

## Returning to a haunting song, or following Karl Van Welden's lead

*You cannot but be taken in by Karl Van Welden's artistic strides into Naturphilosophie.<sup>1</sup> In his work even a bleak heap of stones seems to wheeze a breath of life. Time is a constant in Van Welden's work. From measures of geological time, to time-consuming subtitles, to the asynchronous musicality of the performances he sets up – time after time, you wonder in what time frame you are suspended. Where are you exactly? Which disposition is the artist tapping into? Is it existentialist? Futurist? Or is this pure romanticism, after all? Wherever your internal pendulum points, you feel you are catching up with your own pace as you roam and ramble through volcanic notes, met with imagery reminiscent of black rain and fallout. How did 'global theoretician' Fritjof Capra make the bodily leap into a visual artist, you mumble as you find yourself immersed in Van Welden's revisionist worldscape.<sup>2</sup>*

*In this accompanying text to Van Welden's exhibition Volcano Notes, I pursue a branch of thought that is almost tributary to the artist's own imperative of navigation (see his 'homo bulla'). But in order for me to feel comfortable, I will hazard to plot some escape routes. I believe these associative, eruptive routes are also part of Van Welden's artistic practice.*

### Interconnected risks

Time is crucial, as always. It was only when Alexander von Humboldt climbed the colossal inactive volcano Chimborazo in June 1802 that he became aware that nature is a web of life, that everything is interwoven as with 'a thousand threads'. It was a major ecological step for this all-round scientist who began to think differently about the inner-workings of 'nature', in an era still blissfully unfamiliar with inescapable hazards and global catastrophes. Whichever way the volcanoes blew, von Humboldt would re-adjust his notes and translate his vision into his wonderful *Naturgemälde* drawings. Following in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant, Von Humboldt reconciled rational and imaginative reasoning when he stated: 'Nature should be described with scientific accuracy but without being deprived thereby of the vivifying breath of imagination.'<sup>3</sup>

It's a bizarre thing in the history of ideas, but it was only much later that sociologists and thinkers came to think of 'society' as a similar 'autopoietic network'. Interconnectedness is of course now a major characteristic of our globally linked societies and cultures. Both globalists as anti-globalists face the same risks and challenges, though they might view differently the links between cause and

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<sup>1</sup> Goethe and Schelling were its major propagators, reacting to Cartesian dualism and 18<sup>th</sup> century materialism. Schelling stated: 'Nature must be visible spirit, and mind invisible nature'. When looking back in his *The Roots of Romanticism*, Isaiah Berlin made it clear in the 1960s why *Naturphilosophie* had such a wide-ranging impact on views of art and artists: 'If everything in nature is living, and if we ourselves are simply its most self-conscious representatives, the function of the artist is to delve within himself, and above all to delve within the dark and unconscious forces which move within him, and to bring these to consciousness by the most agonising and violent internal struggle.' Van Welden's approach seems to leave out the 'fitting' romantic inner struggle while bridging the new 19<sup>th</sup> century awareness of the interconnectedness of all living things and today's transformation in how we might comprehend the present intersection of human culture and the environment.

<sup>2</sup> This Austrian-born American physicist, systems theorist and deep ecologist, famous for his bestselling *The Tao of Physics* (1975), was an early and ardent champion of an ecological vision of reality.

<sup>3</sup> Here I rely on the magnificent book by Andrea Wulf: *The Invention of Nature. The Adventures of Alexander Von Humboldt (The lost hero of science)*, 2015.

effect. If the notion of 'risk society'<sup>4</sup> means anything heuristically speaking, besides coming to terms with the new structural conditions in which we are living, it is surely that we'd better think in terms of 'a network of effects' rather than anthropocentric causes. Van Welden's work is only 'effective' in terms of the former: he points us to an ever-present belief in a post-apocalyptic situation turned into a poetics of 'effects'. In Van Welden's *United Planets* projects and staged 'disaster scenarios'<sup>5</sup>, Ulrich Beck's risk society now finds an artistic counterpart that lays bare the extent to which we've been confronted with unforeseen consequences and unanticipated effects – effects our current security systems seem ill-equipped to deal with.

