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ARTIST INTERVIEWS WITH SJOERD BUISMAN

The oeuvre interview conducted with Sjoerd Buisman in 1998 was followed up ten years later with a case interview about the 'planting piece' *Dennenwal* from the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum. Living material such as trees, grasses and potatoes, which frequently recurs in the work of Buisman, is a challenging phenomenon in the practice of conservation. This article pays in-depth attention to the dilemmas with regard to the behaviour of this material and the preservation of the artwork. What is the essence of artworks that are constantly changing and eventually may die? Buisman's answers offer new perspectives on his artwork, lending a substantive value to the interview, which will have to be examined critically with a view to the conservation practice. Both the interviews show that the artist provides varying interpretations depending on the changing manifestations of his work. In his eyes, every appearance is right. For the conservator, this creates a nearly impossible task because conservation and an unrestrained process seem to exclude each other. Even so, it would be desirable to guide the artwork's development, because the degree to which this happens determines the artwork's future appearances. The interviews show how the artist himself would care for the work and what advice he gives for the future. And that is when the conservator's real work begins: this information will have to be valued and weighed against other options and interests.

THE ARTIST

Sjoerd Buisman (Gorinchem, 1948) is a Dutch representative of the Land Art movement with projects in which he manipulates and controls the growth of young plantings and trees. Sculptures by Buisman in plant material, wood, bronze, steel and paper pulp are represented in many museum and private collections and in public space.

THE INTERVIEWS

Both interviews took place in Amsterdam in the artist's studio. The oeuvre interview took place on December 3, 1998 and the case interview on one specific work, the planting piece *Dennenwal*, on November 22, 2008. This article addresses both the oeuvre interview and the case interview. The main subjects of both interviews are the treatment of variable work and the role of the artist and the conservator in this.

THE INTERVIEWERS

OEUVRE INTERVIEW: IJsbrand Hummelen, senior research conservator Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands | RCE.

Simone Vermaat, collections curator Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands | RCE.

CASE INTERVIEW ON *DENNENWAL*: Ellen Jansen and Diederik Kits Nieuwenkamp, at that time both students in Conservation and Restoration of Contemporary Art at the University of Amsterdam.

Sanneke Stigter, lecturer and programme leader of the MA Conservation in Contemporary Art at the University of Amsterdam and at that time also conservator at the Kröller-Müller Museum.

The Artist Interview as a Conservation Tool for Process-Based Art by Sjoerd Buisman

SANNEKE STIGTER

Introduction

Sjoerd Buisman's work lends itself well for an analysis of the role of the artist interview as a tool in the conservation of contemporary art because the essence of his work concerns processes. Art of a dynamic nature requires a different conservation strategy than art consisting of static objects. Buisman, who is internationally counted as one of the Land Art artists, draws inspiration from the natural process of growth and decay. In 1985 he and David Nash made a number of 'planting pieces' in the National Park The Hoge Veluwe, commissioned by the Kröller-Müller Museum.

In 1998 an extensive interview was conducted with Sjoerd Buisman on the basis of various representative works from his oeuvre. In 2008, exactly ten years later, he was interviewed again and this time about one single artwork. Both types of interviews therefore provide excellent material for comparison with regard to the interview methodology. What can we learn from the 'oeuvre interview' and what from the 'case interview'? The first extensive interview was studied thoroughly, not only for the content, but also and in particular for the interview techniques, the chemistry between artist and interviewers and the final outcomes. The second interview, about the planting piece *Dennenwal*, is used in this article to address the role of the interview as a tool for the conservation practice. It was interesting to notice that during the interview, an increasing number of new ideas were formulated.

I. Oeuvre Interview

The oeuvre interview in 1998 starts around the table. This set-up has a positive effect on the concentration of the people involved and leads to substantively well-defined statements. The visual material the interviewers have selected from books clearly works as a trigger. The interviewers ask Buisman to describe his own work on the basis of this material, which gives him the opportunity to highlight the key aspects of his work in his own words. In between questions the interviewers take time to draw up a good summary, enabling the artist to add topics that he considers important, but that have not yet been raised. The second part of the interview mainly provides new visual information, especially about his working environment, i.e. the studio. The additional value of a filmed interview becomes clear when Buisman shows his sketchbook, which provides new insights into his thinking and working methods. (SEE STILLS PAGE 32)

The opening question is a short and successful one because of the way it is posed. Only the subject is stated, followed by a moment of silence, which intensifies the concentration and is then followed by a short, open question, 'A planting piece (pause) – what is that?' The artist fires away immediately. What follows is a wonderful description in which he summarises the essence of his work. Then he goes a step further and touches on the conservation issues because of the obvious field of tension between the intended decay and the question whether or not to intervene in order to ensure that the process-based nature of the work remains visible. Although the interviewer is tempted to discuss this subject more thoroughly, he follows the interview scenario and takes the artist back to the beginning, to the creation process.



