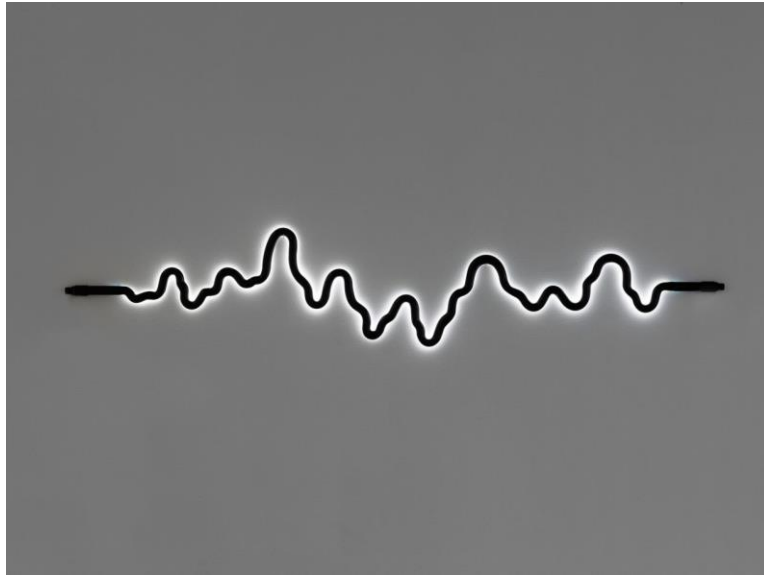


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JAN VAN MUNSTER

The Fullness of Energy

He seems both present and absent. He's there without really being there. He eats, he drinks, he says a few words now and then. He doesn't always feel comfortable in company, he says, especially when it comes to answering questions about his work. Jan van Munster's style, expressed in his cylindrical residential villa designed on an island at the foot of a water tower between Oost-Souburg and Vlissingen, is like the artist himself: reasoned, concentrated, shaped with extreme precision, no frills, minimalist in black and white.

Beyond this island, behind a noise barrier, the fresh waters of the Westerschelde mingle with the salty waters of the North Sea, the din of the port of Vlissingen resounds and the freeway that crosses Zeeland to the Randstad and beyond begins. When you're on the island of the water tower, everything is close by and yet seems so far away.

It's not the first time I've visited visual artist Jan van Munster. It was on this island, dubbed "IK-eiland" (literally the island of "ME"), that Van Munster built a veritable paradise devoted to art between 2004 and 2012. In addition to the cylindrical villa, a square water tower stands on the island. It was built in brick in 1939, the year Van Munster was born. Following extensive renovation work, this austere 35-meter-high tower now has six floors and an elevator. This is where Van Munster works, creates, reads, soaks up the wisdom around him and experiments with the presentation of his works. Small or huge (like the old reservoir), hot or freezing cold (as in the cellar): in these monumental spaces, anything is possible.

A little further along the island is a group of brand-new, angular pavilions, forming the letters I and K. Until recently, this was a comfortable home for artists in residence; now Van Munster uses them

himself. The true beauty of IK Island - a complete work of art - is revealed from the air. You have to board a small plane to see that the buildings on the island are a compilation of geometric shapes. They include a square, a circle, a small rectangle (the "I") and the broken shape of the K. In the air, nothing disturbs the harmonious aesthetics of the whole (as in a polyphonic piece of music), nor the abstract idiom, in which a preference for simplicity is expressed. For the quest for simplicity is characteristic of Van Munster. As he put it in 1977: "In the end, I have to be able to tell my whole story in a single pencil stroke".

Today, more than forty years later, this Gorinchem-born pastor's son simply observes: "Looking back, I haven't made any progress at all in all these years. And he adds, almost apologetically: "That's not a bad thing. Take Bruce Nauman and Mario Merz, colleagues who conceived their story a long time ago and are continuing on the same basis.

Those who think that Jan van Munster's work is nothing more than a formal study of the ultimate pencil stroke - like the one with which Michelangelo tried to convey divine vitality (and spirituality) to man, a stroke that expresses the difference between presence and absence (what else do we glimpse?) or a simple stroke that is nothing more than that, and serves to divide a plane, to create a horizon - those who think so are radically mistaken. For this pencil line never actually saw the light of day.

In its place, works of varying appearances, but with one constant: invisible energy, a short-circuit, an exchange, a movement. These principles are materialized in a number of ways. For example, the two luminous three-dimensional letters that together form the word IK ("I"), found at various locations in the Netherlands and on the island of the water tower, are certainly not about narcissism. For "IK" is both Van Munster himself and the person contemplating this "IK". When we see an "IK" by Van Munster (for example, the reclining sculpture in Rotterdam, created in 1995, or the one above a building in Utrecht, dating from 2003), we always think at the same time of the word "JIJ" ("YOU").

A simple lamp spinning rapidly in circles at the end of a cord in a space also expresses the invisible tension between one and the other, between small and large, between shadow and light. On IK Island, in the darkness of the water tower's reservoir, the projection of light onto the wall creates an incandescent line: a superb circle, infinitely larger than the small bulb at its origin. With Van Munster, light can also have a certain rigidity. He literally fixes it in place in his work *Fixed Light* (produced in various ways since 1975). The shapes are abstract: circular, jagged or smooth, vertical lines, squares or whimsical arabesques, sometimes finished off with a charcoal line and "hung" on a nail (*One Square on a Nail* - 1972-2016). Light radiates in blue and green and can no longer escape.

