

Maastricht Experimental Research in and through the Arts Network: MERIAN and the Legacies of Maria Sybilla Merian/The Maastricht Style of Artistic Research

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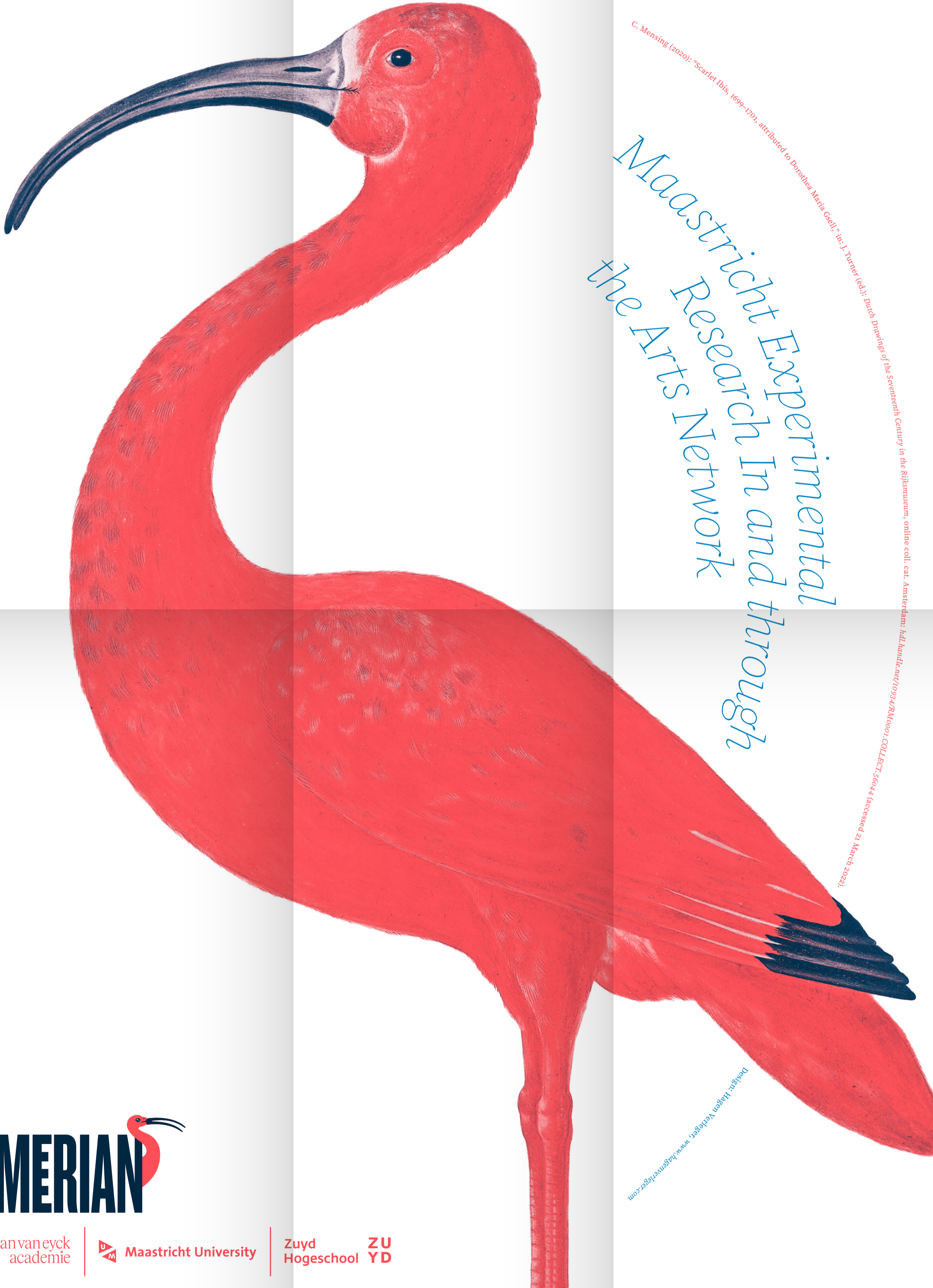
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*Maastricht Experimental
Research In and through
the Arts Network*

