

## Revealing Concealment

On the Visual Artwork of Krijn de Koning

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[ D O R O T H E E C A P P E L L E ]

Anyone who has ever built or renovated a house will tell you that the first step in your not-quite-finished home feels like a step into another world, one in which the perspective seems slightly changed, where the light falls a little differently, where you feel larger or smaller than normal. A house whitewashed from floor to ceiling with no internal doors, furniture, curtains or colours does not feel like a new house, but like a hushed, geometric construction in the midst of the chaos of the world racing by, mildly surreal, as if you had suddenly dropped down a rabbit hole in an architectural model. What if that bright white world were to receive an injection of colour? Not just any colour, but loud ones: blood red, bright blue, grass green or lemon yellow? What effect would that have on the construction? And on you?

That is precisely what Dutch environmental artist Krijn de Koning (born in 1963 in Amsterdam) does. He introduces geometric constructions, ranging from monumental to minuscule, into an existing environment, decks them out in lively colours and invites the viewer to set to work. The viewer has no backstory or obvious starting point. De Koning simply formulates a proposal; entering the labyrinthine constructions, examining the work of art and its surroundings from different angles and considering the effects, shaping the work of art in the viewer's mind. The effect is different for everyone. Krijn de Koning's art is only complete when it is experienced. Above all it emanates freedom, while at the same time having a special physical and psychological impact. That sounds terribly abstract, theoretical even, but de Koning's work could hardly be less so.

### Environmental artist in heart and soul

In 1983 Krijn de Koning embarked on a course in audiovisual design at the renowned Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. Five years later he moved to Ateliers '63 (in Haarlem at the time), later moving on to the Institute des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques in Paris, where he was taught by Daniel Buren among others.<sup>1</sup> Buren clearly made his mark on the young de Koning: the use of expanses of colour and preference for intervening in the environment – minimalist or not – are obvious examples.



De Koning's work can be seen in well-known Dutch museums such as the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, the Vleeshal in Middelburg and the Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Given the nature of his work, these are often, but not always, temporary exhibitions, although the artist also does permanent installations, for instance in public spaces such as the redeveloped Nuon Energy site behind the RAI Exhibition and Convention Centre in Amsterdam, about which de Koning made the following remark to the newspaper *Het Financieel Dagblad*: 'It's as if it simply doesn't exist. (...) All attention at this location is focused on what happens around the Nuon site. It needs something doing with it. It should draw attention. It's a cliché that those closed grey blocks have to be ugly. It's a question of how you present them and how you look at them.'<sup>2</sup> It is this last point which forms the essence of his work and applies as much to an ugly environment such as the Nuon site as to an attractive one like the gothic Vleeshal or Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam.

Krijn de Koning, *Land*,  
work for the Edinburgh Art  
Festival, Edinburgh Collage  
of Art (UK), 2013  
© Krijn de Koning

In 2007 de Koning was awarded the Sikkens Prize, an international prize for individuals and organisations working originally and creatively with colour, created by the foundation behind the paint manufacturer Sikkens. In doing so he followed in the footsteps of Gerrit Rietveld (first winner of the prize in 1959), Theo Van Doesburgh, Le Corbusier and Donald Judd, artists with whom he has been compared more than once. In past years the prize has also gone to recipients such as the Rijksdienst voor de IJsselmeerpolders (a government organisation responsible for the polders reclaimed from the IJsselmeer lake) in 1979 and the well-known shopping chain Hema in 2004. This prevents it from being seen as a 'real' art prize, but that ambiguity and open character makes the prize particularly fitting for de Koning.

Since 2010 de Koning's work has increasingly been on show outside his home country, including installations at the Chapelle Jeanne d'Arc in Thouars and the Abbaye de Corbigny in France. The Dutch artist clearly sees religious sites as a good setting for his work, or is it the other way around?

