

“... but the sea smelled of wild animal, green and instinctive.”

About Matthias van Arkel's work process and painterly acts

Magnus Bons

Tongues of colour weave the painting together. The image twists and turns, folding itself into long, thin, hardened lengths laid closely together. The painting is constructed using coloured wads of silicon rubber of varying length, width and direction. The bands of colour overlap, running under, over, next to and alongside each other. They are creased or cut. The painting spreads out like a heap of colour. There is a lot to see, and everything in the image is happening at the same time. There are many points on which to fix your gaze, but your eyes keep slipping, and have trouble gaining purchase. Similar shades of colour recur in different places, and increase the speed in the picture, continuously creating new spaces with a different light and charge. I try to get the painting to slow down. I want to still my gaze. But it is futile, the painting is too quick. Despite being solid and secured, it exudes constant motion, an endless distribution of events.

In Matthias van Arkel's work, the visual quickness seems to be a deliberate effect. One gets the distinct feeling of wandering, or rather being forced to zigzag one's eyes against the surface of the image. And yet, at the same time, I take in the entire image instantly. I register the full extent of the painting all at once. But isn't there also a stillness present? A lingering, reflective quality? Each painting recreates the colours' striking materialisation. I encounter in van Arkel's works a kind of counterpart to myself. An equal, yet unfamiliar body that establishes a connection with me, and presents itself before me. The paintings have a clarity and a precision in their expression that turns them into powerful statements.

Van Arkel's paintings are physical objects. Their churning surfaces are visual entities that – just like you and me – occupy a place, and possess a spatiality. The paintings are solid reality, and enticing form. The accumulations of paint are reminiscent of strips of fabric or piles of clothing, perhaps of meat scraps, entrails, or why not used condoms; materials that have, or evoke associations of corporeality. Just as the physical paint does. Perhaps it is the paint's musculature that van Arkel is working with?

Silicon rubber has made it possible for van Arkel to paint without a support base. Neither canvas, nor glass, nor walls are needed to hold the painting together. Initially, the rubber is transparent, and van Arkel mixes his colours by pressing the silicon paste through the rollers of a modified pasta machine. He then lays the tongues of colour – which are soft like clay, and can be of different widths and appearance – into specially designed rectangular moulds, the number of which can be combined or increased according to the size of the painting. It is in these moulds that the paintings are composed and develop, together with whatever colour selections he makes during the rolling process. Once the painting is completed, it is cured in an oven, in which the heat is increased gradually over the course of 10 hours. This procedure gives the silicon rubber an extremely high durability, and the process can be repeated if van Arkel wants to continue working on the piece. He often starts out with an idea he has written down, and combines an almost industrial process with lots of quick instinctive decisions that have to be made on the spot. This combination of spontaneity and deliberation creates an original and rebellious presence in the paintings.

C F Hill

“Imagine a dirty surface, that close up gives the impression of a trash heap! You can neither make head nor tail of it. But look at it from a distance, and the air, light and colours come into play, and the objects take on their form. That is what you call realism, effect. And this is the only possible painting for the future.”

For a short period in the 1870s, Carl Fredrik Hill painted beaches at Luc-sur-Mer on the French Atlantic coast. He painted wastelands and stone quarries in the interior, and he wrote about these paintings in letters to his family. He depicted the beaches at low tide, when the water had retreated and the sand was covered in a pungent greenish-brown sludge. He painted “the sea as a swamp”. In the above quote, Hill wrote about how different perspectives affect the impression of the painting. At a certain distance, that which close-up came across as ugly and repulsive coalesces – to form what we recognise as an image of reality.

To my mind, Matthias van Arkel’s paintings bear a kinship to Hill’s dispersed beach scenes. Don’t the bands of colour in van Arkel’s paintings resemble brush strokes under extreme magnification, or rapid manipulations with a palette knife, exuding a similarly refreshing

mobility as in Hill's beach paintings? Aren't van Arkel's colour constructions in that sense also landscapes of a sort? They come across as a topography of the layered expanse of paint, its peaks and valleys, in intimate contact with the effects of light, colour, and form. Perhaps with an even greater immediacy than in Hill's work, since van Arkel doesn't have to go by way of the "motif", but can focus on the material, spatial and psychological effects of painting. His "swamp" is hardened paint.

