

"Trails are both person-made and world-made, and what makes persons and worlds. Trails are in the environment, certainly, but they are also cognitive objects. A trail isn't just an indentation in a physical surface, but a *marking* of the environment; a signposting for coordinating sensation and movement, an experiential line of force. Hence the marking is both experiential and environmental. (...) Each trail occurs over time, and is a manipulation or a trial or an avoidance or capture or simply a movement. It is entirely context-dependent. (...) Yet a trail is not transitory (although a tracking of a trail is): the environmental marking persists and thereby the ability to navigate through the feature-domain is enhanced."

- A. Cussins, *The Theory of Cognitive Trails*, 1992

I.

The objective of cognitive theory is to study and attempt to understand how human cognition works: how thoughts are created, how the understanding of the world functions and evolves, and how that understanding, in turn, shapes our minds and personalities. The difficulty of this endeavour is enhanced by the impossibility of establishing a fully controlled environment. In spite of any attempts to do so, there will always be a certain degree of unpredictability, of variation from norms and their constraints.

Ed Hutchins, in the introduction to his 1992 book *Cognition in the Wild*, explains his chosen title as follows: "The phrase 'cognition in the wild' refers to human cognition in its natural habitat—that is, to naturally occurring culturally constituted human activity. I do not intend 'cognition in the wild' to be read as similar to Lévi-Strauss's 'pensée sauvage', nor do I intend it to contrast with Jack Goody's (1977) notion of domesticated mind. Instead, I have in mind the distinction between the laboratory, where cognition is studied in captivity, and the everyday world, where human cognition adapts to its natural surroundings. I hope to evoke with this metaphor a sense of ecology of thinking in which human cognition interacts with an environment rich in organizing resources." ¹

Despite Hutchins' efforts to demarcate a particular territory, cognition "in the wild" does not necessarily become entirely free. As was later explained by psychologist Yrjö Engeström, Hutchins' title might induce the idea that "there is a wilderness out there in which human cognition is free of constraints. It is more appropriate to acknowledge that human beings always operate in various degrees and forms of captivity, within institutions, organizations and activities that have their own rules, boundaries, and limitations. So 'in the wild' does not mean 'free of constraints.' For me, 'in the wild' refers to the fact that the constraints are never complete. In other words, human action and cognition are never fully predictable or programmable." ²

Elsewhere, Cussins' theory of Cognitive Trails offers a fascinating exploration of the processes occurring in the formation and development of our knowledge, our perception of what is around us, our understanding of the environment, and our sense of self within it.

In his theory, cognitive formation is seen as a slow, practically never-ending process that constantly builds and dismantles concepts. Most importantly, he sees concept formation *“as a process that transcends the divide between mental and material, between mind and body. For him, concept formation operates not only with symbols, words, and language; it is grounded in embodied enactment in the material world.”*³

Thus, the way we experience the world around us shapes and informs our knowledge of it, our cognition. Simultaneously, a complex ecosystem of memories, traces, paths, marks and scars—accumulated and carried on in our bodies, minds and souls—forever shapes the way we experience everything, the way we build our trails. It’s a process that can be linear and non-linear at the very same time; a process of stabilization as well as destabilization. It is interesting, too, to recall the etymology of the word cognition: it comes from the conjunction of two Latin words, *cum* (with) + *gnoscere* (to know). To gather knowledge, to accumulate it. Tracing trails and following them, making sense of the world—and of the past.

II.

After a career as a fashion and graphic designer, Jackie Mulder moved deeper into photography and artistic research around 2021, giving shape to a practice that now intertwines photography with textiles, embroidery and drawing to create multilayered, tactile images and tableaux. Her visual universe stems largely from her youth, when she started drawing as a means to cope with a repressive religious household. Mulder was the fourth child, considerably younger than her siblings; from around the age of 12, she found herself spending large portions of time alone in her room, as she felt she could not freely express herself or her opinions within the wider household.

Retreating to a space she perceived as safer—to explore the limits of her imagination—Mulder’s days were spent drawing countless minuscule figures on cardboard sheets. Such works were of quite large proportions, often up to 3×1 metres in size, filled with the kind of scribbles that would later become a signature element of her adult creations. Some of the images in the book, specifically the ones found inside the cover, refer to the feelings she experienced in her childhood: there is a self-portrait with her head covered, reflecting how her opinion was suppressed; another shows her father’s chair beside her own, one big and one small, deployed as a metaphor for the oppression she felt at his hands; or the last photo, showing the heavy, suffocating interior of her childhood home, with a window to symbolize the liberation she felt when she finally left home at the age of 17.

