Bower:** Do you feel the burden of that? —→





**hdv:** no! oh no, it's not a burden; my engagement with what's around me and then with the work itself prevents it from being a burden.

**RB:** As part of *to be always to be*, you've been investigating the Venice lagoon – a strange environment both in its physicality and how humankind relate to it. What have you discovered?

**hdv:** i think it's very interesting to observe a few tiny islands in the marshlands, which have not just remained a place for fishermen and a few hardy duck hunters. instead they have evolved into an important and interesting city with a distinguished history. when looking around, everything we come across originates from the past, be it recent or the dim and distant; i found pieces of pottery that originate from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, byzantium. the history of the whole place is lying there under our feet. the rise in water level is a more recent and sinister development though...

**RB:** ...something for our children to worry about.

**hdv:** perhaps we need to be more imaginative in how we approach environmental problems. my friend visited rwanda; he was prevented from crossing the border into the country with the plastic bags he was carrying. they simply don't want any more plastic bags to come into rwanda. that is a fantastically brave approach and, surprise, surprise, it hasn't come from europe!

**RB:** The Dutch pavilion in the Giardini was built in 1953. It's been around almost exactly as long as you have been practising. It's stayed pretty much the same, whereas you are constantly evolving. The pavilion represents an alien geist, one of human and technological optimism, an outlook which is entirely foreign to us now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How do you relate to the building as a place to show work?

**hdv:** yes, i started working as an artist in '53. the '50s were a stupid and depressing time in my experience; everything was fixed, there was little political development. perhaps the pavilion does represent the zeitgeist of that time, but it is still a very good space to exhibit in now. the light is just fantastic!

**RB:** You began your career as a horticulturalist and a natural scientist. Was there a point when the processes of communication available within these traditions of enquiry were no longer sufficient to carry the ideas that you desired to express?

**hdv:** i can pinpoint the time exactly. i got hold of an old publication, a reprint of the journal *mammalia*. as i was holding it in my hand i can remember thinking that it's so partial, so one-sided. science has the capacity to enlarge our view of the world but it is also limited and limiting. i wanted to do something else beside science, so i started to work as an artist. i continued working at two scientific institutions for a while, but that came to an end. i found what happens on the borders, on

the fringes of societies, to be more important and interesting than what happens in the middle. there, at the edge, are the real developments, the genuine innovations, and i think the world that i had been inhabiting, scientifically speaking, was centrally situated.

in science you have to formulate postulates, and you need words to do this; sometimes though, ideas are simply not possible to express in words. art affords possibilities to make things visible without words. interpretations are open in the arts too; there is a certain freedom that this way of thinking affords.

**RB:** Do you think there is a parallel with the worlds of science and art, in that the most interesting things exist on the edge?

**hdv:** yes, of course. where else? perhaps the middle ground is necessary though, as a point of initial departure.

**RB:** Do you hold to a position that values complexity fundamentally? That reality – as we experience it – is irreducible? To me this position resonates with the interventions you initiate.

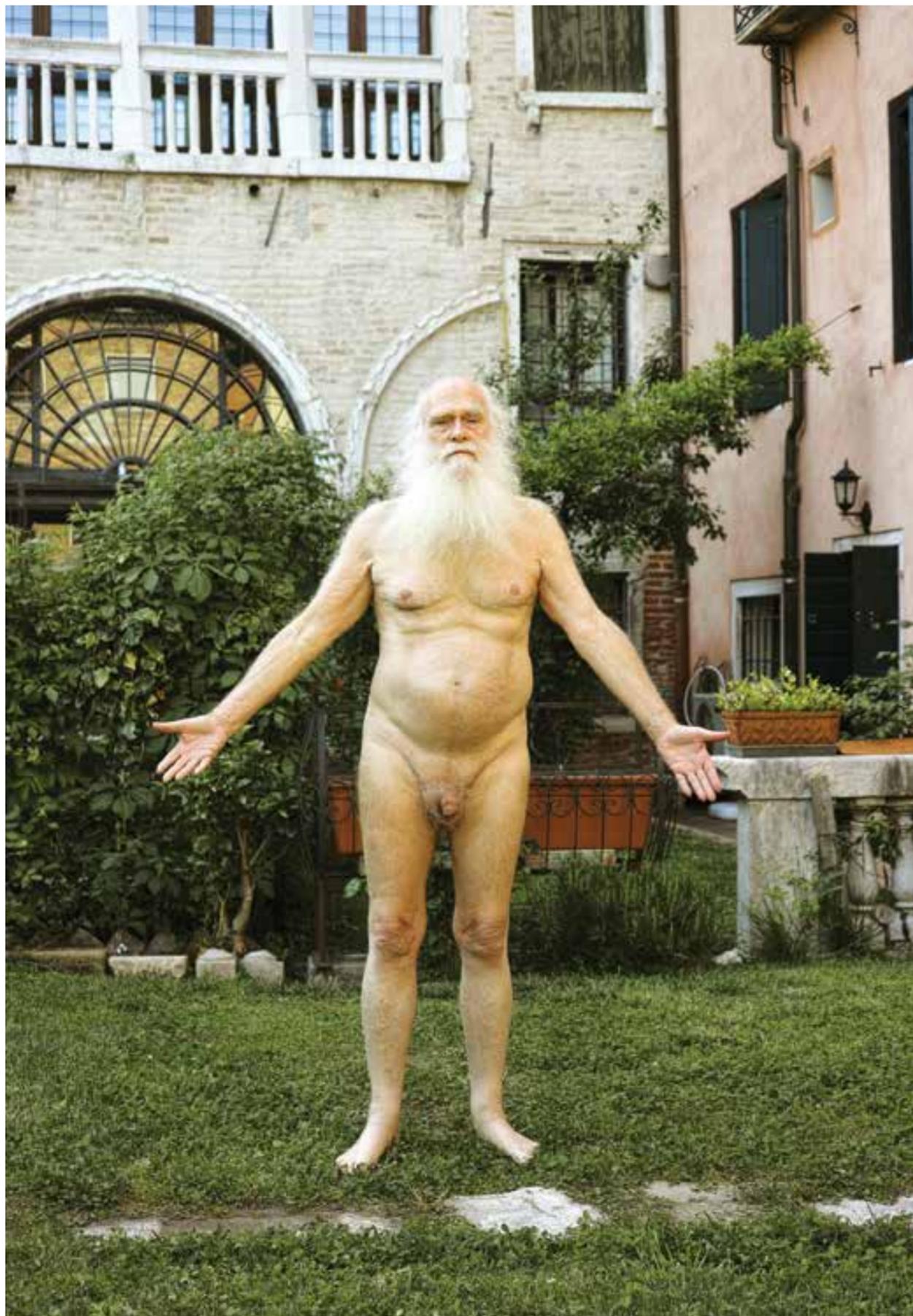
**hdv:** complexity, yes. things are complex, but complexity can be demonstrated in a simple way. how better to observe and experience a complex array of phenomena than as part of a totality? as i walked over the islands in the lagoon, i collected sample bags of the substratum they are made of. when i got home, i began to organise the samples

