



The RICOMET 2019 art exhibition

The Promised Land

> visual poetics of preservation and recovery <

with

Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway

Sergii Mirnyi

Akagi Shuji

Arie van 't Riet

Barcelona Biomedical Research Park, Barcelona, 1 – 3 July 2019

Opening: Monday 1 July 2019, 12h30

Introduction by Gaston Meskens, SCK•CEN & Ghent University

introduction

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Introduction

*I've done my best to live the right way
I get up every morning and go to work each day
But your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold
Sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode
Explode and tear this town apart
Take a knife and cut this pain from my heart
Find somebody itching for something to start*

The promised land is a concept that has many meanings and knows many uses. The quote I just read does not come from the bible and neither does it refer to the Israel-Palestine crisis. It comes from the song 'The Promised Land' written and performed by the rock musician Bruce Springsteen. But it could describe what's in the mind of the millions of refugees who are looking for a better place to live, after having escaped terror or poverty in their homeland. And that is probably the best example describing the meaning of the promised land today:

In our contemporary times, facing social and ecological crises, the promised land is not the land we want to go to, but the land we have to escape from. It has been damaged, exploited or occupied, either by ourselves or by others.

The work of Sergii Mirnyi tells us that, in that sense, the concept can have multiple meanings connected to one event, in this case the nuclear accident in Chernobyl. Sergii Mirnyi was one of the liquidators who were sent into the disaster zone to do the first clean up. Many of them died. And many others who survived struggled for years to have their participation officially recognized. Being concerned with the fate of the survivors, including himself, Sergii began to study the actual health state of the Chernobyl liquidators and his work laid the foundation for a totally different perception of contemporary disasters, their hazards and mitigation. The citizens who were evacuated from the zone around Chernobyl were promised they would return soon. Nobody returned since then, at least not with assistance of the authorities. In addition, the land has been taken over by nature again, and became a research area to study recovery and re-occupation by what was there before.

That situation also learns us something about ourselves as humans: our relationship with nature will always in some way be nostalgic: we occupy nature, and the more people we are, the more we do that occupation in a systematic but not always sustainable way. At the same time, we are longing for the 'pure' unaffected nature that was before: a land we keep on promising ourselves while we keep on destroying it at the same time. For me, this is also what I see in the work of Arie van 't Riet. The technique he uses suggests a scientific unveiling of an aesthetics of the past: as if we are observing the fossils of a nature that will be lost forever, unless we take action to preserve what is still left.

Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway show us that the promised land can have opposing meanings simply based on different visions of the world we want: the film they show here portrays a Greenland divided on the issue of uranium mining at Kvanefjeld. Surrounded by spectacular ice fjords and sheep grazing country, this is a UNESCO world heritage listed cultural landscape. However, many Greenlanders see the exploitation of Greenland's uranium and mineral reserves in the area as the only route to an independent, de-colonised future. For these last, the promised land is the land they shape themselves, in the interest of a different version of social well-being: giving up a part of their land's natural purity in the interest of independency

Akagi Shuji, finally, shows us how the citizens of Fukushima try to deal with their affected land, affected by both the tsunami and the consequent nuclear accident. Many of them escaped or got evacuated, with the promise they will be able to come back. Others were told it is highly uncertain they will ever be able to come back. All of them envision the promise of a recovery and a restoration of what was before.

What kind of land do we promise ourselves actually? *The Promised Land*, in the version of Bruce Springsteen, can be understood as a story of a coming of age. In that sense, it can also refer to us, humanity as a whole. We definitely and soon have to come of age with the way we treat our mother earth, the only land we've got. Raising awareness of who we are and what we do with it is the first important step, and we have to take that step over and over again. This exhibition is a small but important contribution to that step. We hope you enjoy it and that it helps you to see your place in the bigger picture.

One last word:

Art will not save the world. Neither will science save the world. Today, many voices from science and politics claim that innovative science and technology is the only thing we need to solve the climate change problem and all other ecological challenges. Nothing is less true. Science and technology make an important contribution, but they are useless when it comes to fostering respect for nature and when it comes to caring for solidarity, equity and justice among ourselves, humans. Art, and the social sciences and humanities can help raising awareness and mediate dialogue around these most important values. Therefore, also this conference as a whole, focussing on the integration of social sciences and humanities into the research we need to do, is ultimately important. We wish you an inspiring conference and a nice time in Barcelona.

Gaston Meskens, Barcelona, 1 July 2019