

# WETTER

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## Anne de Vries

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TOYS R' US



Text: Samuel Staples

The exhibition *Day Care Drill* at Zurich gallery Blue Velvet Projects marks the latest chapter for the artist Anne de Vries' heraldic avatar. The hero's journey has taken the character across many different places throughout the last year, first unfolding through sandscapes at Berlin's Fragile and later the famous space of the former Tresorclub.

Not long after the knight appeared again, this time as *De Wachter*: a public sculpture located at the Dutch Secret Service in Zoetermeer. De Vries spoke to Curator Samuel Staples about role-play and worldbuilding in his practice, and the infantilisation of power structures.

Bild: Anne de Vries



S Samuel Staples  
A Anne de Vries

S You ended the year as part of a group exhibition at the Frans Hal Museum in the Netherlands »The Rhythm of the Night«, alongside the artists Rineke Dijkstra and Wu Tsang. Can you tell me a bit about the new works? You created these really large scale banners for techno parties and club nights displayed on metal fences throughout the space.

A For this exhibition I installed new works on fences, with big banners for imaginary events, but with real dates and locations. They could be for a dance party, but it is not entirely clear. There is a visual theme of the lonely and restrained individual in contrast to the free crowd, and a general world that is trying to transform. The collage on banners on the fences is inspired by flyers and posters for different kinds of techno, »tekn« and hardcore references and events, including the globe of »Inqontrol« designed by Frank Burghout.

S The first time I remember seeing your work was actually online, and then there was the 9th Berlin Biennale which was curated by DIS. I remember you created a diorama of a *HardStyle* show, a genre that came out of Gabber and Hardcore as an attempt to be more catchy and appeal to a wider audience, complete with a miniature stage, and lighting effects and various DJ sets. What was it about *Hardstyle* that interested you?

A It was interesting to me, because of the use of language. Around 2012 the intervals and narratives got longer and storytelling got more complex, sometimes trying to convey a semi-philosophical breakthrough or a spectacular insight. Creating a build up towards a punch line, followed by a musical climax in which the crowd experienced total consensus, right when the bass drops, to then fully surrender to the music. My quest became to remake some of these narratives to texts that make use of the discourse that circulates in the art world, and rewrite these texts into the *HardStyle* format, to then be performed by some of the most iconic *HardStyle* voice actors. We produced several tracks around several simplified texts, with the idea to create this moment of consensus over something that could help to rethink common clichés like the P.L.U.R. motto in dance music by holding the crowd to a higher standard. In a way we are doing the opposite of what Gustave le Bon describes in the *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind, from* (1895) where the self-aware individual is resolving into a massive monster with a very low moral standard. The individual is no longer living for itself, but in favour of the crowd, a lawless automation, that needs a guide, to reorient it to the new objectives and guidelines. Only the leader has deep insights but can give simple instructions. The objectives don't need to be rational, superficial and emotional works better. The *HardStyle* voice speaking to enormous crowds, (DEFQON 1. 2022, praises itself that it had 100.000 unique visitors) to me is an exercise in stimulating the popular mind, and the creation of an mechanical induced mass guided experience to be enjoyed. Yet, in the end it's crowds that can make the real differences, and fuel a revolution or a populist conservative.



S I'm really interested in this element of the crowd, and of shared experience which seems to be recurring throughline through many of your works...

A Through the years, I have a few subjects I keep coming back to. The crowd and its globalist symbols and the organisation in public spaces, are some of them. Today the power of a crowd goes beyond physical bodies, very different from the early writings by people like Gustave Le Bon or Elias Canetti. The crowd today shows itself in the infosphere, a swarm of users. Likers and content producers with perfect technological connections, between the 99% of the constantly reorienting brains, stimulated by a perfect algorithmic blend of impressions, but also with the very limited impact on the general experience as a whole, unable to reach the decisive powers that escape the swarms of online conversations. Another thing I was interested in with the Biennale piece, *OBLIVION*, but also more recent works on fencing, currently on view in the main space from the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, is that on one hand you have this idea of the crowd being set up to experience a sense of freedom while on the other hand there is the whole logistics of fencing, borders and security around the crowd to facilitate this as well as a capitalistic obsession with growing largest possible numbers of people attending. This doesn't only apply to commercial spaces, it is also used by the Free Tekno movement, just to take a counter example, anarchistic nomads, who are maybe inspired by somebody like Hakim Bey, and know their legal rights, and understand that in order to claim a zone that is autonomous outside the law of the land, one needs a critical mass of bodies and a shared experience, like a circle around a fireplace, music, or opposing an enemy. There used to be an inside and an outside. Something as primordial as »occupy wall street« where bodies started to come together in front of a symbol of something so decentralised as techno capitalism. Free Tekno movement can be that tool to flip that switch and defunctionalize, and create a temporary psychosomatic transformation in the form of a dance party, that is not political in the sense of conveying its case for the future. but it is political by creating a free experience in the moment itself with real people.

S Can you tell me about the character *De Wachter*? Last year a large-scale monument of this character was installed on top of the building inhabited by the AIVD in Zoetermeer, Netherlands. How did this project come to be?

A *With De Wachter* my interest was to think about this governmental building and institution of the AIVD (short for Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst – the Dutch secret service) and what it represents. My curiosity comes from an interest in public space, the representation of power structures, and also the usage of historical monuments within this. I think of my approach to sculpture as a form of *roleplay* of historical monuments, to cast doubt by presenting something more queer and ambivalent. My figure is assembled of two different characters, the knight that acts like the historical (although its design is inspired by games and fiction) and the paws that are a reference to the Heraldic use of lions. When I studied heraldry I started to notice an exceptional detail in the paws. Even from 200 years ago there is often something sensual and cartoonish about the paws, the perfect blend of cute and threatening. Not just soft and fluffy fur, but also sharp nails peeking through. Canetti beautifully describes the nails as elementary forms of physical power. An extension of the mouth with teeth from a predator. To be prey and trapped within this kind of mouth is the ultimate form of imprisonment, an act where time and space will disappear. In face of actual power I want to bring forward a formal infantilization of power, to twist the logic of public monuments, and their promotional message to »the people«. The opportunity to alter this conservative approach to public space, bringing in a more ambivalent self image. To unlearn and remodel ourselves and common spaces.

S I see your exhibition *DayCare Drill* at Blue Velvet Projects in Zurich as continuing many of the ideas we've been speaking about. Can you tell me about the logic surrounding this show and the element of 'play' present throughout?

A *With DayCare Drill* I set up the exhibition space as a day-care, a safe-space for play and experimentation. The artworks I present are also action figures that can be installed, played with, or star in toy photography scenes; a subculture in which small toys often appear gigantic and are a quintessential part of the »action figures« scene, which engages all possible ages. Through this mediation, we are shifting perspective, we see the authoritative posture of a figure through the eyes of the player. I think this exhibition is about infantilized representations of power structures. Something we are exposed to all the time, I am thinking of the perfect algorithmically generated news items, perfectly mixed with a blend of sexy, cruel, cute items in your feed. My task here is to de-functionalize, and contaminate all these useful activities and return them to their quintessential creativity that will unhinge any form of oppression. Like some sort of playful psychosomatic transformation that is impossible to criminalize. To diminish a Police character into a 1:6 toy is a way to detach it from all authoritative status. On a very basic level some might similarly be attracted to a squat of law enforcers, or a dancing crowd, both imply a transgression from the individual into another larger body.

S For *HEAVY LOAD*, an exhibition at Fragile in Berlin in 2021 you filled the space with 15 tons of sand, recreating various neighbouring buildings, among them the nightclub Tresor. A continuation was created within the club itself last year, *STOMPING GROUNDS*, as part of the group exhibition Tresor

31. Can you tell me a bit about these projects and how they came to be?

A In the first exhibition with sand titled *HEAVY LOAD* I wanted to excavate something as basic as sand as a medium for power to express itself, and to draw a relation to the direct public surroundings of the exhibition space; Leipziger Straße. A street with a turbulent history, right by the border of East and West. An ideologically motivated architectural battle shaping the different territories. Today it stands out from the rest of the city due to the many larger buildings that inhabit this area, including Coca Cola's Spittelteck, LIDL, TEDI, McPaper, and a former gold vault that used to be inhabited by Tresor. For this exhibition we sculpted contemporary sandcastles, which were actually visualisations of some of these neighbouring buildings, that then served as a backdrop to introduce the negative imprints of a passing through a much larger body, an invisible entity that we only get to imagine based off these carved out traces, the negative imprints, stamping through these various sand structures, before it hides in the privacy of a new luxury apartment. In the second sand installation, titled *STOMPING GROUNDS*, we zoomed in on the smallest sand structure from the first exhibition, the Tresor at Leipziger Straße that has been replaced by luxury condos and commercial spaces. For this exhibition we built the ruin in sand, 1:1 in lifeseize and parts of Leipziger Straße, its sidewalk and main road, and the entire building in shambles. Based on architectural drawings and VHS-recorded walkthroughs from back then, I was able to reconstruct the exact dimensions, and interior of the demolished club. We could then build in 150 tons of sand, covering most of the 3000m<sup>2</sup> floor inside the former kraftwerk building, known as Kraftwerk. The installation offered a way to go back in time to this place, or for others like myself it was a way to come to this place for the first time. Although it was a simulation of course it did also offer a very real and IRL experience. Although now the visitors were walking with headphones listening to interactive sounds from the different spaces, and were in a way very disconnected from one another.

S So ... what's next? What projects are you currently working on?

A At this very moment we're animating a video in which some of my sculptural characters are interacting with the real world and each other. Some are toys, others are large lifeseize animated sculptures. Transgressing -in and -out of animation, through different media forms. To me the characters are simply vessels which I sometimes guide, but also follow into the world, Like role play using these characters, to discover a different view of the world around us. Besides the film, I'm really excited about an upcoming project in Berlin which will take place at the end of April. I'm essentially creating a deconstructed club experience. We are busy re-converting and remixing the interior and architectural logic of Trauma Bar und Kino and thinking about the ways a club organizes behaviour in its different spaces. What are transgressive spaces in terms of architecture? Can you design transgressive behaviour? We are playing with the border of what is accepted socially and by the law and just how far you can push psychological borders further in their own extremity. Music is also part of this, as it can be used as a tool to induce a crowd, revolt, or to appeal to a form of »en mass« individual freedom.