Mulder’s youth has been deeply influential in shaping her visual language, both in themes and approaches as well as in processes and techniques. Over the years she has crafted a unique working method that culminates in complex, stratified artworks where photography is the foundational, fertile ground from which a new, layered reality appears. Photographic images are stitched together, printed in transparent textiles manipulated with different alteration techniques, deconstructed, then re-constructed and layered with beeswax, embroidery and drawing. Layering, both figuratively and literally, is the essen-

tial keyword that best describes Mulder's visual practice. Her photographs are also combined, overlapping and juxtaposing one another to create new and, at times, non-linear narratives. Embroidery, beeswax and gaps between the layers serve to multiply the appearance of repeated elements, opening up the possibility of experiencing them in different ways.

Embroidery in particular is a skill that echoes back the teachings that Mulder received in the '70s, when she was taught that mastering needlework would contribute to making her, and any woman for that matter, a good housewife. According to those wisdoms, the back of an embroidered piece had to be as beautiful and as perfect as the front, never allowing for loose threads to be seen. Fast forward to her contemporary practice, and the presence of visible, random threads becomes a signature, a manifest act of rebellion and singularity. Mulder defines the way in which she applies embroidery to her images as "anti-embroidery", throwing normative standards overboard and allowing for the trails to become manifestations of her thought process and creative thinking.

Meanwhile, Mulder's use of beeswax as a layer that conceals and transforms, applied thickly to selectively reduce transparency, is another reference to her youth—when the presence of candles would not only mark the clerical environment she was surrounded by, but also the passing of time and her relationship with light and reflections. The physicality of each tableaux is enhanced by calculated distances between the different fabrics and textures, creating living imagery that changes and grows with the viewer's gaze, never fully exposed. The surface layer of a given piece is often made of a transparent textile on which a photographic image is printed. The 'front' enters into dialogue with the back layer, made of paper or another textile containing the same image—in whole or in part—but processed with different techniques. As these layers are never fixed onto one another, the image changes with the movement of the elements or as the viewer passes by, constantly creating different connections and perspectives.

Over the years, the free movement of these constituent layers has been deliberately enhanced in Mulder's pieces, allowing for more space and unpredictability in the creation of meaning. In some of her earlier works, present in the inside covers of this book, the chosen techniques and materials make for a more rigid, fixed structure. The doubling of chairs, the concealment of a face or the compositions of the elements depicted do not allow for perceptive re-thinking: they instead form a narrow path of interpretation, which the viewer is not invited to interact with, but simply look at. Progressively, we see where layering and softening opens up new possibilities—as if another cognitive phase has taken over in which memory makes way for the present, and the present allows for different interpretations. Memory is indeed always a fixture, but its perception, or how it's processed, changes. Memory is also present in the materials used, from her father's old cigar boxes to wooden elements from an old house that is under renovation, or even old book covers reimagined as mounting boards. These powerful signifiers root Mulder's practice solidly within a cognitive process, a trail of cognitive construction and deconstruction, a way to make sense of things.

Each of Mulder's pieces, from smaller elements to large-scale tableaux and installations, is an ode to chance and vulnerability. The way in which she experienced her youth and now experiences her present, her surroundings and her cognitive processes, are represented and reinterpreted in her visual ecosystem, materialized by the trails she follows and leaves behind continuously. She increasingly makes use of techniques and strategies that allow for a lesser degree of control, embracing chance, unpredictability and coincidence. This path is indeed made by walking. Over the years, and particularly in recent times, nature has acquired an increasingly prominent place and role in her visual universe. Embroidery becomes roots, while trees and mountains increasingly symbolize the space between vulnerability and strength: all elements the viewer can easily identify with, spanning the inescapability of our upbringing, their consequences in our present, and the constant escape offered by resilience and reinvention, destruction and re-creation.

Nature also becomes a framework through which to reflect on contemporary lifestyles, in which we often feel trapped within an economic system where "doing nothing" is negative, unacceptable, sometimes outright impossible. We tend to stay away from the depth, sometimes the discomfort, of our own thoughts, trying to fill the silence of the void with devices, artificial content, anything able to silence those wanderings. Nature somehow becomes the ideal context in which one can get lost and find oneself again, follow thoughts and trails or create new ones, connect them through space and time and create a safer space where the mind can wander – and where the soul can heal itself. Botanical elements, objects and textures all contribute to creating an ecosystem in which there is a continuous process of healing, making Mulder's work a deep act of active contemplation that addresses both trauma and the stratification of memory.

Ultimately, Mulder's artworks are an invitation to wonder and to wander, to go through, to allow the existence of our thoughts in flux and to be amazed, surprised. Each work is the result of a complex system of gestures, sometimes unique and at other times repeated almost obsessively, which activate and make visible the artist's creative process in material form. Oscillating constantly between tactile fragility and a pronounced sense of strength, Mulder's craft is the embodiment of her vision, and of its many complexities. It might be defined as an "experiential line of force", sometimes wobbly, but surely there to stay.

Endnotes

- 1 Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*, MIT Press, 1996
- 2 Yrjö Engeström, 'Concept formation in the wild: towards a research agenda', *Éducation et didactique* [En ligne], 14-2/2020. <http://journals.openedition.org/educationdidactique/6816>
- 3 *ibid.*