Van Munster sometimes conceals energy to create mysterious, unreal works. Two aluminum boards (*In Between*, produced in various ways from 1972 to the present day) stand almost vertically against each other in space. Van Munster's magnets in the aluminum mean that the boards almost touch and quiver when given a gentle push. Energy is similarly concealed in works designed to visualize the difference between hot and cold.

On Van Munster's 1986 *Ice Tables*, perfect snowballs are formed around a steel ball using a compressor. These compressors capture the humidity in the air. In addition to snowballs, an ice-covered chain (*Frozen Lightning*, 1996) or a black granite form inspired by the Hindu lingam, with a sublime snow cap, are also created. Over the course of hours, sublime ice crystals agglomerate to form a sculpture. The best part is when these sculptures melt, and the artist then collects the "tears" that fell from the sky in 2000 in flasks labelled *Tears from Heaven*.

Van Munster is an artist firmly rooted in the sixties and seventies, a fertile breeding ground. He was lucky, so to speak, to have escaped the religious atmosphere of his birthplace, Gorinchem. At the age

of sixteen, he was apprenticed to a confectioner. He painted with marzipan. The pastry chef said to Van Munster's father, who was a pastor: "This kid needs to go further, he needs to study. He's creative". In 1955, Van Munster left to study at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts. "Two years", his father told him, "and then come back". But of course, Van Munster didn't come back. After two years of classical training in Rotterdam, he was sure of one thing: he wanted to devote himself to art. He went to Amsterdam to join the predecessor institute of the Rietveld Academie, and his persistence paid off ("I didn't have anything significant in my portfolio") as he was accepted after two rejections.

And it was precisely in the sixties that all barriers came down. In artistic terms, it was a time of radical change. Art was no longer just a statue on a pedestal or a painting on a wall. It can also be an event, a political act or a gratuitous gesture. Like Wim T. Schippers, who in 1961 poured a bottle of lemonade into the North Sea at Petten. Art was leaving museums, taking over magazines, pop concert halls and radio stations, or museums themselves were redefining the notion of art. The machismo of Abstract Expressionism and the overflowing fantasies of CoBrA are still present, but no longer the norm. Art can also be just an idea, even more striking than an executed work. Art no longer has to praise the artist's style. Art can be devoted to the nature of the material and the essence of pure form. The material no longer has to be paint, oil, wood or stone. It can also be light, movement, heat, energy.

Jan van Munster was permanently influenced by two movements. Geometric abstract art his friend, the tormented artist Ad Dekkers. Even today, Van Munster uses this artistic mode of visual expression to give shape to his concepts. He was also influenced by Arte Povera, the Italian variant of anti-form art. In the 1970s, this was not yet as obvious as it is today. In retrospect, we can see how the freedom of choice advocated by Arte Povera influenced Van Munster's artistic expression. Rags? No, that's not what Van Munster is aiming for. Earth? No, it's not. The ancestral myths exploited by artists such as Kounellis, Mario Merz or Luciano Fabro? Not Van Munster's style either. What really attracts him is what Germano Celant, chief spokesman for the Arte Povera movement, called in 1969 "the physical, chemical and biological possibilities" of the earth. It was with these "possibilities" that Van Munster set to work.

For Van Munster, the earth is energy. A simple energy, which attaches itself to abstract images. An energy that emerges from the world of physical manifestations, but is not so easily visible. It comes from temperature differences, magnetic fields, voltage differences between electric currents and, quite literally, from the artist's own head. A prime example is the *BRAINWAVES* series: sinuous light sculptures created by the artist in 1995. That year, Van Munster went to hospital. He wanted to undergo an EEG (electroencephalogram), not because he was suffering from dizziness or headaches, but out of curiosity. He wants to see on paper the effect caused by the current in his head, how his brain reacts when exposed to different emotions. He thinks of feelings as simple as anger, pain, love, sexual arousal. But he is subjected to other tests. He is artificially hyperventilated, put to sleep and much more.

The result: hundreds of pages filled with undulating lines. He calls them his "bible". Even today, Van Munster draws from this bible and transforms these lines into light sculptures several meters high or on a human scale. The electrical currents emitted by his brain over twenty years ago are not manipulated. The artist does not use them to pass judgment of any kind, nor to issue moral or social commands. Van Munster consistently identifies himself, in Celant's words: "With the very substance of the natural event, such as the growth of a plant, the chemical reaction of an ore, the behavior of a river, snow, grass and soil, the fall of a weight". In this process of identification, Van Munster discovers himself: his body, his memory, his movements. And we discover them with him, as spectators.

Van Munster's electric currents always radiate out into the world: our world. The invisible

of the human body has become matter. Perhaps there are other forces we don't yet know about. But this force is light, expressed in a work of art. This force is the heat expressed in a work of art. It's a pure force - also expressed in a work of art.

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Translation: The Langage Lab