## Forgetfulness

Time is crucial. The differences in the time intervals even more so. In *Volcano Notes*, Van Welden revisits almost everything he has touched upon with his *United Planets* projects. One suspects the slow build up was part of the plan, as he now engages in a back-and-forth, dipping into older notes and past experiences. In between lies the crucial difference between Earth and the four planets he has reverted to up until now in his practice, Mars, Mercury, Saturn and Pluto. No doubt this difference has to do with the colours of dust or the nature of rings, a halo that sets a planet apart from everything else. But the fact of that difference is both an driver and a *memento mori* for Van Welden's resolute artistic critique of our own cultural amnesia.<sup>6</sup> It is by connecting the intimate and cosmological that he reminds us of the ways we tend to forget our own forgetfulness. I refer here to the official personal volcano notes themselves that Van Welden has retrospectively hidden on the back of images of specific volcanoes and craters he has visited since 2001. What remains are haunting, practically illegible notes and thoughts that peer through the images turned vague memories, scarcely reflecting the fact of the artist's precise whereabouts at the time.

Whatever our cultural forgetfulness, Van Welden's intimations of our longing for astrological knowledge-patterns certainly also play into our persistent daydreaming about the 'end of the world'. As an exhibition, *Volcano Notes* therefore cycles through different formats and frameworks, (scientific) 'facts' that got tangled up with these history-repeating apocalyptic imaginings.<sup>7</sup>

## Aesthetics of silence

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<sup>4</sup> To paraphrase Ulrich Beck's definition of our 'risk society': in our current 'inescapable structural condition' we face new, previously unknown risks produced by the sources of human wealth. Industry and its side effects are producing a wide range of hazardous, even deadly, consequences for society and, as a result of globalisation, the world as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> The 'disaster' is most present in Van Welden's work on Mars II.

<sup>6</sup> In his remarkable book *Forgetfulness. Making the modern culture of amnesia* (2017), Francis O'Gorman 'explores how and why we have come to assume that we must live without (most) histories – histories that are complex and rich, strange and contradictory, vital and difficult, painful as well as instructive, pleasurable as well as sad'. O'Gorman's linking of our modern cultural amnesia with the creation of societies in which people can always realise their potential, and in which 'growth' and 'productivity' and 'opportunity' are the watchwords, is especially interesting.

<sup>7</sup> As we will see, further in this text, in between fantasy and imagination, the same theme shows up in different 'formats' in different eras during the past century. More exhaustive research on this recurring theme in popular culture and the arts could prove interesting.

A haunting catastrophe is never limited to the associated ecological violence and perplexity in itself. The real danger might lie in an overtly aesthetical view of what some tag as the 'anthropocene' – i.e. one that shows spectacular pictures of ecological catastrophe as a result of human geo-engineering.<sup>8</sup> Is that the reason why there are no humans to be 'seen' in Van Welden's work, except for one virtuosic pianist? Maybe. However, more than looking for an alternative visual representation of our interventionist role as humans, Van Welden's artistic planetarium patiently builds up the momentum to expose something like an 'aesthetics of silence', reminiscent of Susan Sontag's seminal essay of the same name from 1969.<sup>9</sup> Stillness and silence are what you feel when looking at both *Column, Mt. Saint Helens 1980* and the series of maps entitled *The fall and rise and fall ...* The former sees the gradual formation of a column of ash with volcanic acoustics at its base. The latter were soaked in black ink. The visual result is a *memento mori* not so much concerning the devastating outbursts of Mt. Vesuvius so many ages ago, but rather how the heritage site of Pompei is progressing towards a state of decay through local mismanagement.

The protagonists are there for us to speak to. Planets and volcanoes serve as ghostlike sources of inspiration, imagination and orientation. Though the volcano is an unmissable presence in any landscape, we humans do not always pick up on its 'signs'. Volcanic action produces a variety of sounds, and many of those are, so it reads in the booklet on Mars II, 'below the lower frequency limit of human hearing'. In this way the volcano sings of a haunting catastrophe, though its song may not be for human ears.

## Revisiting Mars

In what follows I would like to suggest that Van Welden's slowly falling drops, like a ticking clock, point not so much towards a state of urgency concerning the impending ecological predicament. Rather, in slowing down our common tendency to leap and long for the next future, Van Welden gives us the opportunity to follow different threads of time that weave through the history of our repeated visits to Mars.

