

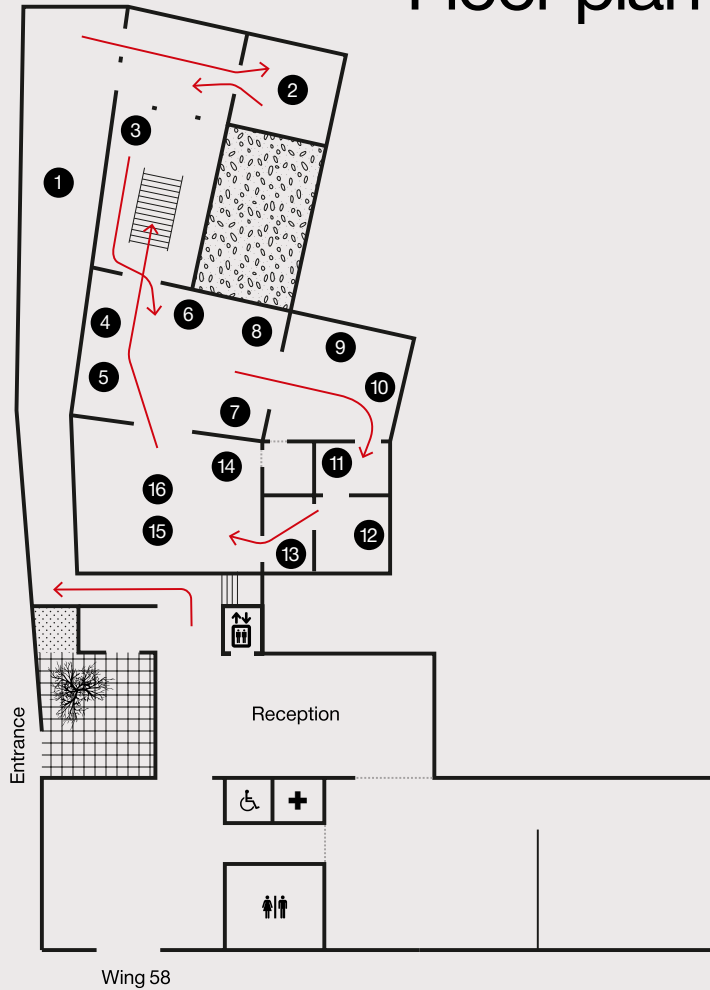
# Kristof Vrancken

The Sustainist Gaze

How did you experience the exhibition?

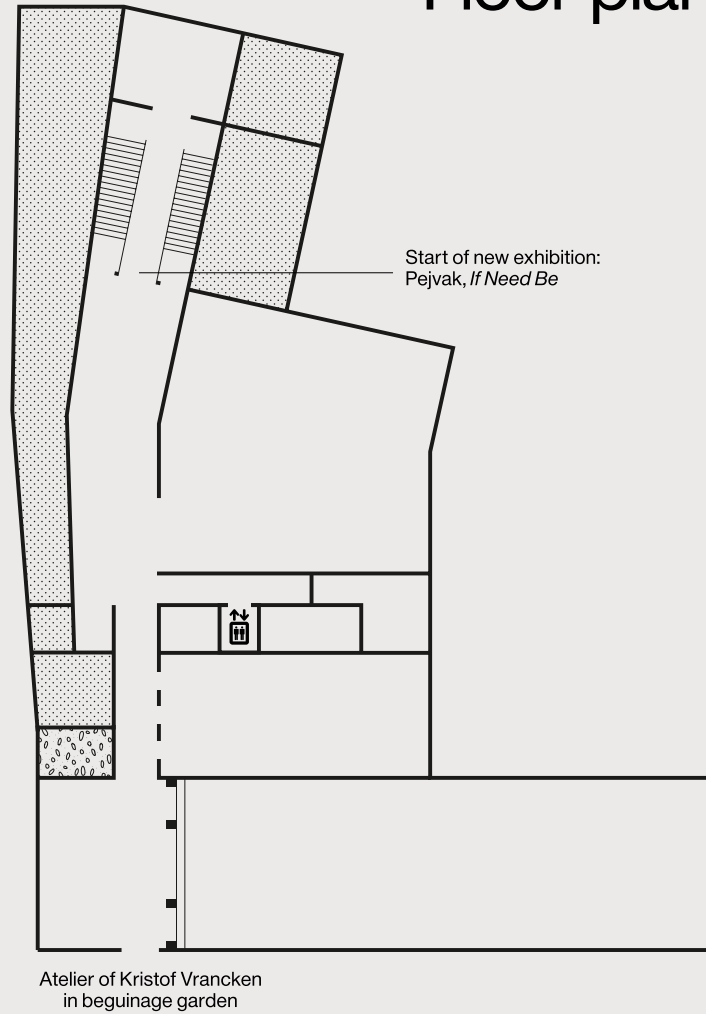
We'd love to hear your thoughts via @z33be #z33be

