

M A R G A R E T
T H A T C H E R
P R O J E C T S



A conversation in spring about one thing

July 4, 2014



We joined **Matthias van Arkel** and Anna Camner; two artists with distinctive practices, for a drink at the bustling social hub that is Hotel Rival in Stockholm, allowing them to adopt dual roles as interviewer and interviewee with each other, and learned about a shared working past going years back in time. Conversation takes the course from transatlantic journeys and fantasies that are yet to be fulfilled to memories from a time that once was.

A.C: To start off, Matthias, I understand you will soon be moving/heading over to New York which leads me to ask; why now?

M.V.A: Well, actually, I won't be moving just yet. I'm in the process of trying to set myself up with a room or studio together with my friend, artist Anders Krisar who's making a more permanent move. We're looking into spaces to share which would be between 100-200 m2 and ideally I'd want at least 50 m2 for myself. And why now? To begin with, it is partly sparked by Anders's move and the convenience of a joint solution.

Moreover, over the years I've been in touch with a number of people over there who have expressed interest in my work, but for whatever reason have never had the opportunity to actually see any of the works in person. I'm also currently assigned a collaborative project with an architecture firm that involves eleven office floors with site specific works by me in Washington D.C. As far as family is concerned, I'm at a stage in my life where my children are getting older and where the situation allows me to be away for certain periods to try my hands in this. I'll try it out for a year and take it from there, and in the event that I would end up moving, I'd apply for a O1-VISA and bring my family.

I should also say that I feel that my visual identity, perhaps more so today than ten years ago, is on par with what is going on in the international contemporary art scene as we speak. So, if there was ever a time, I feel this would likely be it.

M.V.A: How about you though? You're connected by a gallery to New York; what are your thoughts on moving and living there? Would you consider it?

A.C: Not really, but primarily for pragmatic reasons. I have a young son, and I imagine it just wouldn't work out practically for several reasons.

M.V.A: On a related note, how long have you been working with your gallerist Stellan Holm?

A.C: We've worked together since 2010 and initially got in touch through Natalia Goldin who was my gallerist in Stockholm for many years. We've presented two solo shows together; one in 2010 and the second one recently in 2014. In between, I also showed at Faggionato Fine Art in London in 2012, which is the other gallery representing my work. I also just recently participated in the Biennial of Contemporary Art of Cartagena de Indias in Colombia which was curated by Berta Sichel.

But getting back to the question; something that I know some artists have to struggle with, but luckily I haven't, which is also why it has been so great with Stellan Holm gallery in New York and Faggionato gallery (and it's director Anna Pryer) in London is that I've been allowed complete artistic freedom to do as I please. They've never pushed my work into any directions with specific requests which I'm so grateful about. I'm someone who needs to be able work within my own little sphere without interference. I've been allowed a say even down to details such as in what publications to advertise my shows. There just has been no tension.

M.V.A: What's exciting and interesting about the art scene in New York is the various people you may meet and run into on different occasions. I'm curious as to if you've had much personal exposure to your public so to speak?

A.C: Hmm. Well, one thing that did happen which was nice and pleasant along those lines was that Richard Prince, Larry Gagosian and some high-level museum people attended my first show in New York and seemed to take a liking to my work and also actually ended up buying works which is flattering.

M.V.A: Oh, that's really great. I love the impressive and grand almost museum-like premises and spaces of the galleries in New York. For a while people talked about the need to depart from the white cube but I find it appealing and your work in particular finds itself very well in that setting. Myself, I have done collaborative work to date with Margaret Thatcher Projects in New York, showing at fairs with the gallery but I do hope for that more full-on experience.

M.V.A: On that note, would you say your professional dreams are fulfilled today?

A.C: I suppose, yes. I'm very happy about having the opportunity to show my work with galleries overseas, and here in Sweden as well for that matter. I mean it's a privilege getting to show my works publicly at all. There are so many talented artists and colleagues who haven't been as lucky and I feel grateful. You have done many things in your work that I've only fantasized about doing like, say, spray painting and body painting. You've sort of appropriated many of those kinds of things

M.V.A: Oh, you have those kinds of fantasies?

A.C: Well, so what I wanted to ask you, was whether you have any fantasies regarding your work which you have yet to act out or see happening?

