

## **Mariejon de Jong-Buijs: "Life Is Better In The Country" – About Contemplative Creativity**

In the current cultural debate and art historical discourse, historically established narratives of art production, distribution, and hierarchies are rightly questioned and reevaluated. New work is created across conceptual, material, performative, and social practices.

In this context, it is important to reflect upon an artist who - at first sight - seems to confirm the traditional artistic narrative.

Mariejon de Jong-Buijs follows a very personal and consistent approach to making art. She is an individualist, very determined, and resistant to trends, tendencies, and categorization. That her work stands outside of currently celebrated painterly narratives - figuration and gesture - is testament to her independence. After working as a social worker for many years while pursuing her artistic practice at the same time, she started concentrating solely on making art a little more than a decade ago with a clear vision of what it means to be an artist and fully aware of the direction it would take her.

The artist's approach to her own work is systematic and is characterized by confidence and determination. She is fully aware of the history of painting and acknowledges it in her own practice. The point of departure in her artistic practice is always the act of painting itself. The act of painting, everything from choosing the material - canvas, pigments, colors, brushes - to the actual application of paint, is well planned, calculated, and documented. It is an archival process and a performance at once, from the conception to the finally installed work within the exhibition space.

Mariejon de Jong-Buijs questions traditional forms of presentation. Her paintings are abstract and she works large-scale; both characteristics of the minimalism of post-war US art. But does her artistic practice actually reaffirm this canonical reading? Looking upon her studio practice, her methodological approach, concept, and her installation practice, it becomes clear quite quickly that the artist subtly and with great determination questions and undermines this dominant narrative – without being political or programmatic.

Going beyond the political and leaving space to enjoy the esthetic qualities is Mariejon de Jong-Buijs' strength. The dynamic interplay between observing the world and simply being in it can be seen as one of the repeating themes of de Jong-Buijs' work. While she works closely in and with nature, she consequently resists imitating it. The vehicle for representation is color; importance is placed upon the pigment as the sole agent for conveying meaning.

The artist first and foremost plays with and challenges traditional modes of production and presentation. Painted canvas can 'land' anywhere, it can be everywhere, and is 'conditioned' to be perceived differently each time it is shown. She does not always work site-specific, but most of the time, the surrounding/environment is taken into consideration. If she works in a specific location, the work is then 'committed' for the time being, until it is taken away again. Space – that is melting of the work with the surroundings.

Before placing the first pigment on the canvas, de Jong-Buijs has been planning and thinking for months. She is not spontaneous; new ideas and projects instead develop slowly and with great care. Sometimes, she creates work for a specific space; on other occasions, she builds on a previous project to make something new.

Situation One: The artist finds herself on the family farm in the Netherlands with vintage farm equipment. She is of course familiar with life on the farm but now she sees the creative potential of the farm tools. For a while, she contemplates ways in which to make use of it for her work (2015). After attaching a tank for fertigation liquids filled with green paint to the back of an old tractor from the sixties, she carefully drives over a 50m long stretch of canvas, which she had already laid out on a field. The paint, leaking from the small holes of a pipe attached to the tank, left irregular fine green lines on the canvas. De Jong-Buijs drove back and forth across the canvas multiple times, which created a dense pattern of lines. Months later, this work found a new temporary home in the Kunsthalle Basel in the monumental stairwell, covering a large-scale 19<sup>th</sup> century wall painting. Only 10 meters of canvas are actually visible, 15 meters loosely draped on the floor for the viewers to speculate upon its actual

size. (De Jong-Buijs actually made three canvasses of each 50 meters, two with green and one with blue paints. The piece that was shown in Kunsthalle consists of four canvasses, each 25 meters long. While she cut the green work, the blue one of 50 meters (over which she actually drove in zigzag pattern), kept its original length).

Situation Two: The artist is invited to participate in a group show in a 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois villa in Basel (2021). Instead of looking at the different rooms and choosing the best space to display her latest work, de Jong-Buijs falls in love with the romantic, slightly overgrown garden with large evergreens, beautiful flowers, grapevines, a little wooden shed, shrubs, and weeds. This garden has also become the temporary home to two beehives. She immediately decided to create a project for it: "Flowers for the bees" – 15 double-sided brightly colored (stretched) canvases are then placed all over in the garden for five weeks. A beekeeper's suit helped to protect Mariejon de Jong-Buijs to install and maintain "Flowers for the Bees". A beautiful green refuge in the middle of the city became home to an interplay between brightly colored, multi-dimensional canvases and nature! Bees, slugs, snails, spiders, and birds; sun, rain, wind; people touching the canvases, turning them around or carrying them different places in the garden. The installation becomes interactive, participation of the visitors becomes mandatory. This beautiful installation, - or better called a biological and artistic experiment in the garden -, those 30 unstretched canvases have now become "raw material" for a new work.

