

Silke Huysmans | Hannes Dereere // PLEASANT ISLAND (CAMPO | Brüssel | Gent)

Nauru ist ein kleiner Inselstaat im Pazifik. Englische Walfänger nannten die Insel einst „Pleasant Island“. Die Geschichte des heutigen Zwergstaates liest sich wie eine Parabel auf die westliche Welt. Denn nach der Entdeckung riesiger Phosphatvorkommen wurde Nauru zu einem der reichsten Länder der Erde. Auf jedem Stück Land wurde gegraben und abgebaut – bis die natürlichen Ressourcen der Insel erschöpft waren. Heute ist Nauru eines der ärmsten Länder der Welt. Um Staatseinnahmen zu erzeugen, interniert Nauru auf australisches Geheiß Geflüchtete. Silke Huysmans und Hannes Dereere begaben sich für PLEASANT ISLAND auf Recherchereise nach Nauru. Dort sprachen sie mit Einwohner*innen und Geflüchteten. Wegen drohender Repressalien verzichteten sie auf Kameraequipment und beschränkten sich für Interviews auf das Mobiltelefon. Die Ästhetik des Smartphones beherrscht auch das Bühnengeschehen. Die dokumentarische Unmittelbarkeit verweist auf die Dringlichkeit der Situation: Denn das zerstörte Ökosystem Naurus ist ein Vorbote für eine drohende weltweite Umweltkatastrophe.

Silke Huysmans und **Hannes Dereere** unternahmen ihre ersten künstlerischen Schritte bei Kunstenwerkplaats Pianofabriek (Brüssel) und dem Bâtard Festival (Brüssel). Bereits in ihrem gefeierten MINING STORIES (SPIELART 2017) untersuchten sie die Auswirkungen einer Minenkatastrophe in Brasilien. In Zukunft werden sie ihre Werke unter dem Dach von CAMPO mit Unterstützung von Pianofabriek, KAAP Brügge, Kunstenfestivaldesarts und der Beursschouwburg Brüssel realisieren.

28. und 29.10. jeweils 20.30 – 21.30 Uhr
Gasteig, Carl-Orff-Saal

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PLEASANT ISLAND

Silke Huysmans & Hannes Dereere / CAMPO

*When everything around you has been destroyed, your mind is also affected.
You get the feeling that you can see the future there.*

Nauru. The navigation app on your smartphone shows you a small oval island in the Pacific. Yellow with a green edge. When you zoom out, you see nothing but blue around it for a long time, then a few other tiny islets, then the Solomon Islands, and only then Papua New Guinea, with Australia beneath it. At that point, Nauru has in fact already disappeared, but it must be there, somewhere underneath that red pin that indicates its location.

'Vanishing Island' is now one of its nicknames. So are 'Sacrifice Zone' and 'Australia's Dumping Ground'. But in the past it was called 'Pleasant Island'. Nauru was once a beautiful green island of roughly four by four kilometres, peacefully inhabited by the Nauruans, a nation of fishermen. That the ground beneath their feet was full of phosphate was something they ignored, but once this discovery was made in around 1900 by the British, the looting on the island began – and from the end of WWI onwards, New Zealand and Australia entered the fray. The situation continues to this day. When Nauru gained independence from its colonizers in the late 1960s, it was one of the richest countries in the world thanks to this phosphate mining. It could never end ... until it suddenly did. Today every millimetre of the island has been excavated, nature has been ravaged, other countries have become rich while Nauru itself is poverty-stricken. Today it even needs the migrants that Australia transports there and holds in detention centres to prevent the economy from sinking completely.

