



INTERVIEW: KINKE KOOI & MIRJAM WESTEN
'IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT STATUS'

MW: A wall hanging with a variety of decorative patterns woven into every millimetre of it. Newspaper photos of an indigenous man lavishly decked out in jewellery from medieval altarpieces. A scribbled text hanging above a sink with the words 'prepare lecture and travel through the country with it.' There are books on the table with dizzying, fluorescent fractals, Celtic artefacts and miniatures, and there's one about myths of the wild woman, titled 'Women Who Run with the Wolves' ('my favourite'), opened to a story about a witch who lives in a house on chicken legs. i

Amongst this vast array of visual stimuli, my attention is drawn to one constant in Kinke Kooi's studio: a dense web of sensually undulating pencil lines stretched out across sheets of white- or pink-coloured sketching paper and photos. The drawings have names such as 'Adaptability', 'Digging for origin', 'Subtlety', 'Housewife', 'Exercise to surrender' or 'Female view', and they are filled with fine, flowing lines begging to be coveted. Strings of pearls meander elegantly through a deep-blue world, a hand glides through voluptuous curves in order to grab a pearl from its depths. Cave openings and organic vaults draw our gaze inside, mysterious dream cities on rocks peer at us. Elsewhere we recognize ordinary objects, like a comb connected to a needle and thread. Kooi does not limit herself to the 'thing in itself'. The spaces between eyes, beads or other insignificant objects are at least equally important. They are transformed into pulsating, close-fitting shells, which, with their swirling and spherical shapes, endow ordinary things and words with an alluring touchability. The 'incarnation of space' seems to set everything into motion.ii

In my opinion, Kooi's passion for drawing has nothing to do with the fear of empty spaces (horror vacui): the abundance of fragile, swirling lines stems from an almost insatiable need to reconcile the distance between things or people in order to show how the smallness, for all its apparent futility, can be meaningful and alluring. The result is a fairy-tale illusion. Following is a conversation with an artist who tells us, like an ebullient stream, about the inspiration behind her work, about the desire to move towards a society in which all male and female qualities are held in equal esteem, and, above all, who uses femininity as a positive force to change the world, as Yoko Ono once so aptly put it.iii

MW: *Can you describe the physical feeling you experience while you draw? What goes on inside you?*

KK: I derive pleasure from knitting everything together, so to speak, from being close to the paper while I'm drawing. Actually, all I do is comb hair and string beads. It's a meditative way of working. I'm also always looking for an excuse to draw things I can't seem to leave alone, like little balls. They represent things I'm attracted to: jewellery, beads and berries. I have a kind of primeval instinct to physically unite with things as I'm gathering them. It's a form of clinging to things and drawing them towards me, a kind of eroticism and fertility... That's why the rubbing and polishing of circles and spheres are important to me, because I feel the visual smoothness tingling in my fingertips. Somehow it gives me physical satisfaction: my eyes see what my hands want to feel.

Westen, Mirjam & Kooi, Kinke. Oosterbeek, Netherlands, December 30, 2008.



I once saw a commercial for an anti-wrinkle cream that visualized how positive its effect can be, like elastic balls under the skin that dance up and down energetically.

MW: *You added the following text to the drawing 'Logos Eros': 'This is the moment for all women who feel ashamed of being a 'nestler'.iv Shame seems to be a recurring theme in your work. You feel ashamed, and at the same time you take on all the subjects that you feel are painful or taboo, in order to get to the bottom of the subject and embroider on it. In the early 1990s, these were subjects such as female body hair, menstruation blood, cellulitis, leaking breasts, not knowing (ignorance), but also hilly landscapes with grazing animals which, despite the distance separating them, were connected by a kind of vigilance. Striking features of your recent work are the subterranean caves and mountains with cavities. For example, the body becomes a house with cave-like openings, or the reverse is true, namely you make a body out of a house. What does it mean to work with themes you are ashamed of?*

