

Fractured landscapes
by Arno van Roosmalen

The 'Nationale Omgevingsvisie' (Dutch National Environmental Vision) describes the term 'landscape' more or less as follows: an area, as experienced by people, whose character is the result of the mutual influence of natural and human factors. Landscape is therefore both nature and culture, both physical and social. It is partly formed by the ideas, views, images and stories associated with it. Landscapes as such are a layered construction of reminiscences of historical, cultural, physical and social developments and form the basis on which the future takes shape.

The stratification under our feet or that resides in our collective memory is not evident. Because the reality we experience and on the basis of which we organise our lives obscures the past to a great extent. Traces and structures of different ages unfold only to the informed eye or thanks to an unorthodox approach.

Whether it concerns landscapes, social structures, legislation, cultural expressions or media: important or less important information has been erased, consciously or not, ended up in the folds of history, been swept away by natural or technological disasters, and debunked for ideological reasons. Hidden beneath the surface is a layered construction of snippets of information, half-lost knowledge, vague memories, traditions, and norms.

Here lies a task for art: to reveal the invisible, the unknown. In this way, it can contribute to addressing (historical) injustice, to broadening our knowledge, to imagining and visualizing a (different) future. And thereby enriching and deepening our relationship with time, space and with each other.

Like various fellow artists, Raúl Ortega Ayala consciously subscribes to the task above. He does so, I suspect, on the assumption that each surface can reveal different layers of more or less perceptible elements (and social relevance). As long as one listens, watches, observes in the right way; which starts by actually being there.

These elements lie beneath the feet of the artist as he walks over the ashes and rocks that have covered Plymouth, the capital of the Caribbean island of Montserrat, since the eruption of the Soufrière volcano in 1997. But they are also hidden in the sounds that accidentally or on purpose were recorded on the famous albums made between 1979 and 1989 in the AIR Montserrat Studio of George Martin. Ortega Ayala is interested in the physical and abstract forms of a palimpsest of hidden meanings.

Every exhibition by Raúl Ortega Ayala is the outcome of sometimes years of research. This research leads to cohesive groups of diverse works of art that

are derived from the experience and exploration of a particular context and the materials that form part of it.

In his programmatic approach he uses methods derived from science. For previous projects, such as 'Bureaucratic Sonata', the artist chose the method of participant observation often used in anthropology and psychology. For the series 'From the Pit of Et Cetera' (since 2012) about collective memory and social amnesia, he borrows methods from archaeology and history. These are connected with notions such as absence, traces, speculation and iconoclasm. Part of this series is 'Montserrat'. It is no coincidence that the exhibition of the same name at Dürst Britt & Mayhew bears the subtitle 'a phono-archaeology'. [Note 1]

textured topographies

Surely the Italian artist Alberto Burri (1915 – 1995) understood that the craquelure in the Renaissance paintings he admired was an expression of aging. Nevertheless, he also regarded the fabric of cracks and fissures as an enrichment, as 'textured topographies'. Beginning in the 1960s, Burri periodically resided in Los Angeles and frequently traveled to Death Valley. He became fascinated by the dried-out mud planes. Deep cracks gave the impression that the earth was about to burst open. This 'energy of the surface' resonated with something stirring deep below. But the broken earth also had a psycho-geographical aspect. It revealed to Burri his own trauma from the fascism and industrialized warfare he had had to live through. These two experiences prompted Burri to create a series of enchanting 'cretti' (Italian for 'cracks'), monochrome paintings that he manipulated during the drying process so that networks of cracks and fissures literally gave the work depth, texture challenged the sense of touch and a representation of landscape conditions beckoned. Burri created the culmination of the series when the mayor of Gibellina, a town on the island of Sicily, commissioned him to create a work of art. In 1968 Gibellina was completely destroyed by the Belice earthquake. It was impossible to rebuild in the same location. Therefore, a new town was built a few kilometers away, Nuova Gibellina.

