

Sprawl (Mountains Beyond Mountains)

— Five Reflections on the Work of Hanne Van Dyck

In the spirit of Hanne Van Dyck's poetic new series of work revolving around the human relationship to nature—devised during an artistic residency in Sierre, Switzerland—I thought I, too, would offer a series of five loosely connected reflections with respect to Van Dyck's recent findings and undertakings—as opposed to a single, linear argument. Some of these reflections pertain directly to Van Dyck's works, but there are also some reflections that take a rather more roundabout approach to the matter at hand. Each of my reflections, however, manifest in their own way as attempts to think through and think with the questions that her work poses: What is the relationship between the human figure and its surrounding environment? Between nature and culture? Can we continue to uphold these great divides in times of ecological mutations? Can we think matter without thinking meaning and human intentionality?

To begin with, let's set adrift with *A Little Ramble* (1914) by Robert Walser.

1) A litte ramble

“I walked through the mountains today. The weather was damp, and the entire region was grey. But the road was soft and in places very clean. At first I had my coat on; soon, however, I pulled it off, folded it together, and laid it upon my arm. The walk on the wonderful road gave me more and ever more pleasure; first it went up and then descended again. The mountains were huge, they seemed to go around. The whole mountainous world appeared to me like an enormous theatre. The road snuggled up splendidly to the mountainsides. Then I came down into a deep ravine, a river roared at my feet, a train rushed past me with magnificent white smoke. The road went through the ravine like a smooth white stream, and as I walked on, to me it was as if the narrow valley were bending and winding around itself. Grey clouds lay on the mountains as though that were their resting place. I met a young traveller with a rucksack on his back, who asked if I had seen two other young fellows. No, I said. Had I come here from very far? Yes, I said, and went farther on my way. Not a long time, and I saw and heard the two young wanderers pass by with music. A village was especially beautiful with humble dwellings set thickly under the white cliffs. I encountered a few carts, otherwise nothing, and I had seen some children on the highway. We don't need to see anything out of the ordinary. We already see so much.”

2) A body, floating into the land

What must it feel like to make one's descent from a small village, into the landscape, as to make it in time for an appointment with thought, at the foot of a mountain? An appointment that one surely cannot but miss, as the confederate in question—a mountain formation, alongside all the

subjects that it hosts and assembles—is mighty real and present, but might seem to be rather unresponsive to your calls and responses. Here, to catch oneself in the act of thinking, to the extent of observing, registering, and thinking through the opaque being of a mountain and all the curious things it might presently disclose or have laid bare overtime—among rocks, trees, plants and other forms of vegetation, water creeks, birds, rodents—may promptly mislead one into thinking, instead, about these critters, happenings, and effects that manifest themselves on the surface of the mountain. Somehow you seem to be confronted with the fundamental question of how to embody an entity so vast as a mountain, how to become accountable for its totality within the limited reach of the phenomena you are enabled to sense, let alone have a ground of access to what such formation might be, as a being that is and will probably never be in anyone’s pocket. It is a humbling prospect, surely, but also and equally frustrating to the extent of wanting to pay “truth to matter” whilst moving beyond its givenness, the mountain’s “mere” givenness as a seemingly transparent and simple matter of fact.

3) To apply oneself

While instead of making a silent retreat after such deceiving appointment with a mountain, to make a return to business as usual, so to speak, Van Dyck seems to overcome these initial hesitations and tensions by maximizing a poetic resourcefulness in her work, manifested in a partial loss of the documentary, to its recovery in the key of fiction. That is to say, her diaristic registrations and observations in the work *Notes on a Mountaintop*, or the documenting of different mountaintops in the film work *Notes on Mountaintops*, might be held to be documentary in nature—as if she were to shed light on forensic evidence for us—but are representational insofar as Van Dyck subtly adds additional mental building blocks in order to cope, grapple, face and translate these encounters. Her artistic registry and agency, in this sense, becomes a meticulous balance act of applying oneself to an environment, a landscape, and to make deductions from that application. Not to say reductions, or deconstructions, as to strip the things she encounters from their performance, but rather a type of constructivism that looks at how many performers are assembled in a subject—a mountain, for instance—and how many performers benefit from, and are needed to sustain its existence.

