



VERA KOX SENTIENT SOIL

Commissaires : Charlotte Masse et Charles Wennig

Œuvre réalisée au CERCO, © HEAD - Genève, photo: Raphaële Müller 2024

1. VERA KOX - SENTIENT SOIL

28.09.2024 > 19.01.2025

Curators: Charlotte Masse and Charles Wennig

With *Sentient Soil*, Vera Kox invites us to question our understanding of the relationships between humans, nature and matter on the backdrop of the sweeping changes that are affecting our planet. Revolving around three major series of works, this solo exhibition immerses viewers in a part-natural, part-artificial landscape between Pleistocene and post-Anthropocene.

The Luxembourgish-German artist uses the intrinsic properties of materials to create alternative scenarios in which industrial and organic elements merge and collide. Kox's works are hybrid objects that could be described as fossils of our materialistic present. By conjoining seemingly disparate elements, they form an autonomous environment with its own logic that defies common categories and concepts.

On the one hand, the artist presents fragmentary imprints of plants that are reminiscent of remains of long-lost species, thus pointing to the rampant loss of biological diversity. On the other hand, these relics combine with a 'habitat' of living moss, which in turn stands for the long cycles of nature that unfold independently of us humans. (Moss, which developed around 450 million years ago, is one of the first life forms to have appeared on our planet.)

Kox's video installations are the result of her research in places as diverse as the volcanic springs of Dallol in Ethiopia or the Arctic expanses of Spitsbergen, where the effects of climate change are particularly tangible. At the North Pole, for instance, average temperatures have risen by a worrying four degrees Celsius over the past 50 years, leading to extensive thawing of the permafrost soils. These geographical contrasts are also reflected in the diverse, sometimes paradoxical materialities that punctuate the exhibition, as in the works from the Viscera series, which appear to melt or drift like fragments of pack ice. The]Instar[series, on the other hand, with its bursting glazes, is evocative of parched desert landscapes, such as those found at one of the lowest points on earth in Ethiopia.

A central element in Kox's work are steel girders, which embody the unstoppable progress of industrial production. At the same time, these standardised components are representative of her hometown Esch, a former steel city, which has been undergoing fundamental structural change in the wake of globalisation. In the exhibition, the angular beams enter into a dialogue with organic objects made of clay – a material commonly associated with arts and crafts and whose unfathomably long formation process contrasts with the fast-paced manufacturing methods of industry.

In Kox's latest material associations, water, the basis of all life, plays the role of a connecting element. It is only in combination with water that clay, a solid and crumbly material when dry, becomes a flexible mass that can be shaped like skin or dough. The artist embraces these shifting properties to emphasise the transformative processes inherent in her own works, either through material deformations or references to geological processes. This play with the materiality of her objects is key to the sensual experience of the exhibition, blurring the boundaries between the natural and the artificial: hard surfaces appear soft, gooey matter has dried up, fluids have solidified.

With the title of her exhibition, *Sentient Soil*, the artist invites us to conceive of the Earth as a coherent, living organism capable of experiencing feelings and sensations. On the scale of the planet, a wafer-thin layer of fertile soil harbours an incredibly complex organic diversity in constant interaction. It is this layer that lies at the heart of Kox's works, where it gives rise to diverse forms and textures. A mixture of sand, clay, silt, water and air, it has provided the breeding ground for human life for thousands of years, but agriculture, urban development and increasing waste generation are causing this substrate to disappear forever. Seen in this light, Kox's artistic practice is akin to an archaeology of the future: bringing to light the buried remains of the consumer age, it urges us to reflect on the consequences of our actions.

The two parts of the presentation are conceptually connected by down above, a semi-circle of ceramic discs that interacts with the other works to reveal the interconnectedness and porosity of all forms of life. In a simultaneously poetic and disturbing way, the exhibition *Sentient Soil* shows that the planet we live on is constantly changing, but also that our actions are inextricably linked to these processes. In that respect, it is a call to radically rethink our understanding of this complex fabric.

Charles Wennig

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2. Man Appears in the Holocene¹

Charles Wennig

Every day, pale green glass splinters, colourful scraps of textile and plastic particles are washed up on the world's shores. Below a certain size, these fragments can no longer be attributed to any object; for beachgoers who are paying for a carefree experience, they all blend into the general category 'sand'.