In response to the assignment, Alberto Burri decided to transform the original Gibellina into a 'Grande cretto': between 1984 and 2015, the ruins of Gibellina were cast in a 1.60 m layer of concrete. The alleys, streets and paths were left open so that you could pass through them to walk. From above a gigantic material painting, from the inside a true textured topography. In constant connection with the surrounding landscape, the work embodies a spatial 'memory' of the destroyed city and the irreversibility of its ruinous state. It evokes the sadness of the earthquake, where the cracks in the landscape also represent the violence that has been done to the land, the people and the culture of the place.

phono-archaeology

'I was about thirteen years old when I – not owning a record-player – started to collect the fragile shellack discs which were still in use in 1955. I got these from a friend whose father ran a cinema, they usually had no protective cover and were scratched and dusty. So I washed the records in warm soapy water and vigorously rubbed them dry. For a long time this was the only way to express my affection for the music hidden in those mysterious grooves, and I washed them over and over again'. [Note 2]

Like probably every music lover, I tried to make sure my records didn't get scratched. I experienced an almost physical pain as the vinyl slipped off a metal edge or fell onto a dusty rug. In 1988, artist Christian Marclay created an installation in the tiny Berlin record shop cum gallery 'gelbe Musik': the entire floor was covered with unprotected and appropriately trimmed vinyl records. Can you imagine the revulsion, horror and fear I had to overcome to enter the shop and with it the artwork – shuffling with the street grime under my shoes? Marclay played nasty with the fetish association we have with gramophone records. He fearlessly explored the boundaries and also the interaction between a record as a sound carrier and as an object. Shortly afterwards I bought Christian Marclay's 'Record without a cover' (1985). One side of this vinyl record contains music by 'turntablist' Marclay: an intriguing collage of existing music fragments that begins with the (recorded) creaking and ticking sound of a needle in the leading groove of a gramophone record. The other side contains the usual text information pressed into the vinyl as relief printing. Wherever the 'Record without a cover' is located, on the turntable or elsewhere: the environment exerts a physical influence on it. In a way, it gets damaged. You could also say that it gets enriched. Over time this disc embodies a dynamic relationship between grooves and scratches, between intentional sound (his composition) and unintentional additions, between producer and consumer.

You could consider a vinyl record as a readable or audible landscape. With minimal seismographic movement, traces are scratched into it, containing information that can be retrieved. 'Record without a cover' adds the contribution of the participating observer. In that context, you could also translate the title as an exhortation to 'record without obfuscation'. When I put the record on I can no longer distinguish which taps, hiss or scratches are part of the original composition or traces of my life. After all these years, it is actually my (!) unique copy of this work of art. It has now become one of my most cherished objects.

The microscopic images of the gramophone records that Raúl Ortega Ayala found on Montserrat among the settled dust and rubbish evoke an eerie

landscape. Clear lines, inexplicable scattered drops, abrupt breaks. It is reminiscent of Burri's 'Grande cretto', but on a different scale. How did the natural disaster inscribe, etch as it were, itself into the sound carriers of the island's popular culture several decades ago? Is the pain of the now unattainable etched into the vinyl like a trace?

What local sounds of 1980s Montserrat can we trace in the grooves of the gritty productions of Duran Duran, The Police or Paul McCartney – just to name a few of the world-renowned artists who recorded their music at AIR Studio Montserrat? How does this music, distributed worldwide in millions of copies, connect with the almost inaudible registration of a passing procession or of songbirds? Are the traces of the historic Caribbean culture of the island of Montserrat doomed to a slow fade out?

Raúl Ortega Ayala (re)searches openings in the landscape. Literally, in physical landscapes irrevocably altered by human or natural disasters; and figuratively, in cultural and mental landscapes that are – relatedly – degraded, transformed or 'overgrown'.

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Arno van Roosmalen has been serving cultural institutions and communities in Rotterdam and The Hague, played concerts and curated exhibitions internationally, is a music lover and currently works as advisor art in the public domain, mainly in The Netherlands and Belgium.

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This text is based on years of a professional and friendly relationship between the author and the artist. It arises from conversations and correspondence with an investigative, curious, receptive and reciprocal character.

Note 1

Other parts of 'From the Pit of Et Cetera' include: '18 and Half Minutes' (2014), that uses the infamously erased audio fragment in Richard Nixon's White House recordings to create new sculptural work in a spatial installation; 'X-ray Paintings' (2016), which explores through painting the forgotten works of art that have been found under artworks in recent decades; 'The Zone' (2013-2016), a film and photographs that focus on the 30-kilometre radius exclusion zone affected by the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

Note 2

René Block in: 'Broken Music', Ursula Block & Michael Glassmeier, 1989, daadgalerie Berlin – Gemeentemuseum Den Haag – Magasin Grenoble