

Sticky Agency: Isabelle Andriessen  
Philipp Hindahl

Over the past few years, Isabelle Andriessen’s sculptural work has changed, transitioning from squat, melting shapes that blur the line between animal and mineral, fungal and architectural, to ever-new forms. These stand up and are less organic, while simultaneously claiming agency.

“A very accurate reading,” confirms the artist over Zoom from Amsterdam, and points to the goal of making her sculptures increasingly uncanny.<sup>1</sup> Consider *Resilient Bodies*, her 2017 show at Hotel Maria Kapel in Hoorn, the Netherlands. The pieces seemed haunted and inexplicable, as if viewed by an estranged, time-traveling observer. They were held in powered, heated trays so that their viscous matter—paraffin wax—dripped from slightly elevated, warped platforms. Changes that happen regardless of whether a viewer is present are recurring themes in Andriessen’s work. And as the recent works claim ever more space, they present themselves less and less as mere objects of contemplation. The objects in *Resilient Bodies* occupied the aforementioned platforms as the base of their construction, but for instance in the 2021 exhibition *DORM* at De Pont Museum in Tilburg, the Netherlands, the works were more imposing, as if primed to create, reclaim, and embrace space like architecture—or ruins, for that matter.

A somewhat outlier in Andriessen’s oeuvre is the large-scale *Ivory Dampers* (2019–20), a curved arrangement of oblong, smooth ceramic shapes (another staple in her work) held in position by steel clamps. It is adorned with stalagmites consisting of iron sulfate, a salt that crystallizes in a sickly amber hue. While other sculptures straddle the line between living and inanimate, this one falls right into the uncanny valley that a fictional fossil would occupy, a prehistoric relic that aspires to communicate over an immeasurable stretch of time. What links the earlier and the more recent works is a processual quality. The parts ooze and drip. In some pieces, aluminum elements are chilled to 4 degrees Celsius by a liquid that flows to the pieces via conduits. The metal pulls moisture from the air, which runs onto the ceramic parts as condensation, slowly changing them. Minerals crystallize, sculptures remain porous, liquid is absorbed—an ongoing process of degradation and mutation. “The aluminum sculptures feed the ceramics,” says Andriessen.

I ask if she feels any attachment to John Cage’s extremely slowed-down musical composition *ORGAN<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP* (2000–ongoing), which is being performed in an abandoned church in Germany and will take 639 years (the abbreviation stands for “As SLOW as Possible”). She confirms. Maybe this sets the terms for understanding her work: as a very slow performance, and one in which the work’s agency is augmented. “How strange it is that we haven’t talked about systems yet,” the artist remarks a while into our conversation. And indeed, there is a cybernetic quality to the work, which has to do with the contraptions of hoses and conduits resembling a metabolic circuit. The series *Tidal Spill* and *Terminal Beach* (both 2018) release a scent into the gallery via a pipe network. It imitates the smell

of burning plastic or oil, and refers to e-waste sites where refuse is burned to extract slivers of rare metals—materials that are distinctly hazardous for humans and the environment. These conditions create an experiential aspect in the gallery, an architecture within an architecture, a system within a system. The institution, traditionally tasked with collecting and conserving artworks, just provides the shell.

Andriessen’s installations occupy an interstitial space because, as the artist asserts, “they are akin to performances.” Ghostly ones, admittedly, for no humans are visibly involved. Maybe she figures as a choreographer, but the materials have their own agenda, which is what makes the arrangements so unsettling. They create a sharp contrast to everything that is around them, and in this contrast, the strange agency of seemingly dead materials affirms itself.

Art institutions have recently begun to understand performance—ephemeral and contingent, unruly and tied to a performer—differently, that is, as something to be collected, which inevitably brings issues of conservation and legality to bear. At the same time, performance and process have become fuzzy categories, as curators and artists attempt to level the hierarchy between human and nonhuman agents. The old modernist dream of the open work is updated, and no observer is necessary for openness. In this delightful mess of changing institutions and shifting discourses around performance and sculpture, Andriessen’s objects question the very core of conserving and collecting.

Andriessen’s recent exhibition *DORM* introduced architectural elements, and its documentation shows the pipes that dispersed the fluids. The work is an institutional critique, although the use of the term is a little unorthodox here. Then again, hasn’t Hans Haacke, one of the forebears of the movement, also experimented with condensation?

Andriessen’s interest in material agency and the creation of experiential spaces prompts some to draw comparisons to Surrealism, or at least its conceptual bones. “I haven’t studied Surrealism in my work consciously,” says Andriessen. “Rather, I am interested in the uncanny and the abject.” Difficult as these aesthetic categories may be, the pieces can also be read as joyful, maximalist play, as cybernetic contraptions that eschew controllability. “You encounter the sculpture, and then you’re lured into its details and its uncomfortable, grim nature. It might become a little sticky.”

1 All artist quotes are from a conversation with the author on February 10, 2022.

163 Isabelle Andriessen, *Necrotic Core* (detail), 2021. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Aurélien Mole  
164 165 Isabelle Andriessen, *BUNK* installation view at CAN Centre d’Art Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, 2021. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Aurélien Mole  
166 Isabelle Andriessen, *Nocturnals* (detail), 2021. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Aurélien Mole  
167 Isabelle Andriessen, *Terminal Beach*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij









