News From Beyond The Earth: Tales From The Depths of The World

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News From Beyond The Earth: Tales From The Depths of The World

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REFERENCES

Terra Forma : manuel de cartographies potentielles, Paris: B42, 2019

Elsbeth Diederix: When Red Disappears, Amsterdam: Fw:Books, 2019

Matthieu Duperrex, *Voyages en sol incertain : enquête dans les deltas du Rhône et du Mississippi*, Marseille: Wildproject, 2019, (Tête nue)

Ann Elias, *Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019

- 1 Following the artistic and philosophical enthusiasm for the Anthropocene, the transformation of our relationship to the world has irremediably begun, regardless of whether or not this human era, now perceived as a geological and atmospheric agent, is ultimately officialised by stratigraphic world authorities. This transformation relies on altering our point of view [*point de vue*], called “point of life” [*point de vie*] by the editors of *Terra Forma* (the theatre director, science historian and accomplice to Bruno Latour, Frédérique Aït-Touati, the architect and cartographer Alexandra Arènes and the architect and visual artist Axelle Grégoire), a wording coined by philosopher Emanuele Coccia. This shift in focus means excavating the bowels of the earth in order to better understand where we stand and where we are headed. Matthieu Duperrex too, engages in excavation in the mistreated deltas of the Rhône and the Mississippi. As for the photographer Elsbeth Diederix, she went to capture the underworld in the waters of New Zealand, whose ocean beds challenge mechanic and human optics alike; challenges the pioneers of underwater corral photography were also faced with, as described in Ann Elias’ book devoted to Jack Williamson and Frank Hurley.

- 2 The two latter books prove to be complementary in many ways. The pictures taken by Diederix, which make up most of her book, reveal a rather brackish world of dead and living creatures, iridescent shells, muddy sea beds, where the marvellous colours only appear when artificially lit by torch. Drab greys then turn into rusty reds and cadmium yellows. The essay by scientist Philip Ball, "Colour and Composition under the Sea"¹ delves into the specifics of the absence and modification of colour underwater. Reds disappear first, starting at five metres, yellows fade at thirty metres, and beyond 100 metres, darkness engulfs everything. How can photography render this attrition, the lateral deformations of objects underwater, the loss of definition and distortions? Eyes adapt physiologically, but how do things stand with a camera lens? According to this text - which calls forth Dutch still lifes alongside the famous, exaggeratedly colourful and symmetrical drawings of underwater creatures by Ernst Haeckel (who coined the term "ecology") - the "real colour" of the underwater world is a social rather than a natural construct.
- 3 Ann Elias is of the same opinion in the study she devotes to the frantic representation of coral reefs from the 1920s onwards. This visual inventory, more media-oriented than it was scientific, was echoed by André Breton in *Mad Love (L'Amour fou, 1937)*, where he reproduced a view of the Bahamian reef photographed by Williamson a decade earlier. Based on this premise, Elias traces the photographic campaigns of Williamson, who was previously involved in designing sets for the Hollywood adaptation of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne (1916), and his Australian partner Frank Hurley, a master in the art of creating audio-visual spectacles with his deep-sea discoveries. This paradoxically quite poorly illustrated study meticulously follows the itinerary of the two pioneers of spectacular documentaries and their arrangements with truth (in particular films shot in aquariums due to insufficiently advanced techniques). The author cleverly analyses the exploitation of local populations, likened to savages, in the films produced by Hurley at that time, but hardly expands on the paradox of the cultural craze for a highly colourful subject rendered in black and white, a fact that did not seem to hinder the success of a number of its cinematographic depictions, even though they were unable to reproduce the iridescence of some reefs. Elias suggests that corral, particularly the barriers of the Bahamas and Australia, were the subjects of filming campaigns, less for scientific reasons than for purposes of mass entertainment (the aquariums and dioramas at the Field Museum Chicago, the world tour of the film *Pearls and Savages*, etc.). The underwater world of corrals, as the last territorial frontier to cross, was subjected to an imperialist conquest in the 1920s (by Great Britain and the United States), which the author calls "victimless imperialism", an assertion of technical and iconographical command of a visually surprising resource. In the decade that witnessed the birth of Surrealism, the enchanted bizarreness of coral reefs, their strangeness and newness quickly appealed to artists and audiences alike, although this was at the cost of the destruction of certain structures, unauthorised removal and environmental damage, which Elias evokes by putting Williamson and Hurley's work in perspective with the Anthropocene. Emphasising the fact that corral was used from the 1920s to the 1980s as a material in the production of cement and fertiliser, the author makes a case for the necessity for scholars to integrate environmental history into their research as context. She thus espouses the stirring essay penned by Alan Braddock and Christopher Irmscher and published in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*², a profession of faith seeking to expand art history in the direction of ecology, its history and its ethics.

- 4 This type of commitment, however, is still quite infrequent, especially in the French academic field which disapproves of its constituents indulging in political declarations in their work. Notwithstanding, Matthieu Duperrex, a Doctor of Fine Arts and a philosopher, chose to write his *Voyage en sol incertain* [Travels through uncertain soils] in the first person. The book is a critical survey of territories in Louisiana and around the Rhône, in the mud of deltas that were once so renowned and are now devastated by petrochemistry and extractivism. Duperrex is an expert on those zones, and he leads us along the paths of these essential morasses, to which our ties have stretched increasingly thin as their anthropization has escalated. The book is full of effortlessly delivered sharp resources, freed from the weight of footnotes – a beneficial choice, that creates an empathic reading experience which is quite unusual for such a technical and even off-putting subject. By discussing the “cyborg environments” of the Rhône and the Mississippi, those two “working rivers” (following Elisée Reclus’s phrase), the author shows how essential our relationship to sediments is, incidentally encourages us to “re-mineralise” ourselves: they are present in our everyday life under the form of the substances they help create. This realisation is broadened by connections to spectres, dwellers, sentinels and clairvoyants, poetic yet critical traveling companions, which help the author in his inventory of losses, new territories, turbulences, crises, and even the invention of new rituals. In approximately thirty short chapters, Duperrex explains the natural and artificial conditions of these environments, analyses the often absurd situations he encounters, implicitly criticising lifestyles and consumption habits that overlook the soil they rely on. This personal and delicate journey burrows through the uncertain times of the Anthropocene, its history and future implications. This critical geopoetics is written like an initiatory saga, it is often colourful although deeply desolating. The tale of these travels forms a singular, more tender, Anthropocene, yet it is just as menacing as its technocratic or purely stratigraphic version.
- 5 This recentring on humans, on the self, is also a concern for the editors of *Terra Forma*, which likewise works towards recasting the basics of cartography to help us find our bearings in the world as it is and as it will be, a complex, denatured, re-natured, terrestrial hybrid on the borders of monstrosity. Their *Manuel de cartographies potentielles* [Manual of potential cartographies] is neither simple to assimilate or to implement, nor is it very human-like, if one looks closely at the graphs and the maps whose complexity and monochromy, so unlike the usual charts and colours, are destabilising. Living things, however, are in fact at the heart of this project whose purpose is to “repopulate maps”, to “generate them from bodies rather than from reliefs”, without becoming the narcissistic and self-referential object that geolocation can lead to. By abandoning the aerial “Sirius” viewpoint, we must travel differently, establish an unlimited connection to ethology, ethnology, geochemistry and biology, in order to broaden the world to its very reverse, to the world that traditional cartography cannot capture.
- 6 But is it not contradictory to use a printed, fixed object to discuss living things and narrate the crisis in representations of the world as it is being reconfigured by the Anthropocene? This paradoxical choice is explained by the imprint of maps on our collective imagination and our automatisms; graphically distancing ourselves helps us reconnect with humanness while increasing heterogeneity and vitality. Generating maps from bodies, understanding the interactions and agency of each element as well

as their transformative abilities – such is the project of *Terra Forma*, under the strong influence of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’ work (*The Gaia Hypothesis*, formulated in the 1970s and dissected by Bruno Latour in *Facing Gaia* (2015), published in English in 2017). But adjusting cartography to the *point of life* presents the risk of becoming too anecdotal, because the generosity of the process, by seeking multifactorial accuracy, heaps up factors and parameters: mapping depths, movements, points of life, peripheries, pulses, hollows, disappearances, ruins. “Repopulating maps would mean accepting that us humans are not the only ones creating them”³, states the text the three authors co-signed. This is a complex and disconcerting undertaking, including when the reader, faced with these concentric, distorted and potential graphic objects, tries to find his or her bearings. “The following maps are ‘living maps’ rather than maps of living things”, the authors proclaim. Any totalising input is considered obsolete in this “narrative of exploration”. The tone is voluntarily more embracing than in a textbook, a sign that the Anthropocene requires more humanity in the styles through which thought, and subjectivity are transmitted. Such is the main quality of our era, our ability to reinstate the fallibility of interpretation, to accept the “I” and the “we”, to embark on a doctrineless history, to walk ourselves through a problem, with both feet in each subject, with empathy- provoking reading experiences. The book by Matthieu Duperrex smoothly embodies all this, assuming to a certain extent Ann Elias’ environmental and postcolonial ethics, which seeks to bring humans back into the histories of coral, and give back true knowledge to indigenous populations, unveil deceptions, contextualise the spectacle of coral within its exploitation. Elspeth Diederix, through her visual demonstration, also shakes up monuments and topples the deep-sea optical myth, still haunted by the phantasmagoria of Jules Verne’s tale. The act of seeing, which has for so long contributed to entertaining an illusion of command over worlds and territories, contributing to the creation of authoritarian inventories, is truly no longer reliable. Its power has been transformed. All the authors discussed here firmly maintain that nature is a cultural co-construction. The act of seeing in the times of the Anthropocene amounts to accepting a degree of blindness, of incomplete representations, laterally blurred like underwater vision is. It is through this part of uncertainty that the viscosity of the Anthropocene can be explored and constructed.

NOTES

1. Ball, Philip. “Colour and Composition under the Sea”, *When Red Disappears*, Amsterdam: Fw:books, 2019, n. p.
2. *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009. Ed. By Alan C. Braddock, Christoph Irmscher
3. Aït-Touati, Frédérique. Arènes, Alexandra. Grégoire, Axelle. « Habiter parmi les vivants », *Terra Forma : manuel de cartographies potentielles*, Paris: B42, 2019, p. 13

AUTHORS

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Bénédicte Ramade is a French-Canadian art historian. Her doctoral thesis was devoted to the *Misfortunes of American Ecological Art: proposals for a critical rehabilitation*, and will be published by the Presses du réel in 2020. Since 2016, she has researched the anthropocénisation of knowledges and corpuses in art history as a postdoctoral fellow at Montréal University. Most of the exhibitions she curates are devoted to environmental issues. She lives and works in Montréal.