

# THE EDGE

CURIOSITY, COMPLEXITY AND COLLABORATION

# OF KNOWING

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# 16. THE POETRY OF ABSENCE: ON ART, SCIENCE AND THE LANDSCAPE OF AFFORDANCES

Interview with Ronald and Erik Rietveld,  
RAAAF

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In 2010, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science invited Ronald and Erik Rietveld, brothers and founders of the artists' collective RAAAF, to represent the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale. 'That was a real milestone,' says Ronald. 'We wanted to take the stage and make a political statement about the potential of ten thousand vacant public and governmental buildings: *Vacant NL*.' Erik adds: 'Namely, that it is absurd that in the Netherlands we leave all these potential spaces for young artists and scientists vacant instead of using them to attract talent and provide good work-spaces.' The brothers explain that this use does not have to be permanent; temporary use would be an excellent solution. 'There are so many vacant buildings that you could stay in one for three months to even a few years and then move to the next for another period. We call this sequential temporality,' says Erik, the philosopher of the duo. 'Don't give money, but the keys,' became one of their slogans.

The Rietveld Pavilion in Venice is officially Dutch territory and vacant for many months every year

when there is no biennale. The pavilion is literally locked. The brothers decided to keep the lower half of the space empty. 'We had to fight hard for that, but we wanted visitors to be deeply affected by that emptiness,' says Ronald, the artist of the pair. Upon entering, visitors saw a kind of light blue sea above them, as if they were walking under a swimming pool. They chose that blue foam because it enhanced one of the pavilion's key qualities: the reflection of light. 'At first, you saw nothing but emptiness,' says Erik. 'But as you walked through the pavilion, you discovered the stairs leading up. Once upstairs, you saw that vast sea of vacancy, reflecting the light.' This vast sea consisted of models of buildings forming a kind of vacant city. 'But *Vacant NL* wasn't an anonymous sea of blue foam. Each building corresponded to a real place. So, the whole thing represented enormous potential. It was exactly this potential that we wanted to showcase,' Erik explains.

'Maybe now you can now explain affordances?' asks Ronald, slightly impatient. But Erik takes his time, and an hour later, we eventually arrive at the concept that is so essential to both brothers. In addition to his work with RAAAF, Erik is a full-time professor at the University of Amsterdam, conducting philosophical research. 'For some time I kept RAAAF and my philosophical research separate, but over the years, they have become increasingly intertwined.' Initially, RAAAF was a place where Erik could apply the knowledge from his philosophical research. But over time, RAAAF itself became part of that research. 'For example, we had ethnographers observe RAAAF to study the skills involved creating artworks.'

A significant part of Erik's research focuses on skilled action across various domains: 'From cycling to driving a car, conducting scientific research, creating art and treating psychiatric patients.' His long-term research explores the role of the material environment in skilled action. 'And that is where the concept of affordances is useful: possibilities for

action provided by the environment.' Erik points to a glass on the table: 'This glass affords you the possibility of drinking. The chair affords you the possibility of sitting. Pen and paper afford you the possibility of writing.' Aspects of the material environment enable specific actions. One of the philosophical innovations of Erik's research group is expanding the concept of affordances into the socio-cultural domain, making it much more broadly applicable. 'It's not just about things right in front of you. We argue that affordances should also include, for example, 'an artwork that affords the possibility of reflecting on something.'

Take another RAAAF artwork, *Bunker 599*, which involved cutting through a seemingly indestructible bunker on the eighty-kilometre-long New Dutch

Waterline, a historic military defence line. The defence strategy involved flooding the area when an enemy approached. As with all their artworks, this piece was site-specific and linked to history. 'We always start with cultural-historical research on the location,' says Ronald. *Bunker 599* challenged Dutch and UNESCO heritage policies and encouraged people to see their surroundings differently. By cutting through one bunker, visitors could experience its interior – and by extension, imagine the interiors of all the others. Walking through the opening, they reached the waterline as it would have been if the land had been flooded. Thus, the concept of controlled flooding as a defence mechanism was embedded in the artwork.