KK: It means surrender and release. I realize that I like to swim against the current, because feeling resistance is also a form of support. People often talk about the importance of climbing up the social ladder. You have to distinguish yourself, stand out and climb, higher and higher, until you reach the top. No one talks about what it's like to go the other way. You can slide down, to the lowest point, into the abyss. This thought inspired me to create cavities, where you can live and hide. Above the cavities, I draw apartment buildings. To me, the apartments represent urbanity, responsibility, the head, the untouchable, the hi-tech, the hygienic. The cavities represent the erotic, the invisible underworld, the low, the bowels and the unhygienic. I want to visualize the conflict between the career and the nest. I come to rest in the holes of shame, as it were. I live in them for a while, I explore them. They're a no-man's land. Because occupying them is so unpopular, no one wants to be there. The top is all about incisiveness and being squeezed together. Being in a high place enables you to survey things and create distance. I have difficulty with this detachment. I want, above all, to be close, to be intimate. In our interview from 1993, I said that painting is based on a grand gesture.v When you paint with a brush, you have to become detached. By becoming detached, you don't lose yourself in details. It's precisely the latter that I find extremely pleasant. That's why I like drawing so much. That's why I like images with 'fractals', where the large disappears into the small. And why I like the miniatures in Flemish Primitive art, which zoom in so closely on details that the painters literally lose sight of the perspective. After the Renaissance, the brush stroke becomes increasingly heavy, and artists start to create more distance. I wonder whether the increasing 'awareness of self' also results in more detachment and hence the desire to be at the top. Although I also feel at home in that 'awareness of self' and think a great deal about climbing higher, it also bothers me. I have a desire to be a part of the whole. The most difficult thing is being pulled back and forth between high and low. That was certainly true when my children were young. They demand that you do not seclude yourself. Reading a book is already too much. A good talk with a friend is an absolute no-no. The funny thing is that doing the dishes or ironing is acceptable, because you can stay in contact with them.

MW: *How did you manage to combine children with your career as an artist?*

KK: The problem is not a lack of time: that can be arranged. Actually, it's thanks to the children that my husband and I worked harder and better. In that respect, they were an addition to our careers. Being pulled back and forth is essentially something that happened in my mind. The combination of children and ambition was the most difficult ninety-degree

turn I could possibly have made. When I look back objectively at what my real ambitions have been since my childhood, then finding true love came in first place, followed by having children and, lastly, perhaps a career some day. The latter was probably attributable to the fact that in my immediate surroundings there were no examples of women who combined both. It was the complete reverse for my husband, who is also an artist: first a career, then a wife and children. Yin and yang: me from the inside to the outside, he from the outside to the inside. When our children were young, we decided to devote an equal amount of time to our desires in the areas of relationship, children and art. That meant that our careers would have to slow down. We started working at the wide base of a pyramid and slowly climbed upwards. Essentially we're engaged in a 'mixed enterprise', which was a good decision. Now, everything has a place and a name, without the need to furtively whisk off in between.

MW: *Nevertheless, most of your attention now seems to be devoted to the low...*

KK: The high is already so visible and has been elaborated on in such detail, while the low is so inconspicuous. When drawing, I feel a visual hunger inside me to concentrate precisely on the inconspicuous, which occupies such a large place in my life. The cavities have to do with relaxation, intimacy, with being subsumed by the whole, and with my living environment. During a pregnancy, a child lives in his or her mother. I live in my body. Sometimes I feel my eyes literally acting as windows. I am frequently occupied with my living environment. Domesticity is very important to me. My greatest wish was to one day have a low, sunken sitting area or a couch made of the same material as the wallpaper. My eyes long to see something that fades into something else. I never bought anything like it because I was afraid that it would make a frumpy impression. It also seemed a wonderful idea to use a stencil to decorate the edges of every window or door opening. The fact that I was frightened that others would find it frumpy says something about the inherent disapproval of the decorative, the feminine. I have a large drawer full of lace that I hold against new clothes to see how it looks. Still, I never sew them on, because it's not cool. The arbiters of good taste shun decorations along edges, because that suggests obedience. Decoration uses the shape that is already there and adds to it. And that doesn't square with the individual 'feeling of self'. It is acceptable in folklore, however, which is an art form that emerged from the collective, and which represents more of a 'communal feeling'. I'm somewhere in between. Luckily I can indulge this urge in my work. I follow the edges of the paper. In the 1980s, I even painted the frames in the colour of the drawing. That's similar to a form of adaptation and absorption in the whole, with which I want to foster a new understanding.

