

**Jani Ruscica**  
in conversation  
with **Paul van**  
**Tongeren**

As part of the  
exhibition **Tarwe**  
**en Walnoot**

1646



*The Occult Amorphous /  
Twist and Shout*, 2021  
coloured window sticker  
150 cm x 150 cm

*No Dot on the I*, 2021  
4K video, stereo sound  
10'36" loop

*The Inked, and  
their Incandescent  
Irreverence*, 2021  
site specific wall  
paintings, sizes variable

*Walnoot*, 2021  
wood relief  
129.5 cm x 90 cm

*Untitled (The Revered  
Vernacular)*, 2021  
wood cut, 90 cm x 427 cm

*The Inked, and  
their Incandescent  
Irreverence*, 2021  
site specific wall  
paintings, sizes variable

*Tarwe*, 2021  
wood relief  
90 cm x 59,5 cm

*Ring Tone (en plein air)*,  
2016  
HD video, 1'45" loop

*An Effigy of the  
Exuberant Kind*, 2021  
coloured window sticker  
150 cm x 330 cm

# Jani Ruscica in conversation with **Paul van Tongeren** As part of the exhibition **Tarwe en Walnoot**

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**1646.nl**



## Jani Ruscica

Ruscica (b. 1978) (they/them) was born in Savonlinna, Finland and raised in Italy; they currently live in Helsinki. Ruscica has realized a wide range of commissions, including those for Camden Art Centre and Animate Projects in London, and MoMA PS1, Creative Time, and MTV global in New York. Their work was included in Everything was Forever Until It Was No More, 1st Riga Biennial (2018); and presented at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki (2016); and the Kunsthalle Detroit, Museum of Contemporary Art (2013).

## Paul van Tongeren

Paul van Tongeren (Deventer, 1950) is professor emeritus of philosophical ethics in Nijmegen, Leiden and Leuven. He is the current Philosopher Laureate (Denker des Vaderland) of The Netherlands, a role for which he explores the miracle of meaning. He published more than ten popular books based on his greatest interests: Aristotle's virtue ethics and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism. For his book The Art of Living, he won the 'Socrates beker', an award for the most urgent and most original Dutch-language philosophy book. His work has been translated into 8 languages.

21-4-2021 20:17

Dear Jani,

Pleased to meet you, even if it is only online and in written form. Actually, it was a bit more than only in written form. I have had a look at your website and have seen at least some of your work. Please believe me, that I really wanted to stay much longer on your site, to return to the artworks much more often, before daring to ask questions. But after having started this e-mail with a first question more than a week ago, I simply haven't found any time to continue. So here is my first question.

You write several times about exploring things and asking questions. Could you elaborate a bit more on what 'exploration' means to you? Do you start with a hypothesis? Do you look for something special? Can you give examples of results of these explorations? And regarding 'questions': do you mean 'critical questions' in the sense in which the questioner is trying to bring to light what (s)he presumes is being hidden by someone or something? Or are these 'open questions' without any specific exactions or goal?

No idea whether or not you feel addressed by this question that might reveal more about me being a philosopher than about you as an artist. I can only hope that from this first step and with your help we will manage to create a dialogue.

With my kindest regards,

Paul

23-4-2021 10:02

Dear Paul,

Nice to meet you, even if only by email for now.  
Thank you for the conversation opener.

I'm afraid I have to return to your question next week, as this week has been so hectic with a lot of teaching and other commitments.  
I want to really focus on answering your questions.  
Looking so much forward to our dialogue!

Till very soon,

Jani

30-4-2021

Dear Paul,

Finally back to this, so sorry about the slow start!

I'm copying your question here, so I can refer to it directly when writing my answer.

*You write several times about exploring things and asking questions. Could you elaborate a bit more on what 'exploration' means to you? Do you start with an hypothesis? Do you look for something special? Can you give examples of results of these explorations? And regarding 'questions': do you mean 'critical questions' in the sense in which the questioner is trying to bring to light what (s)he presumes is being hidden by someone or something? Or are these 'open questions' without any specific exactions or goal?*

I do advocate for an art that sets out to ask questions rather than provide answers. So there definitely isn't any hypothesis or assumption as to where the inquiry or "questions", set when making artworks, lead me to. I see the making of each piece as a proposition of sorts, a collaboration with it's audience too. Oftentimes, I find things that escape language or easy categorization to be very fruitful, as they leave enough space for interpretation. I am increasingly interested also in this space between specificity and ambiguity, how both can co-exist in a piece and what that coexistence implies or reflects on a broader level.

