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Losing Ground in a no knowledge zone:
Pierre Huyghe's Antarctic *journey that wasn't*

In 2005, French artist Pierre Huyghe set out on a journey to Antarctica in search of a new island and a mysterious white creature, a rare albino penguin. *A journey that wasn't* took place on a specialist Polar research vessel called the *Tara,* with six other artists and a small crew. The boat set sail from the Port of Ushuaia, in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, the southernmost point of South America and gateway to the Antarctic. During a journey to the most remote continent on the planet, the boat wove its way through a vast desert of ice, met with extreme weather and violent storms, became trapped in the pack ice for three days, took a detour forced by the winds and the weather and, finally, came to rest at an island with no name somewhere in the Pitt Islands Peninsula. Huyghe documented the coordinates of the unknown island and named it *Isla Iciosidad (Island of Idleness).*

The projects of Pierre Huyghe gesture towards human and non-human entanglements and a chronopolitics that acknowledge multiple temporalities coexisting alongside one another. In relation to the significance of Antarctica as a site in *A journey that wasn't,* Huyghe has commented: «Going somewhere like Antarctica is an attempt to produce a place without pre-existing protocol, a no-knowledge zone. It might be easier to find this in a place that's not overcrowded with meaning, rules, culture, even longitude and latitude».[1] It seems important therefore to contextualise these comments with a brief introduction to the history of the Southern Continent so as to fully engage with Pierre Huyghe's work and its relationship to questions of knowledge production in the light of shifting formations of nature. Epistemological certainties are increasingly challenged by environmental change. ‹Nature› can no longer act as an enduring and monolithic background to ‹Culture› and the human. This paper speculates on the emergence of ‹post-natural› epistemologies through Pierre Huyghe's *A journey that wasn't.*

French cinematographer Maryse Alberti, one of the artists on board, filmed Huyghe's journey and the footage was later combined with that of a second film—shot in Central Park, New York –where Huyghe subsequently staged a recreation/translation of the journey as a musical for a live audience. The combined footage from these two events was then released by Huyghe as a final video installation work for gallery display. A written text that documented the journey, attributed to The Association of Freed Time and titled *El diario del fin del mundo,* was also published in *Artforum* magazine between the Antarctic trip and the event in Central Park.[2] *A journey that wasn't* therefore presents an artwork that evolved over a considerable temporal duration, across multiple platforms of presentation, involving different media, materials and locations. Its execution also involved a range of actors in its realisation, combining human and animal, remote landscape and urban centre.

On the Antarctic ice shelf, the sense of unstable ground is physically and materially embodied in the crystalline structures of the ice and changes in its molecular structure. It shifts from solid to liquid in response to changes in temperature from above and below sea level. Glaciers creak and move, split and carve, echo and vibrate, breaking away in great blocks of solid ice as they meet the ocean's edge, slipping into the water becoming liquid and light as they dissolve. They join the great ocean currents and begin their journey around the globe, from the poles to the tropics and back again, in a great planetary movement, affecting sea levels, tidal flows and climate variations. The metaphorical significance of the glacier extends to the continent of Antarctica itself as a shifting continent of ice. As a physical system the glacier acts as a microcosm of the forces at work across the formation and deformation of ice fields at the macrocosmic scale. As British geographer Klauss Dodds notes:

> The Antarctic is the world's most unstable space […] Every September, in the late winter period, the size of the continent effectively doubles. A large area of the Southern Ocean extending more than 1000 kilometres from the coastline is temporarily covered in sea ice. This capacity to alter has, over time, played havoc with attempts to map and chart the Antarctic. Countless explorers and mariners have discovered to their cost that existing maps are hopelessly inaccurate, and that there is a rich tradition of islands and coastlines being in the ‹wrong place› or simply disappearing.[3]

The last continent on Earth to be formally charted and framed into organised systems of knowledge, the Antarctic stood for thousands of years as an imaginary place on the maps of ancient civilisations, the mythical *terra australis incognita* or unknown southern land. Climate conditions prevented its full mapping by satellite images until as recently as 1997, indicating the uniqueness of the continent's extreme meteorological conditions and its resistance to formal capture in codified systems of knowledge and visual representation.[4] Ancient astronomers believed in the existence of a great southern land as a necessary counter-balance to the northern continents. The great *terra incognita* of the planet held out its mysteries until the late 18th century circumnavigations of the globe. However, even the circumpolar expeditions at the end of the ‹Great› age of exploration could not provide any certainty of the existence of the southern landmass, which remained elusive as conflicting reports of sightings of land emerged and facts were hard to verify. Extreme weather conditions and the presence of sea ice that stopped ships voyaging further south by trapping them in the ice were only two of the many difficulties encountered by voyagers to the extreme south.

