

## THE MUSEUM AS WEATHER STATION

A museum is a place works end up when they are finished; sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently. The artist, title, medium, format and year become definitive, fixed. All eyes are on the work from arrival, the pieces are guarded by attendants, curators and cameras. The works must stay the same as they were when they arrived; eternity awaits them. A museum must adorn itself with the works and fills up like a warehouse whose supplies never dwindle. There is always room for a newcomer, but not every piece of work is put on display. Daylight can have disastrous consequences, many pieces are packed away in an acid-free box, out of reach of museum beetles and silverfish. Life is pleasant in the depot. The stored works hold their breath.

I walk through the depot, catching glimpses here and there of some of the issues that were at stake during creation. Something begins to quiver in the newly-lit tube lighting. Repressed doubt makes artworks mobile. It makes the depot shake. Sometimes, two quiet pieces cause a commotion: together they suddenly gain new meaning. You can also flip it around: a museum is a place where nuances are stored, possibilities are kept, a place where each work can become a fresh point of departure.

A panel Jacob Maris completed in 1860 (1) is on display. Its title is *Painter at work*, oil on paper on board. A painter sits under a tree with a paint box on his lap. A ray of sun falls on his left shoulder, illuminating his white shirt. He reclines slightly, straight-backed, inspecting his work; his face is hidden in the paint strokes with which he paints himself, mouth and nose obscured. His feet are outside the frame. There he sits, the creator, creating amongst things that are finished. His manner reveals the process: searching, weighing up and experimenting. Nothing is fixed, the patches of colour around him have been applied hastily, he has made himself an environment and sat down in it. The rapid foliage, the dappled sunlight and his jacket cast over a branch provide some shadow. He is a stranger in this setting and yet simultaneously a man who looks at the landscape and dwells in it, absorbing and sketching the woods around him, creating a place within a place, keenly aware of his surroundings. He slowly penetrates his new world from his stool, brushstroke by brushstroke, looking up continuously, the possible is almost infinite yet within hand's reach. The work becomes focused, his actions begin to rule out other actions, he doesn't think, his gaze scanning the view takes the lead. Without having fixed the subject beforehand, all of a sudden there is a painter at work.

After weeks of wandering through the depots, a space forms in my head to which I begin to add categories. They don't have a name yet, they're just images. I gather things willy-nilly; I am a disorganized researcher. Within half an hour, I've forgotten the routes I'd traced out.

## TIME, THE SLOWEST HOURGLASS

In 1928, the year Willem Tholen began work on his masterful *Zuiderzee*, Thomas Parnell introduced his *Pitch-drop* (2) experiment at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. He wanted to demonstrate to students that distilled tar cracks when it is cold and becomes liquid at high temperatures. He placed a glass funnel above a glass beaker and filled the funnel with tar. Nothing happened. The tar remained suspended in the funnel. Nevertheless, there was actual movement in the funnel. The tar drips on average once every 6 to 12 years. After this slow falling, the tar spreads out in the beaker just as slowly, remaining on top of the previous droplet. This experiment has been going on for fifty years; the set-up is still exactly the same.

It is a simple experiment requiring little in-depth research. In the thirty-six years since it began, a single scientific report has been published. It determined that the drop is 230 billion times more viscous than water. If a droplet is on the verge of solidification, can we still speak of falling? What a miraculous still life: the beaker, the funnel and the viscous fluid under the dome, the promised movement and the proven slowness, not set up to be beautiful but to measure the velocity of a fluid.

The slow droplet popped into my mind when I saw Schoonhoven's two drawings, *T 17-1(3)*, from 1965 and *NA 5(4)*, 1967. In an interview, Schoonhoven said of his reliefs, 'To me it's about a totally white surface... regardless of painterly phenomena, regardless of any interference not associated with the value of the field: the whiteness is not a polar landscape, not a substance that generates certain associations, not an attractive substance, not a sensation, not a symbol of something else: a white surface is a white surface.' His contemporary, Otto Piene, saw things differently and wrote, '... light will reflect on his surface dematerializing the form. It will be reminiscent of an artificial planet'. However much Schoonhoven was convinced of the formality of his work, I think of rain and snow when I look at the drawings. The stripes and dots are an account of a system. As they follow on from each other they degenerate into movements taking place on the white surface. The irregularity within the system, the nuance, means that the movement becomes real movement: the lines, areas and dots dance around. This very vibration makes Schoonhoven's work both tactile and fragile. It is quiet and it rattles.