M.V.A: In terms of exhibitions, yes, for sure. For one, I'd love to dress the entire floor and ceiling of an exhibition space in my characteristic style with silicone rubber, and have people take part in it by walking on the surface. An interactive exhibition along those lines, one that would intertwine all senses and then going all crazy with it would be amazing. But shows of that magnitude are difficult to do in Sweden and perhaps almost needs the accommodation of a different market. I don't think that quite exists yet in Sweden; allowing very big works to just command and consume heaps of space in the exhibition setting.

Look at photography as a medium that has had such an upsurge and I think that is partly tied to the notion of space; the way it doesn't consume it, and fits and blends in so easily inside a home. I feel like art shouldn't necessarily have to be tucked in so neatly and conveniently and could rather be allowed its due space. That's the way art is presented at my own home with art I've acquired; it's scattered and makes use of space everywhere.

A.C: I was wondering as well, how you relate to the field of design?



M.V.A: Design, would we be talking functionality and utility then? I did once do a commissioned work for a collector in Sweden who had me embellishing a kitchen island in his modern state of the art home with my rubber work which turned this unit into a solid site-specific sculptural piece of work. Although to be clear I don't think you could apply my aesthetic to render a standard formula for mass production of the things I do.

Every bit of the process until completion is conditioned by deliberate artistic and aesthetical considerations of which I am entirely in control.

However, if you look at design fairs that run alongside big art fairs like Frieze in London and Art Basel Miami you see so many great works that have utilitarian purpose but that are so unique and artistic in their execution that you could rather speak of art than design and I find that quite interesting.

A.C: Do you feel that art theories/art criticism sometimes can stand in the way of a "truer" perception of the actual artwork? Or maybe even function as a crutch to art that lacks real substance?

M.V.A: No, I don't really think that theories/art criticism can stand in the way of the perception of the actual artwork, not for a trained eye. But it can have the function of helping a weak artwork seem stronger. But only for some time. After a while when the words fade into oblivion and the piece is just hanging there, it will just die.

A.C: Any thoughts on the zeitgeist in the art world? Like for example, why is painting everywhere for a while, and then all of a sudden, you see video works in all galleries? Do you think there is a herd mentality that perhaps should be avoided?

M.V.A: I think most gallerists and curators of today want to have a mixture of different media presented in their exhibitions. Sometimes it happens that there are many video works shown at the same time. Video is an extremely strong art form where the viewer experience both the moving image, often figurative and sound and large scale and tempo and... It is difficult to compete with as a painter. What we have is the only thing that video doesn't have, the object. The physical icon made of a material, in your case oil

paint on plexi and in my case silicone. And that is beyond the picture something we should emphasize, I think.

A.C: Would you say contemporary art is interesting right now? What speaks to you?

M.V.A: I follow the art scene with great interest. I'm not particularly interested in current trends or whatever might be working right now. Rather, what catches my attention is the genuine dedication of others to their work. That does inspire me. I do see a lot of art and I think what is interesting is the increasing awareness here of what's going on globally in the art world, which is of course a result of the extent to which art can be accessed quickly today. What I do see here in Sweden compared to say New York is this hesitation of really meticulously executing one's work, as though rendering perfection would come with a label of being "commercial". I think of Anders Krisar, Gunnel Wählstrand and you as well; when someone really goes out of their way to do exceptionally meticulous work, it has a certain effect of fascinating people.

I think of an artist like Sterling Ruby who can almost make you a bit jealous the way he does such a range of different things and does all of it so well. On the one hand it's compelling with vast and diverse practices, and on the other it's also interesting when somebody works consistently to develop their characteristic expression which is the case with you even though within your own realm you take big steps too.

I never got around to asking you earlier. Do you have work fantasies that you'd like to realize? Are there secret wishes of turning to performance or something like that?

A.C: I've had a lot of fantasies that relate to colours. I'm quite crazy about colours I'd say. At the end of the day I'm always inclined towards doing what feels most fun and up until today it has been to do these small-scale meticulous paintings.

