

IN MEMORIAM: Hans Waanders 1951-2001

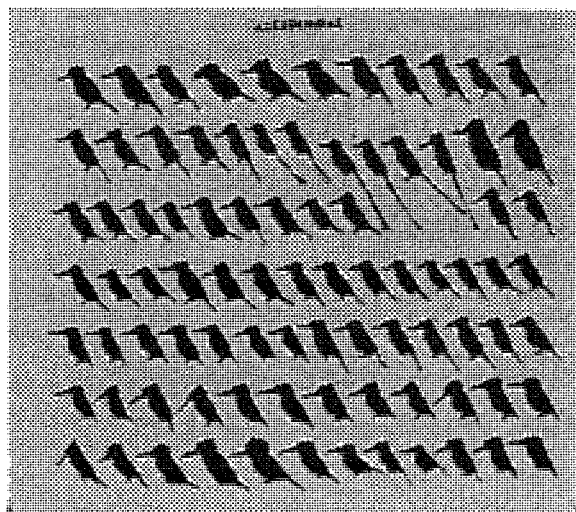
For the most part of two decades of his career, Hans Waanders' activity as an artist was focused on the pursuit of the Kingfisher (Alcedo Atthis, or in Dutch eijsvogel)—a search in and of nature, into every possible characteristic the kingfisher. What began as a small-scale, intimate project, became an archetypal engagement. Perhaps inadvertently Hans created a Kingfisher clan (as his Scottish friend Alec Finlay refers to it), touched by one artist's desire for a magical encounter—the bright flash of brilliant blue that travels close above the water. His books and artist projects rendered the world a stage of possibility.

As a Dutch artist, it is no surprise that water fascinated him. It was in a Dutch Landscape in 1963 on a bicycle trip through the province of Overijssel that Hans sighted his first Kingfisher. But it was his third sighting on October 4, 1982 of a bird's flight across a small pond near the River Maas that transformed his life.

"It was this pivotal third visitation that prompted Hans to adopt the Kingfisher as a personal symbol, itself the symbol for ways in which humanity has accounted for the momentary suspension of struggle—the halcyon days of life. In this deep and unpretentious way, Waander's work itself represents a hiatus amidst the struggle for life and death, a blue halcyon moment that is both full of hope and nostalgia...." (Kristine Stiles.)²

The knowledge of Alcedo Atthis that Hans gathered so reverentially emphasizes a need to document nature and to employ scientific models of observation. The understanding that he sought is only to be acquired by a scrupulous attention to things as they are—not so much a demand for right thinking as for right practice. The work is both testimony and promise of significance. Dissecting a subject into all of its constituent parts was Hans' way to search for a more exact knowledge of the object, and an understanding, and by extension, his subject was as much the self as it was the social and natural environment.

Hans never ran out of fresh approaches: cataloguing, collecting, classifying, compiling, and organizing data on his subject. Since 1991, he carved an exhaustive array of hand-made rubber stamps of the bird creating motifs, or even icons—it's watery habitat, prey, anatomy, even its voice. Hand-stamped airmail stickers and postage stamps bearing his kingfishers flew to and fro around the globe. Ritualized mark-making that arranges, celebrates and memorializes ensued for years, entrancing friends and those who discovered his work. What may at first glance seem simple, ultimately worked its magic as tender, and real beyond measure. Hans restores meaning to everyday existence.



In 2000, Waanders published a comprehensive "field guide" of his own body of work, *Kingfishers and Related Works*. An extensive reference section in the back of the book lists all the literature in his collection on kingfishers. Only the kingfisher parts of foreign editions were photocopied, "the only part of a book that is important," Hans said, smiling wryly.

The biographical section outlines his life in relation to experiences with kingfishers. The book introduces its subject in 20 languages with an inventory of excerpts on anatomy, range and habitat, perches, predators, prey, and migration. It also includes reproductions from many of Waanders' editions, including the now-familiar silhouettes of the global family of kingfishers and his world map constructed from all of the names of Alcedo Atthis in local languages. The Kingfisher family is extended to lepidoptera and a single-pontoon war plane (a kingfisher of course). Newsworthy sightings of the little bird include tragic run-ins with lighthouses and lightships.

The "related works" part of the title refers to preoccupations that pre-date Hans' search for kingfishers that have since been integrated into his cosmology. For instance, first, there was flight: Yuri Gagarin, the first Russian Cosmonaut is memorialized.³ His death in a crash in 1968—he was a test pilot—was suspect to many, including Hans. "Brezhnev didn't like him because he was too popular." This led to Hans' 1992 radio piece featuring a 4 minutes and 58.4 second discussion between the kingfisher and Gagarin.