In 2008 de Koning's work was exhibited in Paris and Budapest. The following year visitors to the Belgian Beaufort Triennial had the opportunity to admire his art on the Belgian coast and another year later he made it to New York. In 2014 de Koning set to work again at the Belgian open-air folklore museum Bokrijk, as well as exhibiting in France, Austria and at the British Folkestone Triennial. There is plenty of diversity in the path Krijn de Koning has taken.

Publications on de Koning frequently refer to De Stijl, Mondrian or Rietveld, influences unmistakably present in his work, although it must be said that de Koning does not colour within the lines nearly so strictly as his illustrious forebears. The work of Krijn de Koning is more playful, freer, perhaps even more ambiguous, despite its tightly geometric character. Emotion and atmosphere play as important a role in his oeuvre as colour, plane and physical space.

On his website<sup>3</sup> de Koning presents himself as the maker of installations, drawings, sculptures and architectural works. In my view this description, extensive as it may sound, is too restrictive. It fails to do justice to the role he gives the viewer, the importance of experience for his art, from feel and atmosphere to the technical and rational. De Koning is a multidisciplinary artist, but he is every bit as much a director who steps in, steers and lets go again. He is also a composer, as Michel Gauthier rightly notes in his contribution 'Passage in het werk' ('Passersby at work') in the catalogue *Krijn de Koning – Binnen Buiten / Inside Outside*.<sup>4</sup> De Koning does not just give his works titles, he also numbers them as a composer would. His website now displays a list of 168 works (on 30

Krijn de Koning, *Land*, work for the Edinburgh Art Festival, Edinburgh Collage of Art (UK), 2013 © Krijn de Koning



November 2015). Numbered 'opera', be they abstractions of his smaller works such as the replicas he presented at his regular gallery, Slewe in Amsterdam,<sup>5</sup> or his manipulated photos. De Koning also composes new works of art with volumes and colours as if they were notes and rhythms. The term 'environmental artist', however, seems the most appropriate, summing up the diverse aspects of his work, the different roles of artist, work of art and viewer, as well as the immense importance of the environment for his art, far better than any other artistic term.



Krijn de Koning, Work for the Rietveld Wing,  
Centraal Museum Utrecht, 1999 © Ernst Moritz

### **Straightforward complexity**

A crucial work within Krijn de Koning's oeuvre is the site-specific *Image for the Centraal Museum Utrecht* which he created for Sjarel Ex, a member of the Sikkens Prize jury and the museum director at the time. It was presented in 1999 and consists of a construction or composition involving interwoven spaces made of wood and acrylic paint. The work nestles over two floors of a wing of the museum, inviting the visitor to enjoy the different experiences of the artistic space of the artwork and the museum surrounding it. The image appears rather chaotic – unlike most of de Koning's other installations – but fits beautifully with the sense of history in the location. After all, this building once housed not a quiet museum but one of the oldest psychiatric institutions in the Netherlands, the Willem Arntsz House. De Koning makes virtuoso use of history and surroundings, bringing the experience intuitively to the visitor. In *Amsterdam Weekly*, Ex remarks, 'De Koning added extra walls to make a criss-





Krijn de Koning, Work for the Rietveld Wing, Centraal Museum Utrecht, 1999 © Ernst Moritz

cross of spaces. With this complexity of architecture and colour he created something that suggests complete craziness.<sup>6</sup> That suggestiveness is crucial. De Koning hints, rather than insisting, whispering softly to viewers or nudging them in the right direction.