Scenario

According to the interview scenario, the interviewer should investigate the creative process and the intention of the work as thoroughly as possible before entering into conservation issues. The carefully structured scenario ensures that no solutions can be discussed before the underlying idea of the work is elucidated. A good understanding of the artwork facilitates better solutions to restoration options and makes the interview more valuable for the future. Running from broad to specific, the structure of this scenario does not always appear applicable to an extensive oeuvre interview. Beginning the interview by discussing the example works in general terms and saving the crucial questions about the various artworks until the end stage of the interview, does not always work out well. When the people involved start to lose their concentration, the time for intensive questioning has passed and it might become impossible to return to the conservation issues concerning the example works with the same intensity. The relationship between the creation process, content, materials, desirable appearance, expectations for the future and potential opportunities with respect to conservation can therefore better be addressed per individual artwork.

It is remarkable that in the oeuvre interview with Buisman, the artist himself raises the issue of conservation immediately after the opening question, something that tends to happen more often in an interview focused on conservation. According to the scenario this would be too soon, reason why the issue was not really entered into right away, but when the core is brought up earlier than planned, the interviewer may grasp the opportunity immediately. Advancing insight has revealed that the interviewer may depart from the scenario if an important subject presents itself earlier than planned. It is always possible to return to important issues when their planned phase in the scenario has been reached. In fact, this might even be recommended, because discussing subjects for a second time in the same interview may sharpen insights.

Conservation by Repetition

Sjoerd Buisman expresses his views eloquently and lucidly. The interviewers understand him well, and the ideas underlying his work are put forward clearly.

About *Phototropic Growth Object* (1969) [FIGURES 1 - 2]:

Buisman ‘You can see it as an installation. The process is important, so a bowl of dried grass, such as you may have (at RCE), with or without soil, that’s not the work. You have to tackle that work; you need to do something with it if you want to show it. What you’re doing is conserving it, but nothing happens with it.’

IJsbrand Hummelen responds, ‘No, because conserving it may precisely consist in repeating it.’

Buisman agrees, ‘That’s the whole point with these works. Allowing the work to function is repeating the process, yes.’