Then, what is to be taken from Van Dyck’s application to the environment, by putting her encounters on the translation table, to the subsequent transposition of her findings into both an artistic context and the space and time of an artwork? I only suppose that the mental building blocks she adds come to represent attempts and approaches to render oneself—and also us, visitors, to some extent—sensitive and conscious to an environment, to one’s place in a scheme and an ecology of things and interrelations, and how that placement, that venturing outward of oneself both shapes the relations with other, external things and entities, but also, more importantly, how these things come to shape us. This sensibility in Van Dyck’s work is not dissimilar from the methods employed in psychogeography, a term coined by Ivan Chatcheglov in 1953, as an approach to geography that emphasizes playfulness and “drifting” around in urban

environments. Further popularized by Guy Debord and members of Situationist International, psychogeography was defined as: “The study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”

In *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (1959), Guy Debord writes:

“When freedom is practiced in a closed circle, it fades into a dream, becomes a mere image of itself. The ambiance of play is by nature unstable. At any moment, “ordinary life” may prevail once again. The geographical limitation of play is even more striking than its temporal limitation. Every game takes place within the boundaries of its own spatial domain.” [...] “People can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is animated. Obstacles were everywhere. And they were all interrelated, maintaining a unified reign of poverty.”

4) Thinking without the head

Another such work in Van Dyck’s recent body of works, titled *Lecture for Plants*, connotes such anthropomorphic qualities, the idea of projecting an image of oneself onto external agencies, and animating another form of existence according to the logic of the morphology of the human body. A striking and playful attempt at showing the redundancy of such efforts, of bringing other modes of existence into the realm of human phenomenology and epistemology, can be found in the work *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* (1972) by John Baldessari. In this work Baldessari aims to let a plant apprehend an alphabet by showing cards of its respective letters, trying to bring the plant into the court of human language and understanding. Similar attempts at “an understanding” may be found in the same period, in which dozens of artists released vinyl albums with music for plants, *and* humans, with warm earth music for plants, *and* the people who love them (Mort Garson, *Mother Earth’s Plantasia*, 1976). To only ever partially extend ourselves and come to “an understanding” with other modes of existence, among the plant, we must try to seek for a non-anthropomorphism and a post-anthropocentrism, but the question remains: could humans ever understand minds that are radically unlike our own? In his book *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), Michael Marder writes:

“”Plant-thinking” refers, in the same breath, to the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking proper to plants (what I later call “thinking without the head”); the human thinking about plants; how human thinking is, to some extent, de-humanized and rendered plant-like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world; and finally, the ongoing symbiotic relation between this transfigured thinking and the existence of plants. A sound philosophy of vegetal life must rely on the combination of these four senses of “plant-thinking,” so as not to dominate (and in dominating, distort)

the target of its investigations. The chances of aggravating the abuse of plants by theorizing their existence can be minimized, of the theorists [and artists, for that matter] themselves expose their cogitation to the logic of vegetal life and learn from it, to the point where their thinking is ready to melt into this logic, with which admittedly it will never be identical.”

5) Does it ever get cold on the moral high ground?

What Marder’s example shows us is that although we may never reach a full embodiment or ground of access to the entities we encounter and come to describe in our practices—what philosopher Rosi Braidotti would call the idea of the body as a limitation, the fleshed-existence of the human being as a threshold—we may and should still strive to come to grasp as much of the curious manifestations of radical forms of otherness, and be accountable for the difference-making among them. This not in order to subtract reality from any given environment, but to add reality instead, leading to a complex “ecology of selves” of which humans and nonhumans are both a part, as evocatively exemplified in Eduardo Kohn’s book *How Forests Think* (2013). However, let us remain wary of the great extents to which humankind has tended and remains to persist on introducing itself as a certain capacity (culture presiding over nature), and to make that capacity the basis of a reconstruction of how things are, function, and perform—all while today the basic unit of reference for the human is completely on the cards.

The works of Hanne Van Dyck may remind us of such contested and dubious positioning ground for the human figure, of being wholly embedded within an environment whilst remaining to consider oneself as an external force. Through her work she introduces a number of templates from which her fieldwork is translated into a new patchwork of significations and meanings, as to underscore this push and pull, forward and backward between observer and active participant, of human phenomenality and language within contexts devoid and indifferent to such readings. By invoking the ghosts of previous states, she tells us stories of the memories and histories we may attach to these subjects and our encounters with them, practiced through the idea of—paraphrasing Donna Haraway—in order to become one, you have to be many in the first place, also as to be enabled to talk about the tissues of being anything in the first place, a mountain, a plant, a drop of water, a cloud-being, a pine tree, a flock of sparrows. We are legion!