Hans hand-stamped a frenzy of blue kingfishers over all the other birds in the many found Field guides that he made. A territorial action, "the kingfisher colonises pages in a methodical take-over. System fights system in this quiet invasion. ...Hunting through the books to discover the

untouched illustrations of the kingfisher mimics the real life preoccupation of the artist in his search for the next glimpse of this bird."⁵

An antecedent to the Field Guide series is *Picture Index*, published in 1994, a remake of an Asian lottery prediction guide. A new drama unfolds with the kingfisher's infiltration of the forecasting system. By altering many of the little drawings, Hans created a theatrical debut for his little bird.

Indicative of Hans' desire to communicate is the legacy of private correspondences he maintained. In 1998, from April 25-June 18, Hans recorded and translated into sound waves a conversation over the ocean by email between the Megaceryle Alcyon (from Lauri Twitchell in Portland, Maine, USA) and the Alcedo Atthis (from s'Hertogenbosch, Netherlands). "A conversation/een gesprek" a concertina book with accompanying CD resulted.⁶ When one bird didn't respond, after a few seconds lapse, the other bird calls out again. The 12-inch bird's voice might seem to dominate the 6-inch bird's reply, yet they carry on enthusiastically. And so it was with Hans.

Kingfishers are known to sit on a favorite perch above the same fishing hole daily. Hans' recent work included forays into the landscape to plant a single branch or stick overhanging the water: a perch, an invitation, a lure, a helping hand for a bird that lives by fishing in slow-flowing rivers, swift-flowing streams, and brooks with mud banks. His gestures were quiet and solitary, akin to the bird he pursued; but they were such a regenerative activity, worthy of directing our own meditations "on what it means to be present in the world."⁷

And yet, inevitably, each perch remains stubbornly empty—representing the tangible longing to recapture the mythic moment of seeing the kingfisher. A melancholy results: "the work is pervaded with a sense of beauty, yearning and mortality."⁸

Hans moved from assemblage to photography in a recent publication, *Perches*. This book documents his episodic placement of these hopeful landing pads. In the Introduction Alec Finlay writes "Perches releases Waanders from a studio-based book-making practice into peregrinations through the landscape....With each unremarkable stick pushed into a muddy riverbank, the artist makes a gesture of faith towards the magical encounter. In doing so he poeticizes the river."⁹

Hans' comment, "The kingfisher lives near the edge of existence" is a metaphor for his own history of survival. He persevered against so many illnesses in his life, buoyed by a resilient spirit, and the love of his family. The sighting of this brightly colored little bird diving for fish in a small country pond where myriad waterways are poisoned due to overpopulation and pollution presented him with a quest, a romance, and sense of adventure—possibilities, survival,

flight, and fall. Hans marveled at his hero who could hover without wind. "All other birds need wind." ¹⁰

In a commentary for Hans' exhibition in the Cairn Gallery (Nailsworth), Thomas A. Clark wrote how "...the world is redeemed by such an event, which ripples back through knowledge as iridescent possibility. Now and then, here and there, there may be beauty and vivacity... What unifies these activities is an urgent sense of mortality that we might live, but without the spirit, without curiosity, piety and revelation, we indeed die."

Hans Waanders died on June 24, 2001 near his family's home in s'Hertogenbosch, Holland. Initiatives for a foundation, exhibitions and a comprehensive catalogue are being discussed. In his evident attempt to re-enchant the world, he succeeded.

It's turning quiet
The kingfisher on its way
To the mountain pond.¹¹

—Karen Davidson

Pont La Vue Press, New York, July 1, 2001

1. Halcyon is a genus name for the kingfisher. It comes from the Greek, halykón, which referred to "a mythical bird, usually identified with the kingfisher, said to breed about the time of the winter solstice in a nest floating on the sea, and to have the power of charming winds and waves into calmness." (Random House Dictionary) Halcyon is synonymous with untroubled, serene, and placid. Its use suggests calm, peaceful, tranquil (weather); rich, wealthy, prosperous (times), happy, joyful, carefree (youth).
2. Kristine Stiles. "Hans Waanders," Raleigh, North Carolina, City Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1995.
3. *Kingfishers and Related Works* is an edition of 100. A copy is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art Library in New York.
4. "Gagarin" is a striking red book from 1992 that presents the last sixty seconds of Gagarin's life and premature death as a test pilot in the form of a countdown of memories, dreams, and feelings.
5. Jenny Brownrigg, *The Field Guides of Hans Waanders*, Grizedale, Ambleside, 2001
6. *A conversation, een gesprek* was published on the occasion of an installation at the Nieuw Grafisch Atelier Den Bosch in s'hertogenbosch
7. Alec Finlay, *Perches*, 2001
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Hans Waanders, from a videotaped conversation with Karen Davidson, Edinburgh, February 2001
11. Haiku: Masaoka Shiki, from Kawasemi, Edinburgh: Morning Star Publications, 1995