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Group show (after Koyaanisqatsi) | february 11 - march 25, 2023

We need a very good gardener. As long as the roots are not severed, all will be well in the garden. In the garden, growth has its seasons. First comes spring and summer, but then we have fall and winter. And then we get spring and summer again. There will be growth in the spring. But first, some things must wither.

Chauncey Gardiner, 1979

Ko-yaa-nis-qatsi was the word spelt out on the austere red and black sleeve of the vinyl record a friend had just put on the turntable, not far from the fireplace of a stone-built house sheltered behind the Trégor coast on the last day of 2019. Under the enigmatic line of text, several definitions, or translations, were printed. Crazy life. Life in turmoil. Life disintegrating. Life out of balance. A state of life that calls for another way of living. Composed by Philip Glass, the repetitive, obsessive, apocalyptic music washed over our ears like the ebb and flow of the high tides of Brittany. To hammer the message home, the back of the sleeve showed three balefully intimidating Amerindian prophecies. If we dig precious things from the land, we will invite disaster. Near the Day of Purification, there will be cobwebs spun back and forth in the sky. A container of ashes might one day be thrown from the sky, which could burn the land and boil the oceans.

Several lockdowns later (clearly connected with those prophecies!), I had the opportunity to see the eponymous film for which the record is the soundtrack. The word "film" fails to describe this cinematographic object, which defies categorisation. If I were to propose a very subjective and eclectic genealogy for the film, I'd say it owes something to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and Guy Debord's *La Société du spectacle* (1973). And even Jacques Tati, minus the humour.

Directed by Godfrey Reggio in 1982, the film has no dialogue, except a few *basso profundo* incantations that form part of the music. And yet it is not abstract: the way it is edited gives it a powerful narrative thrust. When Man finally appears in the majestic opening sequences of natural landscapes, we find ourselves witnessing an

increasingly unhinged diorama, an infernal carousel of images that slows down, speeds up, and makes us feel dizzy or nauseous, all in perfectly orchestrated cadence. The images hurtle past: high-tension power lines, farm fields, car parks, airports, the stock exchange, the subway, expressways, supermarkets, huge cities, business districts, advertisements, printed circuits, casinos, crowds... we even pass by a few individuals. Humans are alienated, subjugated, desperately sad: like Edgar Allan Poe's "man of the crowd". In the social sphere all that remains, at the very best, is a vague herd instinct, and at the worst, mechanical maelstroms synchronised by the gravitational waves of capitalism. The word "capital", let us remember, is linked to the word "head"... as in "head of cattle".

When you watch the film, you gradually understand that the aim of this wordless opera is to force us to behold the road we have travelled on the planet and the deep ruts we have gouged in it, from the lithosphere to the aptly named graveyard orbit. We are by turns fascinated and horrified by the creative and destructive potential of the human species. It is a dark spectacle: the gathering darkness of the world is spectacular, and the terrifying beauty of *Koyaanisqatsi* must be spectacular too, because it is a dramatisation of modern society. It is a film that contains an entire world, a presentation of the collective human condition after its transition from a natural habitat to an entirely artificial and technological environment.

Koyaanisqatsi was the first in a trilogy, created alongside several other similar films directed by the cameraman, Ron Fricke. In the 1980s, when neoliberalism was reaching its peak, the film's introspection seemed at odds with the zeitgeist and, although well received when it was released, it did not leave a lasting legacy.

What can we learn from this 40-year-old film (in terms of ecological thinking, it might as well be from the palaeolithic era)? 1982 was before the Kyoto protocol, before the end of the *End of History*¹, an illusory truce that collapsed on its own, before an assiduous pupil of late capitalism, a cross between Dr. Strangelove and Ayn Rand, discovered the precise weight of the human ego (5,900 kilos) by sending a sports car into orbit round the Sun. It was before we could communicate at ultra-high speed with nothing to say, before smartphones reduced social space to a few square centimetres of pixels, adding an epilogue to Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*.

The cars and clothes in *Koyaanisqatsi* are all completely out of date, but the conclusion we draw from it is that we've entered a new era without changing course. Today, now that the oil lamp and the "Amish model" have been trashed², now that the war in Ukraine has prompted politics and the media to make frantic gestures, seeking to electrify the fences between happy frugality, Luddite degrowth and curative austerity, *Koyaanisqatsi* remains one of the markers of the growing awareness of what our era has dubbed the Anthropocene.

Where the role of art is concerned, the public and private institutional worlds have so completely seized control of the issue of ecology that they risk smothering it. With a few exceptions, its role recalls the clichés uttered by the character Chauncey

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992

² Emmanuel Macron at the Élysée, at a "French Tech" event, 14/09/2020: "Yes, France will take the 5G turn because it's the way to innovation [...] I hear a lot of voices being raised to explain that we should face the complexity of contemporary problems by returning to the oil lamp! I don't believe the Amish model will allow us to resolve the challenges of contemporary ecology"

Gardiner (in another film from the same period³); in other words, it suffers from what Frédéric Lordon calls “the radicality that touches nothing”⁴. Consequently, as we have recently observed, the actions of ecological activists have placed the art world more on the other side of the barricade.

So how can you do a group show today, especially based on an invitation to work with the “stock” of a commercial art gallery? This is probably an insoluble paradox. By not producing new artworks, it's true that we use fewer natural resources. At the same time, simply transforming the stock into a flow will not allow us to escape far from the most basic chapters of the theory of economic exchange. We have to start somewhere, however, and the practices of the artists on show suggest useful avenues to be explored, from observation to infiltration, from testimony to actual transformation.

As for the rest, Marx wrote a famous sentence, which is the epitaph engraved on his tomb in Highgate Cemetery: *“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point however is to change it”*. As the cemetery is private, the ticket that allows you to read that sentence costs £4.50 – which, after all, is a snip (card payments only, wear appropriate shoes because of the mud and steep slopes).

Émile Ouroumov – 02.2023

Translation – Martyn Back

³ *Being There*, 1979. Directed by Hal Ashby

⁴ Frédéric Lordon, “Pleurnicher le Vivant”. *Les blogs du Monde Diplomatique*, 2021. <https://blog.mondediplo.net/pleurnicher-le-vivant>

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