# Wing 19 Floor plan 0



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# Wing 19 Floor plan +1



Floor 1: start of new exhibition  
Pejvak, *If Need Be*

Continue your visit in the beguinage  
garden and discover the atelier of  
Kristof Vrancken.

## Legende

- Walking direction  
..... Locked

# Meet



## Kristof Vrancken

*“For years I have been fascinated by photography, design, biology, ecology, and philosophy. By combining these various interests, I suddenly discovered quite a few new opportunities to tell my story. This story, the unifying theme of my artistic research, is resistance against the current state of the earth – against the indifference of its inhabitants, and in particular the unwillingness, if not refusal, to explore alternative, more sustainable ways of dealing with our world. We need more imagination and new technological and scientific insights to deal differently with our planet earth.”*

As a photographer and activist, Kristof Vrancken (Belgium, 1982) is in search of an ecological and sustainable artistic practice. For the first time in over seven years, he presents his varied artistic investigations in *The Sustainist Gaze*. He opposes today’s accelerated culture by embracing a slow, exploratory photographic practice. He does so by resolutely opting for nature-based alternatives, such as berries and plants, instead of conventional chemicals for developing his photographs. This quest takes him to places where nature indifferently does its own thing, in all sorts of no man’s land, found in Genk, Belgium, but also in Helsinki, Finland.

# Introduction

In this exhibition, Vrancken takes on three guises: he is a writer, scientist, and guide. As a writer or artist, he philosophizes and explores things, looking for words and images to express his discomfort. The scientist observes and experiments. And as a guide he takes you by the hand through the dark zone.

These three characters hardly reflect a random selection. They are found in *Stalker* (1979), a film by Andrei Tarkovsky. In multiple ways this film is a metaphor for this exhibition. This Russian masterpiece is set in a forbidden zone, a desolate and deserted wasteland. Here, a kind of anti-nature has emerged, feeding on the toxic wastes of a bygone industrial era. The story revolves around three individuals who dare to venture in this immense no man's land. A professor and a writer let themselves be guided by a "stalker".

Just like Tarkovsky, Vrancken feels tempted to enter the forbidden zone. Stretches of nature hidden in between agricultural and industrial zones, bits of greenery found along the edges of a highway, or a piece of urban land that sits empty – these are places that due to the impact of human beings develop ecosystems of their own.



*“I, we are the Anthropocene\*<sup>1</sup>: it is in our thinking and flows through our veins like tiny plastic and metal particles. We dream and inhale it, eagerly sniff in the smut of our incinerators and greedily lick the pesticides of our shiny apple. The water in me has been acidified, contaminated. It is in me. In my son, in all my and your loved ones. It won't go away anymore. It is everywhere. It owns us. It is us. And against us.*

*Is it still possible for you to take up arms against yourself? Against us? Can we hold a plea in favor of our own demise? How to convert such a plea into images?”*

In his book *Dwalen in het Antropoceen* (Wandering in the Anthropocene, 2017), Dutch philosopher René Ten Bos links up the film *Stalker* with the Anthropocene. *“It is a place”,* as argued by Ten Bos, *“where you can never feel at home because it does not allow itself to be known. It appears to involve a domain that acts, thinks, and lives autonomously, and that at the same time constantly reacts to who you are and all you do.”* It is as frightening as it is attractive to enter this zone because of the lack of control there, the aesthetics of chaos, and the looming catastrophe – despite the warning signs and barbed wire.

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\*Anthropocene

Anthropocene is the name of a new geological era. The term refers to the unmistakable impact of human beings on the earth's geology, for instance through the presence of plastics and chemical or nuclear pollutants.



# Wandering through no man's land



## 2. Viral

(2021)

## Mourning

(2021)

The film installation and the two prints in light boxes are characteristic examples of the transitional spaces Vrancken likes to visit. *Mourning* is a quest for the sense of “wandering” in an indeterminate zone where indifferent nature is left to do what it must do. The snow refers to the industrial snow from the blast furnaces of the Ruhr region. In the winter of 2018, steam clouds full of soot particles crystallised through the cold moist air and settled in our region.