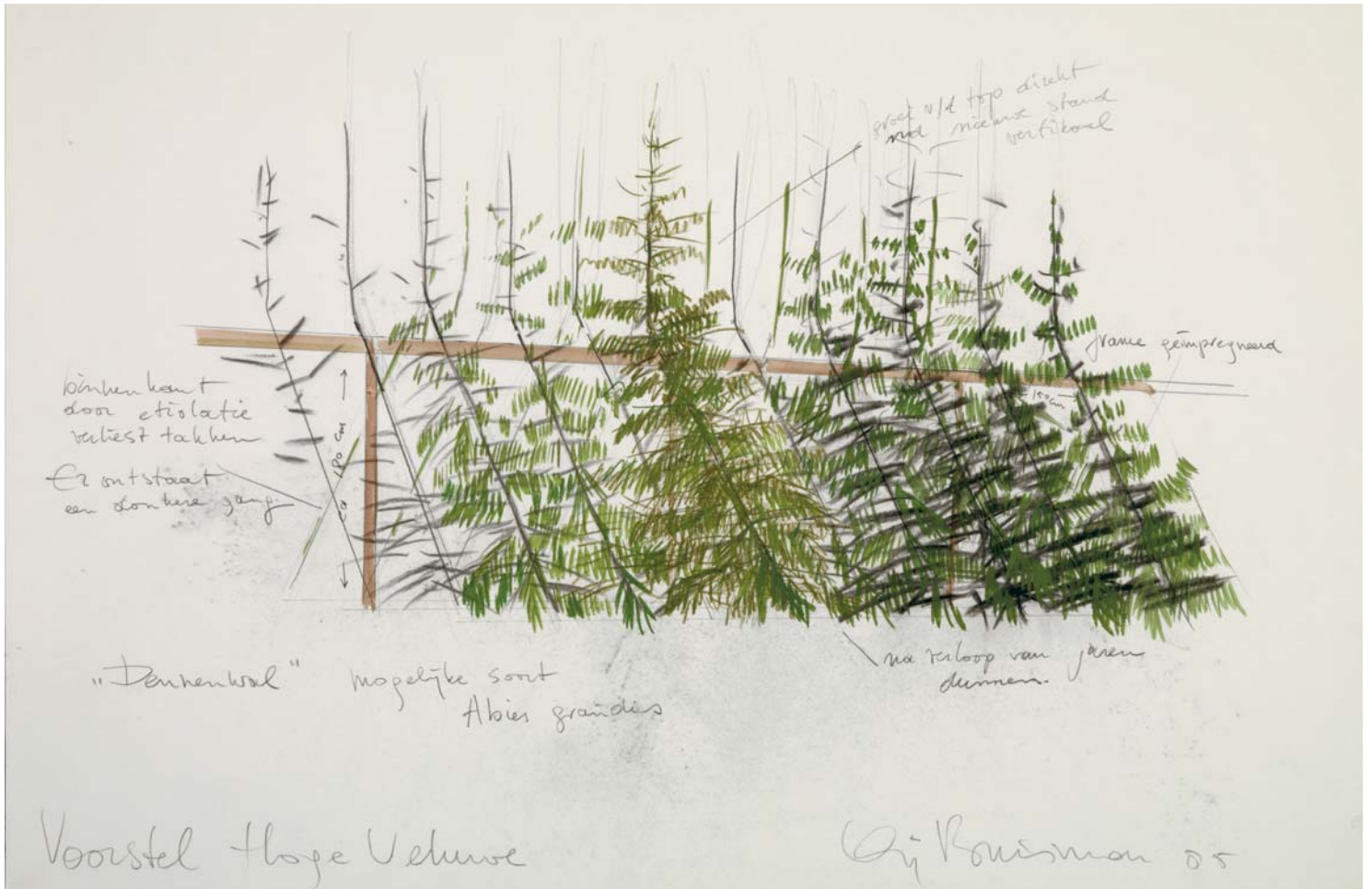
Here it becomes clear what exactly the ‘conservation’ of this work should entail. However, the stage at which the growth sculptures on display stop functioning, i.e. the moment when the repetition should be started, is not stated explicitly. The artist says to be willing to think along with the interviewers about the survival of his work, but the question how his work would have to function if the artist were not available for consultation, for example after his death, is not discussed in concrete terms.

FIGURE 1 *Phototropic Growth Object* (1969), glass-fibre reinforced polyester, metal, neon, soil, wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), 90 x 250 x 80 cm in display. Cultural Heritage Agency | RCE.

PHOTO Sjoerd Buisman, Ateliers '63, Haarlem, 1969

FIGURE 2 components of *Phototropic Growth Object*, 90 x 80 x 75 cm each part. Not installed as artwork.

PHOTO Theo Bos, Cultural Heritage Agency | RCE, Rijswijk, 2001



Interview vs Conversation

Buisman actually sees something beautiful in every problem. In a lyrical tone of voice, he talks about one of his works rotting away, a process in which he sees beauty.

Buisman ‘This finiteness is important to me. I find this dying process so beautiful. And the smell of this rotting process ... So, I do attribute quite a lot of things to the artwork along the way!’

He then continues by stating that there comes a point when he’s had enough of the rotting process. In response, the interviewer jokes,

‘And for how long should it go on then?’

upon which both the interviewers and the artist burst out laughing. The question remains unanswered. Without anyone noticing it, the interview has developed into a pleasant conversation in which some questions remain unanswered although just now one of the key elements of the conservation issues has cropped up. As an interviewer, you have to be aware of the pitfalls that arise in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, and always try to make key issues explicit. This is not always easy as it is also important to maintain the sociable atmosphere during the conversation. It might well be that a friendly atmosphere demands an even greater commitment of the interviewers to stick to their roles.

II. Case Interview

The second interview with Sjoerd Buisman addresses one single artwork: *Dennenwal*, a planting piece of Norwegian spruces planted in 1985 at a specific spot in National Park *The Hoge Veluwe*. This time, the discussion is focused on the possible future of the artwork after the death of the artist.