Situation Three: The artist is asked to install a work in the smallest exhibition space in Basel – PAN (2021). Originally intended for advertising displays mounted on the wall of an apartment building in a residential city neighborhood, this small showcase is a rather restrictive box. For de Jong-Buijs, it is a welcome installational challenge. This vitrine lends itself perfectly to be a temporary container for a 10 meter long painted canvas. It was originally created over a period of eight days in her New Jersey backyard and travelled (folded in a box) overseas to the Netherlands. (It was then installed for the first time in an outdoor exhibition at Fort Sabina, built in 1811 by order of Napoleon). The size of the exhibition space was the deciding factor for what to show. Instead of creating a smallish work especially for the vitrine, de Jong-Buijs takes one of her larger canvases, folds and stacks it so that bulges of colored canvas become visible. Albeit, a lot remains hidden. Foldings interrupt the flatness, volume is compressed so that painting appears as a pliable, packable commodity, but at the same time can be read as an unpacked and exposed painting in process.

These three situations bring to the point de Jong-Buijs' artistic strategies. The artist is not dependent on time and place. De Jong-Buijs takes her work off the wall, folds it, and packs it up. It sometimes travels distances by post, in suitcases, or in overseas containers. It remains packed in a box and awaits reuse. Once the opportunity arises, the canvas reappears, ready to be part of a new project. Folded or unfolded, her boldly colored works can be taken and displayed anywhere in the world, regardless of space and time, regardless of where she is coming from or where she is heading. She makes generous use of this possibility and her flexibility invites people to think about making art in new ways.

The dimensions of de Jong- Buijs' canvases can literally push all boundaries. Often, she is unable to build actual stretchers for her oversized canvases. She is forced to find creative ways to prepare them to be painted, like hanging them up between two trees, mounting them on the wall of a building, etc. Furthermore, most of the time, it is physically impossible to present it in its entirety, stretched out in a traditional way of presentation. Instead, the large canvases get folded, collapsed, hung up with one clip each only, like in "Repetition 9". The effect is sculptural, going beyond the definition of the medium.

Taking away the boundaries between the actual work itself and the surrounding space is what the artist works towards. It merges with its surroundings and the traditional categories of painting and sculpture seem to be dissolving into one.

For someone who only takes a casual look at her artistic practice, de Jong-Buijs seems to maintain a very detached and relaxed attitude towards making art. However, appearances are deceptive. The act of applying paint on canvas and the traces it leaves need careful planning. The documentation of the development and progression of a new 'project', as she calls it, is essential. The final material 'product', such as one or several painted canvases, is only a small part of the work – the process, the presentation - and often its reconfiguration - are at least as important.

The artist takes painting – concept, process, and outcome – to the next level. Never the same tools, never the same place, and hardly ever the same painting process lead to very different results each time. To make “Accumulated Experiences” (2015), she is sitting on a vintage tractor. For her last big New Jersey work, she utilized different tools every day, for example - a large (cleaning) brush, a back sprayer, a broom, a variety of larger paintbrushes - and, of course - large-scale canvases, installed in the woods behind her New Jersey studio (2020). To paint the canvases, she worked with her entire body, like a wall painter, a crafts person. Again, it is the physicality of the process that fascinates her and gives her satisfaction.

For de Jong-Buijs, essence and substance of painting are color. In gambling that exclusively color - to the virtual exclusion of other constituents of a painter's tool box - could carry her art, she builds it up in layers with an expressive immediacy. In so doing, she enables her work to become a material record of its own making and, perhaps, an inscription of her thoughts. The colors, which are applied in layers, are chosen carefully to interact, but not interfere. The different colors remain visible to re-assert their existence.

The set-up of exhibitions is an elementary component of the artistic work of Mariejon de Jong-Buijs. The artist moves herself and her works with great care and reflection in the exhibition space to place them. Even if the selection, series, and spatial sequences are determined in advance, the actual constellations of the works can only be figured out in the space. It is of the essence that the work “functions” in and with the space. Making a work as well as placing it in the space is just like performance. The exhibition, like the work is just as much an expression of a moment that captures de Jong-Buijs thinking and seeing her own work in a new way. She creates an open and free space between the viewers and her works, in which the work meets the audience at eye level.

Once an exhibition has come to an end, the canvases are folded and packed, taken away to the next exhibition, stored, shipped, and retrieved and shown somewhere else. Or they are transformed into something new. Once the project is complete, the artist moves on to the next, but sometimes, the previous project rests in a box in her studio to be reactivated and brought to life again.

Dr. Isabel Balzer (Art Historian and Curator), Basel 2022