In the further course of deep geological time, far from all-inclusive holidays, all these particles will continue to decompose, break up and erode. They will eventually sediment and gradually undergo diagenesis, that is, be subjected to powerful chemical and pressurised thermal transformation processes and come together to form new rock formations. Lavoisier's chemical discovery was also a planetary one: 'Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed' – on an unconceivably long timeline, that is.²

In her artistic-reflective practice, Vera Kox creates sculptures and installations that bear witness to these transformation processes, which unfold outside of human time. Her elaborate ceramics, which she calls 'creatures', are formally reminiscent of detail studies of elaborate Renaissance draperies. At the same time, they are evocative of waste, forgotten, abandoned heaps of industrial bulk goods with their unnaturally perfect, repetitive patterns (cleaning textiles, bubble wrap...). On closer inspection, however, one notices a material thickness that is more reminiscent of extruded, randomly collapsed and hardened foam or miniature rock formations whose folds seem to result from some idiosyncratic kind of plate tectonics.

The tension between the allure of the draperies and the unclear nature of the materials prompts beholders to ask themselves whether the objects can be touched, tempted, as they are, by the desire to ascertain whether they are truly made of soft, malleable matter. At the same time, the garish colours and the crumbly glaze crusts act as blatant, almost cartoon-like 'chemotoxic warnings' commending them to keep at a healthy distance.

¹ The title refers to the 1979 novel *Man in the Holocene* by Max Frisch. The statement is factually incorrect, because humankind as a species already appears in the Pleistocene; it is humankind as an 'observable phenomenon' that appears in the Holocene.

² Antoine Lavoisier, *Traité élémentaire de chimie*, Paris, 1789, pp. 140-141.

Kox's creatures have an undeniably strong presence. Like 'tribbles', they spread out everywhere, take possession of the exhibition space and bide their time.³ Do they move unnoticed? Do they breathe secretly? Will they collapse at some point?

The scenographic inclusion of mosses as well as water and steel elements creates a kind of habitat for them. The steel beam, a recurring element, incarnates the transformative powers of human ingenuity. Each of these girders has already had several lives. Originally made from iron ore, they have been melted down again and again, remoulded with tremendous energy expenditure and thus reused countless times. They act as silent witnesses to the abstract but real cycles of extraction, utilisation and reinvention, reflecting the unstoppable progress of industrial processes. Their presence in the exhibition emphasises the theme of constant change and highlights the material's ability to adapt.

The mosses, for their part, are at the opposite end of the material spectrum. Mosses, which probably evolved from algae around the Ordovician period (around 450 million years ago), are among the first life forms on earth and have been growing rather slowly but constantly on almost all surfaces since that time. Their presence in the exhibition space illustrates the slow, continuous cycles of nature, which unfurl independently of human intervention and chronology. These primitive organisms thus remind us of the self-sustaining processes that have characterised our planet for millions of years.

Sentient Soil: the conscious soil, the living, compassionate soil. It offers billions and billions of microorganisms a habitat in and with which they live in constant interaction. A more or less compact mixture of sand, clay, silt, water and air and unimaginably complex organic diversity, delineated at the bottom by the hard rock of the lithosphere, and at the top by the atmosphere.

This wafer-thin, fertile layer of soil plays an essential role in our existence, because it provides the stage on which we humans have been pursuing our cultural, city-building 'success story' with the help of agriculture and animal husbandry since the Pre-Ceramic Neolithic (around 9,500 years ago).⁴ And with the cities came the division of labour, growth, and waste. The waste that we are burying in ever larger dumps.

³ See *Star Trek: The Original Series*, Season 2, Episode 15, 1967.

⁴ The Austrian website *Umwelt-Bildung* suggests the following method to visualise the relationship between fertile and infertile earth using simple means: 'If we look at planet Earth as an apple, how big is the part of the Earth on which our food can be grown? 1. Cut the apple into 4 parts: three parts correspond to the oceans, one part to the land. 2. Set aside the three parts of the ocean. 3. Divide the piece of land into two parts again. 4. One part corresponds to the deserts, the poles, the high mountains and the glaciers, the other part corresponds to the area that can be inhabited by humans. This "habitable part" is home to 7.8 billion people. 5. Divide the habitable part into another four parts: Three parts correspond to the areas where no food can be grown (drought, roads, houses, etc.). Set these aside again. 6. Peel the small "fertile part": This small piece, the shell, is the tiny part of the earth on which food can be grown. All of humanity depends on this fertile soil, because it provides 90 per cent of our food!' See <https://www.umwelt-bildung.at/wie-viel-fruchtbare-erde-gibt-es-auf-unserem-planeten>.

Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, for example, was the largest landfill site in the world from 1948 to 2022; with an area of 8.9 million square metres, a volume of 115 million cubic metres and a weight of 150 million tonnes, it is considered one of the biggest ‘objects’ ever created by humans.⁵ Layer by layer, the remains of consumer society have been buried here, more recently also the rubble from 9/11. Now the plan is to cover it up with a park. People want to see grass grow over the rubbish and forget about it.

In light of this situation, we may ask ourselves whether Kox is an archaeologist of the future who unearths transformed, fossilised, post-human petrefacts from the depths of our landfills? Or an activist who sends out discreet and subtly disturbing messages warning about the consequences of our reckless, capitalist way of life, while contributing to a multispecies understanding of the world?

Some of her creatures bear a faint resemblance to worm faeces as first described in detail by Charles Darwin.⁶ The British naturalist was one of the first of his creed to recognise the importance of worms in soil conditions and therefore archaeological preservation. He thus freed the supposed ‘vermin’ from its negative reputation, while his observations and insights into something as supposedly insignificant as worm faeces also contributed significantly to sharpening our understanding of complex ecological relationships.

This also rings true for Kox’s works, which express the inexpressible and incomprehensible nature of existence on this outer, wafer-thin layer of the ‘Pale Blue Dot’.⁷ Not as signs of existential fear, but with a deep fascination and reverence for life itself, its diversity, richness, contradictions and resilience.

The recurring use of clay in her installations, this primordial organic matter originating from the deepest layers of the earth, can be said to emphasise this perspective. The formation of clay is a lengthy geological process that takes millions of years and begins with the weathering of rock through various influences such as wind, water and changes in temperature. This releases the rock’s mineral components and carries them to the surface in smaller units. Crumbly and solid when dry, the material becomes flexible when mixed with water, which allows it to be bent and folded like dough or skin.

⁵ See Martin V. Melosi, ‘Fresh Kills: The Making and Unmaking of a Wastescape’, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 1 (2016): 59–65.

⁶ Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms*, London, John Murray, 1881.

⁷ The term ‘Pale Blue Dot’ refers to a photo of the Earth taken in 1990 on a suggestion by astronomer Carl Sagan from the *Voyager 1* space probe at a distance of 6 billion kilometres. See also Sagan’s subsequent book on the matter, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994).

Not coincidentally, water is a central element in Kox's more recent works, where it usually plays the role of a connecting element that fuses the individual parts into a whole. But beyond this function, water stands for a radically different understanding of the world and the place that we humans hold in it. In the words of feminist cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis: 'Our bodies of water ... ask us to consider how the ontological expresses a multiplicity of being that extends into and through other beings in an intricate and intimate entanglement of relationality – that is, an elemental and multispecies hydrocommons of water – while never collapsing this interconnectedness into an undifferentiated mass.'⁸

⁸ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 99.

3. Vera Kox

Vera Kox (b. 1984, Frankfurt am Main) is a German-Luxembourgish artist who lives and works between Berlin and Luxembourg. Her work has been exhibited internationally in numerous institutions and galleries, including the Stavanger Art Museum, Esch2022 Sculpture Trail, Skulpturen Triennale (Bingen), Galleri Opdahl (Stavanger), Cosar (Düsseldorf), Kunstraum Bethanien (Berlin), Ribot (Milan), the KINDL - Centre for Contemporary Art (Berlin), the regional museum of contemporary art Occitanie MRAC (Sérignan) and Mudam Luxembourg (Luxembourg). In 2023, she was a resident at CERCCO - the Experimentation and Research Centre for Contemporary Ceramics of the Geneva University of Art and Design, and in 2024 she is a resident at Cerámica Suro in Guadalajara, Mexico and at the Bridderhaus, Esch/Alzette