As an artist I find a free associative space to be very productive, to work in the gaps, some kind of interstices, in between spaces. I believe that to reflect also my experience as an individual in the world.

Being an artist for me is essentially about having the agency to turn things upside down, to exercise hypothetical thought and at its best to defy normativity and find alternative ways of seeing and experiencing. I'm not saying it's easy or that I succeed in doing that tough...

Looking forward to more dialogue!

All the best,

Jani

16-5-2021 4:22

Dear Jani,

My turn to apologize: I was simply too busy to really reflect on your answers and to look again and more carefully at some of your artworks.

I think I do understand your reply to my first question. I hope you don't mind that I nevertheless continue and insist on that question once again. I do take your point if you write about "things that escape language or easy categorization". I have done quite some work on the philosophy of Nietzsche, who is always seeking for some kind of transgression of language, or an overcoming of grammar. But as a philosopher I (like Nietzsche) have only language to express myself.

By the way: my introduction makes me curious to know how you yourself view the text-blocks that describe/explain the art-works on your website. Are these texts part of the art-work? Or are they (as I just supposed) descriptions and explanations? What is the relation between text and work/sculpture/performance?

But now back to my question regarding questions: I do understand that you rather want to ask questions than to provide answers. That is - by the way - an important similarity between you and me, or between art and philosophy. Nevertheless: I do think that questions cannot be real questions or serious questions, if they do not seek for answers or at least are interested in possible answers. I don't mean final or absolute answers, but answers nevertheless. What else should be the difference between a question and a statement? So what kind of answers are you looking for? Can you give examples of answers you got?

If you say that you are "increasingly interested in this space between specificity and ambiguity", you specify that interest in terms that do suggest possible answers: "how both can coexist in a piece" and "what that coexistence implies or reflects on a broader level". I can imagine answers to these questions. I mean, I don't know the answer, but I can imagine such questions being answered. Do you agree? If not, could you explain why I am misunderstanding you?

A different way to ask the same question: I assume that your experiments (may I call them that?) are sometimes more successful and sometimes less; I mean: I assume that you, looking back on your work, the making of it, the presentation of it, the reception of it and the reaction to it, observe differences. I would be interested to know whether you could say that you are more satisfied with some of your works than with others. Would that show something of the kind of answers to your questions you expect or request or desire?

Further on, and referring to the term "collaboration" you use: questions are addressed to someone. This addressee can be the questioner him/herself or someone else, or both. I assume that you address your questions as much to yourself as to your audience. Am I right? But do you ask the same questions to your audience

as you are asking yourself? And do you ask your questions to the audience in the same way as you ask them to yourself? Or do you ask questions (questions A) to the audience in order to get answers (some kind of answers) that might help you to answer your own questions (questions B)?

There are different kinds of questions, seeking for different kinds of answers. Informative questions just seek for information. They are satisfied when the required information is provided. I don't think that your way of asking questions is informative in this sense. You do ask questions in a performative, rather than an informative way. I refer partly to the fact that several of your artworks seem to be performances (I would love to have the experience; the pictures on your website make me 'hungry' for the real thing); partly to my impression that also the answers you are looking for are themselves "performances": you do not ask for information from people, but rather want to bring something about in people (including yourself): liberation, ability to make variations, to think differently, or - as you say - "to defy normativity". Am I right? Please correct me, if I am wrong.

If I am right, would that not mean that your questions are an instrument to bring something about? That is: that you are rather making a statement (or even more: trying to realize something) than actually asking questions? If I would be polemical, I would ask: "who is really asking questions here?"

I start to feel guilty asking you so many questions. It is how I understood the request of the people from 1646...;-)

Looking forward to your reaction.

With my very best wishes,

Paul

22-5-2021 10:06

Dear Paul,

Thank you for your insightful responses to my first answer. I'm happy to elaborate, and I think it is necessary too.

