

Frozen Flutter of Flame, Leaf, or Ribbon:

on the artistic practice of Jonathan van Doornum

by Eloise Sweetman¹

I became a bit nervous when an unidentified aluminium package was delivered at my studio. Inside the package I found a large, incredibly sharp aluminium nail, possibly for a crucifix or a boat; a model antenna with cables all tangled up; and a timepiece with a thick magnifying glass, a pattern of shattered lines painted on its white dial. Time stopped.

What kind of speculative fiction had I shifted into? Should I hammer the nail into something, wear the timepiece, and tune the antenna to receive signals? How uncommon it is nowadays to receive messages in the mail, let alone such unusual objects, I thought as I examined each object. Instead of bills and taxes, I had received a mystery, a responsibility to take this opportunity seriously.

Not one for crucifixion or fancy timepieces, I try to pick up a signal with the antenna.

I turn one section.
I tune the other,
and the antenna lights up.

I leap out of my chair as the rattle of metal rolling on metal rings through the room.

Silence.

There it is again.
Where is it coming from?

Silence.
And again.

Silence.
Rattle and roll.

It is a coin dropping and settling into a machine. And the sounds is coming from the antenna.

When my initial astonishment subsides, and I fail to explain to my colleagues what I had received, I return to the objects to read their labels more closely. Although they don't state his name, they must have come from Jonathan van Doornum's studio, who I had asked to send fragments for a text I am writing on his work.

Jonathan van Doornum is a Dutch artist living in Zwolle, The Netherlands. His practice spans drawings, sculptures and performances that blend the boundaries between the technical (the nail), communicative (the antenna), and ornamental (the wristband), opening a speculative realm where ordinary objects become vessels of deeper meaning and narrative potential. Often, his artworks have the smoothness of mass-produced products, yet he makes each element himself using aluminum and steel. He counters this cool, machine-like quality with elements that show his hand, literally as a lace glove or indelible finger prints left in modeling clay, or incorporating the softness of handcrafted wood.

I return to the antenna.
Coins are rolling all around me.

Forms of communication are present in, for example, *Reaching For A Silent Signal* (2020-2024), which started as a performance, then a photograph, and ends as an installation. It is also in *Faithful Folly* (2023), where Van Doornum is drawn to the design of 5G towers. Communication is present in *Show & Tell* (2021), where a stylus-like pen (or is it a magician's wand?) is in the middle of a series of looping oooooos. Of *Round Transmitter* (2021), a satellite dish of hand-molded clay with ornamental woodwork set inside it, Van Doornum writes, "The wooden element has the look of an ancient object that could send and receive invisible information. The sculpture concerns a form of existence between this world and others on one hand, and devices that capture and distribute information between distant places on the other. The whole of the work is a transmitter that can send and receive through time and space."²

Van Doornum's sculptural world can be comprehended through speculative fiction, a literary genre aimed at exploring hypothetical scenarios and alternative realities. The worlds of speculative fiction – like in Van Doornum's work – differs vastly from our own, it can be part fantasy, horror, futuristic, or set on another planet, thousands of years ago. Storytelling and worldbuilding plays a large part in Van Doornum's artworks that combine contradictions that at first are unsettling, weird, and seemingly unknowable. I like that because the Old English "wyrð"

2. The artists website: <https://jonathanvandoornum.nl/round-transmitter>



***Decision table* (detail), 2022, aluminum, carbon tubes, steel parts, bitumen kit, spray paint, various lenses, bullet cases, metal drills, leather, fineliner on paper, epoxy glue with pigment and ball chain, variable dimensions**



***Reaching for a silent signal*, 2020, epoxy clay, pigments, aluminum fabric and lace
this act took place on the 7th of February 2020 in Marienberg**

means “having the power to control fate.”³

“What is fate?” I ask aloud.

“To be destined to happen, turn out, or act in a particular way,”⁴ answers the antenna.

“Thanks,” I reply. The antenna doesn’t say anything back, it just keeps letting coins drop and roll.

But I am wondering about the coins.

On Van Doornum’s website I find *Gasheater* (2018-2021), a wall sculpture of a coin-operated gas heater paused in time. Its flames of hand-pressed clay are protected by a thin wire grating. The stopping or slowing down of time that occurred in the timepiece I received in the mail, is also present in the ornamental flourishes in Van Doornum’s work, such as ribbons fluttering in the breeze on *Faithful Folly* (2023), the flames on *Voor Toverstaf* (2011/2023), and the flags and leaves of *There is a strong current coming up* (2019-2022). The frozen flutter of flame, leaf, or ribbon become flags that lure the viewer to see it, to pay attention, that give the audience the chance to come to terms with the artwork.

Mark Fisher writes, “[t]he weird is constituted by a presence – the presence of that which does not belong.”⁵ Contradictions – similar to “wrong shoe theory,”⁶ a sartorial hack of combining combat boots with a silk dress – are often present in the work of Van Doornum. In *Reaching for A Silent Signal* (2020-2024), Van Doornum stands in a field head-to-toe in lace in a village that cannot bring themselves to turn their heads to look. Here time in the photograph is suspended and the ornamental is a provocation, a message.

The artist’s contradictions occur by colliding the industrial with the ornamental, the technical with the intuitive. In ‘The History of the Senses’ Diane Ackerman writes, “Mix well is life’s motto.”⁷ It should be Van Doornum’s motto too.

I tune the antenna to hear out for something else.

Silence.

Static.