With the ‹heroic› age of exploration in the 19th century when humans finally set foot on the land, the mysteries of the continent were still in place. Its myths, far from dissipating, only began to grow and expand in the imagination of those who encountered its vastness and impenetrability. As the American environmental historian Stephen J. Pyne notes:

> The problem was not solely the formidable physical geography of the ice terranes: the Ice also challenged the philosophical precepts, artistic genres, and scientific systems by which the era had understood the metaphysics (and metahistory) of nature. The abundance of the observed world was stripped away […] The Promethean desire to embrace everything lost its meaning in a landscape of nothingness. In place of increasing information, there was less. In place of abundant objects, there was only ice; and in place of

tangible landmarks, such as mountains and lakes, there were only abstract concepts, such as the poles of rotation, magnetism, or inaccessibility, all invisible to the senses.[5]

The role of exploration and science in contributing to the construction of Antarctica in the cultural imagination has been of particular significance since the advent of the ‹heroic› age of exploration. Renewed interest in the unknown south began in the final years of the 19th century with the launch of a number of international expeditions to the continent, famously immortalised in the race to the South Pole by the British and Norwegian explorers Robert Falcon Scott and Roald Amundsen during the early years of the 20th century. This was followed in the mid-20th century by the initiation of the International Geophysical Year that took place between 1957 and 1958, an event that marked a shift in the depiction of the continent as a land to be discovered or claimed in the imperial sense, towards an understanding of the continent as a valuable resource for scientific endeavour. Scientists flocked to Antarctica, new research stations and bases were built with a view to long-term occupation. For the first time, in the absence of any indigenous population, humans permanently inhabited the continent.

The shift from territorial landmass to scientific laboratory led to the formation of the Antarctic Treaty System in 1959, which legally suspended territorial claims to the land by any individual nation state in favour of a collective custodial approach by several nation states. The initial signatories of the treaty comprised those states who had previously registered a legal claim on the territory and those whose interest had been demonstrated through their participation in the International Geophysical Year: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Great Britain, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the USA and the USSR. Until this mid-century moment it seems remarkable to note that Antarctica as a continent remained «a legally indeterminate geography, outside of the conventional framework of state possession».[6] Its formal constitution in international law is therefore a relatively recent event and remains a precarious one, as the only comparable indeterminate territorial status can be found beyond Earth's atmosphere in outer space and beneath the ocean with the sea bed, both of which were also formally constituted in law during the late 1950s and 1960s.

The Antarctic Treaty System continues to be a source of dispute and an example of international diplomacy in the context of complex geopolitical relations. Prior to the International Geophysical Year, the continent was subject to a number of competing (and overlapping) territorial claims by seven of the signatories: Great Britain, Argentina, Chile, Australia, New Zealand, France and Norway. Some of the original claimants recognised one another's claims whilst others refused. The USA and USSR did not recognise any prior claims to Antarctic territory, viewing the continent as an example of *terra nullius,* land belonging to no one and without ownership. Under this term, whilst choosing not to recognise existing claims, these nation states could leave open the option to register a future claim on the territory should they choose to instigate one. The Treaty, a widely acknowledged piece of geopolitical diplomacy, states the following in Article IV:

> No acts or activities taking place while the present Treaty is in force shall constitute a basis for asserting, supporting or denying a claim to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica or create any rights of sovereignty in Antarctica. No new claim, or enlargement of an existing claim to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica shall be asserted while the present Treaty is in force.[7]

The Treaty therefore effectively ‹froze› the existing situation of territorial interests, neither acknowledging nor denying any nation's claim. Since the initial signing of the treaty in 1959 a further forty-one countries have acceded to the treaty system as members of the United Nations, however, only seventeen of these have so far met with the stipulation of the treaty that full Committee membership be defined on the basis of «*conducting substantial research activity there*». The remaining twenty-four signatories can participate in Committee meetings but cannot actively participate in the decision-making process.[8]

