

## FROM THE HUM OF THE CRICKET TO THE CALL OF THE LOON Fleur van Muiswinkel

It is on her we stand, walk and lie. But why is it that we so often experience her only unconsciously? It seems so contradictory; she is always there and nevertheless most of the time we ignore her presence. Personally, I really enjoy the moments that I consciously make a connection with her – the Earth. It sometimes happens during a walk or while standing still that my attention shifts, and slowly, very slowly, I become aware of the sensations under my feet. I start to ‘see’ her, but it is a whole new way of perceiving. An image occurs but it is not generated by the eyes. It is the thousands of nerves in the bottoms of my feet, transmitting sensorial input into my brain that make me see with my toes and the soles of my feet. This way of experiencing and seeing goes beyond the visible. It makes you want to shake your head and free yourself from the habitual ways of seeing and interpreting the world around you with only your eyes.

When I was growing up I was told: “Use your imagination, dear. Don’t only trust your eyes. Look also with your hands, nose and ears.” Even nowadays, when looking at a work of art, I remember that same voice trying to explain how I should look: “Let the work challenge your understanding of its physical and mental space. Allow your own subjective interpretations of object and subject-matter to emerge.” I still agree it is the work of art that invites us to create our own narrative about the thing presented. There is no right or wrong, as the German philosopher Theodor Adorno explains to us: the work of art is something that is in the continuous process of becoming. According to him it is in the momentum of subjective interpretation that the work of art is only temporarily finished. Each end becomes a new beginning. The continuous flow of crystallisation, informed by our own interpretations, commentaries and critique of the work, never stops. It is the movement of these moments that allows the viewer to anticipate the work of art as a temporal manifestation of truth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Athlone Press, Oxford, 1997

I am referring here to the following two quotes: “[...] *They serve the truth content of works as something that goes beyond them, which separates this truth content – the task of critique – from elements of its untruth. If the unfolding of the work in these forms is not to miscarry, they must be honed to the point where they become philosophical. It is from within, in the movement of the immanent form of artworks and the dynamic of their relation to the concept of art, that it ultimately becomes manifest how much art – in spite of, and because of, its monadological essence – is an element in the movement of spirit and social reality.*” p. 194

[...] *The emancipation of the subject in art is the emancipation of art’s own autonomy; if art is freed from consideration of its recipient, its sensual façade becomes increasingly a matter of indifference. The façade is transformed into a function of content, which derives its force from what is not socially approved and prearranged. Art is spiritualized not by the ideas it affirms but through the*

In relation to the work of Erica van Loon, Adorno's proposition - the artwork is in a continuous moment of becoming - presents us with a useful approach to formulate what is happening in and between her works. *So Are We To The Trees* presents a selection of work by Erica van Loon in a semi-dynamic format that allows us to find our own path. Her work characteristically achieves its meaning through a strong interplay between form and content – a continuous moment of becoming. It invites us to go beyond the usual ways of interpretation and allows the unexpected to happen. Its diversity of forms points in so many different directions that it creates a kaleidoscopic pattern of references that then become one image. Her work is not a search for an objective truth about where and how we – as individuals – are positioned within the ungraspable vastness of our reality. Rather it is a subjective projection by the artist that, through its poetic power, weaves together supposedly unconnected elements. The works create a metaphorical entity that makes it possible for us to refresh our view on how to interpret reality.

Returning to Adorno, it was he who warned us against our inveterate habit to look for the logical in a work of art. He emphasised that the opposite should become our aim: it is the absurdity and the virtuosity that constitute the work and allow us to imagine a new reality.<sup>2</sup> This idea, that one should not look for the logicity in a work of art but rather look at the different elements it is combining, is key in understanding Van Loon's work. Her work offers a new reality and the proposition is particularly relevant when looking at the entirety of the different works presented. This new reality is continuously questioning our place within the larger universe. More precisely it questions our relationship to our immediate environment and shows that we are not separate entities standing outside the natural world's complex inter-relationships of growth and decay but are inherently connected to and part of this living environment.