3. “Weird”, Etymonline retrieved: https://www.etymonline.com/word/wyrd#etymonline_v_40238

4. “Fate”, Cambridge dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fate>

5. Mark Fisher, (2016), “The Weird and The Eerie”. Repeater books, United Kingdom.

6. Emily Chan, The “Wrong-Shoe Theory” Is The Easiest Way To Update Your Wardrobe This Summer in Vogue: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/allison-bornstein-wrong-shoe-theory>

7. Diane Ackerman, (1995), “The Natural History of The Senses”. Vintage Books, United States of America



***Faithful Folly*, 2023, Aluminum, colored anodized aluminum and stainless steel parts, 600×300×190cm, commissioned by Lustwarande for Eartheaters 2023**



***Round transmitter*, 2021, epoxy clay, pigments, stainless steel, steel, decorative cornices, wood stain, spraypaint, aluminium, plastic tubes and steel springs, 81×68×30cm, during Art Encounters biennial 2021 Romania**



***Show and Tell*, 2021, epoxy clay, pigments, stainless steel, steel, HPL, aluminium, plastic and steel parts, 81×137×34cm, during Art Encounters biennial 2021 Romania**



***The gasheater*, 2021, epoxy clay, pigments, stainless steel, steel, wood, rubber tube, spraypaint, aluminium and steel parts, 108×204×15cm, studio setting**



***Voor de Toverstaf*, 2011–2023, Glass, aluminum, stainless steel and colored anodized aluminum, collaboration with Maria Roosen, at Museum de Fundatie during Roosen & Guests**

Then stereo whine.

Then a soft beat.

Music.

Instructions to reader: play “Techno Creep” by Khotin.⁸

In his process of making, Van Doornum weirds daily objects, creating a strange presence of something that does not seem to belong. A hat, bike stands, drums, lighters, eyes, twigs, a horse. The embroidered blood on an impeccably folded shirt comes to my mind. Is this a reference the curator whose skin accidentally got pierced during a visit to Van Doornum studio?⁹

And the artist never heard from the curator again, dear reader.

Van Doornum’s process begins when he, utterly bewitched by an idea, creates sculptural elements in his metal workshop, with no drawing, no measuring, just hands on tools following through with the idea. He stops working when he is so surprised by the result of his work that he doesn’t know what to do with it. He then steps back, and has to work backward to figure out where the element should be placed. And so the process of building a world of objects around, or for, this intuitive beginning goes on.

The music has finished.

Static.

A horse whinnies.

“Sweaty ideas,” whispers a voice.

It is in movement where Van Doornum can think. Therefore, a workday begins with a run. On this day, the artist stops to catch his breath and notices a horse in the field beside him. As he pets the horse, he is struck by its domestication and use as a beast of burden. With the idea that engines produce “horsepower”, he runs to the workshop and sets to work on making the head of a horse. Once finished, he steps back to consider the meaning of this element, why it exists, and what to do with it.

In his studio, Van Doornum transforms making into thinking; during exhibitions, he transforms thinking into making. As an extension to the studio, Van Doornum uses the exhibition to test out the different scenarios that the artwork must live out until the final result makes sense. The work *Leaves and Jacket*, for example, began in 2018 as a bomber jacket made of textile oak leaves, but over the years it has been reworked and now features an ornate structure of aluminum and steel, reminiscent

8. Khotin, Techno Creep: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83Zod8VuZFI>

9. Jonathan van Doornum, Tea towel rack, 2018-2021



***There is a strong current coming up*, 2019–2022, aluminium, anodized aluminium and metal parts, 700×86×86cm, commissioned by Viaa Hogeschool Zwolle**





Tea towel rack, 2018–2021, aluminum, stainless steel, fabric with embroidery and plastic parts, at kunstplatform L/NK Zwolle





***Leaves and Jacket*, 2018–2021, aluminum, steel, textile, zipper, meat pins, metal parts and wire, 250×60×80cm, at Museum de Fundatie during Roosen & Guests**

of a Victorian hat stand, while the top evokes a samurai sword. The leaves scattered on the ground seem to fall from the jacket, referring to abscission, a botanical term describing the shedding of plant parts at the end of the season.

I tune the antenna for the final time.

Its lights are fading.

The static is dropping in and out.

And I have to find my way out of the responsibility of
having this antenna.

What am I going to do with it?

“Deal with it,” says the antenna.

In receiving this mysterious package and unraveling its contents, I became intertwined with the speculative narratives that Jonathan van Doornum constructs. Each piece, from the nail to the wristband to the antenna, opens a portal into a world where the boundaries between the technical, the communicative, and the ornamental blur. Van Doornum’s practice develops a unique form of speculative fiction, one that melds the familiar with the fantastical, drawing viewers into a state of contemplation and wonder. As I tune the antenna to decipher its messages, I realise that my experience mirrors the artist’s own process of creation—a journey of discovery, intuition, and reimagining.

In the end, the power of the antenna, much like Van Doornum’s artworks, lies in its ability to challenge and transform our perceptions, inviting us to ponder the convergence of past, present, and future. Van Doornum not only shapes objects but also sculpts the narratives and destinies they hold, leaving us with the profound realisation that art, like fate, is an ever-evolving dialogue between the tangible and the unseen.

The lights of the antenna flicker and fade
the static ebbs away and is replaced by a deep, resonant hum.
Suddenly, a calm and deliberate voice clearly breaks through,
“You have reached the edge of what is known. Beyond this point,
all is mystery.”

The hum dissipates, and the room is silent once more. I sit back, the weight of the antenna in my hands. The journey with these objects, and with Van Doornum’s art, is far from over; it is just beginning.