At the same time, the film also refers to a feeling that besieges us when losing a piece of nature with which we have a strong emotional bond. The current pandemic causes people to re-valuate these small pockets of nature in their neighbourhood. In times of isolation, nature offers us a sense of connection and consolation.





## Hunger of the Pine I

(2021)

This emotional connection also underpins *Hunger of the Pine I*. The work shows a coniferous wood with which the photographer feels a strong bond. In recent years the wood was seriously damaged by the impact of a parasite (the spruce bark beetle) and the ongoing drought. The monumental print was specifically made for this space. Through the light that is present in the space, the print will slowly fade, eventually to vanish completely. Like in the case of the coniferous trees, all that will be left is a memory.



## Kyläsaari

(2016)

Kyläsaari, on the urban edge of Helsinki, is another such typical wasteland to which Vrancken feels drawn. It is a place in transition, where the remnants of the earlier industrial incinerator are still lying around in a new and still tentative natural area.

*“I recognize these human signs, the furrows in the landscape and the wreck. I see the wreck. The relics of a complete car spread out nakedly across the frosted grass. I see the bricks of something that once was there. I see dices waiting for someone throwing sixes. There is a party, for I see flags. One person forgot his glove. The desecrated soil accepts me. It pollutes me, like I pollute it with my garbage that at some distance is being incinerated.*

*Why do I end up here? Why does my body take me here? Time and again, I feel driven to the edge of us both – to where the greying begins.*

*Blinded by colors is not the same as color blind.”*





# The Anthotype: Photography with Berries and Plants

Vrancken associates himself with the growing ecological and climate awareness movement in the arts world. How can you be activist and constructive as an artist, instead of merely registering things or being critical? How do you not just show an alternative gaze but also convert it into specific actions?

To address these questions, Vrancken found inspiration in *The Sustainist Design* movement, which highlights methods for sustainable design. He pursues alternatives to chemical products commonly used in analogue development of photographs. He also reflects on our current accelerated culture, in which images vanish as quickly as they are created.

The artist decided to return to a slow, organic, and craft-based process, developed in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century photography: the anthotype\*. This early photographic procedure uses emulsions (mixtures) of plants or berries as basis for the print. This procedure was never commercialized because it involves a slow and indeterminate process. Moreover, after some time the print will fade because of its continued photo sensitivity. But precisely these imperfections render every image made in this way unique and non-reproducible, much like a painting.

Certain plants are perfect indicators of pollution. For example, blackberry and elderberry will often be found in places marked by a disrupted ecosystem. Moreover, plants take up toxic substances such as particulates and heavy metals in their system. The pollution present in the plant, then, will also end up in the emulsion, as well as in the print. In this way, Vrancken's landscape images convey a troublesome message, despite their romantic and aesthetic appearance. Nature is fully present in them, even literally so.

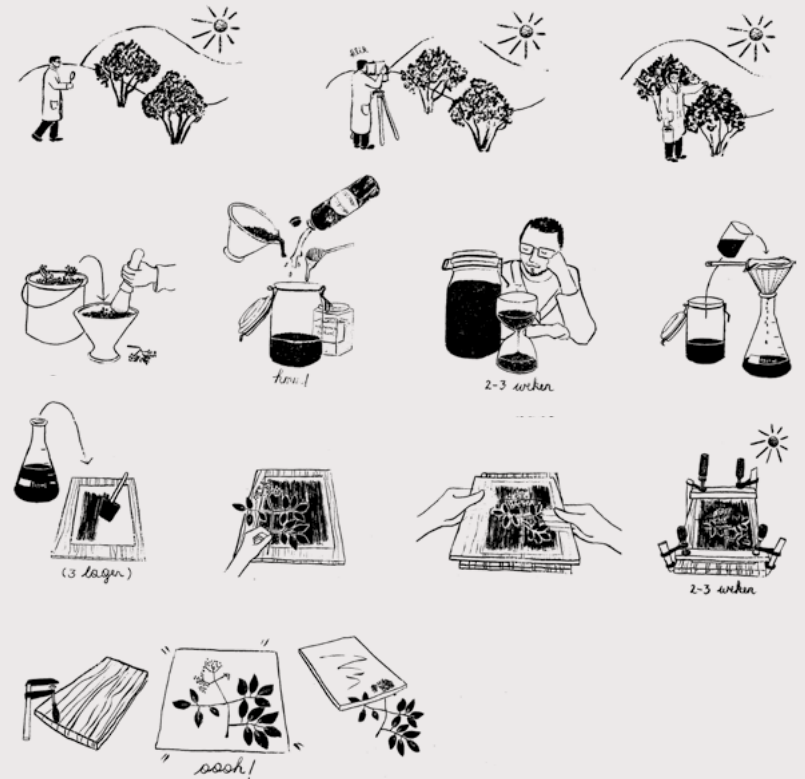
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\*Know more about the anthotype? See other side



