

MARS II – A catastrophe (handmade)

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MARS II is a poetic account of the impact of catastrophes on our thinking. These days ecological disasters, economic crises and terrorist attacks seem to be constantly hanging over our heads. In its obsession with risk, modern-day Western society has sometimes been described as a 'risk society', largely organized around preventing risk. Does perhaps the human race have a need for stories of catastrophes in rather the same way as a child enjoys a gruesome fairy tale? After all, our focus on a specific threat also activates us: the fear of a possible disaster makes us determined to avert it with every possible means. In that respect every apocalyptic scenario, however likely or unlikely, is a sort of secular 'memento mori' – a reminder of our mortality.

See Naples

Karl Van Welden's fascination with volcanoes has taken him to Vesuvius and Etna in Italy, to Mount Aso in Japan and Kawah Ijen in Indonesia. And, of course, others like him are drawn to both active and dormant volcanoes, many of them now highly popular travel destinations. Twenty-first-century man continues to be captivated by the potentially destructive forces of nature.

In the run-up to *MARS II* we visited Pompeii and Herculaneum, both destroyed by an eruption of Vesuvius. Two towns, choked by volcanic ash and engulfed by a stream of lava. Thanks to the nineteenth-century archaeologist Fiorelli, the inhabitants' last moments are preserved in the form of macabre plaster casts of bodies, solidified in their last movement, whether resting or resisting. They remind us of the marble figures on medieval tombs. Sleeping beauties and tormented bodies, which reflect the Eros and the Thanatos of our relationship with the end.

Volcanic eruptions wipe complete towns off the map, but at the same time volcanic ash makes the soil fertile. In Naples houses are still built and vegetables grown on the slopes of Vesuvius, despite the danger. Neapolitans might have a different attitude to life than the rest of the Western world. For them risk – however latent – is an acknowledged and inescapable part of daily life, as is the thought of death.

We, on the other hand, take a very different approach to risk: prevention programmes, insurance policies and health and safety rules are designed to exclude or at least postpone the threat of catastrophe. In the face of death we often seem fearful and unprepared.

Moreover, in the last two centuries we have manipulated the world in such a way that human actions and choices must also shoulder responsibility for such adversities as climate change, world wars, terrorist threats and economic crises. However, in an increasingly complex world it is difficult to take stock of the chain of causes and effects.

Music without us

Together with pianist Frederik Croene and sound designer Vincent Malstaf, Karl Van Welden went on a musical quest. As an artefact the piano embodies a large chunk of cultural history. In the nineteenth century the instrument occupied an important place in the work of romantic composers like Chopin, Liszt and Thalberg. And in that era the piano was a central component of middle-class domestic life. In particular young ladies passed their time with the disciplined practice of piano playing.

At that time industrialization and mechanization impacted on every aspect of our culture, including the piano. The pianola, or player piano, was born along with a whole series of other automatons, from mechanical looms to chess players. Thanks to an internal mechanism the piano could now play itself. So the pianist disappeared from the living room, followed a little later by the piano itself when its place was taken first by the gramophone, then the radio and after that the MP3 Player.

In those first attempts at automation, man managed to make himself superfluous, or at least he managed to place new question marks over himself. What is the role of the virtuoso pianist vis-à-vis the automaton which approaches perfection without years of practice? If the machine can produce every conceivable sound, what

then is the human creative force within it? The man-made machine threatens to erase his maker, but it also opens up new possibilities and concepts.

Fade to grey

On September 28th 2015 NASA announced that the MRO space probe (the next generation of machines) had discovered liquid water on the planet Mars. People had been wondering about life on the red planet for more than a hundred years. After all, water is necessary for life as we know it. But those minimal traces of water cannot offset the saltating sand particles and dust storms on Mars. The desert, the wasteland, the infertile soil. The invasion of dust that makes life impossible.

In the nineteenth century London was choked by smog, i.e. the Thames fog intensified by the smoke from chimneys. In 1952 a killer fog or 'pea souper' hung over the city for days wreaking havoc. In the *Big Smoke* over 4,000 people lost their lives, 100,000 others suffered respiratory problems. The cityscape was reduced to a dark-grey panorama. The old photographs put one in mind of ash rain.

Dust and ash have reminded us of mortality ever since biblical times. But they also pose a threat to man today, even in their most banal form. While the urban space fills with smog and fine dust, we become increasingly obsessive about keeping it out of the domestic space. We exclude dust from our homes in an almost moral desire for hygiene. A dust-free house suggests diligence and healthiness. A dusty room is a spectre from a horror film, a set in which colours dim and darkness looms.

And we love horror. The thought of a world without us is both hair-raising and tantalizing. A world like a monochrome painting by Malevitch. Full and empty, devoid of human characters, but hand-painted.

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