Archival Research and Condition Assessment

In the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum are design drawings of *Dennenwal* with important notes scribbled on them. They say, for example, that the tree trunks will lose interior branches ‘through etiolation’, a disturbance in the growth process caused by the absence of light, which will lead to the creation of a ‘dark tunnel’ [FIGURE 3]. In addition, the archives contain notes addressing this subject: ‘[...] The *Dennenwal* consists of evergreen pines, planted over a length of 55 metres, at an angle of $\pm 45^\circ$, on either side of a yoke. The tops of these pines lean against the yoke at a height of ± 1.80 metres, where they will be fixed. This will cause a vertical correction of the growth process from the yoke. A dark hallway will form under the yoke. The aim is to create a monumentally grown volume that because of the tree species will manifest itself in the landscape as a wall of trees, forever green, with an intriguing dark inner space.’¹

In art historical research, much value is attached to the kind of source material from which this quote is taken, since it contains the earliest data about the artwork. Hence, these are considered the most ‘legitimate’ facts. Examination of the artwork itself, however, tells us different things, namely that the dark corridor never really came into being because the curvature of the tree trunks is too low [FIGURE 4]. This leads us to believe that the yoke never was 1.80 metres tall. Photographs of the creative process indeed show that the yoke’s maximum height had been 1.50 metres. Meanwhile, the wooden yoke has been removed. A large number of trees have disappeared, leaving gaps in the row of trees. Because of this, the title *Dennenwal*, or ‘spruce wall’, does not really fit the work anymore. Besides, there are also less healthy, dried-up trees, which have a disturbing effect on the intended green character. As the current condition of the work seems to contradict the artist’s intention stated in the archives, the question arises whether the work still functions as intended. The interview attempts to find answers to this.

FIGURE 3 *Dennenwal*, 1985, charcoal, chalk, pencil and water-colour on paper, 75 x 100.4 cm. ‘Inside: loss of branches caused by etiolation. A dark passage way is formed.’ PHOTO Kröller-Müller Museum.

FIGURE 4 *Dennenwal*, 1985, Picea abies, about 55 metres long. Kröller-Müller Museum, National Park *The Hoge Veluwe*. Visible are the curvature of the tree trunks, a low inner area between the tree trunks, the open spaces in the row of trees, dead trees and the path that has formed along the trees.

PHOTO Sanneke Stigter, Kröller-Müller Museum, November 21, 2008



Discrepancy

The discrepancy between the characteristics described initially and the current condition of the artwork can be interpreted as a serious conservation problem. However, a more careful investigation of the artwork reveals that some of the original features entered in the notes have not fully been incorporated into the realisation of the work from the start. The notes therefore convey more about the mindset of the artist at the time of the creative process rather than of the final artwork itself. Moreover, quite in keeping with the character of a planting piece, *Dennenwal* has gone its own way.

During the interview, recent photographs of the work are shown; the condition of the work is deliberately not touched upon in order to gauge the artist's response as neutrally as possible.

Buisman 'Well, I think they're looking quite good. It looks as if a few are still missing. The gaps have become bigger. ... But I really do like it very much, you know.'

In connection to what the preliminary research revealed, Buisman's reaction is surprising. Therefore, the interviewers continue questioning. Buisman confirms that there is no dark passage way in the wall of trees, but that over time a sort of passage way has formed adjacent to the work, a kind of pathway, because people apparently walk along the row of trees. This was something the artist had not foreseen, but he is clearly charmed by this effect of the planting piece. It is a totally new aspect of the artwork, which without the interview would never have been specified as an accepted effect of *Dennenwal*.

Conservation by Managing Change

It becomes clear that *Dennenwal* has known ever-new and unforeseen moments. Development and change are part of this process, just as a biography is dynamic and part of a person. This idea had already become evident during the first interview on Buisman's planting pieces, although the implications for the conservation practice remained somewhat underexposed. This is not surprising given the paradox that underlies the 'conservation' of deterioration and change. Moreover, at the time of this interview in 1998, concepts such as process-based and ephemeral art were fairly new subjects in the field of conservation of contemporary art. Meanwhile, for this type of art, a way of thinking has been developed that is focused on art conservation strategies, enabling the management of change in artworks that are allowed to or even have to change in time.

An interview with an artist like Sjoerd Buisman is valuable because it tempts one to reflect on the practice of art conservation outside the traditional framework. *Dennenwal* is a process and not a solid object with a single preferred state. Buisman recognises that this is a challenge to conservators and he reflects on the role of the artist interview as a conservation tool himself.

Buisman 'I think that conserving my work is just bloody difficult ... in that respect I think this interview is relevant indeed.'

To elicit concrete instructions, more questions are asked about the best way to guide the artwork, but the answers are rather ambiguous. The interviewer, asking if blown-off branches should or should not be cleared away, comments on this by saying,

'But now you're saying two things: clear them away and leave them.'

In response, Buisman emphasises the ambiguity of his answer, saying that this is revealing a lot about the way he thinks his work should be managed.

FIGURE 5 | STILLS

Sjoerd Buisman with IJsbrand Hummelen and Simone Vermaat in the artist's studio in Amsterdam.