M.V.A: That's good though. I don't think one has to rush to change the course of one's work although I do think there is a pressure and tendency towards it. See if you look back in art history you notice that many artists had a prime era where they rendered their best work, after which they steered away in a different direction and less successfully created work that was blander. Few artists can really pull that switching back and forth off, with Gerhard Richter naturally being the obvious example. Or Sterling Ruby who has all the pieces together

I find it a bit strange to be asked whether I should start working with something other than what I do today with silicone rubber. It's not like an oil painter would expect to be asked that. I'm no way near being tired of silicone and I think I'll stop once I've drowned the entire world in it! (laughs)

M.V.A: Just wondering, do you feel any particular affinity with the surrealist movement?

A.C: That's a good question that I've been asked on several occasions. Although it may look like my art has the preciseness and eerie qualities that some of my favourite surrealists applied with great results, it's actually reality to me. My reality. With no particular striving to explore my subconsciousness. With that said though, I must admit that Salvador Dali was a very fascinating man!

M.V.A: And by the way, how did your particular imagery come about?

A.C: Growing up in a neighborhood with very few children I spent a lot of time alone in the forest surrounding our house. Being naturally close to the ground, as children are, I

focused on the tiniest things in the forest. I have always been intrigued by small, defect and insignificant plants and by deviations in nature. Flamboyant tropical flora and fauna is too viable and overwhelming for me, instead the more subtle Scandinavian biotope inspires me.

A.C: Just curious, how do you personally handle critics and criticism?

M.V.A: I feel like when you've come this far, or perhaps been doing this for so long, you've experienced your fair share of shit and you become quite thick-skinned. Of course you can to some extent be affected by reviews, seeing that an opinion is declared openly to so many people. But aside from that, one person not liking your work; well, there have been so many no's over the years that you can handle it. But it is interesting to hear how your work communicates with the viewer and for that person to write down what they see, good or bad.

A.C: So what is your take on social media to promote your own work?

M.V.A: I know people who do social media very well but there's something about it that can be a bit troublesome, you know. This thing of the public buying into the notion that the more you're seen and heard as an artist, the better you consequently have to be. It's difficult for people to filter everything and what you see in your channels and outlets is what you start believing. I also know of people who have hired professional help getting the services of PR firms to handle these things. But then you also have to keep my mind that not everyone went to the same schools that we did that are able to provide an entry into the art world, and in that case perhaps as an artist you have to really find your own ways of communicating and reaching out with your work.

Speaking of something else, you and I, we go quite back in time.

A.C: Working at Magasin 3 you mean?

M.V.A: Yes, what a great start, and what a great bunch that was, this group of up-and-coming artists that were with us at the time, all of whom did really well.

We did an exhibition together at Skulpturens Hus at the time which I think was probably a little bit before you started. Me and Fredrik Söderberg set together a show.



What happened was that Fredrik Söderberg and I were working the front desk at Magasin 3 one day when the director of Skulpturens Hus at the time came by with a friend and asked if it was fine to bring her along inside and we said sure. She asked if there was anything she could do to return the favour and we boldly suggested she give us a show. She said yes and thought it was a great idea.

There was also the show we did at Dunkers Kulturhus in Helsingborg that you participated in, which originated from me having dinner with the director Magnus Jenser and explaining I had this dream or vision of us aspiring artists at Magasin 3 having a show together along the lines of what Robert Ryman did at MoMA, and that prompted Magnus Jenser to suggesting we should have one there.

A.C: Yeah, it was an interesting period in time. This profession that we have, it's a dream job at the end of the day.

M.V.A: Of course, it can be really hard and difficult but so are other jobs. All lines of work come with their baggage and I think instead it's nice being able to say that it is a great job. All the time that you invest in your work is essentially an investment in yourself and perhaps that is rare. It's very exciting this feeling that every other call can literally change your life.

A.C: Are you working on anything in particular as we speak?

M.V.A: I'm currently working on doing a 14 meter long wall for the new entrance at Värtahamnen (ed. note: a harbour in Stockholm) after an invitation for submissions by Stockholm Konst. I think it's something quite special, being allowed to render art experiences of that magnitude for others. And I'm also working on several projects together with my gallerist Cecilia Hillström. We want to participate in some major art fairs and we are also working with several commissioned works both in Sweden and abroad.

C-Print met with Anna Camner and Matthias van Arkel on May 27, 2014, in Stockholm.