MW: *What you call adaptation can just as easily be interpreted as being contrary.*

KK: You're right. That's a complicated but also an exciting area. I am naturally attracted to seeing possibilities in the impossible. As a result, I often get mixed up in thoughts about pain and all those things so many people find embarrassing. That automatically leads to feminine subjects. I once heard that gynaecologists are scared that their profession will lose status as soon as there are too many female colleagues. I found this immensely intriguing. Wow, imagine a world without status! Around 1995, I drew brightly coloured rays and auras around people, animals and bodily orifices and house windows. Painting auras felt just like performing magic: the object around which I was going to paint an aura became instantly significant. An aura is always used to draw attention to something invisible. In icons it's holiness, in comics it's emotions. I perceive that which is omitted as a visual hole. This form of invisibility feels like a void demanding to be filled with attention. So actually I fill the holes.



In fact, my work is about completing: I want to make things whole again. I can therefore imagine that a great deal of art springing from contrariness is actually healing.

MW: *When we talked about this subject fifteen years ago, I felt relieved to meet an artist who for once didn't react so furtively about issues such as 'gender' and 'femininity'. You simply called them by their name, and you described your shame and fear as candidly as I had ever heard an artist do. This lack of inhibition suited you, and simultaneously it made you more vulnerable. Do you consider yourself a feminist?*

KK: On the one hand, I want to be a feminist, and on the other hand, I want to be a bourgeois housewife. Strangely enough, the two don't combine well. Although adapting is an unpopular issue in feminism, many nevertheless have adapted to the male work rhythm. For example, there's no monthly interval. I can imagine that as soon as women were to organize a workplace, private and professional life would interact much more and be less strictly separated. There should be many more women working at higher echelons, but the top itself has to change too. Too many elements are shut out to which women in particular attach great importance. The time is ripe for a new balance focused more on cycles and not only on linearity.

MW: *Do you think there's such a thing as typically female art?*

KK: When I was at the art academy, the art history professor explained the origins of art to us. According to him it all started in caves when men drew the animals they wanted to catch. When I asked him what women were creating, he replied that they decorated pots and pans. This had a huge impact on me: I was seriously working on becoming an artist but wasn't a direct descendant of the original source. Instead, I belonged to the 'home crafts' branch of art. As a woman, I had no ancestors in art. At that point, I realized that art is not just about quality but also about granting status. Although at the time I was shocked by the story about the prehistoric drawing, it also intrigued me. What's the story behind adorning and decorating? Why is one referred to as home crafts and the other as art, I wondered? Why are decorative patterns and weaving, from which the first mathematical principles and abstraction are derived, called home crafts and the other Art with a capital A? Why is knitting a piece of clothing from a single piece of thread not seen as a great concept? How did it become 'less valuable' than 'high' art? When did men actually stop wearing jewellery? What happened in their way of thinking to make them stop focusing on outward appearance, on the small, on decoration, on detail? And why did women continue to wear jewellery? In my work, I don't think in terms of feminism, but I do think in terms of typically female themes and art. Feminism sounds like mutiny to me, because it's such a charged subject. At the same time, it's brushed aside: no one wants to burn their fingers on its vulnerability. For example, someone once called Louise Bourgeois' work uterine art. That word gave me the creeps, but I also asked myself why. I recognize female themes in art, which incidentally can be treated by men as well. I associate femininity with a more exploratory attitude, more intuitive and sensory, unafraid to lose the overall view or one's way. It means working without a predetermined plan, which I once witnessed during a visit to a workshop in San Francisco where a woman was passionately crocheting beautiful dresses without using a pattern. I immediately recognized her love for crocheting: you start somewhere and create the shape with a single thread as you go along. During that visit, I was also intrigued by the work of an artist who stole other people's possessions and immediately wrapped them in thread, like a spider. In our interview from 1993, I compared my way of working with a meditative way of knitting. The principle that you can create any kind of shape from a single

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thread still appeals to me. With my pencil line, which I consider to be my thread, I spin everything together: I enfold and clothe everything and move in between all these things, like a spider weavings its web. Sometimes this contrariness can provide support, but it can just as easily be oppressive. It's a pleasant way of giving you the creeps. Caring and intimacy can become constricting in a similar way and turn into oppressiveness. I want to face up to it through my drawing. Whenever I draw something, I always develop a love for it.