# How does the anotype work?

With illustrations by Jenny Stieglitz



The anotype procedure involves a traditional, analogue process. It was first described in 1842. An anotype is created by spreading a photosensitive emulsion, made of the color pigments of plants, onto a medium and exposing it to sunlight during several days or weeks. Ultraviolet rays break down the colors, a process which gradually generates an image. During this process, the organic emulsion undergoes a chemical change, or photo-destruction, causing the pigments to grow lighter. Every plant responds differently to

the light, but several other parameters influence the coloration as well, including the moment of harvesting, freshness, and pollution.

Another major aspect of the slow, craftsman-like anotype procedure is time. The photographer also needs to reckon with the rhythm of the seasons to be able to collect particular leaves or berries. The lighting through natural light may take weeks and is dependent on the weather conditions.



## Transit

(2017)

## De Maten

(2017)

The title *Transit* refers to the many changes in the landscape around Genk. The rise of industrialization was accompanied by the steady disappearance of the original heather vegetation. But “Transit” is also the name of the type of van produced in the Genk Ford plant. When in 2012 this plant was forced to close down, the company left behind yet another polluted wasteland, in addition to the many workers who lost their job. These prints were made with emulsions from plants and berries from the locations shown in the photo. In this way, a direct relationship emerges between the landscape and its photographic representation.

## Strain

(2016)

The series of photos shows the impact of a severe storm in Haspengouw in 2016, which had disastrous consequences for local fruit growing. The images were made with damaged berries from the ravaged landscape. Vrancken added alcohol to the emulsion based on extracts of juniper berry, nettle, blackberry, blackthorn, tansy, and elderberry. These plants, which are used in traditional local gin recipes, are also linked to medicinal qualities and ritual customs. On the basis of these old recipes Vrancken made his first drinkable photographic emulsions.





## Algaetypes

(2018)

In this series, Vrancken experiments with micro-algae. The prevalence of particular micro-algae is an indication of contaminated water. He developed the technique during a workshop in Arles, located in the highly polluted region of Camargue. It is a location that, like Genk, has been in transition for decades. Today, after the decline of the local heavy industry, a fragile recovery of the ecosystem has set in.

## Zinc Violet

(2021)

The zinc violet is a delicate and fragile flower that only grows under highly uncommon conditions, namely in soil holding a large quantity of zinc. The only place in Belgium where the flower is found is a polluted area in Blieberg (Plombières), the former site of a large zinc and lead mine.



# The Spruce Bark Beetle: hieroglyphics of vanishing

Like a serial killer, the spruce bark beetle leaves its signature in the dead woods. It is as if it leaves a coded message for us in its victims. The tunnels built by this beetle underneath the bark of spruces look much like the strange symbols of hieroglyphics. But do these tiny insects act as burying beetles, or is it us who created the conditions for this onslaught?

“I caught one beetle. Locked up in a glass test tube, it sits on my desk in my studio. Time and again I pose the same question to it, without ever getting a reply.”

## Hunger of the Pine

(2021)

In this space, the tiny spruce bark beetle is the protagonist. This beetle causes entire woods to vanish throughout the world, and unfortunately, also here with us. On account of climate warming and the ongoing drought, this insect has managed to undermine weakened trees more easily all the time. Our milder winters allow the beetles to survive in ever-larger quantities. This tiny glutton destroys complete coniferous woods (spruces in particular). It nestles precisely in the tree's most sensitive spot: in between the bark and the stem, through which water and nutrients are transported. After the tree thus loses its bark, it is bound to die.

