

**A conversation between
Lennart Lahuis and Alex Farrar**

Alex Farrar: Hi Lennart, I hope you don't mind me suggesting to Jaring [Dürst Britt] & Alexander [Mayhew] that we have this conversation. After sharing a gallery for the past five years, it seems like there has never been an opportunity to talk to you about your work, so I jumped on this one! There was a word Jaring once used that I've been trying to remember, he was talking about how we were both 'water lovers'. No, that doesn't sound right! 'Lovers-of-water? I've found 'thalassophiles', but I think that only concerns loving the sea!

Lennart (L): Thank you for taking this initiative, and also for adding a new word to my vocabulary, 'thalassophiles'. I remember Jaring saying that in relation to your show at Bloc Projects in Sheffield where you flooded the gallery space. I wish I could have seen that, it looked really intriguing. And likewise, I was also looking forward to getting a chance to talk to you a bit more in-depth!

A: Great, let's start then! I want to talk with about Willem Hussem's work, which you will be showing with in Turin, but first I want to get into this 'appearing and disappearing' act that is such a big part of your practice. Maybe we could do that by talking about the works you've been sharing online recently: When is it that we feel change in the air. They are so god-damn intriguing. The text on your website links it quickly to environmental causes. They seem to be made with equipment that is domestic (like trash cans), but also include industrial objects that we may in the near future be required to have at home, like pneumatic pumps, large water barrels, and water boilers. The custom-made crates talk about the lives of artworks, constantly traveling, but they double as vitrines, suggesting a museum display. They invite a lot of questions, whilst at the same time, they seem to make sense. Like I couldn't imagine the world without them. I don't really know what I am asking you, and I don't know if I want to know more to be honest. Maybe just out of curiosity, do you feel like these works are particularly successful, or are they just the beginning of an engagement with this technology?

L: I like your perspective on these 'industrial' objects and their possible use in a domestic setting in the future. These works were shown in Le Grand-Hornu, a museum on the Belgian-French border. It is a former mining complex that is renovated to house a museum for contemporary art and design. During the industrial revolution it was, among other things, a factory for the design and production of steam machines. I was invited to participate in an exhibition there that dealt with water in relation to the climate crisis. The climate crisis and the industrial revolution are completely intertwined of course.

So I included archival material of the museum's past as a site for the design and production of mining equipment next to my own 'steam machines' that asked the open question 'when is it that we feel change in the air'.

A: Are you interested in saying something specific with these works?

L: When collaborating with the graphic designers on my new website I identified with their way of working. Their job was to create an environment that responds to and can accommodate content, from typeface to lay-out. I think that is an important part of what I do as well. First I invent a new technique to process information, that often has to do with decay and/or disappearance. And only afterwards do I choose the texts and/or images I want to work with. This choice for subject matter is always made in close relation to the techniques that I develop to process information. That also makes for a more complex relationship to the subjects I work with, it is never just 'about' something. Can you relate to that somehow?

A: I can relate to your questioning, experimental approach to content, though I still struggle with the language that we use to differentiate content from form, or material. The more I've messed around with them the more I've realized they are all the same thing. That's why I think the 'steam' pieces are so successful for me, they are perfectly coherent as objects.

L: I understand your hesitance regarding the differentiation between content and form, I would prefer to say content and medium, form is too much wrapped up with 20th century art for me. But you're right, it can be more helpful to stay away from those terms. I want to let the words and images I work with speak together with the ways in which they are reproduced. I think it creates more open-ended forms of reading and understanding.

A: From your website it's clear that you are thinking about how we consume information/content: text is formatted in a way that disrupts the casual 'scrolling' one does without thinking, you have to slow down and in fact stop for it to gradually appear legible. Whilst looking through your previous works, I am wondering if the gesture of 'reappearance' is a relatively new development for you? Your wallpapers, burned works and images behind wax, deteriorate, are partially destroyed or hidden from view in a way that challenges the viewer-object relation. There's something different about the drive to make things 'reappear' isn't there?

L: I think that's true. It's still on the spectrum between appearance and disappearance, but it's not one movement from one to the other anymore or frozen like my wall paper works / wax works / burnt and

restored prints, it is continuous now. Time and duration has actually become part of the work recently.

A: Whereas the processes you used in the past demonstrated natural processes of deterioration/entropy, the 'steam' pieces are locked in a cycle of perpetual rebirth, which taps into something different and alluring.

I studied the documentation on your website again this morning. It's hard to tell how quickly they loop, or whether it is just the video looping. The effect is strangely calming to watch, reassuring. Was there a 'tone' or 'feeling' that you were looking for, or that spoke to you when you found it? And is it actually steam? Does it emit heat?

L: I don't think I am supposed to call it steam, technically it is called something else, because there is no heat involved. I always forget what the technical term is. And yes, the videos are looped, it's more or less the same rhythm as it would be in real life. The rhythm is determined by the work itself, by timing. I work with milliseconds to make the text appear. The difference between 45 and 50 milliseconds has a big impact on the readability of the words for example. The steam also needs enough time to dissolve in between the 'breaths'. The result happens to be a calm rhythm in which the words appear.

