

Thinking like a mountain: In conversation with Mirjam Kroker

by Shona McCombes

Cultureland is a residency program that aims to fundamentally rethink the relation between nature and culture, by providing its artists with the opportunity to explore the cultural and scientific life that the city has to offer. The program kicks off in Amsterdam, after which the artists retire to the rural area of Starnmeer. Drawing inspiration from both locations, the theme for this season is ‘The end of nature as we know it.’ I spoke to current artist in residence Mirjam Kroker, whose project is titled ‘**Think like a mountain (because colonizing heaven might not be such a good idea)**’.

### **Challenging categories and order**

The Cultureland flat was sparse the last time I was here; now it is cluttered. The walls are adorned with what Mirjam calls “document drawings”, playfully poetic lines of stencilled text: *sound is seeing without light; what does it mean to live according to listening?* The tables are strewn with books and pens and miscellanea, and in the centre of the studio floor there is a large tree branch, wrapped at intervals with bright scraps of paper – fragments of the things she has been reading. “I took a lot of walks to record sound. In the park, these branches talked to me, so I decided to invite them in to see what they could tell me.” She is not here to make visual art, she tells me, but still she found herself making this – wrapping text around bark the way language wraps itself around the world. “We shouldn’t take the world like this, but that’s what we often do; we cover it, but we could try to let ourselves be asked and embraced by the world in turn.”

Mirjam is resistant to categories and order, critical of how we slice things into pieces to make sense of them. “For many centuries, western knowledge production has tried to dominate the world. We still tend to believe that if we can categorize or label things, we can know their ‘nature’. But is this really true? How we perceive the world is shaped by how we gain knowledge, and vice versa; the challenge is to be aware of this and try to make autonomous decisions.”

This project is attempting other ways of knowing. Much of her previous work has dealt with text, but at Cultureland she is immersing herself in sound. “Sound offers us a different way of engaging with reality. If I close my eyes while we are here in this apparently limited space – what happens if we just listen? I can hear the tram and some other strange noises, sounds that are already difficult to verbalise. And then I realise that the space is not so limited. In a visual interpretation of the world, this room has these four corners, and it ends here and it ends there; but the acoustic world extends beyond the walls, makes connections between different moments, a certain expansion of time. Images you can look at from a distance, but sound goes through your entire being. It doesn’t stay over there.”

### **Participatory realism and digital commons**

I ask Mirjam about the project’s title. “It’s funny, maybe, thinking like a mountain in a flat landscape. But the idea was exactly *because* of the flat landscape. It’s important that we activate our imagination. I love to give something a title, I find it delicious, but I don’t want to give a title in order to make a work *work*, to make it understandable. It’s more like an entrance into a state between paradox and poetry, or something like that.” She sees this mode of imagining as “a starting point for a participatory realism. Somehow the research itself is the work; it’s the materialization of an idea that I understand only incompletely. It’s a kind of unfinished state that continues where something of it survives and inhabits another living system. Circulation is an important aspect of it – the desire to be continued in another person’s head.”

The second part of the title – *colonizing heaven* – is not a reference to technoscientific dreams of space exploration as I had initially assumed, but to the digital cloud. Clouds have always had an aura of utopianism, “this romanticised idea of the ever-shifting and ever-transforming,” but Mirjam is also

alert to the dangers of the “digital commons”; like everywhere else, it is a space structured by power relations and global inequalities. “The globe is a thin horizontal surface – networked, controlled, dominated, developed, defined, mapped, controlled and capitalized in a certain homogenisation of knowledge. But the earth goes deep and high. So instead of colonising heaven, instead of homogenising knowledge, I propose think like a mountain, think vertically, make interruptions, against this flat worldview.”

Originally trained as an anthropologist, Mirjam is fluent in the language of academia, which “gives you a certain kind of authority,” but she’s trying to get it out of her system, practicing what Gayatri Spivak calls *unlearning*: “I’m trying to find other ways of producing and circulating knowledge.” She was drawn to the Cultureland theme, she says, because it “proposes not the end of nature, but the end of nature as *we* know it. It’s about questioning this very dominant western, European, North American claim to define the truth about everything on planet earth. Nature has been colonized through rationalisation, exoticisation, idealisation, utilisation – a complex pattern of control to maximise resource exploitation. So what we call ‘nature’ is inextricably connected to culture, economy, technology, social organisation, law. It’s connected to the militarisation of borders, to indigenous rights violations, to the corruption of what we call democracy. But this also tends to come with a certain fashion for apocalyptic thinking. I want to move away from dystopic ideas about the future or the end of nature; I’m more interested in inventing narratives outside of or beyond this disaster of capitalism. It’s about imagining and practicing another form of engagement with what surrounds us.”

When I ask if she sees her work as political, she turns the question on its head: “As an artist you are so often asked about whether your practice is political; why not the other way around? It would be interesting to ask politicians about whether their political practice has an artistic dimension! The theme of this residency is obviously entangled with the debate around climate change, which is first of all a political crisis – but you don’t have to address political issues in the language of politics. I prefer a poetic approach, not relying on the already established vocabulary to explain things, but giving space to small moments of reflection. I am not doing this project because I know something, but rather to find out something. It’s about accepting uncertainty, trying to listen, and welcoming the instability of knowledge for a moment.”

**Cultureland invites you to join us and dwell with the unheard at Mirjam’s presentation on February 1<sup>st</sup>, Friday, at the storefront on Admiraal de Ruijterweg 181. Read more at [www.cultureland.nl](http://www.cultureland.nl).**