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The Maastricht style of artistic research is not equivalent to artists doing academic research, or vice versa. Instead, we believe the values of artistic research emerge from (and through) specific empirical and analytical practices. **MERIAN** starts from the premise that these artistic research practices necessarily involve exchanges between art and academia, between artists and scholars, between making and thinking. **MERIAN** embraces multiple differences and similarities. We encourage making border-crossings and learning across boundaries as a fundamental part of our institutional arrangement. Instead of positioning artistic research within academia or claiming it principally for the arts, we imagine **MERIAN** as a *collaboratory*—a shared initiative through and through.

Distinctive in the Netherlands, **MERIAN** does not belong primarily with one artistic or academic discipline but builds on heterogeneous research conducted in the context of **MERIAN** thus goes beyond individual artistic practices or the disciplinary confines of academic research. It arises from—and is reflexive about—basic questions about *how* research is to be done, *where*, *why*, and *for whom*.

The Maastricht style of artistic research

»What you learn from any project you love is a way of paying attention. Call it methodology if you want.«
—Donna Haraway

MERIAN

The *Maastricht Experimental Research In and through the Arts Network (MERIAN)* invites established artists and academics to engage in collaborative research in between making and thinking. **MERIAN** is a collaboration between the Jan van Eyck Academie, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (specifically the research center for Arts, Autonomy and the Public Sphere) and Maastricht University (specifically the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and University College Maastricht at the Faculty of Science and Engineering).

MERIAN is an institutional space for the development of new norms and forms of embodied knowledge. We aim to renegotiate relationships between existing cultural- and knowledge institutions to address urgent matters of societal concern. Participants of **MERIAN** mobilize the powers and fragilities of artistic and scientific practices to engage in research that is problem-based and methodologically innovative, and which focusses on interdisciplinary topics that can fruitfully be explored across the arts and academia.

As an acronym, **MERIAN** stands for the breadth and potential of a collaborative network. However, it also refers to the legacies of Maria Sibylla Merian, the famous art-science illustrator. We are aware that **MERIAN** stands out in a context of research institutes being named after famous male artists or scientists, but hopefully not for much longer. In fact, we hope that by naming our network after one famous woman, Maria-Sybilla Merian, we will be able to critically carry her story of sharing knowledge and skills forward into the contemporary. However, rather than being a veneration of the life of one individual, her name, Merian, and therefore our name, **MERIAN**, requires critical (self-)reflection.

Maria Sibylla Merian is famous for her intricate illustrations of plants and insects. These illustrations represent Merian's scientific observations, which were seminal for their time and are still influential today. Merian's insights included but were not limited to the knowledge that insects were not born from dirt of the earth, as was commonly believed in Western Europe at the time. Maria Sibylla Merian was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1647. Her stepfather, Jakob Marrel, gave her the tools to learn how to draw. Merian's passion began early. By the age of ten she was already illustrating the small changes in nature, like the caterpillar becoming the butterfly. At eighteen Merian married young and had two daughters, Johanna Helena, and Dorothea Maria. In 1670 Merian's family moved to Nuremberg where she continued her illustration practice. Merian's first collections were published around this time, including *Blumenbuch [Book of Flowers]* (1675–80) and *Neues Blumenbuch [New Book of Flowers]* (1680). Significantly for the time, as Germany had laws subordinating women, Merian and her husband divorced, whereafter she moved to Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

MERIAN and the legacies of Maria Sibylla Merian [PART 1]

Sibylla Merian, we want to critically acknowledge these problematic histories, as well as their continuities and discontinuities in the present. With **MERIAN** we emphasize that collaboration—while necessarily imbued with power relations—has always had its place in the production of culture and knowledge.