Ronald enthusiastically describes how they seek out skilled craftsmen for each artwork. 'How do

RAAAF, *Bunker 599*.



you find someone who can cut straight through a bunker? You often have to look in entirely different crafts. In this case, it was the world of viaduct constructors.' Ronald continues: 'These people love it because we appeal to their craftsmanship, their trade. How can you cut through concrete with razor-sharp precision? And when they go home, they have a story to tell that isn't just about another viaduct. That's just great!' The real challenge, however, is bureaucracy. 'Cutting through an indestructible bunker takes a month, but cutting through policies takes five years,' is one of Ronald's favourite sayings.

Erik returns to affordances: 'The bunker affords the possibility of experiencing how heritage can be transformed into art. By making an exemplary intervention, you can change the entire practice.' The heritage sector is highly conservative, but by cutting through a monument and transforming it into art, they paradoxically increased its value. 'A bunker affords the possibility of being cut through. And a monument, in principle, too. We demonstrated that well-chosen transformations can change the heritage sector.' The Dutch National Heritage Agency embraced the artwork, considering it as much part of cultural heritage as the preserved, untouched bunkers. Ironically, UNESCO declared the bunker World Heritage as part of the New Dutch Waterline after the bunker was cut through. 'So, *Bunker 599* set a precedent within UNESCO,' Erik remarks with a smile. 'Altered or transformed heritage can be more interesting than the untouched original. That's exactly what I mean by expanding the concept of affordances.'

**'CUTTING THROUGH AN INDESTRUCTIBLE BUNKER TAKES A MONTH, BUT CUTTING THROUGH POLICIES TAKES FIVE YEARS.'**

As a child, in 1985, Ronald gave a presentation on 'The Environment,' a rather unusual topic for a school presentation at the time. 'I'm not the scientist that Erik is, but I was always a very physical

child who played outside a lot. We lived near a polluted river. If BASF in Germany had discharged waste into the river, we weren't allowed to swim in it.' In 1993 and 1995, Ronald and Erik's family experienced flood evacuations, and in 1998, Ronald graduated from Hogeschool Larenstein with a focus on flood management. He designed a 'green river,' a nature area that occasionally floods, to solve future water problems in the Dutch river delta. Five years later, while working at a famous landscape architecture office, he earned another degree, this time at the Academy of Architecture, focusing on the same topic. His graduation project, "Green River," was awarded an Archiprix in 2004 for the best Dutch graduation plans. He was now officially registered as a (landscape) architect.

This time, his brother, Erik, helped with the text for his next project, planting 'the first seed of our collaboration.' Then came the Prix de Rome in 2006, which further deepened their partnership. After the initial selection for the Prix de Rome, Ronald received a working period at the Rijksakademie of Visual Arts. That period was important for him. A whole new world opened up. 'I suddenly had so much more freedom than I was used to in the constrained architecture world.' Erik adds: 'It was a revelation to discover how you can apply architectural skills in more autonomous ways.' One of the insights Ronald gained was that 'you don't always have to build something. Sometimes, removing something can be just as impactful.' 'Ultimately, the space where creativity emerges – where art, innovation and all those things find their place – is in emptiness. Often in temporary spaces, which don't even have to be permanent.' Thus, emptiness became not only a political statement against vacancy but also a driving artistic force behind their work: the poetry of absence.

Much later, in 2022–23, Ronald became an artist-in-residence at the IAS. 'That was another

example of a wonderful temporary space where I could work exactly as I wanted. It was so liberating to be able to draw, sketch and talk freely with all these different researchers, especially during the well-known IAS lunches. And to not have to worry about funding for a moment.' Ronald's sketchbook lies on the table, and he flips through it, showing many beautiful sketches and drawings, a large part of them made during his time at the IAS.

