

## **Thursday Night Live! Report: Design Dialogues, Ore Streams with Formafantasma**

Het Nieuwe Instituut conducts long-term research into materials, including such basic materials such as glass, wood and plastic. It also investigates more obscure materials and even immateriality. For example, in *Design Dialogues* Studio Formafantasma on Wednesday 3 May, curator Natasha Hoare and artist Giuseppe Licari discussed their research into ore streams. Minerals and precious metals have an ambiguous status. They are all around us in expensive electronic equipment, but the process of extracting and distributing the material is often invisible – or kept invisible. The fact that the extraction, production and distribution of minerals have an impact on economic and social issues was clearly reflected in the three presentations and the concluding discussion. Writer and designer Tamar Shafir (Het Nieuwe Instituut) moderated the evening.

### **Studio Formafantasma**

During his presentation, Simone Farresin of the Amsterdam-based design agency Studio Formafantasma, provided an overview of their methods and projects. Special attention was paid to their most recent project, in which they investigate ore streams. Two earlier projects of note, which expose international issues and problems by means of in-depth use of local (material) research, illustrate their approach. A project that effectively illustrates this layering was *Moulding Tradition* (2009), which started with a traditional ceramic vase from Sicily with a representation of a black person. The representation was part of a tradition imported from Africa. This object is therefore a particularly good example of the influence migration has on local cultures. Without the design duo intending it, the project seamlessly connects to the current debate on migration, which has become ever more relevant since 2009.

Project *Botanica* brought the Italian design duo to Australia in 2011, a location that proved to be the starting point for their ongoing research into ore streams. Project *Botanica* focuses on industrial plastics, in which the duo encountered animal and vegetable spores. They became interested in the changing role of the designer due to the increasing use of semi-manufactured products since the Industrial Revolution. This process has changed the role of the designer to being mainly concerned with transforming semi-manufactured products into sought-after objects. As designers the artists prefer to be involved throughout the entire design process. In their current project (a commission by the Australian NGV Triennial), which is concerned with the manufacturing of electronics and the associated global ore streams, Simone Farresin and Andrea Trimarchi try to have a grip on the entire design process.

The Western world's obsession with electronic devices formed the basis of their current project. They began their research several years ago, but due to its large scale, the duo is still deeply immersed in the process. Electronic waste and the extraction and circulation of minerals and metals are central to the project in which a local history is once again linked to a global phenomenon. The duo had already learned about complex mineral extraction methods from centuries-old manuscripts. Mineral extraction has come to lie at the very root of countless ecological and socio-economic problems. Farresin and Trimarchi first attempted to map the circulation of ores. Through ports around the globe, the minerals are mainly exported to China, where the electronic devices are manufactured. Naturally, this process is

not immune to injustices, social-political unrest or conflicting economic interests. Eventually, the project brought the duo into contact with numerous companies, key figures and governmental agencies. Hence Farresin's inclusion of political events in the presentation. The Basel Convention of 1998 is a global agreement on the management of hazardous waste. The duo found that in 2002 Australia and the United States, both co-signatories of the treaty, had not yet implemented the agreement. This raised another question relevant to their project: How do you convert a treaty into law? And how can entire nations be held accountable for global problems such as this?

Farresin is equally fascinated by both the aesthetics of mineral extraction – which he likens to a choreography – as well as the abstract trade value of the metals. A pivotal moment occurred with the publication of the article *Business of Mining*, which stated that half of the Earth's mineral deposits have already been extracted. The worldwide mineral mania has reached unprecedented proportions.

For the past three years the duo has been blogging all the interim results of their research. The big question is how they will process all the findings and what 'object' will come of it that will surpass the significant amount of e-mails that the duo have accumulated. As designers, Farresin and Trimachi have reviewed the problems we are currently facing. They see it as their task to convert the acquired knowledge into constructive guidelines. This can easily be achieved by, for example, labelling materials correctly, and including recycling instructions. Harmful substances such as plastic are sometimes incinerated for mineral extraction, something that can be avoided with simple guidelines. In addition, the duo is working towards creating a design object and producing a documentary.