A: It also speaks to a kind of 'magic' or 'surreality'. I saw the word 'magic' used on your website (by someone else), how do you feel about this word?

L: Personally I feel like it is a word you are supposed to be weary of as an artist in relation to your work. Because the connotation is that you are developing tricks, and tricks are cheap. But for me magic, when successful, creates an encounter with something we cannot grasp. Making objects that are impossible to grasp really fascinates me too. It is a powerful idea and an important part of experience to me that I try to apply to my work.

A: I don't know if I'm ready to get into a discussion about the philosophy of magic, but I will say that yours is an apparently honest one, you show your working, you expose the mechanics of the trick. My favourite books by B.S Johnson do a similar thing with the novel: the author constructs and deconstructs plots and characters simultaneously, breaking the fourth wall constantly, whilst somehow maintaining a narrative. You would think that would make the telling of a story and the reader's investment in it impossible, but somehow it does the opposite. When you share how vulnerable our illusions are, it makes you care about them more, because in that moment we become conscious of their value.

L: That sounds like a writer I should read, its spot on, thanks for sharing!! Here are some poems by Willem Hussem by the way, including my own translations; Can you let me know how you read them? I couldn't come up with another word for 'einder' in the last poem, I chose skyline, what do you think?

het zou een bloem kunnen zijn
it could be a flower
maar het is geen bloem
but it is not a flower
het zou mist kunnen zijn
it could be mist
maar het is geen mist
but it is not mist
het komt te middernacht
it comes at midnight
een droom van het voorjaar
a dream of spring
het verdwijnt in de ochtend
it disappears in the morning
een oplossende wolk
a dissolving cloud
je zult het nergens tegenkomen
you won't happen upon it anywhere

bedwingt de kust
the shore restrains
de aanrollende golven
the rolling waves
de schaduw van
the shadow of
de naderende wolken
approaching clouds
houdt zij niet tegen
she can not stop

de wolken dalen op de waterspiegel
the clouds descend on the water table
zij wandelen langzaam naar de kust
they walk slowly to the shore
en vallen daar in diepe slaap
and fall into a deep sleep
ik heb geen voetbreed zicht
I have not a foot of sight
mijn spoor zelfs kan ik niet meer lezen
Even my trail I can read no more

De veerman vaart mij over
the ferryman sails me across
Steeds dichterbij wordt de mist
the fog grows denser and denser
Hoe bereiken wij de andere oever
how do we reach the other shore

avond zet
evening makes
de polder blank
the polder flood
huizen komen
houses start
te drijven
to float
rijen bomen
rows of trees
zweven naar
glide towards
de einder
the horizon
het land lost op
the land dissolves
in nevel
in mist

A: Wow. What a great selection! I saw the word 'einder' in the last poem. The translation is still not as good as the original. Horizon suggests slightly more of a boundary than skyline to me, which has more modern connotations with urban landscapes.

L: Thanks though, the horizon is already better. If I think about it visually then trees become smaller in the distance through perspective. The poetry of the sentence for me is that he suggests that they don't just get smaller, but that they glide towards 'the end', the horizon. Einder is an old Dutch word that would translate like something as 'at the end'. I wondered if there is an English equivalent for that.

A: I couldn't think of one, but 'at the end'... as I've come back to it, works well too.

I get the impression that in your work you use language in the same way as you use images, they are an equal form of communication. Have you ever considered your practice in purely linguistic terms? For example when it appears as a list of exhibitions or works?

L: I do use images similarly to language, that's right, I see them both as materials, that I connect to natural processes. I am interested in balancing the fine line between readability and formlessness, to capture a moment where an image or word only briefly communicates before it disappears back into nothingness, to make the construction of meaning a temporary performance. I think this is also why I never considered my practice purely linguistically, the opposite I would say. Language needs a carrier which by definition is material, whether they be vocal cords, a screen, a book or an exhibition wall. I am interested in the material conditions for language to perform its role as a signifier. The same counts for images.

I re-read the text for your first exhibition at the gallery in which you talk about open-endedness being an important part of your work. Do you still identify with that?

A: Open-endedness is still everything to me! I've been thinking about it recently in relation to 'ellipses' ... which can be used to communicate unfinished thoughts, open invitations and things that are difficult to put into words.

A: I wonder if we share an idea of art as a performative act – an interest in what it does in space. A 'temporary performance' to use your expression.

L: Yes, absolutely. Besides considering the construction of meaning as a performative act, I am also fascinated by what texts and images really DO, how they transform and integrate, melt and evaporate.

A: I just realised that I haven't actually asked you what you are showing at Artissima. Are you reusing all of the steam making machines from previous installations? Do you know what text you will use?

L: Yes, it will be the same installation as in Le Grand-Hornu. The sentence 'when is it that we feel change in the air' will remain the same. I will choose two of Willem Hussem's poems to print them on top of the 'technical drawings' that were part of the installation in Le Grand-Hornu. These images were printed on the foam that is part of the transport case. I will pour resin with a white pigment on those images before printing the poems on top. That will place the images more to the background and in a fog that is similar to my 'wax works'.