With language describing art or one's practice as an artist, one can easily remain too vague and it is rarely that one digs deeper into the specifics of what is being said. Partly also because of a fear of assigning too tight of a straight jacket so to speak, both to the work and the practice in general.

First, your question regarding the descriptions that accompany works. I always feel they are utterly inadequate, I really struggle to capture the work in language. And most often, as you probably noticed, the descriptions are quotes, language that someone else generated in response to my works.

In some ways I think it is important that art works to a degree also escape language. And I am often drawn to work by other artists that I find difficult to articulate through language, work that resonates also on a more instinctual level, work that you might discover and deepen your understanding of only through time and repeated experiencing. Art shouldn't be a puzzle that needs piecing together, the pieces should fit in endless configurations, be fluid and breathing and alive.

At worst language can be so overpowering and lack nuance. It is such a powerful tool, yet or perhaps exactly because of that, it is so easy to make use of it clumsily, inadequately. Language can be so descriptive, even reductive, however opaque it might be. Needless to say, this innate quality that language has, is both its strength and its flaw in relation to articulating what other art forms attempt to do. Sometimes I think poetry might be a more accurate structuring or use of language to describe or talk about art. What do you think? But to answer your question simply, the texts are definitely not part of the works, they are mere contextualizations of the works, an aid of sorts, another entry point into the documentation, as the work can't be experienced first hand in a space (whether physical or even virtual).

Having said all of that, at best language is of course revelatory, liberating and even revolutionary. My goodness, what would the world be without critical theory and philosophy (not that it is nevertheless in such a good state...a weeping emoji would be fitting here). I think I was just stressing it's limitations and flaws in relation to describing another art form.

I do agree of course that the whole question and answer dichotomy is a bit too simplistic. The work can seek to do several things; among them inquire, propose, question, define, redefine, destabilize, or that's the intention at least. How successfully these intentions manifest in the work of course varies a lot, and indeed some projects seem more successful than others. Some "experiments", as you called them, are carried out further, developed, varied etc.

I think the reason why I insist on avoiding the word answer is because it could easily also imply resolution, and that is something I never see a work achieving or arriving at, correct me if I'm completely misunderstanding the meaning of the word "answer". I do understand that obviously you are not implying that answers are singular either, there can be many and they can vary, potentially as many as there are "replies", "responses". The work keeps changing, living, resonating to and with the times, in different contexts to varying degrees. Even I, myself often have a different reading, understanding of a piece years after making and presenting it for the first time. Different ideas simply resonate differently in different moments in time.

**I like how you framed my practice putting forth questions in a performative rather than informative way. It is definitely a way of also stressing how volatile meaning is; this incessant use of variation is a way of refusing the "answer", the resolution, the finality of something, because of it's inherent performativity or incessant variability it will never find stability in relation to any meaning.**

**Hope I answered some of your questions at least.  
Look forward to continue our conversation.**

**All the best,**

**Jani**

31-5-2021 13:12

Dear Jani,

Thanks again for your reply. I am enjoying the conversation ever more, even though this will probably be the last exchange before the opening of your exhibition. Later this week I travel to Crete to teach there and will have no time for further emails before June 8, the deadline, we got at the beginning of our conversation.

There is a nice paradox in a conversation on the limitations of language. I fully agree that language always runs the risk of fixation that we (artists as well as philosophers) try to escape from. Even Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote much more on that "wovon Man nicht sprechen kann" than about the rest. I envy artists who do have other ways of communicating than only by language. I remember a story told by a composer, who was asked to explain what he meant with one of his compositions; he answered by playing it once again.

I assume that your exhibition in The Hague might also help me to understand what you are doing, since it will be - as I understand from the website of "1646" - about "the way we deal with ambiguity, our urge to recognize the signs in front of us." I am looking forward to see it, to experience it, instead of just talking and writing about it.

But allow me to play once more the only instrument I have: asking questions. I refer to two passages in your last reply:

You write:  
"Some "experiments", as you called them, are carried out further, developed, varied etc."

