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**On the Quest for Nature
in the Work of Esther Kokmeijer**

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While Travelling I Acquire (Vacando Acquiro)

— Esther Kokmeijer, *life credo borrowed from W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp (1874-1950)*

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Abstract

The aesthetics of the Romantic era are still very influential in the present day. Since this time, pictorial mediation has ensured that the human view of nature was prejudiced. Over the years, this mediation has only become more dominant. In the present time we often experience nature through pictorial mediation as more real than real nature itself. Using Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra, I demonstrate how the gap between images of nature and real nature is becoming bigger. The Romantic aesthetics in these simulacra make this a difficult circle to break. This thesis demonstrates the dominance of this pictorial mediation through the exhibition 'