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An attempt to describe what cannot be described

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A

n attempt to describe what cannot be described

MA Thesis, Andrea Bakketun

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First: Epilogue

I will start off with someone else's epilogue. These words hit me. Whether it is because of the poetic way of talking about politic issues relevant for our times, or if it is some of the beautiful sentences that draw together magic and science into an unity, I don't know.

The dreams of magic may one day be the waking realities of science. But a dark shadow lies athwart the far end of this fair prospect. For however vast the increase of knowledge and of power which the future may have in store for man, he can scarcely hope to stay the sweep of those great forces which seem to be making silently but relentlessly for the destruction of all this starry universe in which our earth swims as a speck or mote. In the ages to come man may be able to predict, perhaps even to control, the wayward courses of the winds and clouds, but hardly will his puny hands have strength to speed afresh our slackening planet in its orbit or rekindle the dying fire of the sun. Yet the philosopher who trembles at the idea of such distant catastrophes may console himself by reflecting that these gloomy apprehensions, like the earth and the sun themselves, are only parts of that unsubstantial world which thought has conjured up out of the void, and that the phantoms which the subtle enchantress has evoked today she may ban tomorrow. They too, like so much that to common eyes seems solid, may melt into air, into thin air.



1862 Golden Bough, after Joseph Mallor William Turner

The epilogue is taken from *The Golden Bough*, James George Frazer, 1890. The book is originally a 12 volume study in magic and religion, where Frazer has compared myths, rituals and religions throughout the world over a wide time span. His personal voice is quite present, especially in this epilogue. I cannot completely grasp all he is saying, but there is something there I want to reach. When I read the text over and over again, it is becoming more banal, as the words are conjoined with meaning, and I find myself wishing I'd only seen the Turner painting *Golden bough* instead.

My way of reaching, is rather creating something I don't understand, based on these words.

This thesis is built from stories about my artistic process, which I tend to tell repeatedly, and for this reason believe to have importance. In addition there is a reference archive in the back, linked up to these texts, functioning as independent text works as well as they relate to the stories told.

The spirit of electricity

I was busy rebuilding found electronic household equipment. I made their movements irregular and removed their traits to make it more difficult to spot their original purpose. After dissecting various devices for months, looking for the potential of movement, movement based on the circular spinning engine rebuilt to be impossible to predict, I was about to give up. My knowledge and skills could not bring the fruits I imagined, and my relationship to electronics were still of the same character as to magic.

At the time I was located in a tall building in Amsterdam. I had detached the engine of a vacuum cleaner, attached the cables directly to the socket and pressed the power button. The engine was shooting off in one direction, hitting a table leg and spinning off in another in tremendous speed. I had to jump away from its hazardous journey several times. I had a joyous feeling watching my creation. At the same time I was scared. All of a sudden the engine short-circuited. All the lights in the building went off with a hissing sound. I had to stand up for the spirit of electricity, trying to explain its sudden violence to my fellow students. Later I have been in touch with the spirit every once in a while. Once it crushed a window, and it has managed to scare me into the habit of always placing one of my hands on my back in honour, while making its paths and circuits, to avoid it running through my heart and thereby stopping it.

The reborn waste grew into characters, and the audience could easily attach them selves to them, recognizing a bad day or a hopeless attempt.



Vacuum cleaner engine inside wooden box

Reference archive:

2. It is there

but cannot be taken for granted



From the making of *Untitled* (Comprehension based on walking sticks, umbrella sticks and disconnected emotions)

Crane flies moving a building crane

I started to search for a wizard outside my field, with insects in the back of my head. I talked to a specialist in crane flies who showed me the Institute for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Dynamics, section Entomology, I went to universities around the Netherlands to pick up old instruments that could measure insect movements, and finally got in touch with a professor in biology specializing in moth, who had electronics and robotics as a hobby. We started meeting regularly. To begin with he was supposed to help me make crane flies move a building crane. After a lot of efforts from his side, and me realizing my lack of interest in electronics, we managed to create an installation where Giant Prickly Walking Sticks were moving kinetic sculptures. The sculptures were still mainly made from electronic equipment found on the streets, some quite abstract, still referring to living organisms, some rebuilt into animated everyday objects.

Unseen energies and the potential of movement

After dealing a lot with electronics and insects, I moved towards work that didn't require technical skills. I had access to a huge office building. In this building, stripped from all its interior finesses and former function, exercises were started to be able to cope with the emptiness and the size. This involved observation of the man-made, and how the man-made started to live, only when meeting with nature: the wind howling in the ventilation system, the shadows moving as sun and clouds passed by, the lighting conductors on the roof quivering with the wind. The most interesting part was however how I, as the isolated human, encountered the building, searching for unseen energies and the potential of movement. As we strive to find meaning in our surroundings, and when meaning is lacking, we tend to create the missing connection.



From research, Atlas Arena, Amsterdam

Withstanding the shatter of origins

I got occupied with the energies present in a space, as well as how the traits and character of a room already speaks loud in an exhibition setting. I brought an amount of materials and equipment for a three-week stay in Kunsthaus Essen, and worked on an installation based on the space.

I put up flags outside the windows, which with lines attached to objects inside the space, transmitted the movement of the wind into the gallery space. I had brought with me a huge latex mould of a room, which functioned as the spaces lounges, moving in relation to the visitor's air turbulence. I also brought a climbing plant and a growing light. To one of the branches of the plant I attached a spy camera, which during the 3-week exhibition filmed different angles of the room and itself, in relation to its own growing rhythm. The video was shown on a live-stream monitor, and it turned out that the cameras way of perceiving the growing light was the most dynamic part of the footage. The light appeared as fast sunsets on repeat.



*Climbing plant with surveillance camera, growing light and live monitor, detail from the installation
Withstanding the shatter of origins*

W^{ithstanding the shatter of origins II}

I started to work with the unpredictable electronics again. I rebuilt some of the oldest sculptures and instruments, making them function better and look more professional, with my gained knowledge.

I planned to make a pure video work. The framework of the video is an apartment where my grandmother used to live. Her father was an art dealer, and there are still traces of his collection there. My grandmother also is a collector, but on a more mediocre scale. This has been the starting point for staged sceneries and still lives, where elements from my own work are brought in, as interventions animating and mystifying the environment. The video material turned out to have the quality of a sci-fi movie, a robotic nature to the panning reminded of the eye of Hal in a Space Odyssey. In the technical boredom which usually ends up in something great, I started doing spontaneous water colour sketches and thought drawings, aluminium sculptures, and a still life instrument, made out of science articles, an egg slicer, a flower pot and a cheap lamp.

These sculptures and drawings appeared out of the process of making video, and have turned out to work as a sort of communication with the video, as different realities speaking with each other.



*Still life instrument,
from Withstanding the shatter of origins II*

Skeleton around the human's story

Conscious, and unconsciously, I have worked with objects and spaces as carriers of an event. It has to do with a desire to talk about psychological states in an atmosphere without humans, but where the human is present. I have been writing texts to systematize and build up an own logic. The texts are mostly descriptive. They give out hints to events where the humans have been involved, but are excluded. Some times the humans can be in the story too, but then within a flat structure, described on the same level as the objects and the space. Through talking about the things and the spaces surrounding people, I attempt to build up a skeleton around the human's story.

R

ference Archive

1. Irregular circles in the air
2. It's there, but cannot be taken for granted
3. Tribal Trance
4. Into Grey (1st aspect)
5. Pinches in the Kitchen
6. Frozen River
7. Tipping Point

Irrregular circles in the air

Bushes are waving from side to side as if they would lift off the ground. The thin branches at the edges wave irregularly, hysteric and intense, then slow. It is the plants way of moving. Their movement has the same nature when growing. If you look at a growing spear in fast forward, you see the same, searching, restless power of life. It aims out of the ground, up towards the light. Groping from side to side, drawing small, irregular circles in the air.

The plant in the windowsill is slowly making its decisions, producing oxygen. Today the plant decided to grow in the second branch to the left. This leave is pale and dead, the other is full of life. I find myself wondering why that specific one was zeroed. Is the plant conscious, or is its body and unconsciousness acting in the same secretive way as with humans?



It is there, but cannot be taken for granted

The sky is the third aspect, which takes a grip around my brain when trying to concentrate. It is a soft grip, as if air is lifting the brain towards the window. I am standing there for a long time. Always colours, different ways of changing the landscape. The sky is one of the few elements that makes the world make sense some times.

It is there, but cannot be taken for granted. Everything belongs to it, moves with it and changes as constant as it does. From tiny bacteria, to sea gull, from fence post, to building crane.

Tribal trance

The beats of the club music simulate memories of your mother's heart rhythm. We all know the beat. In our bodies. Throughout the night everybody at the club gets a common logic, they swagger from side to side.

The computer game flickering over the screen is the dream world filtrated through reality. Daydreams put in to system.

The aquarium is a highly distanced way of keeping pets, yet we are watching it, fascinated by how nature takes its turn, and amazed that we are able to control this small ecological system.

The building cranes are leading animals. They are floating from side to side, breaking the horizontal line.

Satellites are as likely to appear as stars.

Science was born with magic and developed through religion.

Imagine that everything surrounding us is equally important. Take everything in without making a hierarchy.

Into Grey (1st aspect)

In the buzz from the ferry, a massive and deafening whir, the grey clouds roll over the sky, taking over each other's shifts. The sky is not interested in sharing any colour with the earth today. It is keeping the colour hidden behind layers and layers of humidity, which probably, with all the colours of the rainbow are creating grey.

The sea is copying. It is splashing irritably, with small waves that gain dark blue shades. The sky and the sea comprise the main surfaces, they meet at the middle in a thin and almost wiped out line. Cranes of metal painted in white, grey or yellow, stretching towards the sky, are the ones breaking this line. Today they also blend in, as if they are trying to stitch the ground to the clouds. They are standing massive and calm, pretending not to notice the wind. But if you look at the masts and the thin cranes, you can notice how they flex their muscles, and still are moved. Bobbing slowly from side to side, toning in with the splashes of the ocean, turning in to music.

Flags on masts are trying to take all of the attention, they throw themselves around, rates hard to jump off their staffs and become waves or wind, or sky. Boats glide past, just as laid back as the cranes. Large boats slide outwards or inwards, but also here, the wind and the sea manage to catch them, forcing them into the groove.

In the noise from the ferry suddenly everything makes sense for a single man. Everything is so right, so wrong, strong, sad and alien. Tears are trying to force themselves out at the side of the eyeballs, to mix into the grey, and be a part.

Pinches in the kitchen

The radio is howling a silent howl. The radio's voice is mostly harsh. At the moment it is incomprehensible, but at the same time it is expressing the tension in the room. A cupboard door is slammed. Plates and cups rattle together, getting anxious. The floorboards prepare for stomping. Tightening their muscles. Wooden muscles. There is creaking, but it cannot be heard, because of the heavy stomps from strict soles, drowning out the rest. They send staccato waves of dust and air towards the ceiling. Paff, paff, paff. Regret is already sneaking around the corner. Its fingertips have a helpless grasp on the edge of the last wallboard. However, there is no way back. The flag has to stay up. It is flapping in the heat.

A prickling stays in the room. Small dots, like pinches. The dishes are weighing more this day. All plates, cups and glasses, and not to mention the forks, have a coating of guilty conscience. This was where it all started. They were dirty, needed care. It all cracked. The day is ruined for everything in the room. Waiting for reconciliation.

Frozen River

On an island, on top of the island, there is a rock, a slope of naked rock. Pine trees, continuously trembling aspen, and oak surround the area. A spruce in a pot is attempted integrated in the environment with little luck. There is a small lawn on both sides of the small house that is lying there. Prickly, yellow grass with hints of light green. This is mountain landscape. Archipelago.

In front of the house there is a ravine. For many years there has been made attempts on filling it. First probably to lower the risk for children falling in to it and hurt themselves. In the bottom of the ravine there are burned logs, black ones. There was a fire here once. Nearly down to the ground. The leftovers constitute the fundament in the filled valley. On top, grass, compost, sticks and stones. Waste that needed a place to be anyways. It gives a good atmosphere. Like a frozen river lying there quivering. All the time there is something for the eyes to explore.

Further out, over the bridge, there is more naked rock. If you go out there you see the sea in panorama view. Small islands spread out here and there, a few sailing boats, sea, horizon, sky. Some pine trees are standing at the edge of the cliff, creating silhouettes, national romantic, no, Munchish. They are safe beings, protecting the yard with the little house.

In the evenings, the woods surrounding the house get extremely dark. Sounds of branches, strolling, insects and boats are thrown out from it. It is threatening, especially if you are indoors. The house has a row of windows going around half of the house. There are no curtains, so if you cast a glimpse out there, you see a flickering movement, the glass reflecting the room inside, trees swaying in the wind. But it is too dark to get an overview. If you start to think about the possibility that someone can come to the house, either to visit or to look, it is easy to get lost in deep fear. You frequently see faces outside the window. Pale with hollow eyes. They are standing outside the window looking in. Wonder what they want.

Tipping Point

It is tipping. The whole terrace is tipping. At least it does when I look back at it now. The people on the terrace are slowly sliding towards the lawn on the right. However, just before they fall, the terrace is turning and starts to lean towards the other side. The people start to slide again. Slowly. They get wooden chips in their thighs and hands. The smallest one of them tilts and falls with the head straight into the woodwork. No sound is made, no displeasure. It just lays there.