In the last drawing in his sketch book no. 48 (1870-1880)(5), Isaac Israëls depicted a scene that changes every time I look at it. It is a quick sketch. Two figures pull on something or use an object to keep their balance. The right-hand figure is standing on the ground, leaning backward with all of his weight. I think it's a man but I'm not sure. The left-hand figure is holding the object loosely, with his fingertips, somewhat teasingly as though he wants to show that he's not going to waste his strength on this. Sometimes he resembles a monkey, other times a bird. He could fall backward at any instant but he doesn't care. The object the two of them are pulling starts off a ship's propeller, then it's a wing nut, a handbag, a large tropical butterfly. It sweeps backwards and forth, unbridled, between the two figures. Israëls has captured an amazing resilience in this drawing. He didn't copy the characters from life but caught their apparent movements in lines which are still incredibly taut.

## THE IMMATURE HURRICANE

During my teenage years, I cycled right across the Alblasserwaard polder each day. Past the Bergambacht ferry and the livestock feeding towers, there was a small factory on a dike that produced ceramic objects. In the mornings, the misfires would be laid in front of the building, a roguish collection of crooked vases, lopsided flower pots, pillars and animal figurines that for whatever reason hadn't made it out of the ovens intact. I was reminded of these touching creations when I saw Front's *Blow Away Vase*. The vase was produced using Computer Aided Design (CAD). An existent Delft blue vase was exposed to the wind via a computer animation, deforming the object. Next, a new vase form was modelled based on a static image of the animation, with the wind's digitalized signature.

## WIND

Tjeng Sit Oey's 1965 drawing 1000459 (6) looks just as impetuous. The line drawing is made up of precise but fast lines. A landscape with a lot of movement. To the left of the centre is a raging whirlwind moving to the right, whisking the horizontal lines along with it. Mere seconds later, the wind sweeps up into the sky and climbs a hill, breaking loose three compact forms. At the top, a giant dice is flying, no, being catapulted or fired. Only two of its sides are visible: the two and the five. The dice is about to shoot out of the picture. Right under it, five circles are erupting, as dangerous as whirlpools. When I look at this drawing, I realize that drawings often depict the quiet and continuous, not fractions of a second, few situations that are very brief in nature, while drawing is exceptionally suited to capturing a fleeting moment.

What the above pieces have in common is that they touched me. When I saw them, I knew immediately that they should be put on display. Each one of them seems to be a free composition, not so much having sprouted from an idea but having come into existence during the act of creation. These artist have paid attention and left space, they have left the work alone in time.

## INDOOR CLIMATE

In the upper rooms, the temperature of the light coming through the glass roof varies. Clouds cast shadows on the walls, they are the fastest painters in the museum. One of the curators told me that the museum and the display cases are permeable to air. The museum is a weather station, humidity meters tick away in the corners. Deeper in the museum depots, there are numerous snow-covered pieces. Solidified weather, often clouds. In early photography, clouds were invisible for a long time. People didn't know how to increase the contrast between cloud and sky so photographed clouds remained one-dimensional. Clouds were printed in cyan so that people would understand that the spots depicted clouds.

## S I G H T

Amongst Julius Jacobus van der Sande Bakhuyzen's sketch books, I come across a burgundy-coloured booklet with copies of paintings by old masters. It's a hand-drawn 'catalogue' in which the painter captions sketches with things like *Vischmarkt* (fish market) by Albert Cuyp(7). Van der Sande Bakhuyzen describes the canvas as follows, 'A respectable gentleman buys fish from a fishmonger. His servant, hat in hand, stands behind him. Left, an old man holding a milk churn. Right, in the foreground, a crab, sturgeon and other fish. In the background, the hustle and bustle of fishmongers.' The text appears through the image like a brass rubbing. The text allows me to make out the fish and the milk churn amongst the scrawls; they suddenly become three dimensional. Would it be possible the other way round, I wonder. Could sketches contribute something to a poem? Might they help render language clearer?