### **Natasha Hoare**

Natasha Hoare works as a curator at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and was responsible for the series of exhibitions and the publication *Art in the Age of...* (2015). The three presentations *Art In The Age Of...Energy And Raw Material*, *Art In The Age Of... Planetary Computation* and *Art In The Age Of...Asymmetrical Warfare*, were presented over the course of a year and resulted in the publication. The three thematic exhibitions were closely intertwined. Each exhibition consisted of seven works of art, some of which remained in place for the next presentation, fulfilling a new thematic context.

In her presentation, Hoare discusses the work of several artists, with a particular emphasis on that of Lara Almarcegui from Spain, who was also present at this event. As part of her long-term research project *Mineral Rights*, the artist researched land ownership in Rotterdam and the property owned by Witte de With. For years, she travelled through Europe mapping the property ownership of deposits of iron ore, oil and metals. She was unsuccessful in many locations and this became an integral part of her (artistic) process. It proved impossible to do anything in Germany because of the strict regulations. In Germany, the government owns the national soil all the way down to the Earth's core. Spain was less difficult, but at the very last moment, the government withdrew its cooperation. In 2015, Almarcegui, together with Salomon Kroonenberg and lawyer Willem Bosma, conducted an investigation into the property of Witte de With. The leading question here was whether the institute could lay claim to the minerals in the soil beneath its art centre. In the Netherlands, it appears that only the first five metres can be owned, as opposed to the United States

where everything belongs to the landowner. Land ownership is rife with complex rule sets and ambiguous governmental positions. The title of the book by participating geologist Salomon Kroonenberg, *Why Hell Stinks of Sulphur*, proves its validity.

Hoare discussed the exhibition series and some of the participating artists, such as Nina Canell, in more depth. In her project *Brief Syllables*, Canell focuses on the transferral of energy. She emphasises the poetic potential of communication cables by presenting them as physical organs that facilitate or obstruct communication. Dutch artist Femke Herregraven made the technological impact on the social tangible by placing it within a more political and broader context. She compares the micro-time of the stock exchange, measured in milliseconds, with infinitely slower geological time.

Via the work of Mikhail Karikis, a link is again made with Kroonenberg's book. Karikis composed a soundtrack for the first Italian silent movie, *Inferno* (1911), an adaptation of Dante's volume of the same name. 102 years after the movie was made, Karikis created a sonic version of Hell in the Tuscan valley where one of the world's first and largest geothermal power plants is located.

### **Giuseppe Licari**

The final speaker of the evening, Giuseppe Licari, is currently connected to the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht and has a solo exhibition until 14 May 2017 in Rotterdam TENT titled *Schlak*. The artist focuses on the relationship between man and nature. Licari's work shows how the contemporary landscape is shaped by economic plans. As part of his research he travelled to Luxembourg, where steel has long been mined, where he documented, analysed and documented the massive impact mining has had on both a local and a global scale. Intriguing photographs of the post-industrial landscapes testify to the permanent deterioration of the environment.

The images of these surrealistic landscapes are as disturbing as they are fascinating. Licari also examined a by-product of mining, called schlak stones. He distilled pigments from this broad diversity of rocks in line with a centuries-old artistic tradition. Analysis of the schlak stones revealed they were 90% volcanic rock. The great differences in their appearance and strength are caused by the cooling process. Despite their ambiguous status, Licari considers the rocks beautiful and presents them much as a natural history museum would. He has also collected the results of his research and analyses in a book with the same title as his exhibition, *Schalk*.

### **Panel discussion**

During the subsequent discussion with all participants present, Tamar Shafir noted that all the projects reflected on the past, the present and the future. Placing contemporary problems in a greater timeframe only increases their relevance. Artists and the institute alike considered it their role to provoke discussions on urgent contemporary issues. However, participants should approach this didactic function of their activities with some caution. Natasha Hoare does not see this as Witte de With's role, however. According to her, within the institute artists should be free to experiment, which does not require a clearly articulated story or point of view. Fantasmaforma takes a similar position. Trimarchi explains: 'We do not want to be or become moralists. So we take a neutral position. We don't do this to avoid taking responsibility; we're deliberately avoiding taking a moralistic position.' Licari

sees his role as an artist as a thermometer of society: 'We are both culture and nature', he suggests. 'We live in the Anthropocene in which the issue of climate change is a daily concern. We are talking about rising temperatures and CO2 emissions, but the effects go beyond what we can see; it expresses itself as global structures, our food and our nutritional base.

Report by Sanneke Huisman