It's been precisely 80 years since the young Orson Welles made radio listeners believe that Martians had landed in New Jersey. This mythical radio play – a brilliant re-enactment of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898) – converted science-fiction literature into fake news *avant la lettre*. In hindsight, the 'real' fakeness was not so much in Welles' make-believe, but in the ways people afterwards only remembered the 'half lie' that the show had caused a nationwide panic. This staging of a Martian invasion, a hype that started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not only caught the Anglo-American imagination, it also set the bar for how one was supposed to externalise and control certain terrors and fears. Mars' functioning as a haunting (warrior-like) ghost is intricately interwoven with the self-images of world powers (Great Britain in Wells and the United States in Welles).

Whether there was 'life on Mars' at all already constituted a major theme in arguably one of the first works of science-fiction (or conjectural science, strictly speaking), Christiaan Huygens' *Cosmotheoros*,

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<sup>8</sup> More on this 'problem', see T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today*, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Sontag's seminal 'Aesthetics of Silence' (1969) was published in a collection of her essays: *Styles of Radical Will* (2002).

published exactly 200 years before Wells' book. In this philosophical booklet, this Dutch inventor of the pendulum clock and one of the first modern scientists to measure planetary movements and study the rings of Saturn, reported his observations of Mars. Together with his brother Constantijn, he constantly made improvements on their self-designed telescopes. That's how he was able to discover a dark triangular area on the planet known as Syrtis Major. And here's where Van Welden decided to follow his lead: the prominence of a volcanic feature (a shield volcano) on Mars enabled Huygens to be among the first to observe a surface detail of another planet.

The automaton of the pendulum clock is what would ultimately lead Huygens, in a collaborative spirit with craftsman of clocks Johannes Van Keulen, to build a small planetarium. As if Huygens was the piano virtuoso, bringing forth previously unheard mathematical sounds (though reminiscent of Pythagoras' harmonic planets) by manipulating his new automated piano, the planetarium. Unsurprisingly, the solar system is a common source of inspiration for collaborative creatives. Musical dreams and planetary visions would seem to go well together. The American multi-instrumentalist Sufjan Stevens performed *Planetarium* for five years, together with composers like Nico Muhly, Bryce Dessner and James McAlister, to finally release it as a completed album only last year. On this interplanetary 'American' album, Mars plays the role of the producer-god of war whilst also embodying a haunting, naive futurity, in which we – the human race – might be able to do away with guns and swords.

Stevens has a feel for majestic renderings and grand stories, perfectly in line with what some would call these post-postmodern times.<sup>10</sup> His brand of new sincerity and faith started in 2003 with his 50 States Project (though he would later refer to the project as a 'joke' in light of its apparent overambition). He planned to release an album in honour of every one of the United States. Only two albums, two states, have been released to date. Whenever – and if ever – the third album would follow, Stevens has already set in motion some 'spaces of hope', at least in the public imagination. Going beyond the typical boundaries of rock, while apparently training his lens on the boundaries of 'one' state at a time, Stevens – who famously plays every instrument himself – revivifies a kind of storytelling akin to 'landscaping' that focuses on specific people and places, answering a desperate call for a home in a globalised, anxiety-driven atmosphere.

Does this longing for a space resemble the way in Lars Van Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) Justine builds a 'magic cave' for Leo, to keep the forces of chaos (and extinction) outside? Only a couple of years before Huygens discovered that 'dark triangular area' on Mars, another philosophical forefather pushed another dark button, precipitating a development that would haunt Western logocentric thinking in the ages to come. To remain out of that ever-tempting 'kingdom of darkness', i.e. to control our fears and violent inclinations towards ourselves and others, one needs, according to the moral philosopher Thomas Hobbes, to install the Leviathan as the demiurge of society. Interestingly – and that's how half-truths thrive, on stories half-told – Hobbes, in his visionary *Leviathan* (1651), also links this anxiety to curiosity in the seeking of causes and in coming up against invisible powers. This is no small 'dark matter': to break open the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain, to use Žižek's words, or, even to divert the catastrophe (absolute darkness), there's a curiosity

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<sup>10</sup> My comparison between Van Welden's *planets* and Stevens' *states*, is of course a bit far-fetched, but there's no doubt a more general 'need' in the arts to transcend postmodern irony and its obsession with the 'fragment' and disconnected snippets of the (bigger) story ...

that pushes boundaries and imagines – in the depressive though ‘beautiful’ logic of Von Triers movie again – a ‘blue sphere of Melancholia’ approaching from behind.