A: So the origins of the works site-specificity are not being erased but they are receding into the background, it suggests to me their displacement and 'second act'. It's a very poetic and honest way of dealing with the works' history.

L: Yes, that is exactly what is happening. Including the works' history was also informed by me not being able to and subsequently not wanting to use new materials. When I was looking for the same foam that I worked with before, I realised that there was a shortage of it, it was difficult to find. You might have read about the global shortage of construction materials recently (among other things), and this is one of those materials. That made me want to recycle the materials that I use, and as an effect, not erase the history of it, but let it be part of the work.

A: Maybe this is another conversation for later Lennart but I would love to talk to you about your relationship with site-specificity.

L: Some of my works are site-specific because they use the walls and floors of the exhibition space as a carrier. I started doing that to connect my work to the time

frame of an exhibition and not let my work exist in a material form outside of that. And more recently the context in which my work was shown was instrumental for the source material I worked with. It informed which texts and images I wanted to process with the techniques that I developed. That is the 'second act' of how site-specificity became part of my work.

Both the 'water texts' and the steam pieces are more 'time-specific'. They always change. It challenges the idea that the viewer always gets to see the work, because the work has its own timing. And that, to me, is an integral part of the work, the 'information' not always being instantly accessible. I always fear that my fascination with this might frustrate people in the same way that a temporary disruption of your internet connection is annoying, you disengage and move on.

A: As we've been talking I've been thinking about how the instability or changeability or temporality of your works is something that, coming out of the pandemic I am much more drawn to in my own work. I wonder/suspect/hope that the audience you will meet will be open to the idea that something changes. Isn't the alternative at odds with the times we're living through?

L: Well, I must also admit that in general the response to these works are very positive.

It's just that an important part of my work is that it records its own erasure, to let duration affect visibility and readability. After a few hours of the steam objects continuously working, the surfaces on which the words appear do start to clog a little bit and the text becomes less readable for example. This creates a tension with the very idea of exhibiting. That is when I fear that the viewer might disengage, although it is an integral part of the work for me. It's a paradox, on the one hand I am working with disappearance and impermanence and on the other I want to have complete control over that process.

A: What responses have you had to the open question 'when is it that we feel change in the air'?

L: Someone asked me why I used 'we' instead of 'you' or 'I'. Besides the sentence losing some of its beauty if I do that, it was also self-evident to me when you start thinking about changes that (should) happen on a scale that is 'supra-individual' or that take more than a lifetime to take place. What was your first response?

A: I think online I first experienced it as fragments of the question: 'when is it' emerging from an industrial sized kettle, 'feel change' coming out of what looks like a trash can, they're beautifully abstracted, I think I probably had more questions than answers! Looking at it again just now, I realised that there's no question mark, so actually it doesn't ask for a response, it is a statement.

Do you know what works by Hussem the gallery will show in Turin?

L: They made a selection of paintings, most of them with an emphasis on lines and cloud-like forms. The compositions seem to slowly drift outside the canvas, they suggest movement. They really remind me of those early abstract animations by Mary Ellen Bute, like Tarantella. As if his paintings are stills from ever-changing compositions that communicate in a form of morse code that I cannot read. The lines seem to be organised according to a logic that escapes me. A little bit like his poems, there is always a certain logic, a matter-of-factness, that at the same time is difficult to grasp.

A: The first thing I think about in relation to Hussem's work is music. I can see the connection with Japanese calligraphy, that's clear, but his use of colour suggests to me Kandinsky's influence, they could be synesthetic visions. Did Hussem ever publish writing on art or about his own work? Did he use language poetically to title his works?

L: Yes he did! Several times in the 50s he wrote texts about modern art. He also gave a radio-interview in 1956 about the similarities between Rembrandt and modern painters. When it comes to titles, I've read that after the mid 50's he referred to most of his paintings as "Compositions". This was apparently because he didn't want to influence the viewer too much while looking at his pieces; titles contain words, and words are loaded with meaning. In his poems an anonymous painter sometimes comes to the stage. Only on a few occasions does he seem to allow his personal perspective about making art to be part of his writing. For example;

je schildert je schrijft

you paint you write

je vindt een weg

you find a way

naar de weg zonder einde.

to a road without end.

A: Talk about open-endedness.

L: It was part of a selection of poems that I made when I started thinking about this duo presentation, but it gets an entirely new meaning after our conversation. Thank you for this!

A: Amazing, thank you for sharing Lennart! Let's keep talking now!

Alex Farrar (UK, 1986) studied at Leeds College of Art (2006), Leeds Metropolitan University (2009), Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam (2010), and completed a residency at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam in 2016. Recent solo exhibitions include '56 risks, 55 risks transferred...' at vaga, São Miguel, the Azores (2021); 'Fall, slump, drop on a bedside cabinet in water...' at Bloc Projects, Sheffield (2019); 'Ecstatic, darkling with...' at Dürst Britt & Mayhew, the Hague (2019). Recent and forthcoming exhibitions include 'Raw' at Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam (2021–2022); 'On Happiness' at SEA Foundation, Tilburg (2021–2022); Walk&Talk 10, in São Miguel, the Azores (2021).