

Roderick Hietbrink: *Vivarium*
Dougal Phillips

I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in.

George Washington Carver (1864–1943)

Tune in, says Carver the botanical researcher, the educator, the advocate and lover of painting. Nature, if we take it to include the full spectrum of death and sex it deservedly should, is the ur-motif of art—see the caves at Lascaux, where the prehistoric man figure falls back in priapic ecstasy before a speared beast. Nature, one of the broader concepts up there with Time and Space, is the beating heart of art, we might confess in a moment of poetic weakness. Yet in contemporary visual art, particularly video-based art, nature *per se* is not a commonly explored theme, outside, of course, of the crossover between environmentalist and art discourses.

If the greening of our contemporary social consciousness (however symbolic) has truly begun to bloom in recent years, it should by all rights be matched by a renewed greening of our art practices—whether they be performative, video-scopic, or simply the drawing of lines (political or literal) in the sand. But where should the artist begin and end in relation to intervening in the world—tromping carbon footprints around the globe on the circuit of art production; producing endlessly thirsty neon and fluorescent highways of installation; burning up projector bulbs? How, today, can the artist place themselves within nature?

The tradition of land art taught us the value of a meditative or monumental interaction with the specific site, and the element of a strange sort of atavistic surprise contained therein, for both artist and viewer. Whether through the arrangement of pebbles in a heap or the sculpting of a volcanic crater, historical land art was always about re-seeing the surprises in nature via an intervention. Rather than the sublime surprises nature has always offered—the vast vista revealed, the crack of lightning, the tree-as-skyscraper—land art re-arranged the stuff of the world through simple architectural gestures which then opened up surprise at the meeting of the act of building and the world in a non-violent fashion.

Follow the etymology down: surprise is always phenomenological and ultimately plant-like. It is about seizing and grasping—from the Old French *surprendre* (*sur-* ‘over’ plus *prendre* ‘to take’) itself from the Latin *prendere*, contracted from *prehendere* ‘to grasp, seize’, as in the prehensile hand. Follow further, we get to the plant: *prehendere* is ‘before’ plus *hendere*, related to *hedera*: ‘ivy’, via the act of clinging. Aptly for the work of Roderick Hietbrink, a Rotterdam-based artist working with sound and video installation, comprehend and prison both share these roots.

The trope of surprise runs through Hietbrink’s work, work born from an ongoing process of thinking about the most basic of themes: the world around us. His video-sound pieces concern architectures of experience in a world where nature is both rampaging around us and caught within boxes-within-boxes across the urban and domesticated spaces of the everyday.

Vivarium is a work made by a European about Sydney, and thus resonates immediately with the history of how the Australia biota and came to be grasped, classified and understood by the settlers from the North, from Sir Joseph Banks on. A contemporary video-tale, *Vivarium* is an oddly pared-back exploration of the borders between nature and the built environment, as processed by a Dutchman arriving in Sydney—by proxy through the figure of a young female protagonist.

Vivarium aims at the recollection of that which has been marginalized, particularly through the instrumental programs of urban planning and modernist architecture. It is a video heavy on greenery, appearing on a screen suspended by invisible wires in a glass cabinet, and matched with a surrounding soundscape. A vivarium is a casing to hold life (literally). It differs from a

terrarium—a terrarium is a drier cabinet used for studying plants, whereas a vivarium is a closed environment that allows for the study of animals within a ‘natural’ landscape. The metaphor thus unfolds. We are at a situation of remove through the cabinet from the glowing green screen, just as we are removed behind the glass panels of the contemporary upper-bourgeois apartment which, during a key scene in the video, echo and reflect the installation itself.

There is a vague narrative running through the piece, a sort of reverse documentary about a young, professional-looking woman who works as a botanist in a tropical greenhouse. We follow her, ourselves at a remove, with the lens focused on the developing plants as the true protagonist: chlorophyllic development rather than that of the character kind. We travel between the woman’s house and the greenhouse nursery as we see her nursing the plants and controlling the miniature world like a deity of hothouse botany. And then, the video transgresses to the next layer: to a view of the Blue Mountains, gazed at on horizon, skirting the city. We understand the woman deciding to leave the city, we cut to Blue Mountains, and as she disappears into the forest (*Hanging Rock*-style) we loop back to the interior forest cultivated in the greenhouse.

Hietbrink’s work has been said to be a subtle commentary on the processes of negotiation and navigation that underlie the human condition, and without excessive reference to such universal topics, it can be seen that a certain set of experiential parameters are reconfigured in Hietbrink’s work—brought to light, as it were. The artist initially looked to work with the cultivation of nature within the heart of an expanding garden: the greenhouse, the city, then nature surrounding the city itself, the Sydney basin. From the European perspective again, he identified a distinction between the Continental treatment of nature—where it is cultivated into bands of forest between commuter belts and other major centres—and its presence in Sydney, where there is, it was deduced, a much greater sense of the *proximity* of nature. Australia, after all, had its first incarnation as a natural prison. We are bound by it.

And yet, he recognises that the forestry fringe is a screen, an illusory and alluring projection of a desired leafy reality. The hazy blue membrane captures our latent Anglo dreaming of rolling (massive) hills and screens out the fatal truth—beyond the screen, the desert is the real thing. A nasty surprise. Indeed, Otherness and surprise mark Hietbrink’s oeuvre. In 2005’s *White Horizon—Hollow Wasteland*, the urban periphery of a generic western city is depicted, an almost artificially heavy fog shading a landscape of bricks, with an emerging humanoid and building. A soundtrack directs the viewer, but to where? We wait for the figure to reveal itself, on the edge of suspense, and then: nothing but whiteness.

In *Quicksand* (2006), a video projected on the side wall of a building in a major plaza in Rotterdam, we have a split-screen: above, the deserted square at night, below, the parking garage beneath. A woman (again) walks through the square and then the garage, and trying to drive her car out, is oddly hindered by a man in another car. This standoff continues for a moment and then is suddenly interrupted by an unexpected moment: a mass swell of people walk noisily across the garage and out of shot, breaking the tension of the solitary face-off in a surreal, Tati-esque fashion. Another uncanny surprise lies at the heart of *The Fringing Forest* (2004), where the camera slowly parts a delightful European forest scene to reveal the grand structure of an oil refinery.

What does it all mean, as an art experience? One thinks of Levinas’s *meontology* (Greek for ‘non-being’), the *a priori* state of the ethical relation that comes before the appearing Other. As Peter Schmiedgen notes:

In the most general terms Levinas is committed to the view that [the representational object is] the outcome of an attempt to synthesize and hence represent the un-synthesizable infinity of the other ... For Levinas an image of the other is impossible *per se*. The beautiful image is without voice; silent. This is the silence of the portrait or death mask in contrast to the living fertility of the face that speaks to us ...¹

Hietbrink pulls us into a limbo within this idea, between the dead white air and the natural bloom; between the revealing figure and the abyssal void. Thinking though these Hietbrink works might lead to tying Levinas into the Ecosophy of Félix Guattari, the linking of an environmental ecology to a social and a mental ecology: a breaking of the repressive binary separation of human (cultural) and nonhuman (natural) systems; while, of course, preserving heterogeneity and difference, joining up all the naturally rhizomatic assemblages of the world. These video works present a speaking other which joins us with something bigger and more slippery than we often imagine while ensconced in our glass walls. Removing barriers can be a shock (opening up to the deep trauma of exposure), but we know that glass walls hide as much as they reveal, so why pretend otherwise?

In Hietbrink's *Corner Corone*, a hooded crow, a bird common to the urban areas of Germany, appears in an empty Berlin office block, and the viewer is made uneasy. A different type of unease comes in the key moment in *Vivarium*, when the protagonist waters the decorative plant in the glassed apartment using a commercially-bottled water. In the end, nothing is left to chance.

Nature surprises us: the bottle green of a pre-storm sky, a blast of hail, the rich scent of dirt. Stumbling and sliding down a friable hill is an uneasy yet thrilling moment. No matter how glassed-in we get, we still cling to nature like the etymological ivy leaf. But where to from here? The hedera or ivy-leaf is in fact an extinct punctuation mark, used in classical texts to separate words or major sections of text or to mark the end of a passage. In the light of seeing environmentally conscious (in the most literal sense) contemporary artworks, one might hope that we are not ourselves clinging to a passage and a passing.

¹ Peter Schmiedgen, 'Art and idolatry: Aesthetics and alterity in Levinas', *Contretemps*, July 2002, available from <http://www.usyd.edu.au/contretemps/3July2002/schmiedgen.pdf>.