in glass frames. they seemed to almost compose themselves as i worked. the samples are all different and they display, in themselves, an encyclopaedic range of different information, but they also display a certain unity. these are the kind of complexities we walk over every day, but we are completely unaware of them. there is, fundamentally, both a homogeneousness and a heterogeneousness to our environment. when you first go into the pavilion you hear my voice, it says 'infinity', and then 'in...finitude', and then i say again 'infinity'. inside the word infinity is the word finitude. in the finitude represented by finitude you always find infinity and the finitude is always in that infinity. those words and the ideas they embody are utterly different, but still, they exist naturally together.

**RB:** Are we being offered a series of false dichotomies in our everyday understanding of these things? Should we choose not to choose, or to alternate focus, between simplicity and complexity, finitude and infinitude?

**hdv:** yes, my point is that it is with words that you separate these things from each other. language is a strong tool with which to analyse our environment, our life-space. We can manipulate with language, we can communicate with it, but at the same time we lose something with it too. it breaks the unity.

**RB:** What of the relationship between the work in the pavilion →



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freigestellt, herman de vries, 2014

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from the laguna of venice – a journal (detail), herman de vries, 2014

p36 & 37  
from the laguna of venice – a journal, herman de vries, 2014

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herman de vries: this is me, here i am, Ric Bower, 2015

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from the laguna of venice – a journal (detail), herman de vries, 2014

and *natura mater*, the work on the island? Can you explain the conversation between those created environments and how they work together?

**hdv:** *natura mater* is a building that is falling apart. nature has taken over, like nature always does. i hope it becomes a sanctuary, a space isolated from the influence of humanity, and that it can remain like this. i made a sanctuary on a traffic point in stuttgart once; there was a big iron fence around it and inside there was nothing. so the newspaper reported: 'we know what will happen, we know what will grow in this empty space... bad weeds!' my response to that was: 'yes, they will. the weeds are the pioneers.' a large part of europe was once wild forest. when a forest develops it can remain, self-sustaining, for thousands of years. parts of it can fall apart, but it will fill up again. the forest feeds itself; all the rotten woods are the food for the next plants - it is in a perpetual state of regeneration. i love forests. it's a different experience to walk in a forest than to walk through the streets of frankfurt or london.

**RB:** You use grids – human tools – to order your work. You also commissioned a custom font for the catalogue, font natura. How have

these structures and aesthetic traditions for ordering information worked their way into your practice?

**hdv:** a grid is the most efficient means by which to observe difference; it facilitates comparison. it is a scientific method, but it is also an aesthetic tool. my grids are always adapted, as such, to work within the context of a given show.

**RB:** The sickles and cutting hooks arranged in one of the grids in the pavilion, are visually aggressive; a very different aesthetic experience to viewing earth marks or stones arranged on top of posts.

**hdv:** you use the word 'aggressive' for the sickles. of course the sickle is aggressive; it's the tool with which we first tamed the environment. it's a very old tool too. at the beginning of our material culture it was just a stone with a sharpened edge. the sickle and the net are still in use now and those that use them have a close relationship to their harvests. the man who sits on the combine harvester with his ears protected has very little connection with what he is doing. the sickle represents the beginning of agriculture, and our culture is built up out of that, from



the possibilities offered by nature as a gift. spirituality too comes out of culture and that is another way to step away from direct experience. it's something like a photo; the photo is never what is photographed.

**RB:** There is a process of removal from the experience then?

**hdv:** that process of removal comes out of the movement 'zero'. zero is significant as a number; it is a gate. zero is a mode of being, of freedom and openness. i can return to zero and start again in any direction. remaining in zero is optimal being, the doors of perception are open. that's on my website by the way, *zero is the gate*; i don't use the internet though, i am still a primitive. in these modern times i cannot function on my own, but i'm fortunate enough to have ladies who help me. it's a luxury to be a primitive, you know. —**CCQ**

to be always to be is in the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale until 22 November 2015

[mondriaanfonds.nl/en/venice-biennale/](http://mondriaanfonds.nl/en/venice-biennale/)

[hermandevries.org](http://hermandevries.org)