Exploring the verges of a misguided, magical kind of thinking that imposes a ‘shared connectedness’ upon us, it is no coincidence that we have stumbled onto the colour blue. Earth-dwellers only started looking at the Earth itself (the Earth-as-an-image) through the famous ‘Blue Marble’ photograph of 1972. Remember also Yves Klein’s ‘blue revolution’ which, in the middle of the atomic age, tapped into a transformational, universalising discourse in the light of the new destruction machine. In 1958, inspired by the fact that scientists were discussing the creation of a ‘cobalt bomb’, Klein sent a letter to the President of the International Conference for the Detection of Nuclear Explosions, proposing ‘to paint A- and B-bombs blue’. Klein wanted radioactive fallout to be visible, to be tinted in blue by his own International Klein Blue procedure. Absurd as this leap into the void may sound today, taking into account all our current attempts ‘against the anthropocene’,<sup>11</sup> here you have an artist igniting the Blue Revolution that could be spread by the bomb. ‘Come, come Armageddon, come’, Morrissey sang, exactly 30 years later on his album *Viva Hate* (1988), as if adding a soundtrack to Klein’s explosive call. Both the Brits and Americans, as if again on a par here, seem to enjoy (‘come, come’, on repeat) the inclusive sarcasm of this political mismatching of the dangers of total extinction. A bizarre serialism flows like magma out of the volcano’s crater: Andy Warhol’s painting *Red Explosion* (1963) not only reproduced an atomic bomb explosion multiple times, but also echoes the manner in which newspapers and tabloids replay images of destruction and disaster.

Warhol’s *Red Explosion* sets us again on a trajectory aligned with the Red Planet. It’s the course of planetary colonisation, transcendentalism, eco-cultural dream visions and science fiction. We all seem to want something from Mars ... We cannot avoid entering the messy arena of politics, no matter how hard we try. Wherever and however far our telescopes can probe. In his much acclaimed Mars trilogy (1993-1999), the American science-fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson uses the Red Planet – at the peak of a post-historical and post-modern era – as ‘a historical tabula rasa, a template for creating a saner, more sustainable, and more just human society’. Oppositions abound when it comes to Mars. While some are constructing the conditions for a common stewardship of the land, water and air, on Earth, others (like Robinson and Elon Musk) are boasting about sending other humans to Mars for the price of a Lamborghini by 2022.

### **End tune on politics and re-appropriation**

Whatever course you take, Mars catapults you into a full-circle orbit. That’s how I come to realise that Van Welden has something in common with the French visual artist Eric Baudelaire. The latter’s last monographic presentation was called *The Music of Ramón Raquello and his Orchestra* (2017), titled after the perpetually interrupted fictional band leader in Orson Welles’ *The War of the Worlds* radio play (!). The question they both seem to ponder is: how can we accommodate the catastrophic complexity of contemporary life? In order for them to face this feat, they revert to the cyclical, the returning. Certain trajectories become looping re-visitations rendered through a mix of installation,

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<sup>11</sup> As the already mentioned T.J. Demos manifestly propagated in his booklet with the same title: debunking the politically irresponsible belief in the thought that regards ‘human activities as the central drivers of the geologically significant conditions in our present’.

print, film, photography and so on. Through a series of landscapes 'filmed' at the locations traversed by a subject or the artist himself, these artistic practices question how such landscapes reflect the social and political structures that form the backdrop for a journey of alienation. Both share some commonalities with the Japanese 'fukeiron' (landscape theory), which seeks to avoid any fetishisation of the landscape. Though Van Welden might be less overtly disrupted by 'political narratives' as in the work of Baudelaire, he maintains a grip on a certain political reality when dealing with the ever-looming wasteland conditions at the foot of the volcano. The re-appropriation of Joseph Beuys' own re-appropriation is a good landmark in exploring this setting. Beuys' subversive renaming of the twin towers in 1970, inspires Van Welden to 'return' to what has become the 'wound' of *ground zero* and to scribble the names of Deimos and Phobos (Mars' two moons) over Beuys' work. Almost like – to use a typical Robinson phrase – 'terraforming' another's art work in order for us to return to old symbols and better understand the new challenges we face.

Tom Viaene (Brussels, 15/03/2018)

In response to Karl Van Welden's exhibition *The Volcano Notes* at Gouvernement in Ghent (15 – 18 March, 20018)