This reflection on the legacies of Maria Sibylla Merian and the naming of **MERIAN** is the result of an applied research internship project at University College Maastricht commissioned by the **MERIAN** steering committee. The project was designed and supervised by Christian Ernsten and Christoph Rausch and executed by UCM students Alice Jourdain and Olivia Garfitt Christensen between September 2021 and January 2022.

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Throughout her life, Maria Sibylla Merian analysed and drew the life cycles of 186 insect species. Merian's work was meticulous, always describing the shapes, colours, and timeline of the insects' lives. Her studies generated important scientific insights and contradicted many commonly held views at the time. Merian contributed to ecological knowledge while also raising the standards of scientific illustration with her beautiful work. Merian's achievement lies in her passion and careful eye, practised, and shared with the world through artistic methods.

Art Meets Science: Throughout her life, Maria Sibylla Merian analysed and drew the life cycles of 186 insect species. Merian's work was meticulous, always describing the shapes, colours, and timeline of the insects' lives. Her studies generated important scientific insights and contradicted many commonly held views at the time. Merian contributed to ecological knowledge while also raising the standards of scientific illustration with her beautiful work. Merian's achievement lies in her passion and careful eye, practised, and shared with the world through artistic methods.

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Independent (Care) Work and Merian's life is defined by her independence. Maria Sibylla Merian published her works while taking care of her ill mother and young daughters. When her daughters were old enough the three of them moved to Amsterdam where they opened their own studio, painting as well as preparing pigments and specimens for collectors. By 1699 Merian sold her belongings to self-fund a research trip to Suriname. Having been raised as a woman in the 17th century achieving these feats alone is inspiring. Yet, it is also important to view Merian's life acknowledging that she could not have achieved what she did alone. Long overlooked are those that helped and worked with and for Merian. There is, for example, the contribution of her daughters, whom she travelled and collaborated with. More pressing, there is also Merian's work in Suriname (then a Dutch colony) which would not have been possible without the expertise and work from enslaved people. Colonization then and now contributes to Merian's success. It is only through the oppressive system of colonialism, that is through the exploitation of local labour and knowledge about the plants and animals in Suriname that Merian's voyage became possible, and these colonial relations also explain her wealth. Now Merian's name is featured in history books and her scientific and artistic reputation is credited, while hardly anyone refers to her daughters, and the Surinamese enslaved people's names are "lost," and their fates ignored.

MERIAN and the legacies of Maria Sibylla Merian [PART 2]

Daughters and Feminist Collectives While we certainly cannot say that Maria Sibylla Merian was a feminist by current standards, as an independent woman in art and science she is an early representative of the female empowerment that would prove crucial to the modern feminist movement. Throughout her life, Merian supported the women around her—from teaching drawing to the unmarried daughters of wealthy families to her own daughters, Johanna Helena, and Dorothea Maria, with whom she travelled and collaborated. The bigger picture here is that Merian is not just one impressive figure, but that her story is one of shared knowledge and skills.

Colonial Suriname As a Dutch Colony, the Netherlands had full control over Suriname, oppressively capitalizing on its resources, culture, and people (1667–1954). Maria Sibylla Merian's position in this context is not that of a settler, but her role is emblematic of the exploitation and racism that colonisation brought about and stood for. Merian's research was geared at observing the "exotic" Surinamese natural environment, then considered a curiosity. However, vital to her research was the work of enslaved people, for whom this natural environment was anything but exotic. While Merian's reliance on these enslaved people's forced assistance remains uncredited, their cruel treatment was well documented by Merian herself in *Metamorphosis of the Insects of Suriname* (1705).

Without critical attention to Merian's biography and her work in its contemporary context of colonialism and slavery, her legacy will continue to contribute to a dominant tradition of 'white knowledge,' problematically rewarding the colonizers for their so-called "discoveries." In any case, such exclusive accounts of history render invisible the labour of many, and they brush over the exploitation of enslaved people, the consequences of which still inform social inequalities today. Choosing as our namesake Maria