Klaus Dodds has highlighted that the lack of any indigenous human population in Antarctica has in no way diminished the continent's subjection to colonial practices. He draws attention to the mechanisms at work in the drafting of the Treaty and notes how article IV «is more than a careful diplomatic solution to the thorny issue of claimant and non-claimant states», arguing that, «in effect, it rewarded colonial appropriation».[9] He goes on to identify this colonial appropriation with the imposition of the scientific model that emerged during the International Geophysical Year as the dominant model relating to any interest in or claim to the continent. Any states wishing to accede to the Treaty system therefore had to visibly demonstrate their commitment to, and investment in, scientific research. This was usually made visible by the establishment of a permanent research station in Antarctica. There is an implicit assumption of Science's neutrality as a basis for collective global politics at work in this research imperative. However, Science is an implicit part of cultural practices that help to shape knowledge and entrench certain geopolitical positions. It is tied to cultural and national prestige; it is linked to the military and to capitalism, particularly via interest in raw materials and potential resource extraction. Within the highly-coded environment of Antarctica therefore, a site at the leading edge of science, Pierre Huyghe's notion of a ‹no-knowledge zone› becomes a provocative gesture. The idea of a different kind of journey emerges from those linked to colonial expansion and the opportunity to assert a ‹heroic› national identity against the blank page of a continent without history, or the narrative of scientific truth claims at the frontiers of knowledge production.

There is renewed interest in the Antarctic in the early years of the 21st century due to its central role in scientific and cultural debates and visual representations of climate change. It therefore seems an important moment to revisit the continent's chequered legal history in order to highlight its symbolic significance within mythic constructions of space, territory and systems of knowledge production. As Dodds succinctly points out:

> Since the 1940s and 1950s, the widespread notion that the Antarctic functions as a ‹scientific laboratory› at the proverbial end of the world, with due emphasis given to controlled and ordered knowledge creation and international behaviour, remains a powerful framing device.[10]

Co-opting the tools of the contemporary scientific economy: a specially equipped polar research vessel; advanced clothing and equipment for surviving at extreme temperatures; monitoring and recording equipment, Huyghe's journey to the Antarctic appears to present a picture of modern scientific research, one with clear aims and objectives identified in advance. Yet, on closer inspection, these aims have a sense of vagueness about them. The call to discover an ‹unknown island› and search for a ‹white creature that may or may not exist› suggests a realm of myth and imagination rather than one of rules established to test hypotheses. This

uncertainty recalls the previous history of the continent as an unknown or mythical land. Such uncertainties suggest a shifting and elusive topography that parallels an equally uncertain terrain of knowledge and understanding. They draw attention to the ways that knowledge is shaped through different systems of codification and ideals of verification, and the ways in which places are shaped and spaces produced through geopolitical maneuvering. As Pierre Huyghe notes:

> There are facts and constructions that have been part of history for a long time, which have become linked through language and a dominant sense of the imaginary. These facts are shaped by language. It's important that the present remains speculative. That's the idea of zones of non-knowledge, understood as something that cannot be exhausted by discourse […] something that opens up the realm of possibility, even if chaotically. I'm interested in un-telling […] I pursue a kind of incongruence and, as a result, tend more toward vitality, toward what grows.[11]

The artist's appeal to an organic metaphor of growth introduces an earthly dimension to the production of knowledge. Antarctica offers a productive site for engaging with questions of ecological thought in relation to geopolitics and the material conditions of landscape. The construction of Antarctica as a ‹territory›—a term that signifies the formal codification of landscape in law as «the extent of the land belonging to or under the jurisdiction of a ruler, state, or group of people»,[12] has taken place within a short historical timeframe. This instability of the political territory is juxtaposed with deep geological time evidenced in the scientific collection of ice cores that represent slices into earth's history as compressed in snow and ice over millennia. The material conditions of the earth itself re-surface as solid objects, blocks of ice that, when sectioned together from shorter one-metre cylinders, can extend for up to two miles. Entangled in these relations between territory and the earth are questions of duration and of depth, of nonhuman timeframes and of space conceived as more than surface.