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4. Press visual

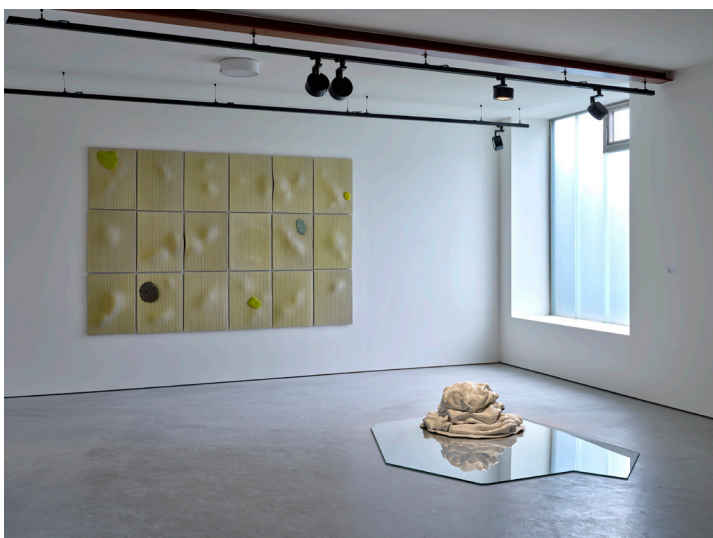
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5. Framework program selection

16.11.2024- 10am – 1pm

MASTERCLASS - INDUSTRIAL IMPRINTS

With Roxanne Flick

Join independent object designer Roxanne Flick in a workshop as part of the exhibition 'SENTIENT SOIL' by Vera Kox.

Participants will create plaster casts using collected industrial materials, offering a playful introduction to working with plaster - a material frequently used to make moulds in art and craft.

Taking as a starting point the myriad textures and materials found in the works of artist Vera Kox, this workshop will introduce you to an impression technique that records material directly.

24.11.2024 - 4pm

MONOGRAPH PRESENTATION & TALK

Vera Kox in conversation with Lisa Robertson

The conversation will be moderated by curator Charlotte Masse.

In her sculptural work, Vera Kox explores the interconnection between the environment, human, and non-human life forms. She examines the multifaceted properties of various materials and often combines handcrafted ceramic elements with industrially produced semi-finished products, which in her installations merge into a cohesive whole as fossilized hybrids of our modern civilization.

As part of the Sentient Soil exhibition, the Korschthal is inviting you to a conversation between the artist Vera Kox with contributing authors Lisa Robertson, author of the text for her new monograph and Charlotte Masse, co-curator of the exhibition, at the Korschthal.

This conference is being held in the framework of the Luxembourg Art Week (22 - 24.11.2024)

30.11 & 07.12.2024 - 10:00 – 12:00

MASTERCLASS – MAKE YOUR OWN CLAY

With Dijana Engelmann

This workshop is an integral part of Dijana's artistic practice, which engages with the local earth of the Minette region and represents an essential element of her current artistic expression. You are invited to join the artist on this unique journey to prepare and shape clay from local sources together.

In this workshop, you will learn how to prepare good clay for making ceramic objects. For this purpose, Dijana personally collected clay in the areas of Esch and Dudelange to form small objects. The goal of this course is to impart technical knowledge about preparing clay from local sources and to provide a deeper understanding of the significance of local materials in art. You will not only learn how to process and prepare clay but also how to use this material to create sculptural ceramic objects.

19.01.2025- 15:00

CONFERENCE CERAMICS TODAY: HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

With Joëlle Swanet

The Korschthal in Esch is hosting Joëlle Swanet, an artist and technology professor at La Cambre, for a conference on the challenges related to health and the environment in ceramic practices. With over 20 years of experience in this field, she is recognized for her role as a whistleblower. Her presentation will place contemporary ceramic practices within a historical and social context, clearly highlighting the areas of risk and key issues. A Q&A session will follow, exploring avenues for collective solutions. This exchange promises to raise awareness, where the expert insights of the speaker will open up possibilities for improving our workshop practices. Her resolutely optimistic and eco-responsible perspective invites participants to choose between understanding and taking action or remaining in denial. This is a date not to be missed for anyone seeking this opportunity.

6. Publication

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