

art|lead

an insider guide to today's best artists

Our journal will currently function as an extension of the agenda we started in our newsletter, and won't be as elaborated as the journal on our actual site. Expect short pieces on what shows to see, brief artist features, occasional video and collected content we found interesting and wanted to share with you.



C.o.C.A. Foundation Art Prize 2015: Paul Geelen at A Tale of a Tub

February 16, 2016

Since governmental funding for visual arts has been continuously diminishing, numerous non-profit organizations saw their operating budget decline. This of course has consequences for young artists, who - besides having a considerably harder time seeing their scholarships approved - are left with fewer venues for support and presentation. To counterbalance this, a group of eight Rotterdam-based collectors came together in 2010 and initiated the foundation Collectors of Contemporary

Art (C.o.C.A.).

C.o.C.A. aims to promote the work of young emerging artists in the Netherlands by providing a scholarship. Every year, they invite another curator to compose a shortlist of artists. One of them receives the C.o.C.A. Foundation Art Prize, a grant to realize a project of their choice in complete freedom. Each new work is presented during Art Rotterdam, in a non-profit organization around town. Previous presentations included Katarina Zdjelar's video *Too old, too tired and too fucking blind* at TENT and Jay Tan's installation *Mute Tell Yell* at Witte de With. Since last year, presentations take place in A Tale of a Tub, a non-profit operating out of the former bathhouse at the heart of the recently renovated Justus van Effen complex.



For this sixth edition of the award, curator Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk proposed the work of Paul Geelen, and now A Tale of a Tub presents *Sliding under Traces*, the starting point for a new series of works by Geelen. Within his artistic practice, Paul Geelen examines the similarities and possible cross-pollination between science,

chemistry and art, often in the form of process-based and sculptural installations. As part of his grant project, Geelen traveled to Chile to collect materials to investigate the origins of the rejuvenating effects of snail slime. He associates this process with a study of the oldest preserved mummies in the world. Paul Geelen combines these two areas of research and translates them into a series of artistic proposals regarding the possibilities of a new life elixir. The resulting elixir is presented as part of an installation at A Tale of a Tub.



Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk writes: "The exilir includes, amongst others, an extraction of the snail slime, also known as *Helix Aspersa Muller* – a chemically and complex mixture of proteoglycans, glycosaminoglycans, glycoprotein enzymes, hyaluronic acid, copper peptides, antimicrobial peptides, and trace elements including copper, zinc and iron – as well as a sculptural presentation of a snail habitat and a sound recording. Striking here is the relationship between Geelen's scientific interest and the resilience and durability of the materials he uses. By employing organic and volatile materials such as snails and the liquid they produce, Geelen highlights the unstable and volatile results of his experiment in a sculptural installation that is constantly becoming, but never quite arriving. As the title of the exhibition implies, the artist's relationship to matter remains unstable. Whilst realising the work, Geelen has to continuously relate to the characteristics, qualities and performance of the entities he deals with. This uncertain relationship and interaction offers a desirable post-human dimension within the exhibition: an important departure point to bridge the gap between susceptibility to emotions, affects and relationships, since it no longer give preference to human ways of encountering and assessing the world, but instead seeks to investigate how others see

and interpret the world – take, for instance, the environment of the snail. In other words, pursuing a plurality of perspectives – without dismissing the notion of the human – that makes it difficult to speak truthfully and universally about something that is considered human.



Ultimately, the exhibition *Sliding under Traces* shows the result of an intensive working process that balances itself between science, alchemy and artistic practice. By applying scientific chemical processes within an artistic context, the exhibition seeks to generate new values and meanings, particularly questioning the associations between organic matter and the mystical, seemingly ambiguous concept of a life elixir, or rather the repetitive manufactured promise by the cosmetic industry. Building on the rejuvenating properties of snail slime, for the next step Geelen will focus on a bacterium that was recently discovered on the slowly decaying, oldest preserved mummies in the world. More specifically, he will focus on the preservative substance *Sphagnum* (peat moss), an extract from *Hoogveen*, a protected region in the Netherlands, which has led to preservation of bog bodies. Whilst operating in a precarious atmosphere and under climate change, Paul Geelen's research focuses on the fusion of various raw materials originating in animals (snails) and plants (peat moss). One element moisturises, whilst the other preserves – rejuvenation (progressive) and preservation (conservative) comprise the basic principles that form an ambivalent mixture..."





(Photography: Luciana Caputo, images courtesy of the artist and A Tale of a Tub)