Van Arkel's paintings also change depending on the standpoint of the viewer. What from a distance may seem pleasing to the eye, can take on an almost repellent quality close up. Much of the paintings' convincingly seductive allure is derived from this paradoxical oscillation between attraction and aversion. There is a shared point of contact here with the Dutch painter Willem de Kooning, whose work drove the physical qualities of paint ever closer to a kind of obscene desperation. Like Hill, de Kooning painted close to the sea, only on the other side of the Atlantic, and he was a master at capturing the shifting coastal light on canvas. That same agitated restlessness in the paintings of these two artists can also be found in van Arkel's works.

As the title for this text, I chose a quote from author Lars Norén's suite of poems *Dikter över Carl Fredrik Hill* from the book *Kung Mej* from 1973. Mainly because the words possess a raw beauty that corresponds well with the physical expression in van Arkel's paintings, but also because Norén gets close to what could be referred to as the painting's underlying layer. The subject, the content – the meaning of the painting. What we apprehend as a reaction to the colour, and which draws its import from the unique experiences that each viewer brings with them to their encounter with the image. Norén's words can be said to signify this underlying structure that in Hill's painting is represented by the exposed sludge. And which acts as a sounding board also in van Arkel's work. What could be described as a psychological content is inextricably linked to how the painting has been executed. The technique, style or material cannot be distinguished from the meaning of the painting. They are all equally important components of the painting's statement.

Gobelin (F.A.S.) – Edvard M – Sarkofag

The title of an artwork acts as an entry guide into the piece. A point of access into the image that the artist has devised. Several of van Arkel's works have descriptive titles; *Laundry* (2008) and *Wet Clothes* (2005) also resemble piles of clothes, *Untitled (Grey Tube)* (2013) looks like grey plastic tubing, *#931 (Round and Green)* (2009) is a round painting done in shades of green, *Pressure Paintings* (1998-2007) are paintings that have come into being through impressions made in paint, and *100 Litres of Burnt Sienna* (2000) consists of that precise amount of paint in that particular colour. Van Arkel made *Gobelin (F.A.S.)* (2012) specifically for William Aronowitsch's jubilee exhibition *A Subjective History 1966-2011*, which was held at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm during the late summer of 2012. The title establishes a direct relationship to the way tapestries create a presence in a space. The huge piece was built up with vigorously folded strips of silicon rubber that mark out different directions through the image. In *Gobelin (F.A.S.)*, just as in *Interrupted* (2012), van Arkel experimented with an irregular outer edge, which generated an interesting uncertainty surrounding the paintings' definitive form.

In both *Triple Stripe (Horizontal)* (2012) and *Lines of Thought* (2011) – the latter being part of van Arkel's artistic rendering of *Micro/Macro World* (2011) in a newly built bus terminal in Jakobsberg, north of Stockholm – the paintings provided an account of their own vertical development. Each new strand of silicon rubber was placed right up against the contours of the previous one, in an attempt to repeat the lineation of the image. At certain points, deviations occurred, or decisions were taken, that changed the painting's rhythm.

Perhaps in a few of Matthias van Arkel's works, the title aids in the understanding of a more emotionally charged content? There are paintings that refer more directly to conditions outside the image. That is not to say that the work's expression actually becomes any clearer. More that the viewer is led in a certain direction by the title. Take, for example, the painting *Edvard M* (2005), which through its title, colour register, and the way the image is drawn using meandering bands of silicon rubber, calls to mind the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. Another work is the installation *Bedroom*, exhibited at Botkyrka Konsthall 2003, which was a kind of full-scale reconstruction of the artist's bedroom. It was possible to physically enter *Bedroom*, and the walls were painted in four different tones of red oil paint. The paint was applied in different ways, and completely enveloped the viewer. According to van Arkel, the colours represented the different emotional states of an intimate love relationship.