During his IAS residency, the Herkules

project was also conceived – a structure in the middle of the IJ, meant to represent the new centre of Amsterdam, as it lies precisely between Amsterdam-Noord and Amsterdam-Zuid. No longer are the canals seen as the city's centre, but a centre that sees Amsterdam-Noord as an integral part of the city. Ronald and Erik show the drawings. The structure consists of two push barges – the kind frequently seen navigating the IJ – placed on top of each other, so that an enor-

RAAAF, *Deltawerk* //.



mous yet intimate space for silence and reflection is created in the centre of 'Water City Amsterdam.' A small shuttle service from the NDSM wharf would transport visitors back and forth. Scientists at the IAS were thrilled with the idea of this intimate place, and the structure could even provide space for various forms of scientific research, including studies by the IAS's Urban Mental Health group. In a short time, after consideration by the IAS, Ronald and Erik found themselves sitting with Amsterdam's mayor, Femke Halsema, and soon after they were invited to present their plans at the mayor's residence. 'It was fantastic! Everything moved so quickly and smoothly. Everyone was incredibly enthusiastic.' Herkules was originally intended to be part of Amsterdam's 750th anniversary celebrations, but, in the end, it just didn't make it through the 750 committee, because of the limited budget. Ronald now thinks that might even be for the best. 'By then, we had even more new ideas.' Undoubtedly, Herkules will rise in Amsterdam at some point, in one form or another.

**'AT A TIME WHEN PEOPLE ARE BOMBARDED WITH MORE AND MORE IMAGES AND OBJECTS, I AM INCREASINGLY DRAWN TO OMISSION.'**

Ronald is not an artist who works in solitude, who wants to be left alone or who presents his work without being present himself. The story of RAAAF is clearly part of the work. For this reason, he was a great fit at the IAS. Moreover, he was already engaged in an interdisciplinary collaboration with philosopher Erik, so working across disciplines and domains was nothing new to him.

Beyond many conversations, sketches, drawings, and artworks, Ronald also organised two 'field trips' with the IAS. The first time, a group from the IAS took a bus to the Waterloopbos's Delta Works, where the artwork *Deltawerk //* by RAAAF/ Atelier de Lyon is located. The Waterway Expert

Laboratory features a large wave basin, which served as a testing site for Delta Works from 1977 to 2015. Engineers built scale models of hydraulic structures there to test their resilience. 'By excavating and cutting large concrete slabs out of this colossal (national) monument of the Dutch struggle against water, *Deltawerk //* now stands in the water. The weight of the work becomes a physical experience as visitors can walk over the water beneath the massive blocks. Once inside, they are confronted with a grand perspective on the emptiness between the concrete slabs.

The second excursion was by boat, carrying the crème de la crème of the Netherlands' academic community and municipal government to Het HEM. In the old bullet factory, RAAAF's work *Still Life* is on display. *Still Life* foregrounds the danger of the bullets that were created in the war factory and draws connections between the past, present and future of this historically burdened heritage. Once again, emptiness plays a crucial role in the work. Ronald: 'At a time when people are bombarded with more and more images and objects, I am increasingly drawn to omission. I call it the *poetry of absence*. To get to the essence, sometimes you are better off taking things away.' Erik adds, 'In *Deltawerk //*, there was a channel with a large building over it. The engineers had built an entire hangar around it to observe everything properly. There was also a large crane used to place objects in the delta channel. We ended up dismantling the entire hangar and removing the crane as well. From a sustainability perspective, that was also an attractive option.'

**'SKILLS ALWAYS DEPEND ON AFFORDANCES. IF YOU'VE NEVER LEARNED HOW TO HANDLE A CHAIR, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO SIT ON IT PROPERLY.'**

Ronald and Erik believe that all their work, in a sense, connects to *Vacant NL*, the 2010 installation at the Rietveld Pavilion in Venice. Ronald explains: 'That project was about ten thousand vacant public

and government buildings. Together, they represent fifty thousand years of vacancy, because each building stands empty for an average of five years.'