Taking a completely different but equally effective approach, he entered into a dialogue with the environment at Edinburgh Art Festival in 2013. In *Land* he presented a sort of podium with different levels, enabling the visitor to view the works in the Sculpture Court at Edinburgh College of Art completely differently. The sculptures, the location and their history are seamlessly integrated into the piece. Here the bright splashes of colour he is so famous for are conspicuously absent, apparently incorporating his own artistic history. In older pieces he used wood shades or white, leaving the raw materials visible from time to time. Here he repeats this in stylised form. Is that a statement? A way of wrong-footing those familiar with his work? Surely not. It simply suits the space of the academy. De Koning often makes his choice of colour, shape and proportion intuitively.<sup>7</sup>

The work in Edinburgh particularly emanates peace and contemplation, while at the same time inviting the visitor to investigate. The same is true of de Koning's installation for the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, a gigantic rhomboid platform mounted five metres up, diagonally above the altar. Visitors were able to climb onto the new platform to see the church, stained-glass windows and pulpit from a completely different perspective. In the middle of the floor was a construction in which visitors could wander and lose themselves, leading towards a crypt and the ground floor.

For Krijn de Koning, however, art does not always need to be cerebral or monumental. From time to time some humour or even kitsch is allowable. The beach huts and the work around the Victorian grotto which he produced in 2014 for the Turner Contemporary's Summer of Colour Festival and the third Folkestone Triennial are examples of this. Small works also make up part of his oeuvre. In 2012 he exhibited a series of small to medium-sized sculptures, *Models*, at Amsterdam's Slewe Gallery. On the one hand the models, drawings and photos are a reflection of his own research, his artistic experiments, because of course a downside of his temporary, monumental and site-specific installations is that, once dismantled, only the sketches, images and miniature versions remain to remind us of what has been.

At the same time they invite the visitor to set to work, albeit in a completely different manner from his building-sized installations. One model consisted of five parts which each appear quite unusual on their own, but which can be combined in endless different ways to make new miniature architecture. Visitors were able to work on them too, feeling and handling the different parts, learning to look differently, to think in shapes and to experiment, just as they did as children playing with a box of building bricks. One work particularly expressed this playful, childlike character in de Koning's work. The artist bought a 1970s



Krijn de Koning, Work for the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, 2010 © Ernst Moritz



Krijn de Koning, *Dwelling*,  
work for the Turner Contemporary Margate and the Folkestone Triennial (UK),  
2014 © Thierry Bal

dolls' house on the online sales site Marktplaats, one with the bright colours he uses in his own work. De Koning transformed the dolls' house into a sculpture barely distinguishable from his large-scale, monumental designs in existing buildings, except in its proportions, illustrating how a playful fantasy world and reality become entangled. De Koning's art is simultaneously complex and yet straightforward.

At the end of 2015 Krijn de Koning presented a new series of smaller works in his regular gallery. These pieces are more abstract and colourful than the previous series; life-size, three-dimensional puzzles which the viewer can look over, under and through. De Koning has plenty more to say and we are all too happy to be coaxed along into his captivating, colourful universe. ■

## NOTES

- 1 [www.nieuwekerk.nl/nl/#/nl/de\\_kerkmeester/2010/biografie.htm?m=99](http://www.nieuwekerk.nl/nl/#/nl/de_kerkmeester/2010/biografie.htm?m=99)
- 2 Edo Dijksterhuis, 'De wereld anders ingekleurd. Beeldhouwer Krijn de Koning krijgt prestigieuze Sikkensprijs 2007 uitgereikt' ('The world coloured in differently. Sculptor Krijn de Koning receives the prestigious Sikkens Prize 2007', *Het Financiële Dagblad*, 1 December 2007.
- 3 [www.krijndeconing.nl](http://www.krijndeconing.nl)
- 4 Michel Gauthier, 'Passage in het werk', *Krijn de Koning – Binnen Buiten / Inside Outside*, Rotterdam, 2000, pp. 85-125.
- 5 For example, the exhibition *Models*, Slewe Gallery, Amsterdam, 2012.
- 6 Marinus De Ruyter, 'Complex Interiors', *Amsterdam Weekly*, 6-12 December 2007, p. 7.
- 7 See also the video interview at <http://www.slewe.nl/videos?id=365>.



Translated by Anna Asbury

Krijn de Koning, *Shafts and corridors*,  
Courtesy Slewe Gallery Amsterdam, 2016 © Peter Cox