In 2004, van Arkel constructed a blacked-out space for an exhibition at Skulpturens Hus, which he curated together with the artist Fredrik Söderberg. The thin plastic walls of the installation *Inside Out Upside Down (Milky Way)* were filled with a dark film, and the floor was made out of Plexiglas. A kind of fibre-optic effect was achieved when the floor took up the light from the fluorescent tubes that had been mounted on the outside of the walls. All the scratches and dirt on the Plexiglas glowed like the compressed image of a universe. The small, enclosed space seemed to suddenly expand and deepen beneath the feet of the viewer.

A liberating feeling of spatial disintegration of another sort could be found in an installation that van Arkel created together with the Dutch architect Alex van der Beld at the Alma Löv Museum in Värmland in 2008. The milky-white elastic hoses of silicon rubber formed a huge three-dimensional spider web that spread throughout the entire space, from floor to ceiling. It was possible to enter the intricate weave of nerve fibres, and the installation made the viewer acutely aware of their position within the space. These three spatial works possessed a singular intensity and a powerful existential charge that reappeared in *Sarkofag* (2013), one of van Arkel's most recent works. During the Market art fair in Stockholm, the work was casually propped against the balustrade of the main entrance at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts. The body-sized object was made in the shape of a casket, and was completely covered in van Arkel's characteristic ribbons of colour. The painting created a loop without beginning or end. The title *Sarkofag* gives a clear indication of its contents – it is a tomb of paint.

If we ignore for a moment the fact that *Sarkofag* had an inner support structure of wood, and instead imagine someone actually lying inside it, that person would see the colour from the back. He or she would view the painting from underneath, from inside the image, so to speak. Van Arkel's painterly object in silicon rubber has a clear front and back, which, despite being very similar to each other, also differ. It was naturally the front he was working with when he built up the image, while the backside became a sort of flattened, slightly blurred version of the frontal image. Yet it is fully possible to follow the paint's layered movements on both sides. The painting supports itself, as it were, by virtue of the fact it lacks any underlying structure. It holds up its own presentation and provides a very direct and revealing account of its development.

The intuitive consequence of the work process

In 1998 Matthias van Arkel exhibited a series of works at Galerie Aronowitsch that, at first glance, looked like rather conventional monochromes. The paintings displayed muted surfaces in layers of mostly grey, brown or green tones of oil paint. They vibrated faintly with a speckled pattern that spread out across the paintings in slight relief. But several of the works were not painted in a traditional manner with a brush. One of the paintings, *Untitled* (1996), was lighter than the rest, and was covered in spots of beige-grey paint. In the interstices between these spots, he had applied a reddish layer that was partially hidden. Van Arkel described his work on this painting as “accentuating the diffuse”. He first applied a layer of red spots with his fingers, which he then painted over with a beige-grey colour, reminiscent of the canvas. By covering the sharp centre of the spots, he instead brought out the faint redness along the edges. You might say that he made the aura of the spots visible.

Another work vibrated with a thick, bright red colour, with occasional spots in a darker red. The surface had a greasy appearance, like that of dried blood or ketchup, and was also finger-painted. In another of van Arkel’s paintings, he used his knee instead of a brush. Another smaller work done on wood consisted of 60 pure unmixed colours that had been scraped from another painting. The light in the thoroughly blended mass of paint had been completely extinguished, and now formed a thick brown sludge. The title *60 Colour Painting* (1996) bore a reference to the American Sol LeWitt’s systematic practice. The artists share a conceptual take on the creative process, and van Arkel’s almost performative exploration of colour brings to mind the first paragraph from LeWitt’s *Sentences on Conceptual Art* from 1969: “Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.”