Do you mean that you sometimes rework work that you made before? Do you ever make new versions of work you did exhibit already? Or are your artworks steps

in a continuous process, but such that the works remain as they are while you are continuing your experiments (just like steps of the stairs do not change, but we move forward)?

That question is related to a question regarding another passage from your mail: "I am often drawn to work by other artists that I find difficult to articulate through language, work that resonates also on a more instinctual level, work that you might discover and deepen your understanding of only through time and repeated experiencing."

Could you elaborate a bit on the role of work by other artists in your work: are there specific artists that you are inspired by more than others? Do you ever in your own work continue on an experiment that you encountered in work by others? Have you seen other artists continue on your work? Am I right to expect that you are much more interested in future possibilities than in history? What is your attitude towards art history?

I saw the description of your work "Hope is the thing with feathers"; it seems to connect past and future; am I right?

Our e-mails flew back and forth without feathers. I hope they will be continued another time, at other places, maybe by other people. I am grateful for the efforts you made to react to my questions, and send my very best regards and wishes for a wonderful exhibition.

Paul

10-6-2021 10:23

**Dear Paul and everyone else,**

**Thank you for the last question and sorry it has taken a while, again, to reply. I have been a bit pressed for time to actually finish all the works for the exhibition, as shipping and other deadlines are approaching.**

**It really has been an interesting conversation, I am happy to continue a bit longer of course, but totally up to you and your other commitments.**

**Making work is indeed a continuous process, aimed at progressing, somehow. Progress is actually not such a good word at all, as it implies some kind of development. And of course that is not the case, the practice is multidirectional, somehow fluctuating, There are "highs" and "lows", and that is not so much linked to linear time or any kind of idea of development actually.**

I do tend to leave works as they are once they are made, rarely have I changed something once it has been exhibited, I do focus my energies on new works at that stage. I have to say though, that one of the reasons I shifted away from moving image and video works, towards what I call performative objects was to evade the kind of finality that moving or still images potentially have. The objects I made had no fixity in a way, as they all had performative potential; being musical instruments, puppets, costumes, devices etc. They could be endlessly interpreted and quite literally activated to produce whatever content. They are like avatars of sorts, shells to be temporarily inhabited. The fact that these objects were appropriated from images, also meant that they had agency of their own, they spoke of various histories, materialities, ideologies etc. They carried in many ways the baggage of cultural history, regardless of who interpreted them, therefore they were active, even when silent and non-performative. Ideas formulated within the frame-work of object oriented ontology really resonated with the way I approached these objects and their existence or materialization.

I guess this takes us to the role history plays in my practice. I am indeed interested in the future, in new possibilities, new ways of seeing, perceiving, structuring and obviously also living our realities. That's an imperative of course, given the mess we are in and the fucked up power relations and structures that dominate and control the world. How much and in which ways this thinking manifests in the work I don't know, to be honest. But exactly because of the aforementioned, history has a foundational role in my work. As you know, I predominantly work with appropriation, I do need that baggage, if you like, that context to work with or against. I need the material I work with to be loaded with meaning, and then to twist, bend or even deny that meaning. The prefix re- is important for me, I need to rework things. In that sense, I think it is interesting to see certain ideas, or motifs repeated over time, centuries even. This kind of time travel can foreground the cyclical nature of time, but also the elasticity of time and ideas. And maybe it all relates again to this idea of specificity and its volatile nature, it's sly shifting, morphing nature, its inherent fluidity.

As far as other artists go, I do rarely, if ever, actually, work with material produced by other visual artists. I tend to gravitate more towards material that has a different kind of collectivity, that is circulated and produced more within the context of popular media. It just resonates more the way I need it to resonate. But I am of course influenced or inspired by the work of my fellow artists, often ones that tend to work quite differently to me. Agnes Martin, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Tomma Abts are a constant inspiration to me, so groundbreaking and focused, so subtle in what they do, yet so powerful. Aria Dean is a really interesting artist, someone closer to my own practice, I guess, and of course many, many others. The list could really go on forever, also with artists from all possible other fields, not to mention writers, theorists, philosophers...

Hope you are enjoying Crete, it sounds wonderful!