The Sphinx ceramics factory in Maastricht, where toilets were once manufactured, also stood empty. RAAAF was asked to create an artwork there. Erik recalls: 'Initially, they wanted to simply lift our installation from Venice and bring it to Maastricht. But that's not how we work. Our approach is always site-specific.' Ronald adds: 'So we started looking into the entire cultural history of the building. How were those ceramic toilets baked? What did the ovens look like in which they were made?' While in *Vacant NL*, they focused on the reflective light of the space, leading them to use blue, the Maastricht project became, quite literally, a work of fire. The exhibition *Firemen* confronts head-on the risk-adverse behaviour that currently characterises our society. In collaboration with the fire department, they set the entire three top floors ablaze in a controlled burn. Erik shows photos and describes how visitors experienced it.

'Look, you enter here, on the ground floor. Then you walk upstairs. And you see, floor after floor, these vast empty spaces. People feel that, this emptiness. And then they reach the top three floors, where the fire installations gradually intensify. You smell and feel the heat, the smoke, the fire – it's very physical. Finally, you arrive at the roof, where someone points out all the other vacant buildings in Maastricht. That's when you realise that this building is just one example of the massive vacancy potential of the city.'

Erik emphasises the importance of embodied experience: 'The environment, the experience that emerges from the location in its context – that's what we amplify by paying attention to all the senses in our work. And that principle runs through all our projects.'

'Skills always depend on affordances. If you've never learned how to handle a chair, you won't be

able to sit on it properly. Skills are learned within a cultural environment. That's why skills and affordances are always complementary. My research focuses on both. For example, when we study the clinical expertise of psychiatrists treating patients, we also look at the affordances they rely on.'

This presents a very different model from the traditional stimulus-response theory. Instead of a linear process, it's a complex dynamical system, more like an ecosystem. Affordance, Erik explains, is 'the core concept in ecological psychology.' 'You can think of an ecological niche as the rich landscape of affordances in which a human, an animal, a plant or even a cell is situated. Whether it's a worm, a lion, a human or a cell, they all engage with the material possibilities their environment offers.'

This concept is most explicitly explored in *The End of Sitting*, which can be read as a local landscape of affordances for standing, perching, leaning and switching positions. It began with the question: What would a world without chairs or tables look like twenty years from now? RAAAF created an installation – a landscape without chairs or tables. Erik points to an edge in *The End of Sitting* installation: 'Look, this is made at just the right height so that it doesn't invite sitting.' Instead, the design encourages supported standing. 'From an embodied cognition perspective, you can see how this accommodates different bodies of varying sizes. The structure slopes from large to small, so everyone can find a spot that suits them. But each position is only temporarily comfortable. After a while, your leg muscles get tired, so you naturally shift to another spot. And that's what keeps people active,' Erik explains.

*The End of Sitting* landscape was not just an installation for visitors; it also served as a research site for ecological psychologists, physical therapists, ergonomists and human movement scientists. 'They all conducted research within the installation.' Some studied it onsite, while others analysed a

cut-out of it that was later extracted and shipped in a shipping container to the Chicago Biennale. The extracted piece also travelled to several academic medical centres, enabling further research from different disciplinary perspectives. Insights from these researchers then led to new iterations of the project, where different materials were tested. Ronald calls these test sites material playgrounds. 'We don't start by designing the living room of the future. We begin with material experiments and then discover what new material constellations afford.'

The brothers prefer an inverted way of thinking that constantly leads them to exciting, creative and innovative spaces. They call them spatial thinking

models – physical spaces that make you think. Empty spaces, for example, are brimming with imagination, upon closer inspection. The principle of transformation through absence – what Ronald calls the poetry of absence – runs throughout their work. From their installation *Vacant NL* at the Venice Biennale to their project *The End of Sitting*, which reimagines workspaces without chairs or tables, RAAAF continuously explores how voids can afford new possibilities. Whether through political statements on vacant government buildings, physical interventions in military bunkers or radical material experiments, RAAAF's work challenges our perception of space, absence and potential.