The paintings that van Arkel exhibited in 1998, were the first in a long series of works in which he consistently explored the material qualities of painting – an approach that lay beyond all rational thought, but which, in accordance with LeWitt’s reasoning, led to new experiences. The silicon rubber paintings that van Arkel works with today, stand out as a logical consequence of his playfully methodical investigation of the physical paint.

“The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall,” Donald Judd 1965 wrote in his seminal essay *Specific Objects*. Like a number of the so-called minimalists, Judd started out as a painter, but then gradually went over to working with serial objects. He argued that they constituted a new category of works, which, although resembling sculpture, were actually closer to painting. His works ventured out into a spatiality, and van Arkel’s experimentation can be said to respond to Judd’s critical definition of painting. Even if several of van Arkel’s works are rectangular and actually hang on the wall, they nevertheless do all they can to expand their given context.

The next step in van Arkel’s exploration was the series *Pressure Paintings*. These paintings were made in different sizes and out of different materials, but shared one fundamental action, which involved pressing the canvas, with the still wet oil paint on it, against another surface. The painting was subsequently pulled apart, and the work was comprised of the two mirror-image surfaces, which bore the obvious traces of how they were made. Exhibiting with the Susanne Petterson Gallery at the 2000 Stockholm Art Fair, van Arkel presented a pair of large *Pressure Paintings* whose impressions had been made against the floor of the space. The two-meter high duplications constituted a powerful artistic statement in a commercial context, since the works were in reality site specific. Although not necessarily unsellable, the action used to create them, would at very least have to be repeated in order for any of the works to be installed elsewhere.

Over a period of almost ten years, van Arkel created variations in the same series. Such as the smaller *Sliding Pressure Paintings* (2000-07), in which the paint was squeezed between two panes of glass that were then slid apart sideways. The result was a broken symmetry, in which the halves resembled each other, but did not correspond exactly. On one half, the paint was on the front surface of the glass, while with the other we encountered the paint from behind, on the inside of the glass. Through a simple act, a complex causal context was created.

Van Arkel created the piece *In Between (Pressure Painting)* for an exhibition at Galleri Mariann Ahnlund in Umeå that took place in 2001. It was made by applying red oil paint to a sheet of Plexiglas, which was then pressed against another sheet without any paint. The two were then pulled apart, and each hung on a separate wall in a corner of the space. By controlling how the sheets were separated, an imprint was made in the paint. The common denominator for the *Pressure Paintings* series was the desire to get inside the paint, to create

an expansion, a spatiality within the paint. By making an impression that was then separated, an actual interspace was formed. In Galleri Ahnlund, van Arkel also created *Confetti* (2001-02), an over 4 sq m site-specific golden-beige oil painting that was painted directly onto the ceiling of the gallery using a trowel. In order to further confound the viewer, the fluorescent ceiling lights were mounted on one of the walls. A subtle twisting of the room's perspective by a quarter turn.

The thick layer of paint in *Confetti* is closely related to *100 Litres of Burnt Sienna* (2000), a temporary painting that van Arkel created in the then offices of the Claesson Koivisto Rune architectural studio on the island of Södermalm in Stockholm. As the title indicates, the painting consisted of 100 litres of oil paint of the colour burnt sienna. The paint was applied in a metre-wide band that ran across the walls, ceiling and floor. The work was an effective demarcation of its own space, and a bold partition of the room itself. Van Arkel built a little bridge out of MDF board, which allowed the viewer to enter into and stand in the middle of the paint. As with the earlier *60 Colour Painting*, van Arkel then reused the hundreds of litres of oil paint in a new piece. When the dark reddish-brown paint was scraped away from the space, he constructed a little table, and smeared the paint out onto it. There it formed a viscous mound, reminiscent of Joseph Beuys *Fat Chair* from the mid-1960s.

“The sea smelled of wild animal,” Lars Norén wrote of Hill's painting. Van Arkel's table with fresh oil paint must also have given off a strong odour over a long period, just as *Confetti* and the various *Pressure Paintings* must have done. His current material, silicon rubber, doesn't smell, but van Arkel's expressive use of the material nevertheless makes the raw scent of wild animals an apt choice of words to describe its pungent and perturbing undertone.

