

Latitudes talks with the Dutch artist Marjolijn Dijkman about visions of Earth, cartography, archives and representations of the future, blank spots and new land.

First published in *SUM: Magazine for Contemporary Art*, N° 05, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts' Schools of Visual Arts / Revolver Publishing, Dec. 2009, pp.56–64

Your film and web-animation Blue Marble (2008) specifically relates to the famous image of the Earth taken on the Apollo 17 mission in 1972. Along with the “Earthrise” image from 1968’s Apollo 8 mission, this was an entirely new view of our blue planet from space. As the work investigates, analogous representations have proliferated into a panoply of images and logos with all manner of different agendas. For example, this “whole earth” view, albeit in a highly abstract form, is central to many of the graphic identities of United Nations Climate Change Conferences. From your research as an artist whose work is closely related to cartography and the categorisation of images, what do you consider to be the importance of this image?

It is one of the most widely distributed images in the world and has become an icon instead of an abstraction of our surroundings. You hardly ever see the real picture the way it was shot originally. First of all it was turned upside down – a logic that is totally irrelevant in space – and the earth was also centred in the picture. Anyone can appropriate and use the image of the earth as a sort of billboard for whatever message you want to spread. For instance many companies use the image as basis for their logo to stress their global position and likewise the image became an icon for ecological movements and a globalised world.

Many appropriations of the original photograph exploit its fragile and pure appearance, and others create iconoclastic gestures to communicate a particular message. While a map of the world maintains a certain sense of power, the image of the “Blue Marble” has become a caricature of itself. In the animation I wanted to reveal these collective visions of our planet and perhaps see that the sum of all these appropriations tells us more about the world we inhabit than the “neutral” image taken from space.

The ease with which this photograph can be manipulated seems to function as a wider symptom of environmentalism’s Janus-like present and future – disaster-mongering versus quasi-spiritual positivism, or personal responsibility set against government action?

It sometimes feels as if people need a religious opposition and the self-imposition of a curse of responsibility in order to convince and change attitudes. Commerce plays a big role in this. Logos for “environmentally-friendly” products, for example, all have nice green and blue colours to make you believe that they can circumvent “the big problems” we’re facing. By contrast, environmental activists seem like modern Atlases carrying burning globes. As an individual it is hard to know how to deal with these extremely different ways of communicating. Moreover, we are not living in a world where environmental problems will have the same impact everywhere, nor are we able to easily monitor the positive effects of the small changes we can make through not buying certain products.

Beyond science-fiction

Related to this bipolar imagery, your film Wandering Through the Future (which was first shown in the context of the ecology-themed 8th Sharjah Biennial, 2007), addresses how cinema has imagined the near- and-far distant future. How do you understand the value of such fictional futures with regard to “realistic”

ones – scientific models and predictions, and so on?

When I collected all the scenes for this project I couldn't find a single optimistic future scenario. It started as a timeline of the future along which I placed all the films I could find according to the fictional date when they are set. The distant future is mostly represented through films from the early days of science fiction cinema, and in general the closer you get to visions of the near-present, the more recent the film. Scenarios change from Barbarella rocking in her space ship in 40,000 AD to almost hyper-realistic and feasible scientific models of the future in which nothing is playful at all. I think in the 1960s and 70s culture you could still imagine far future scenarios, but nowadays people are already so afraid of the coming 30 years that they cannot think ahead. We live in a science fiction future already; the future of sci-fi has shrunk from the day after tomorrow to today. Yet we should think beyond science fiction and face the future in a different way.

The films which comprise *Wandering Through the Future* often represent a worldwide apocalypse – the entire earth variously becomes frozen, a desert, flooded, contaminated by influenza, a single totalitarian state or taken over by robots. Cinema here does not think of local scenarios or the possibility that different phenomena might happen in different places and at different scales. It's important to stress that we cannot only paralyse each other with fearful scenarios for entertainment but we should also think of possibilities and create new scenarios to be able to imagine a long term future again.

Personal atlas

Your image archive Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (2005-ongoing) often seems to highlight an interface between the human and the non-human at a quotidian, improvised and serendipitous level. It also frequently inhabits a kind of non-site between planned urban development and wilderness. Does the micro-scale of the archive's individual elements represent a resistance to generalised statements about humankind's impact on the world? Do you see it as a political undertaking?

It's named *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* ("Theatre of the World") after the world's first modern atlas, which was published in 1570 by Abraham Ortelius. He collected all the maps from European explorers, although he hardly ever travelled or saw much of the world he compiled. Maps create territories and are immediately associated with strategic planning and politics. Yet instead of considering the world as a political or geographical stage I am working on a kind of update of this atlas made with photographic representations, where images are being added to the work, and their classification is constantly changing. Almost every single place on the planet is organised in a conscious or unconscious way by mankind and the archive and its categories investigate, for instance, the way we control each other, how we create boundaries and try to control nature. I consider the atlas as a collective self-portrait – instead of a distant and abstract viewpoint. I hope it enables people to recognise parts of themselves in the world in a personal and subjective way.

"Here be dragons"

We are the curators – and you are one of the artists – of Portscapes, a series of commissions taking place alongside the construction of a 2,000 hectare section of new land (Maasvlakte 2), an expansion to the Port of Rotterdam into the sea. It's a reworking of landscape on a vast scale, a typically Dutch pursuit perhaps. Your project is concerned with the historical and ecological echoes of this phenomenon. Where is this

leading your work?

The start of the project was the first phase of the building process where enormous machines are constructing a new “blank spot” on the map. On ancient maps a blank spot marks an unknown land or implies the “possible end” of the world – these maps were filled with projections of fear and imagination. As the term for blank spots, “Here be dragons”, suggests, thoughts of the unknown have long been associated with various monstrous creatures and sea serpents. The term monster refers to a being that is an absolute exception to the norms of the ecosystem. I’m interested in these connotations in relation to the temporary island which is the beginning of Maasvlakte 2. This island is sort of a combination of a contemporary blank spot and the sea monster itself. This new land is full of opportunities on the one hand and concerns on the other.

Inspired by the old drawings of explorers who made watercolours of the coastlines of new lands as they discovered them, I filmed the coastline of this “new” island. At the moment I’m working on the accompanying subtitles for this video and researching all sorts of associations with the notion of new land: both fears and worst case scenarios and utopian proposals.

Marjolijn Dijkman (b. 1978) is an artist. Recent exhibitions include *The Uncertainty Principle* at MACBA in Barcelona, *COMMA02* at Bloomberg Space in London, and *The Order of Things* at the MuHKA in Antwerp. In 2005, together with Maarten Vanden Eynde, she initiated the artist-run organisation Enough Room for Space, which is involved in curatorial projects, events and exhibitions. She lives and works in Rotterdam and Saint Mihiel.

Latitudes is a Barcelona-based curatorial office initiated in 2005 by Max Andrews (b.1975, Bath) and Mariana Cánepa Luna (b. 1977, Montevideo). Latitudes collaborates with artists and institutions in the conception, organisation and production of exhibitions, public commissions, conferences, editorial and research initiatives.