

# metalligent®

**NOT ACCORDING  
TO THE NORM**



# The air artist from Amsterdam

He blocked out the light with a series of small and large objects; he drilled perfect cylinders from vast, unhewn blocks of granite; he exploded huge marble spheres. He spent weeks painstakingly polishing a perfect cube of marble—only to topple it headlong over the face of a cliff. Today he is sucking the air out of ten-ton steel forms . . . Who is Ewerdt Hilgemann and what is his mission?

"Hu, da!" (Look at that!)—these, rather than "mama" and "dada" were his first words. "If you want to understand Ewerdt Hilgemann you must know that his attitude to the things of the world has always been one of curiosity and wonder—and it still is today. He has a need to communicate what he's seeing to everyone, all the time," writes Antoinette de Stigter, his wife, in the book *Ewerdt Hilgemann* (Art Affairs, Amsterdam 2015). "I just have to," Hilgemann says.

## A MAN FULL OF IMAGES

When I visited the two of them in Amsterdam, I was given a warm welcome—and entered a cosmos full of stories, which, as Hilgemann says, "mature into concepts in my head, are converted into processes, and lead to results. Which I then have to accept." And, he says: "I am full of them, they sit everywhere in my whole body."

Born in 1938, he gathered his first images and impressions as a war baby in the Ruhrgebiet: Nazi fanfare, air raids, rubble, cripples, dead bodies. And he tried to make the incomprehensible comprehensible and to put it in some sort of order, through drawing. He collected fragments of shrapnel, fascinated by its shapes and colors—and fatal effects.

When things became too dangerous for his family, Ewerdt Hilgemann was sent to the farm of his beloved grandparents in Lengerich, where he was plunged into a world of unspoiled nature and its careful cultivation. He saw the perfect parallel lines of the plough's furrows in the fields and stared at the passage of the clouds across the blue sky for hours on end.

His other grandfather, a laboratory director in a cement factory, led him by the hand through the screeching and crashing of the machine hall. The experiments he conducted, testing the breaking point of different materials, left a deep impression on his grandson. But destruction also struck here, when a shell hit his grandparents' house, leaving only half of it standing. An explosive device disguised as a fountain pen fell from the sky on a parachute and lacerated the "sowing hand" of his best friend, a farmer's son.

After the war the "perpetrators," his father, his teachers, locked the door to the past by glorifying ancient history and German classicism. They played down all questions about the Holocaust and its causes and prescribed the classics, piano and violin lessons, and the importance of studying something "proper." "But how was I supposed to listen to the people who had triggered the catastrophe?"

...





## A LIFE FULL OF RUPTURES

Hilgemann decided he had to work things out for himself and in 1959, distanced himself from his parents. After visiting various art museums he realized that he didn't want to become a landscape architect as he had originally planned (the love of nature!) but an artist instead. So he enrolled in the Werkkunstschule in Saarbrücken, which in those days was like a different country. It was here that his first and one of his most important teachers, Oskar Holweck, taught him skilled craftsmanship and how to develop independent ideas. As well as to regard life and art as an inseparable unit to be aspired to.

In an early phase of his career Hilgemann started working with strictly logically conceived small- and large-format serial structures and the play of light and shadow. Soon he wanted to make the artistic process visible—by this time he had moved to the Netherlands—creating a series of different squares and cubes by adding to or removing sections from them. Now he was on the right track.

From 1975 to 1984 Antoinette and Ewerdt Hilgemann rented a studio in Carrara in Italy where the artist began working with growing intensity with the power of the elements and physics, and with the relationship between construction and destruction. He began grinding and polishing a hunk of marble 1.5 meters long for hours and hours every day in the sweltering heat until it was a perfect cube. "Stone stays stone, and I was just a little person who wanted to do something he could be proud of. And then the day came when we let it roll 330 meters down the face of a cliff. I hoped that it would merrily bounce down the mountain where it came from. But a chunk of stone that weighs upwards of nine tons does not bounce, it crashes and thunders. Boom! Boom! Boom! Eventually his "bella ruina," the innermost, untouched core of the cube, landed at the bottom, not broken, not shattered, but worked on by nature and gravity. E.H. had found his subject.

He then turned his attentions to explosions, but remained on the lookout "for a way of deforming a perfect shape without hammering away at it." He hit on the concept of implosion and later found his ideas confirmed by the philosopher Marshall McLuhan—known for his work "The Medium is the Message"—who described implosion as the symbol of a changing world, as a way to the center of things, and as the antithesis of expansion. And so it was that Hilgemann found a method with which he could achieve "transformation from the perfect to the incomprehensible."

Antoinette de Stigter and Ewerdt Hilgemann | Image: Klaus Altevogt



## AN OEUVRE FULL OF IMPRESSIONS

He continued to experiment and developed a process that resulted in highly unusual and impressively monumental artworks, which in the meantime have made him famous all over the world. First of all he gets his "boys" in Hardinxveld/NL and at Arnold in Steinbach-Hallenberg to weld him perfect cubes, pyramids, and cuboids two, three, or six meters high, out of stainless steel, which are fitted with a valve. Then he attaches these giants to a vacuum pump and lets them slowly implode. It is overwhelming to watch the first wrinkles form, or the ten-ton colossus gracefully lifting a corner as if it were a leg, or the top half bending sideways like a flower. In the interplay of precise calculation and tamed arbitrariness of physical forces, the cool metal forms transform serenely into "three graces," an angry

„Freeze Frame“, Magnan Metz Gallery, New York 2014 | Image: Arnold



"Cerberus," a flowering "cactus". It is the perfect collaboration between an artist's intention and his "collaborator," the air.

When the Park Avenue Sculpture Committee invited E.H. to New York, he felt extremely honored. For his Park Avenue Project 2014 he created seven sculptures whose shiny surfaces reflect Park Avenue's brick "façade sculptures" and astound passers-by. Antoinette and Ewerdt Hilgemann are currently preparing new projects in Amsterdam, Constance, Los Angeles, and for the sculpture biennial in Bad Homburg. A strong team, a fantastic artist, wonderful, modest people. "I was always an outsider," he says. Thank heavens for that.

Text: Klaus Altevogt

Image: Rolf Giesen



**Antoinette and Ewerdt: A strong team,  
a fantastic artist, wonderful, modest people.**