Antarctica, when considered within the historical dimensions briefly outlined of its discovery, (un)mapping and (de)territorialisation, can be seen to function as an exemplary site for the production of a ‹no-knowledge zone›. Pierre Huyghe talks about building up fictions in order to verify them, problematising notions of truth and the construction of knowledge. He repeatedly states that he is not interested in documentary, in any process that faithfully captures the event or the experience, but instead prefers to work with notions of re-scripting, re-defining, inventing and re-inventing reality. In the case of the *Island of Idleness* for example, he suggests that the island *should* exist as an elsewhere so the project becomes one of a collective movement «towards the hypothesis».[13] This notion of drifting towards the possibility of an elsewhere has echoes of the earlier mythic descriptions of Antarctica as the unknown southern land of the historical record. Yet, Pierre Huyghe's journey, as suggested, is situated within the realm of a decolonising of thought rather than any ongoing colonial impulse to conquer and to bring back knowledge of an ‹other› place. As the artist comments: «I'm interested in translation and movement and corruption from one world to another. I have doubts about exoticism, this fascination for bringing an ‹elsewhere› here, believing that ‹there› is ‹here›. Elsewhere always remains a story: to bring it back, you have to create an equivalent ».[14] Huyghe refers to this process of equivalence in terms of topology, a mathematical method of geometry that is not concerned with exact dimensions or measurement of Euclidean qualities such as angles, lines, perspective and surface, but with spa-

tial relations. For the artist, as well as the spatial relations afforded through thinking topologically, there is also the possibility for multiple temporalities to emerge.

Pierre Huyghe's accounts of the journey via the article in *Artforum,* the staging of the event in Central Park and film footage by Maryse Alberti used in the video work, all serve to underline the physical, material and experiential nature of the event. The landscape is shown using wide-angle shots that emphasise the vastness of the ocean and the absence of human life outside that on board the boat. Such images and representations of the poles are familiar, recalling historical representations of vast uninhabited landscapes as landscapes of the sublime, such as Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice (1823–1824).* This reference to the aesthetics of the sublime is echoed in the film's opening shots and in the voice of the narrator, who informs us that the film is a «story of a tragic odyssey». Images of the boat attempting to clear a path through the ice, violent images of the crashing sea and stormy skies, views of mountains and majestic whales are followed by images of the crew setting up a curious system of sound and light equipment to attract the penguin. When the creature finally appears it is shown to be rejected by the other penguins who huddle together in groups, the solitary penguin wanders alone along the sea's edge calling out to the surrounding landscape. These visuals reinforce a heightened sense of emotion and are interwoven with images of the theatrical set up of the stage in Central Park and the unfolding of the musical. Loud and unsettling atonal music is played alongside dramatic light and smoke effects that create an otherworldly atmosphere. These merge with the dramatic weather conditions of the event on a dark and rainy night in New York adding to the discordant and disorientating effects. The blinking lights of skyscrapers in the background provide a stark contrast to the constructed and projected icescapes appearing on the stage.

British Geographer Nigel Clark has written of the affects of natural phenomena and earth forces as a fundamental part of any shaping of the social, and of the significance of the changing climate in forging new relations between humans, nonhumans and the planet we in(co)habit. In his reading of a number of contemporary French philosophers, including Michel Serres, Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Clark discusses how the changing signification of the ground in recent thought as «shifting and precarious»,[15] highlights the impact of «the rumblings of the earth» in the formation and reformation of social and communal life[16]. Drawing from French philosopher Michel Serres' work *The Natural Contract* (1992), Clark notes:

> It is the raw and the processed physicality of the earth—howling wind, surging waters, falling leaves—that unravels pre-existing bonds and propels exposed beings into each other's paths—and in this way re-enacts an originary imperative to being-in-common. And this is where theories of the other community need Serres' primordial story: not the convening around a contract, but the idea of the ungrounding of the ground as the impetus to communicating with others […] whatever new bonds or ties were improvised in the heat of this event are reminders that vital aspects of the being of community emerge in response to the imperatives of the earth.[17]