I often open volume 3 of the twelve-volume German dictionary *Große Duden*(8). Rather than definitions and cases, all the words in this part are illustrated. The publication is from 1958. Although they are dated, the drawings give a good impression of the phenomenon that is mankind. The book begins with the atom and ends with semi-tropical fruits. On pages 500-502, there's an overview of a whole range of gymnastics exercises (*Leibensübungen*) and on page 184, an internal combustion engine is taken apart. Learning a profession was never so easy. With this book in your pocket, you can make yourself understood all over the world by just pointing at the pictures. Aside from the page with the atmosphere, chromatics, flags, exotic birds, butterflies and the human body, Duden's world is black and white and at the same time, every possible colour.

## R A I N B O W

In his *Meteorologica*, Aristotle argues that it is possible for rainbows to come into existence at night which are only visible the next day. I try to imagine it: a supply of coloured light stored in the darkness. (9,10) It reminds me of the pieces in the depots that are accustomed to the darkness and only reveal their beauty when put on show.

An actual rainbow, *De regenboog* by Willem Roelofs (1875) (11) hangs in the Quist depot. It is not the painted rainbow that makes the canvas so impressive, but the dark sky against which it is contrasted. The dry strokes of greyish green paint run diagonally across the canvas. Path and field seem to hang onto the long streaks of rain. The grooves in the paint carry my gaze with them, from the top left to the bottom right and back again, against the rain. The light is razor sharp on the seagulls flying into the storm. Crestfallen cows stand watching.

In 1635, Rubens painted a rainbow darker than the sky. Critic John Ruskin took Rubens to task for the fact that his rainbow wasn't true to life and wrote in *The*

*Eagle's Nest*, 'Rubens is not to be blamed for ignorance of optics, but for never having so much as looked at a rainbow carefully... '

Poor rainbows, who ruined you? Why is each word about you excessive and every rendering a cliché?

## F O G

Fog is not listed in Frank L. Lane's *The Elements Rage* as a meteorological phenomenon. I look in the index and stumble across an over-garment missing a button instead. Moments later I find a megaphone in the Adlib, the museum's search machine. *Fog horn* is written in brackets after it. What is a fog horn doing in a place where the humidity is constant? No one remembers how the fog horn got into the collection. Standing between a rack of drums and a rack of strangely shaped cases that reveal the contours of the instruments they house, I look for the horn with the Music depot's curator. 'This'll be it.' She pushes a red case forward on the shelf. We lift the object onto the grey plastic trolley. Upstairs in the reading room, we find the horn inside. It is ingeniously powered by three bellows filled using the handle on the outside of the case. The temptation is great to move the crank back and forth and have the sound of the foghorn blare out throughout the museum. How often and on which sea has this horn hooted? When a fog horn blows, there's usually a response. Two or more horns at sea, warning each other. They try to increase the distance between each other. The hooting is a promise: we won't sail into each other's waters.

## C O L D

Ice is a strange, almost unreal material. Needles of ice suddenly shoot through water, seeking to connect. Supercooled water droplets in the atmosphere become flakes composed more of air than ice. When the wind blows, snow crystals stick together on their way down to earth.

I'm always drawn to photographs of snow and ice. They show an image that has usually disappeared during the development of the photo and was rescued from a tragic demise just in time by the intervention of a camera. Amongst the paperwork for the exhibition *Journey to the Surface of the Earth* (Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, 1970) by Boyle Family, I find a photo from *The Snow Studies* (12) series. Boyle Family took casts of the earth's surface. Chance dictated the locations. In this work too, son Cameron shot six arrows into the dunes at Camber, two of which got lost. Of the four casts, two were damaged whereby only two snow studies could be made. After the cast had been made, the melted snow was poured into a small basin behind the mold. A cooling element was supposed to freeze the water again, but unfortunately never worked.