Looking closely at all the works presented in the publication (*Plantar Surface*, *Sacrum*, *Microcosmic Orbit* and *Endless Chain*), one starts to slowly realise that the human body is the starting point for Van Loon's perception of our position and of our connectivity to this large system called reality. Her works actively call upon the imaginative capacity of the viewer to consider the places these works investigate. Like a cartographer, she is abstracting information by zooming in. She generates a new layer of meaning that is found in the pictorial space of the work. For example, with *Plantar Surface* she creates an alternative reality of what it is that is represented. At first, the image just appears to show its abstract curved black planes, alternated with meandering white lines, juxtaposed with a geometrical grid of connecting straight white lines. Re-modelling reality into the two-dimensional, both artist and cartographer acknowledge the potential of abstraction to communicate the three-dimensional spatial realities we live in. However, the most important difference between these two personae is that the cartographer is driven by a need to represent factual information, whereas the

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*elemental – the intentionless – that is able to receive the spirit in itself; the dialectic of the element and spirit is the truth content.*" p. 196

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 280

artist takes the act of map-making to a metaphorical level. Here, in the context of an individual work or of all the works together, this abstraction of information creates a poetic freedom to combine different fields of empirical and alternative sciences to mediate an aesthetic as well as a sensorial experience, thus allowing a new, temporary, subjective reality to appear. The poetic freedom that Van Loon takes, creates a synergy that occurs while seeing the works together. It enhances their reciprocity but also emphasises the relationship between the perceiver (us) and the perceived (the work presented in the book). It is a phenomenon that was formulated by the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty and explained by David Abram as follows:

*"[...] perception itself is an inherently relational, participatory event [...] perception is always experienced as a reciprocal encounter between the perceiver and the perceived, an open dialectic wherein my sensing body continually responds and adjusts itself to the things it senses, and wherein the perceived phenomenon responds in turn, disclosing its nuances to me only as I allow myself to be affected by its unique style, its particular dynamism or active agency."*<sup>3</sup>

As we look once more at *Plantar Surface* after having read the quote above, and while realising the image we see is a result of the artist zooming in on a digitalised foot print, the work recalls and heightens a bodily awareness in the viewer. While the eye is invited to wander along the curving black shapes that blend into an asymmetrical rhythmic order, it is the act of looking at this abstract landscape that causes the memory of one's own foot to appear in the back of one's mind. The act of zooming in creates a feeling of disorientation in relation to the actual space represented. The overall work becomes a momentum, an interpretation of the thin layer of skin that separates us from the earth. *Plantar Surface* becomes a poetic discovery of the bodily landscape.

This poetic approach makes its presence even more felt when one is looking at the titles of Van Loon's work. She consciously plays with the multiple meanings and associations that words can have. A new dialectical experience of the work manifests itself through the suggestion given in the title while at the same time contrasted by the pictorial reality that one sees. For example, the title *Plantar Surface* has a certain dualism in itself with on the one hand 'plantar', relating to the sole of the foot, with the connotation 'under', and on the other hand 'surface' with the connotation 'top'. In combination with the image, which shows a figure connecting specific spots, the title causes a slight confusion. But it is these particular dynamics that allow the viewer to imagine what lies beyond our perceivable world.

Another unknown world and landscape are revealed in *Sacrum*. A series of drawings show the triangular bone that is situated at the lowest point of our spine. Zooming in while 'walking' around in the landscape of the bone that resides so deep inside us, Van Loon shows us the invisible. But there is more to it. If we realise that the word *sacrum* is translated from Latin as 'sacred bone',

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<sup>3</sup> David Abram, "Animism, Perception and Earthly Craft of the Magician", *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Taylor and Kaplan eds, Continuum, 2005

and stems from the belief that the soul resides in it, another layer of meaning becomes apparent. This sacred place is where a multitude of tangible and intangible systems meet in our body. In alternative medical concepts like acupuncture, cranial-sacral therapy and reiki, the sacrum is explained by acknowledging that this place is an important point for grounding the human energy system. The sacrum might therefore be understood as an experiential hub transmitting and connecting sensorial information from our physical body to our spiritual being. The title *Sacrum* shows a way into the vastness of references and different layers of meaning. It is the metaphorical reading that brings everything together.

Something similar is happening in *Microcosmic Orbit*. This work is best understood as a triptych consisting of a book, a drawing and a title. The full meaning of the work is found in the combination of visual, textual and indirect information generated by these different elements. The title *Microcosmic Orbit* refers to a Taoistic exercise that cultivates the energy flow in the body. It is a meditation that concentrates on bringing the energy upwards on inhalation and downwards on exhalation. It is a continuous movement, that makes a full circle, or orbit that goes up along the spine, over the head, and then down again, down the front side of the body. A second circular movement becomes apparent in the drawing showing a cross-section of the earth, indicating the movement of tectonic plates and showing the layers that constitute the earth and the spheres we inhabit. By juxtaposing title and drawing with a two page excerpt of Henri David Thoreau's famous book *Walden* (1854), a third layer of meaning is introduced. The pairing of the different elements enhances the symbolic meaning of the overall work without neglecting the individual qualities and significance of the separate elements. On the pages shown, Thoreau tells us about his interaction with a Common Loon, a bird living on the inland lakes of North-America. If one made a drawing of its diving technique, one would recognise formal similarities to the movement of the tectonic plates. In addition to its diving techniques the bird is famous for its call, a fascinating, mysterious sound that is echoed by the mountains surrounding the waters that are their homes.<sup>4</sup> Knowing this birdsong might add to the mythology of the work; however, Thoreau's description - 'demonic' and 'unearthly' - helps us hear its voice:

*"At length [...] he uttered one of those prolonged howls, as if calling on the god of loons to aid him, and immediately there came a wind from the east that rippled the surface, and filled the whole air with misty rain, and I was impressed as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry with me, and so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous surfaces."<sup>5</sup>*

The bird's diving underwater, the movement of the tectonic plates, the sound of the bird and the circular breathing should be read beyond their formal parallels. Here again it is about the momentum where the visible and the invisible worlds meet. It nearly becomes a transcendental moment abstracted in a visual metaphor stimulating us to reconsider nature and to find again the spiritual side

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<sup>4</sup> The sound of the loon is an important element in Van Loon's work *Bird* (2012), video, loop

<sup>5</sup> H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*, Walter Scott Ltd, London, ca 1890, originally published in 1854, p. 235

of our human existence. This idea that abstraction can be understood as another way of visualising the mystical and deeper level of meaning has been around in the arts for a long time. But Van Loon finds her own voice and takes the ideas of early twentieth century artists like Mondriaan, Toorop, Malevich and Hilma Af Klint, who are known for having addressed the spiritual through art, to another level. The level of abstraction that materialises in her work is in line with what art historian Donald Kuspit explained in his essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*<sup>6</sup> as:

*"[...] reflects an inner conflict between the socially encouraged will to conventional communication and the personal will to spiritual experience."*

Kuspit also describes how the process of abstraction leads up to the silence needed. This silence, which I see coming back in Van Loon's work, is necessary to create a rupture that allows a new way of looking at art to come into being.

*"[...] silence evokes an ecstatic sense of immediacy, an experience of radical beauty, breaking all habits of mediation conventionally associated with perception. The achievement of silence is the logical conclusion of the process of negation that abstraction is."*<sup>7</sup>

In Van Loon's work, this silence is one of becoming aware, standing still and meditating on the work, which allows it to open up. In *Microcosmic Orbit*, however, it is not an aesthetical silence of mineralised forms that would allow an absolute spiritual freedom to occur as mentioned in Kuspit's conclusion, but it is rather the poetical interplay between the different elements. Looking closer, one starts to realise that in many of Van Loon's works silence plays an important role, but at a more indirect, metaphorical level. Silence while meditating, silence in the woods: it is the silence that opens our vision, hearing and feeling to new experiences of movement, sound, and awareness of being part of a larger system of constantly transforming matter and energy. It is this awareness, and this being part of a larger constellation of interconnected matter as a human being, which is beautifully caught in a short poem by Gary Snyder.<sup>8</sup> It was Van Loon's inspiration for the title of this publication.

*As the crickets' soft autumn hum  
is to us  
so are we to the trees*

*as are they*

*to the rocks and the hills.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art", *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Maurice Tuchman ed, Abbeville, New York, 1986, p. 314

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Snyder is an American poet earlier in his career associated with the Beat Generation. Later his work became involved in the Deep Ecology Movement. He has been described as an environmental activist.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Snyder, "They're Listening", *The Etiquette of Freedom: Gary Snyder, Jim Harrison, and the Practice of the Wild*, Paul Ebenkamp ed, Counterpoint, Berkeley, 2010, p.110

Snyder's poem made me look differently at the photographs of *Endless Chain*. The repetition of the mountains, rivers, trees, rocks and the act of framing them by the hands, turn into a rhythm and, just as in the poem, everything seems to become connected. We humans are connected to the trees and become internalised by the tree, not by a sound we make but by the carbon dioxide we breathe out. The cricket's soft hum penetrates our ears like the carbon dioxide the trees. Both Snyder and Van Loon only hint towards the connection between all elements. It is the crickets' soft hum that reminds me of the loon's call and it is the repetitive act of framing the mountaintops, allowing for a moment of silence for us to become more aware. As we look closer, turning page after page, differences and details become clearer. Time makes small nuances appear in the composition; various shades of colour; shifting points of sharpness. Each picture has its own dynamism, its own rhythm, every time a little different. I see something new, again and again ...



*So Are We To The Trees* (2015), an artist publication by Erica van Loon, in cooperation with Studio Adriaan Mellegers, which includes the above essay by Fleur van Muiswinkel.