MW: *What role does 'the invisible' play in your work?*

KK: Nothing is invisible if you look carefully enough. I like to focus my attention on things that you don't see. For example, there's also a different, recent opinion about cave drawings. Apparently the drawings didn't focus on hunting but originated during rituals focused on trance. People sought the darkness of their caves because the eyes produced spontaneous images in the dark. I find this 'seeing in the dark' very appealing. I see a connection between looking very carefully and the spiritual. Since the Enlightenment, human beings have focused on the visible, that which can be proved and can be perceived. In alchemy, the day/sun, the visible, represented the male and the night/moon represented the female element for centuries. They were held in equal esteem. In our society, the emphasis has been placed on the visible, the day, while the invisible, the night, has fallen by the wayside.

MW: *In other words, you see a link between invisibility and femininity. Please explain.*

KK: After I had my daughter, I became more interested than ever in the images that she would see in her lifetime, and which she would identify with. I was shocked by the one-dimensional image of women in the media, films and comics. I call that visual loneliness. Take 'Mowgli', for example. That's a wonderful cartoon, but there's not a single woman in it, except at the end, when a girl entices Mowgli to settle down and lead a respectable life together. The element of adventure is therefore juxtaposed with respectable life: one is exciting, the other boring. In fairy tales, women often do play a leading role, but then as Cinderella or Snow White. As a girl, you like to identify with them, but not as a feminist: both are a part of me, but there's a huge emotional gap in between. I've developed a kind of tic while watching television, which is something I like to do and do a lot: I 'cover up' the men and 'leave out' the women'. I've noticed that especially in adventure films, an entire film can revolve around a woman though she barely appears on screen. So invisibility and femininity go together well. You see the same imbalance in the Smurf village. There are all kinds of Smurfs, characters and occupations: a clever Smurf, romantic Smurf, intellectual Smurf, etc., but there's only one female Smurf in the entire village. The characterization of the female Smurf is that she's female. I would like to fill in these black gaps in visual information.

MW: *Where does your appeal for all the curves, openings and connecting lines come from?*

KK: I find it incredibly satisfying to draw curves and arcs. I'm attached to the idea that one thing fades into the other without interruption. In my experience, a straight line also involves making an incision. In the explanation of Tarot cards, there's a story about the sharpness of the sword, which is capable of separating one thing, good, from another, evil. In discussions, people are always going on about being sharp, separating matters of primary and secondary importance, which essentially represents clarity, something that can be very pleasant, and which can be restful to me. But if you strive for harmony, which I like to do, minor issues are also extremely important so you can bring different points of view together and connect them. I keep winding them around and around until, as if from their own volition, new images

and insights emerge. Perhaps that's why my eyes are so often drawn to the 'completed' whole. All I do in my work is look for extremes and nestle myself in between them. Connect everything to everything else – it's like the 'cuddle hormone'^{vi} I sometimes compare my way of working with water. It has no form in itself but adapts itself to any other form. It always runs to the lowest point, fills even the smallest hole without missing a single one. So from that perspective, my drawing behaviour is a perfect form of adaptation, because there's nothing I like better than filling up the space in between things. This enables me to touch everything, and it gives me the feeling of being in contact. It also evokes something electrifying and lustful as soon as everything touches each other.

ⁱ A fractal is a geometric shape that is irregular on every scale. Fractals have an infinite number of details. Some fractals have patterns that keep repeating themselves on smaller scales. The term *fractal*, coined by Benoît Mandelbrot in 1975, is derived from the Latin *fractus* (broken or fractured); [Women Who Run With the Waves, Myths and Stories Of the Wild Woman Archetype](#) (1992) by Clarissa Pinkola Estés.

ⁱⁱ Wim van der Beek, 'Het lichamelijk kunstverlangen van kinke Kooi .' In [Kunstbeeld](#), February 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yoko Ono, 'The Feminization of Society' (1971). Published in the [The New York Times](#), February 1972. Complete text available at: <http://imaginepeace.com/news/archives/2565>.

^{iv} Kooi heard the term once in an American televisionsoap: a man warned his best friend for a date with a girl: watch out, she is a nestler!

^v M. Westen, [Onbenul. Kinke Kooi](#). Arnhem: Gemeentemuseum Arnhem 1993.

^{vi} Oxytocin plays a key role in the social interaction of both people and animals. It is necessary for bonding between mothers and children and between lovers. It's sometimes referred to as the 'cuddle hormone'. The influence of this substance diminishes the natural tendency in animals to keep a distance and makes them more willing to approach each other – behaviour we would perceive as 'confidence'.