

An accidental flower

This could start anywhere, but for now the story starts with a screenshot. Thom took it on his phone on the 1st of May 2023 and sent it to me leading up to this exhibition. Nothing special – good friends share screenshots with each other. But this one opened something up, made something bubble to the surface.

The upper half of the screen shows a field of grass, seen from above. In the grass lies one of the white, star-shaped figures of alginate that Thom has made, casts of car rims found alongside the road. A car logo is still discernible in the white on white of the cast (there's probably kids able to identify car brands easier than plants species – the video 'ABC Car Brands for Children' on YouTube has been viewed more than 4.8 million times).

Hovering above the logo is a digital icon of a leaf. The bottom half of the screen displays a menu, featuring 'Results' and 'Siri Knowledge'. The operating system recognised the star-shape in the grass as being a plant. More specifically: the *Peach-leaved bellflower* or, as a second option, the *Campanula*.

This digital 'accident' leans into many of Thom's (and my) fascinations, specifically this one fundamental question: how is something being defined, where does it end and where does it begin, how does meaning grow and always get entangled in new and evermore complex organisations?

A field of grass is something natural, but what about the strange star-shape? It's referring to the wheel, a.k.a. 'the most influential invention of mankind'. All these shapes together look like cogwheels or interconnected gears. But whether it's a wheel or a gear, it's definitely come to a grinding halt. This is a feeling we're starting to get familiar with: the system with which civilizations have been built, especially in the West, is no longer working for us but against us. PFAS, nitrogen, the climate crisis and the aftereffects of colonialism – the largest challenges of our time were brought forth by the systems that we created. Cars and cogwheels, at some point in time symbols of progress are becoming the icons of pollution, destruction and suppression.

And all Siri sees is a flower.

The title of the exhibition as well as the central work here is *Object Permanence*. The term refers to the phenomenon of children that at some point begin to (spontaneously?) realise that objects are also there when they do not perceive them. A little ball behind your back is still there and it might appear again.

Adults are very good at forgetting, we know that objects are permanently there, but as soon as we throw something in the trash we say goodbye to it mentally. It's as if it disappeared – of course you still need to bring the trash out, but who on earth does that in a mindful manner?

All objects have a prologue, an origin story, before they are for sale, and they have an epilogue as well, a whole life after they've been thrown away (a luxury watch brand capitalises upon this insight with the slogan: *you don't own it, you merely look after it for the next generation*).

Alginate, the material that Thom gratefully employs, is the perfect embodiment of this phenomenon. It is a plant-based product, made of seaweed and thus biodegradable. However, it has a lengthy production chain to come to its useable form. This chain, the prologue, is invisible yet vital. The rims that Thom used as a mold, already entered their epilogue. They fall from cars, get dispensed with and fruitlessly wash upon the side of the road.

As soon as it has been poured, the alginate dries out and starts to rebel against the shape it has been given. It starts to curl, retreats one arm and, as a starfish, it seems to try and get up off the ground. Like an octopus it's grabbing the void underneath itself.

In the meantime, Thom wholeheartedly tries to somehow reanimate the alginate. He plants seeds that often, as a result of the confused Dutch climate, refuse to grow. It gives the work a heavy touch: the prettiest flowers grow next to canyons, but on certain ruins nothing seems to grow.

Or perhaps?

The alginate shapes are casts of their respective molds; a photograph is always a 'cast' of the light in a specific moment. The work *Object Permanence* is being accompanied by a series of photographs, of which each in their own way expose a bit of how the world consists of bundled systems and linked structures. From a concrete wall in a colonial building of the Portuguese PIDE (the secret police), to the reproduction of shampoo bottles and twin beagles. From a digital error message on wooden doors, to a tree trunk slowly embracing a marble statue.

We can never completely say goodbye to the world that has come before us, we have to continue constructing on top of ruins. We have to keep it going.

Hopefully I'll be like Siri, recognising it as a flower.

by Thomas van Huut

translation by Thom van Hoek

(This text stems from numerous conversations between Thomas van Huut and Thom van Hoek.)