This passage recalls Huyghe's emphasis on the journey as an event that forges new relations from unexpected encounters (human and non-human). This is also evident in *A journey that wasn't* where the meteorological effects and the shifting ground of the ice are central components of the story. The landscape is a key character in the narrative, not simply a passive backdrop that signifies an enduring and monolithic

realm of ‹Nature› against which any ‹Culture› might define itself. Despite Huyghe's own ambiguous response to claims of the work's environmental art credentials, and any explicit engagement with the politics of climate change, it may be possible within this identification of the topological relationship between the figure and the ground to locate an example of an expanded sense of environmental art and ecological thinking.[18] It becomes possible to read the ecological encounter in Huyghe's work as a provocation to shift position: «The expectations and the preconceived modes of behaviour are what I try to deregulate. An encounter should be a deviation».[19] Within this framework the production of the artwork as an event and encounter offers an alternative chronological platform and a non-linear mode of history that gestures towards a «vibrating temporality» [20] incorporating non-human time scales and non-human agencies as part of its unfolding. Pierre Huyghe maps a constantly shifting set of coordinates without resolution. These open systems are akin to the figure of the glacier as it forms over time, from falling rain that captures the sky as it falls, trapping air and microparticles of dust and turning to ice crystals on its decent, settling as snow and compacting into stratified layers of ice.

This shifting or ‹ungrounding› of the ground acts as a metaphor for a loss of knowledge, which, far from resulting in catastrophe, instead opens a space for new encounters to form and enriched ways of knowing/being to emerge. Pierre Huyghe's ‹no-knowledge zones› can be seen to embody the task of thinking ecologically in a ‹post-natural› present, through speculative scenarios that acknowledge our constitutive relationship to an increasingly unstable planet.

Anmerkungen

1 Pierre Huyghe in «Remote, Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain», moderated by Tim Griffin in: *Artforum,* 2005, vol. 43, no. 10, pp. 288–295, p. 289.
2 The Association of Freed Time, «El Diario del Fin del Mundo» in: *Artforum,* 2005, Vol. 43, no. 10, pp 296–301.
3 Klaus J. Dodds, *The Antarctic: A Very Short Introduction,* Oxford 2012, p. 8.
4 Kathryn Yusoff, «Visualizing Antarctica as a Place in Time», in: *Space & Culture.* 2005, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 381–398.
5 Stephen J. Pyne, *The Ice,* London 2003, p. 84.
6 Christy Collis, «Critical legal geographies of possession: Antarctica and the International Geophysical Year 1957–1958», in: *GeoJournal,* 2010, vol. 75, pp. 387–395, p. 388.
7 Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty: http://www.ats.aq/devAS/ats_parties.aspx?lang=e, accessed on 20 September 2015
8 Ibid.
9 Klaus. J. Dodds, «Post-colonial Antarctica: an emerging engagement», in: *Polar Record,* 2006, vol. 42, no. 220, pp. 59–70, p. 63.
10 Dodds 2012 (see note 3), p. 89.
11 Pierre Huyghe in: Marie-France Rafael, *Pierre Huyghe: On Site,* Köln, 2013, pp. 44–45.
12 Territory, in: Oxford English Dictionary, website http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/199601?rskey=z5jAyv&result=1#eid, accessed on 15 November 2015
13 Pierre Huyghe. *Artist's Talk: A Discussion with Mark Godfrey* 5th July 2006, Tate Online: http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/pierre-huyghe-artists-talk, accessed on 12 September 2015
14 Cheryl Kaplan, «The legend of two islands: A conversation between Pierre Huyghe and Cheryl Kapla », 2005, Db Artmag: http://db-artmag.de/archiv/2005/e/7/1/385.html, accessed on 12 September 2015
15 Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature,* London 2011, p. 22.
16 Ibid., p. 146.
17 Ibid., p. 159.
18 The *Artforum* article makes reference to the emergence of new islands and new fauna as a result of climate change which initially seems to suggest an environmental motive to the project. However, in a later interview the artist has distanced himself from any explicit environmental foundation to the work and Mark Godfrey refers to this reading of the work as: «a complete dead–end when it comes to considering the work's actual content», noting that «Huyghe has gone so far as to say that the mentions of global warming were hooks to attract attention to the work and never part of his actual concerns». Mark Godfrey, «Pierre Huyghe's Double Spectacle», in: *Grey Room,* 2008, vol. 32, pp. 38–61, p. 52. We might also note that the work's extravagant staging and significant costs also positions it in a problematic relationship to any standard environmental art interpretation.
19 Pierre Huyghe in Rafael 2013 (see note 11), p. 19.
20 George Baker. «An Interview with Pierre Huyghe», in: *October,* 2004, vol. 110, pp. 80–106, p. 88.