Continued acts

A number of different experiments with completely removing the painting's support base have subsequently followed. Through the use of various devices, van Arkel has instead attempted to get the painting to become part of the surrounding environment. *Negative Painting* (1999) was a kind of excavation in the wall, in which a 20x18 cm section of the plaster was chipped away, creating essentially an inverted image. In *Even Level Painting* (2000), van Arkel instead used a palette knife to fill in an already chiselled out part of the wall

with oil paint. The surface came across as an impasto painting, even though it was completely flush with the wall. *Box Painting* (2001) was a similar bluish-grey “marbled” painting that filled the inside of a Plexiglas box. The several-centimetre-thick object hung on the wall, but the transparent surface of the Plexiglas gave it the appearance of being devoid of any real structure.

Quite logically then, van Arkel has also worked with applying paint to found glass, which possesses its own insubstantiality, so to speak. During an exhibition at Galleri C Hjärne in Helsingborg in 2000, he created a painting directly on the gallery’s window facing the street. In *Window Painting*, the paint was applied to the inside of the windowpane, but naturally could also be seen from the outside. The transparency of the glass revealed the other side of the painting that would normally lie hidden against the canvas, and which we ordinarily would not get to see. The backside was flat, while the front, facing into the gallery, had a structure carrying traces of the paint’s application.

In 2003, van Arkel created three works that in retrospect stand out as the final critical steps in his progression toward working with silicon rubber. The first was *Inverted Landscape* (2003), a site-specific work carried out in an apartment, in which he forcefully hurled acrylic paint directly onto the wall through a funnel-like screen. As in *Box Painting*, the physical paint was the most tangible part of the work, if not the *entire* work, which consisted of three different sized splashes of thick paint. The paint was at the same time almost unmixed, with a splotchy, streaked quality, giving it a continued purity of expression. It looked a bit like messy “modern art”, and was quite reminiscent of Jackson Pollock.

The second work was *Strip* (2003), which van Arkel showed at the group exhibition *Adagio* at Gävle Konstcentrum 2003, and then at Galerie Aronowitsch the following year. The work was a logical continuation of *Box Painting*. *Strip* consisted of a pair of two-meter-high sheets of Plexiglas suspended from the ceiling. A thick layer of oil paint was first applied to one of the sheets directly out of the tube, and then worked and distributed using a squeegee. The two sheets were then laid one on top of the other, before finally being pulled apart. The image in the surface of the paint was thus transferred to the clean sheet. In the exhibition space they were shown hanging slightly apart, facing each other. The gap between them allowed the viewer to pass through the two halves, to literally enter into the painting, which could perhaps

be described as a bisected image. Unlike *Window Painting*, where it was possible to view the painting from both sides, *Strip* also displayed a cross-section right through the paint.

The third work in his evolution toward using silicon rubber consisted of the actual pivot point in van Arkel's artistry. *Cut Open* (2003) was a consequence of his various colour experiments, only turned up a notch. The work was exhibited at Dunkers Kulturhus the same year as the group exhibition *Invasion*. The work was a vividly mottled cube of Plasticine, a brand of modelling clay, and in terms of its appearance looked very similar to the cubes of coloured silicon rubber that van Arkel makes today. But *Cut Open* came about through a slightly different process. Instead of modelling the coloured silicon rubber in a mould, as he does now, van Arkel and his assistant pounded together large amounts of Plasticine into a vaguely cuboid form, out of which the cube was then cut, as the title suggests, in an attempt to see the work from the inside. *Cut Open* was placed on a custom-made birch table that van Arkel had designed, with a Plexiglas cover over it. It was during this exhibition that van Arkel came into contact with Sven-Ingvar Olsson, the owner of Helsingborgs Gummifabrik, who suggested that van Arkel try working with the factory's silicon rubber. This encounter is what ultimately provided him with his new medium.