## Hunger of the Pine II

(2021)

The spruce bark beetle (named *letterzetter*, or “typesetter”, in Dutch) did not steal its name, for it is known for the fascinating hieroglyphical patterns it creates in the bark. The alienating beauty of these line patterns constitutes the basis of a new media work developed by Vrancken together with Lieven Menschaert. The work visualizes and imitates the spruce bark beetle's line drawing on the basis of 500 images of the affected tree bark.



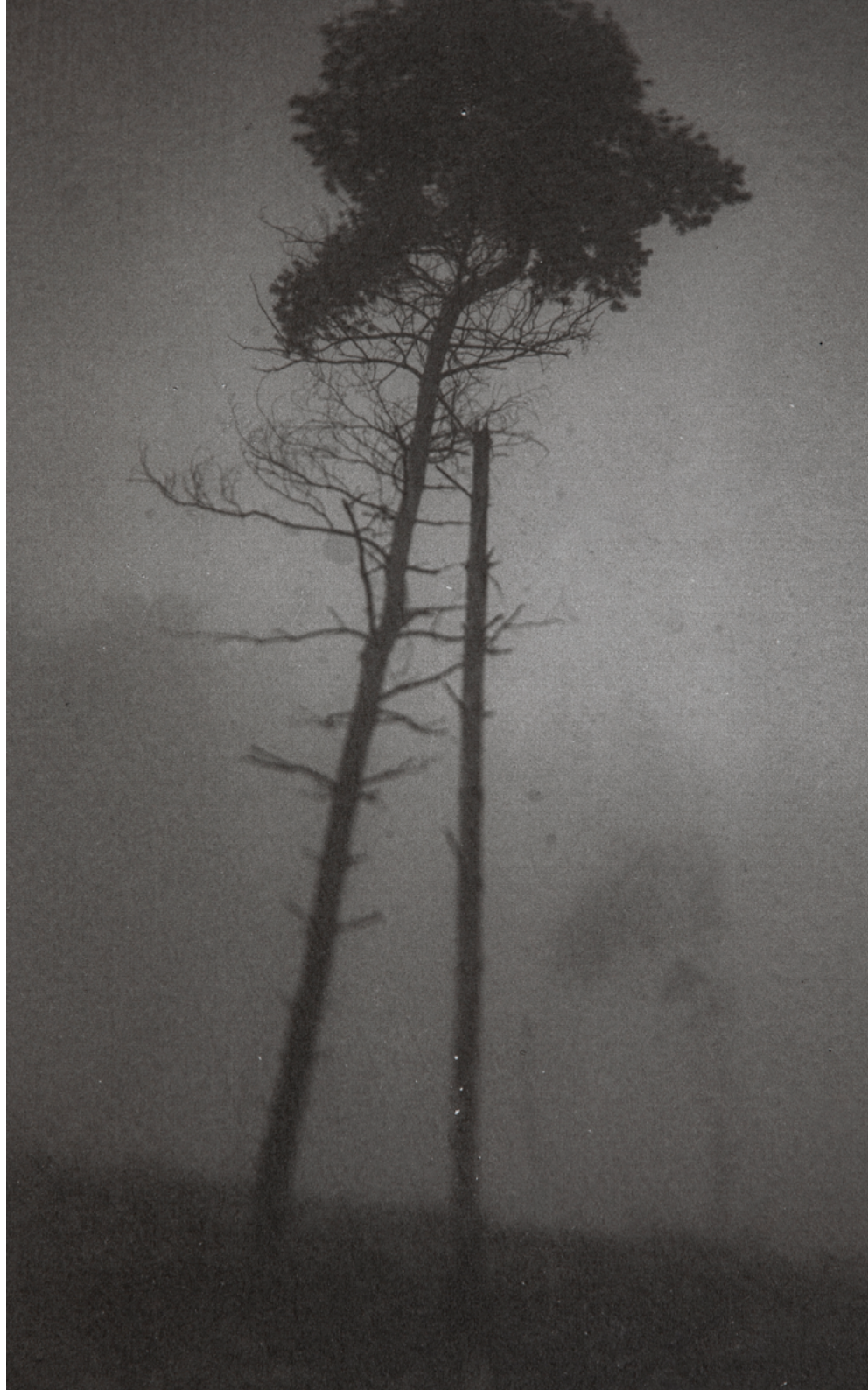




## Hunger of the Pine III

(2021)

Using yet another old process, carbon printing, Vrancken introduces a new way of interrelating landscape and image here. For the first time, Vrancken experimented with charred wood from dead spruces. The dusky landscapes are an ode to the dead trees – mourning images from yet another natural environment, slowly slipping away from us. Here, too, the beauty and pureness of the work go hand in hand with loss and sorrow.