The Pointillist-style jumper from the Fashion depot was donated by the Leiden Dutch specialist, Antonia Helena de Vreese-Kroon. Recorded in the index: Jumper made of beige/light brown wool with diagonally knitted stripes, patched up with wool in

various colours, the Netherlands, 1940-1945. What cold-blooded words. The jumper has been repaired out of necessity time after time. Its holes have been filled with thousands of stitches. The colour of the threads matched less and less. The original is buried deep under the crisscross mesh.

After reading her 1,000 *rondijnen*, as she called her poems, in which the word jumper doesn't even appear once, I'm no further. What I do know is that its wearer or the person who inherited the jumper also donated a papier-mâché hairgrip to the museum, a blouse made of striped curtain fabric and a black leather pouch.

The length of time a museum piece sometimes has to wait until anyone pays attention to it was confirmed by one of the curators. On her way to the museum, she lost her gold bracelet. To her astonishment, she came across her bracelet two years later in the box of drawings she was indexing at the time.

## NORTHERN LIGHTS

In woolcomber Eise Eisinga te Franeker's planetarium, a few sickles and scythes are arranged that belonged to local farmers who scratched the positions of the heavenly bodies into the handles of their tools.

On May 8 1774, there was an unusual planetary line-up. In the early morning, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and the moon were all close together in the sky. There were claims that the celestial bodies would crash into each other, causing the earth to be thrown off its axis and burn up in the sun.

For Eise Eisinga, the commotion around the conjunction of planets was the stimulus to build his world-famous planetarium. He designed and built a moving model of the solar system in his sitting room. Using a large pendulum and many cogs and gears, each planet would revolve around the sun at the correct orbital period. Two centuries later, it still works perfectly.

## L I G H T

Two photos that can barely tolerate daylight. 'If we scanned them, they'd explode,' the curator says, so we dim the light in the exhibition. 50 Din is the maximum. I make a sketch of *Sunrise in Pamusak*(13) in an attempt to capture the image. A ragged robin flower contrasts with a panel set upright, turning bright pink. In the foreground, green and brown clumps of moss cover the bare ground into which the flower has been inserted. The flower enters the scene through a white door in the meadow.

Jean Ruiter's second photo shows a mountainside with stone suspended on it. How big is the stone, how thick the wire? The sizes are missing. The mountain is large and small at the same time, crumpled through time and light. The stone weights nothing but looks heavy. Soon the wire will break loose and the stone will roll out of sight.

## MONDAY

On Monday, when the museum is closed, I work at Rietveld's blue desk, drink tea from eggshell porcelain cups and sleep in the Dijsselhof room. It's a day when the lobby remains empty and sounds hollow. The attendants stand together, a vacuum cleaner comes rolling along. There's just one route for a person without a key. I step through the door to the patio. In the corridor leading to the pond, I have two options: the fire lane to the Mondriaans to start the week or up the linoleum-covered stairs to the first floor. At the top I am met with three closed doors. I stay downstairs today.

Sometimes a painted landscape furnishes proof. A winter scene complements history, giving the meteorological historian an indication of the temperature in a particular year. The mist I saw hanging over the patio on the first day of my residency, engraved itself in my mind's eye and determined the direction of six months of searching. For *Tamed Skies*, I selected sixteen pieces from the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag's various depots. This book arose from my strolls through the depots without setting fixed limits. It gained shape through the material which presented itself: the vast collection on display, the works in storage, the captions in the index, the paperwork relating to previous exhibitions and the words which tumbled onto the page through the act of looking.

The clouds are static, the wind is contained, the sun remains high in the sky, the temperature is always the same. I look at Anton Mauve's large canvas. Its blanket of snow doesn't melt. Right next to it, the rain continues (14). If you collect fearlessly, you get headwind. The museum comes with me as I stroll outside.

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