Silicon rubber

Sliced Space was one of van Arkel's first works in silicon rubber, and was based upon the same rationale that produced *Cut Open*. The intention was to make a cube that it was possible to see through, in order to literally be able to follow the painting's own perspective. But when the piece turned out to be only partially transparent after it was cast, van Arkel decided to cut the solid block into sections. *Sliced Space* was divided into six pieces, which, when hung one next to the other, revealed how the different colours in the work traced out their own movements within the three dimensions of the sculpture.

Many of van Arkel's titles consist of verb forms that provide a fairly straightforward description of how the works have been made; *Sliced*, *Cut*, *Strip* correspond well with the artwork's stated character. The American sculptor Richard Serra drew up a long list of verbs at the end of the 1960s, in which he described the activity upon which his art was based: "to roll, to open, to fold, to bend, to split." As with van Arkel, Serra's infinitives are the result of

a process-oriented approach to working with the material. Serra's works included *Hand Catching Lead* (1968), a film in which he tried to catch a chunk of lead falling through the air. In photographs from the time, the artist threw molten lead at the angle where the floor meets the wall, hardening into long, narrow, sedimented objects. Serra's action, whether he intended it or not, bore a clear visual echo of Jackson Pollock's dripping paint brush from almost twenty years earlier. There is an interest here in spontaneous creation, in a form of "doing" inspired by the material itself, and which van Arkel, too, is invested in. This involves a kind of focused engagement in the ongoing process, where a unification of intuition, chance and composition becomes the work.

The American artist Lynda Benglis worked, during the same period, with painterly objects using a similar technique. There is a famous photograph of her pouring paint directly out of the can, and letting it dry right on the floor. Benglis described her works as "frozen gestures", and looked for ways of creating paintings without an underlying structure. Her works can be seen as a direct reaction to, and an extension of, both Pollock's drip paintings and Morris Louis's Color Field paintings. Van Arkel's spatial experimentation, and his silicon rubber paintings share certain similarities with Benglis's process, visually as well as conceptually. Van Arkel's materialised brush strokes possess a titillating kinship to an industrial material that moves his project away from traditional visual art, without losing contact with a painterly practice.

For you, Dad

During the first few years that van Arkel began working with silicon rubber, he often displayed the "backside" of his works. Because of the manner in which they are made, the back of the painting is more randomly fused together than the front. Van Arkel fashioned rectangular mountings out of stainless steel, fitted with round knobs to hang the paintings on. Holes of a corresponding size were then drilled through the paintings, in practice making it possible to choose which side of the artwork to display.

The invitation card to van Arkel's exhibition opening at Galerie Aronowitsch in 2006 provides an interesting illustration of the relaxed attitude he has toward his works. Using a didactic device, the painting *Wet Clothes* (2005) was depicted from both sides. An earnest

game designed to shed light on the open nature of the work. All the text on the back of the card was reversed, and printed in exactly the same position as on the front. If you held the card up to the light, you could see *through* the painting. Van Arkel called the exhibition *For you, Dad* – a tribute to his deceased father who was also an artist. Included among the works was *Heavy Stool* (2005-06), which visitors could sit on while viewing the other paintings. The seat of the chair consisted of a single solid “painting” of modelled silicon rubber mounted on top of a sand-blasted stainless steel base. There were shared points of contact with the later work *Sarkofag* – which was also a piece of furniture of sorts. As with the invitation card that depicted *Wet Clothes* from two sides, *Sarkofag* offered the possibility of seeing the painting also from the inside. Whoever wanted to, could, through their imagination, transport themselves inside the object. By extension, this also provided a slight hint as to van Arkel’s personal attitude toward his art.

Matthias van Arkel’s expression has a clear forward momentum. His art exists in a state of fruitful tension between image and process, but his paintings cannot be reduced to either one or the other. They are not representational, nor are they solely a testimony to their own creation. They are also imbued with another meaning. The works’ formulation has an unmistakable conceptual intention, at the same time that their significance is not immediately accessible.