

ABOUT THE WORK OF KALEB DE GROOT

by Huib Haye van der Werf

Perhaps the best way in which to describe the work of Kaleb de Groot is the term psychogeography. As Guy Debord defined it in 1955 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. Not to propose that this term is an exact explanation of his artistic practice, but its definition provides all the language and circumstances to understand his art. In the case of De Groot, his vocation is indeed the study of environments but important in this is that he is often the inventor of these settings, either by building them himself (and/or in collaboration with others) or animating an existing situation. In doing so, his aim is to tap into the mental, often associative, potential of a location.

Patterns and forms carry a nostalgic air of their former purpose. Each material and element in his work holds its own specific memory and unique relationship to the context in which it has been. The language used in composing his work - and how it relates to its greater surroundings - is architectural, only reshuffled and reinterpreted. Plastic tarps from Chinese construction sites become inflatable architecture, the structure of his former house in IJmuiden becomes a protective capsule dragged behind his pick-up truck through his old neighborhood, explosives from land-mines become tools for cosmetic decoration, and even his own skin becomes a document on which each realized project is given its own unique form and place in permanent ink.

These last mentioned take on a special place in Kaleb's oeuvre. This is due to his initial hesitation to regard his tattoos as being part of his art practice regarding them more as a personal memento of his engagement to a finished project/work. However, there are essential characteristics to these documents that not only place them within the conceptual and formal framework of his practice, but also extend its breadth. Each one is a symbolic distillation of an elaborate process. It is the illustrative concentration of not only a work realized, but the development in realizing that work. Ultimately their location on his skin is also a thoroughly deliberated decision. Each requiring its own psychologically and formally sound position in regards to the other. As for their place within his practice, their final design reveal that De Groot is also an accomplished draftsman, not often the focus of attention when regarding his work. His drawings are layered in

handwriting as well as dynamic in their purpose. While their initial intention are sometimes no more than to be a design for three-dimensional work, their translation to a two-dimensional surface reveal an artist capable of creating a geographic and emblematic world all its own within the boundaries of a flat surface, whether it be a wall or a piece of paper. Drawings that disclose moments in the process of the artist's practice, as well as his sensitivity for the 'foreignness' of his surroundings, whether that be Zambia, Ijmuiden, Xiamen or Amsterdam Bijlmer. This element exoticism though, is never singular. It finds its way into his drawings as a combination of his actual location, environs from the past, and those of settings unknown.

It is this unknown that stands out to the viewer, as while looking at his work they sense a familiarity with their position through recognition of certain symbols and structures - but at the same time they cannot determine their exact location. That is because Kaleb de Groot does not offer answers, but questions. He is an artist who is curious. Extremely curious, in both what a changed surrounding whether two- or three-dimensional - means to him as it does to an (un)suspecting audience.

This curiosity insures the diversity of his practice. Although his works are reminiscent of an architectural language Kaleb de Groot is not an architect. Although his constructions and built environments are sculptural in their form, he is not a sculptor. Even though he has created and run his own exhibition space he is not a curator. While he is often plays a visible role in his own projects, he is not a performance artist. As he states himself, the tragedy and beauty of human interaction captivates him, the possibilities and impossibilities of mankind to manipulate their environment intrigue him.