December 3, 1998.

FIGURE 6 | STILLS

Sjoerd Buisman during the interview conducted by Ellen Jansen, Diederik Kits Nieuwenkamp and Sanneke Stigter in the artist's studio in Amsterdam.

November 22, 2008.

Buisman 'It means: decide for yourself what you want to do with it. It sounds as if I don't care, but I do! ... Also the ways in which decay is treated are aspects of the process.'

This is a significant statement because what the artist implies here is that no matter whether or not a conservator takes action, it always affects the artwork. He not only accepts this but also recognises it as part of the life of the artwork.

The perfect result would be, according to Buisman, when his work dies off in a natural way, down to the last tree. If the museum were to take this statement as a starting point, the work – or part of it – might well last longer than expected, as the longest living tree in the world happens to be a spruce that has almost reached the respectable age of 10,000 years.²

Creating and Interpreting a Source

New and interesting views may arise about the artwork, especially when the artist had never thought of the far future of his work before. When an artist's new thoughts about his earlier work are inconsistent with the older contemporary sources, they tend to be pushed aside. They are believed to be less reliable because they date from a later period than the one during which the work was created. However, new thoughts of the artist do not need to replace the old ideas, but they can be valuable with regard to their own time. After all, the artwork is not fixed in time either; it is subject to development, which becomes patently obvious in a process-based case study. A follow-up interview with the artist offers the opportunity to register this valuable information and allow it to be incorporated in the future decision-making processes.

The interpretation of the artist interview as a source requires that we should realise that it is created by both the artist and the interviewers at some point. The interviewer should therefore always ask open questions in order to avoid leading the interviewee's answers. The interview as a source of information will become more transparent and its content more accessible when the interviewer writes down his experiences and analyses the contents of the interview. This may require time and reflective insight, but it does provide the interview afterwards with a clear context for interpretation.

Light-Hearted Dynamics

The interview concludes with the question whether the artist wants to add something to what has been discussed. Buisman indicates that he is pleased that we have had a thorough conversation on *Dennenwal*. He appreciates being kept informed about the progress of his work and stresses the importance of the dialogue:

Buisman 'It is important that the problem has now been identified and recorded. And that we've been dealing with it in an atmosphere of light-heartedness. That you don't have to be so frantically busy with this kind of work to preserve it, but that every moment of the work's existence, even when it is about to collapse, that these are moments, too. So you should also ask yourself "When do I have to intervene?" And those are very subjective things. And I think that the people who're involved in the process should have a prominent say in this.'

This statement underlines the dynamic nature of *Dennenwal*. Specific moments and choices in the history of the work, the natural development and the unknown future are considered an integral part of the work.

III. Conclusions

The extensive interview based on various example works provides a good overall picture of the artist's thinking and his artistic principles, while the interview about one specific artwork offers the interviewers the chance to address the conservation issues from a more substantial angle. It thus seems to work best to have the oeuvre interview followed by a case interview. This approach ensures that the artist is already familiar with the issues and the purpose of the interview, while analyzing the oeuvre interview may prove a good way to prepare for both the background of the work and the expected dynamics during the interview. The combination of preparatory research and the interview with Sjoerd Buisman on *Dennenwal* clearly shows that the artwork has a distinct identity of its own that may differ from what historical sources and the artist himself communicate about it. Careful examination of the artwork by a conservator whose expertise this is can therefore provide vital additional information. It is clear that the artwork has its own biography, which is determined by events in time and inextricably linked to the artwork. In fact, this applies to all types of artworks, but when it concerns process-based art and variable artworks, the acknowledgement of change as an integral part of the artwork becomes all the clearer. During the case interview with Buisman the desired future of *Dennenwal* turned out to be discussed for the first time. Newly acquired knowledge emerging from the interview proves that the artist interview is a constructed source and that information is 'made'. The outcome of the interview may influence the subsequent stages of the artwork if it is taken as the basis for a conservation strategy, in which case the artist interview may contribute significantly to the biography of the artwork itself. The conservator should be aware of this process and document his role in it in a critical reflection on the interview afterwards.

NOTES

¹ Notes by Henri van Nes marked as 'proj.: Buisman / Nash, Goal: design adjustment, Otterlo, March 7, 1985', collection archives Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

² This was announced by the University of Umeå on April 16, 2008, via www.info.umu.se/nyheter/pressmeddelandeeng.aspx?id=3061, consulted on December 2, 2009. Buisman himself thinks that the *Dennenwal* will exist for another 100 to 120 years because the trees have been manipulated.