Jani

24-6-2021 12:39

Dear Jani

Let us add a final (?) epilogue to our conversation. The last word of your reply triggered me and gave rise to new questions: you write that even philosophers might inspire you. I would be most interested to hear more about that. Maybe I can seduce you to some further thoughts by differentiating that very general interest in different questions and reflections:

\* I would, of course, be interested if you could mention some philosophers who have been some kind of influence on your work, and even more if you could specify in what way they have been or might be influential. Would you primarily think of philosophers who are themselves artists, like e.g. Nietzsche (who probably for that reason has been extremely influential for many domains of art)?

\* Do you recognize your own interest in making experiments, changing perspectives, confronting interpretations in what (some?) philosophers do? Is there any difference in the way philosophers are influential from the way other "theorists" might be?

\* The term "conceptual art" might suggest a relation between this type of art and philosophy; there is hardly any other discipline which can be more "conceptual" than philosophy. Do you think philosophy is therefore closer to conceptual art than to "traditional" forms of art?

\* I think that art and artists are extremely important for and influential to philosophy because they make us see, hear, feel, experience what we normally overlook, fail to hear, and do not notice or do not pay attention to; the artist is - sometimes - able to break through all kinds of traditional, cultural, conceptual and other frames, and by doing so might make us aware of these frameworks. Philosophy can be defined as "reflecting on what normally is not be reflected on but taken as obvious as "a matter of course". Would you say that philosophy can be stimulating for art in the same way as art can be for philosophy?

\* And to conclude: during our conversation I often had the feeling that I was unfair by trying to force you into my "language". Please don't think that your replies gave me that impression. Far from that. It rather was my own "bad conscience" that made me think that by asking questions in the way I did, I was trying to impose a vocabulary on you which wasn't yours. Philosophy might sometimes be not so much a stimulating partner but rather a nasty troublemaker... If I was, I apologize.

With strong feelings of gratitude for the way you replied to my questions and very best wishes,

Paul

5-7-2021 21:45

Dear Paul,

Thank you for your last set of questions and taking the time to extend a bit our conversation!

Many questions... where should I start.

Philosophy and critical theory, but also other literary forms, like poetry and fiction, have indeed been influential and important in relation to my artistic practice.

How, whom or what in particular is a much more challenging question to unravel.

As a student, in the early 00s studying at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, I delved into Gilles Deleuze, Paul Virilio, Georges Bataille, Guy Debord, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan and others. My interests were very much geared towards gaining a deeper understanding of the moving image and media or media spaces, even though perhaps somewhat paradoxically, I was studying in the sculpture department at Chelsea. New Materialist or Post Humanist thinking hadn't really landed in art schools back then... I guess a lot of that material was too fresh out of the oven too.

At the time I was very much a cinephile, so a big part of my education in London consisted of just sitting in the cinema and watching endless double or even triple bills of auteur cinema from all over the world.

Over time my interests expanded of course, and other thinkers or authors became deeply influential. Over the years I revisited some influential works by Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Simone DeBeauvoir and Michel Foucault, but have also found deeply affecting the work of Édouard Glissant, Timothy Morton, Paul B. Preciado, Fred Moten, Legacy Russel and Mark Fisher to mention a few.

I do think philosophy and art have a strong affinity, and most definitely philosophy and other forms of critical or cultural theory can be highly influential for artists. Art and philosophy could after all be seen as different ways of thinking, don't you think?

The term conceptual art I find complicated though, as all art is conceptual I think. As thinking in art can also be very much rooted in the making of things, in the material processes and its outcomes, which to me seems just as conceptual as what traditionally is defined conceptual in art. In a way how the history of conceptual art is defined or retraced back to a specific point or action in time I find somewhat problematic and definitely worthy of a rethinking.

Hope I answered at least some of your questions Paul!

I have to say it has been a real pleasure to engage in this conversation, thank you for your insightful questions.

Have a lovely summer!

All best wishes,

Jani

5-7-2021

Thank you so much, Jani! It has been my pleasure.

All the best

Paul



Leading up to an exhibition the artist engages in conversation with a previously unknown correspondent.

The conversation aims to get an insight on how the initial ideas for the project develop, to paint a picture of the otherwise untraceable choices in the artist's process, practice and the making of this exhibition.

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