Pleasant Island is the second chapter in the ongoing artistic research of Hannes Dereere and Silke Huysmans into mining on the planet – and therefore into the socio-economic depletion of everything and everyone. In their previous work, *Mining Stories*, they showed the disastrous consequences of mining in Brazil. Now, on Nauru, on the other side of the world, the economic blueprint of the story remains virtually the same: a pattern of destruction that fits in a neo-liberal political mentality in which there is no room for an alternative way of thinking that advocates a reciprocal relationship with the world. Naomi Klein calls this phenomenon 'extractivism', a system that cannot think outside the mechanism it runs on – exploitation. Nauru is a miniature version of how dilapidated the Earth might be in a not too distant future as a result of the extraction monster that destroys itself in its hunger for more. Silke: 'You get the feeling that you can see the future there.'

In the summer of 2018, Silke and Hannes themselves spent a few weeks on the island. After proving that they were really not journalists but theatre-makers, they obtained a tourist visa, being strictly forbidden from interviewing asylum seekers. They were free to ask the Nauruans questions, but because of a media ban in force on the island – which intended to make any criticism of the asylum agreement between Australia and Nauru impossible – the islanders themselves were highly suspicious of prying visitors. ('Mute Island', another nickname ...) Hannes and Silke nevertheless managed to gain some trust. They met local residents and migrants, made friends, drove along the coast with them, collected different perspectives, left their 'suspicious' recording device in their bag and recorded interviews – with their permission – using the smartphone they purchased specially for the trip.

The smartphone proved to be not only essential for them to gather knowledge and material on Nauru. For the people there it is a survival instrument, the Internet is their *only* connection with the world. Our perceived sense of dependence on this device refers rather to an illusory connectivity with everything, in relation to which we prefer to maintain a safe distance from it all: migration, mining and destruction are things we prefer to keep out of sight, on a tiny island thousands of miles away. At the same time, the smartphone also cancels out the 'here-and-there'. It makes it possible for Silke and Hannes to stay in touch with Nauru after their return to Belgium and to record the stories of a number of asylum seekers through text and voice messages. The migrants want to be heard, just like the indigenous inhabitants whose story has always remained underexposed in the media. The smartphone can bring those voices to us and make them heard in different ways. As a bearer of the knowledge that they gathered on the island and that forms the raw material for *Pleasant Island*, this instrument (inevitably) becomes the device of the performance that jointly determines how the story is told.

Given the thorough documentary way in which they explore their theme, Silke and Hannes themselves are also *mining* in a sense. But then in a way that doesn't erode. While Nauru is a story about our Western mentality of negligence, Silke and Hannes take care precisely by deepening the different perspectives and details and by bringing them to the stage in all their complexity. Although in doing so they honestly explore where they stand precisely in this story, they have no doubt that they are an integral part of the phenomenon they are observing. In the process they adopt what Eve Sedgwick calls a 'reparative attitude'. The situation is not further drawn apart, criticized or destroyed, but different parts are assembled 'into something like a whole'¹. Not a whole that already existed or that restores what has been destroyed, but one that shows the possibility of an alternative way of thinking – beyond the extraction urge.

In their awareness of their own 'entangled position' and the question about the responsibility involved, the sharing of knowledge in the work of Hannes and Silke is not about facts, but about making worlds. They re-count the story of Nauru in a way we have neither heard or seen yet – as a 'nova historia' in which we are confronted with our ignorance about, and our role in, the history of colonialism and how it continues tirelessly today. As spectators, watching *Pleasant Island*, we become part of that world and we too are asked about our position. If we as Europeans are just as much a part of the story, if we too, in a sense, 'are' Nauru, then what is our attitude towards such 'sacrifice zones'²? While plans are being made to exploit the seabed in, among others, Nauru – and, why not, on the Moon – it is becoming clear that the Earth itself may already have become a 'sacrifice zone'. It is then no longer possible to keep watching critically from a distance. *Pleasant Island* shows us 'the specific configurations that make worlds'³ – and that we are all co-makers.

Nienke Scholts

Text von Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brüssel: <https://www.kfda.be/en/program/pleasant-island>

¹ Eve Kokofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, 2003: 123-152.

² 'Sacrifice zone' denotes areas and people that are sacrificed for the purpose of economic gain.

³ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Duke University Press, 2007: 91.