# Experiments: The Artist- Researcher

“I am an activist. I do not climb on barricades but engage in activism through my artistic practice.”



## A Possible Sustainocene

(2021)

*A Possible Sustainocene* is a true first: it shows the preliminary results of a fresh and experimental study of local pigments and electro-active bacteria living in the wetlands near the De Maten area in Genk. The work represents an important step in the quest for alternatives for the raw materials that are needed for the production of a new generation of electronics and solar cells, but that also pollute our environment.

For developing *A Possible Sustainocene*, Vrancken for the first time joined a scientific project, led by X-LAB in cooperation with MFPF (UHasselt). X-LAB studies the generation of renewable energy with the help of organic materials such as plants and bacteria. Vrancken developed this installation as a poetic spin-off of this research. The image is actually coming into being live in this space, as light is transformed into energy and energy transformed into images.



50°57'27.4"N 5°28'19.6"E



50°59'09.8"N 5°28'01.7"E



50°55'47.0"N 5°29'59.2"E

## mijnKOOL

(2017)

This project started from anthotypes of red cabbage. This plant is a strong indicator of soil quality. The acidic level and composition of the soil have a direct effect on the cabbage's growth and can be established from the structure of its leaves. Vrancken planted different cabbages in areas with varying features that are visible in these photographic shots of the leaves. Just like in *A Possible Sustainocene*, science does not just inspire the artist, but the artist also inspires science: UHasselt, led by Prof.dr. Ann Cuypers is currently studying the results from this experiment.

## Rauw

(2020)

In *Rauw* you see fragile polaroid emulsions floating in petri dishes filled with water from sandpits. Their fragility refers to the disappearance of this photographic technique, but also to the water-surrounded landscape around Mol Rauw. You see a strange mixture of natural reserve, tourist hotspots, artificial lakes, and channels that came into being through long-term sand extraction.



# Not In My Backyard: unwanted guests

*“I do no longer remember exactly where we first met as a species, but I do remember the slightly uncomfortable feeling caused by this meeting. The uncomfortable, alienating sense that makes you feel like you’re carrying a wet rag in your neck. The feeling that you notice something but cannot exactly say what it is – that you keep staring at some undefined object without being able to name it. What if the blind spot is in your mind, rather than in your eye?”*

*It was a forgotten place between the always busy highway exits – along a desolate stretch of highway – and the hypermarket near the intersection. There, in that one spot, where every day thousands of cars rush by whose drivers do not pay the slightest attention to this forgotten piece of greenery, something changed. The invasion had begun. It first spread underground and made countless interconnected branches, which each sprouted again. Sprouting power.*

*There, in that particular spot, I began to witness the transformation. During my many drives past it, whereby each time my gaze drifted away from the road and toward that forgotten piece of land stuck among the many spatial functions of the urban periphery. Probably I had noticed it before, yet without giving it much thought. A single plant will not stand out, but the organism kept growing faster, deeper, and higher until it was impossible anymore not to notice it. The plant I long failed to identify suddenly was everywhere, forming an impenetrable reality.*

*The plant was taking over this place, each year conquering more territory. The invasion had started, and there was hardly any resistance against this proliferating organism.”*



## Mutating Ecologies

(2021)

The exhibition's final part comprises a series of works involving Japanese knotweed, an aggressive invasive exotic species which is spreading rampantly with us and even manages to sprout through cracks in concrete. These plants best flourish in areas such as vacant lots, urban edges, and wastelands.

*Mutating Ecologies* consists of anthotypes made with emulsions of the Himalayan balsam and the black cherry. The latter is a non-native species that mainly nests around water borders, where it overgrows and threatens the native species.



## NIMBY

(2021)

The book project *NIMBY* (Not In My Backyard) resulted from a workshop with participants from various disciplines (photography, arts, design, graphic design). Instead of combatting exotics with every available means, participants looked for ways to deal with knotweed in a constructive and sustainable manner.

Through such artistic interventions, artists Kristof Vrancken and Niek Kosten unraveled the meanings of knotweed. In this way they try to open up the debate on these unwanted exotics within the identity of the Flemish landscape.



“Shall we do all we can to fight these uninvited guests, or should we rather look for new ways of living together?”

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## Support

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## Colophon

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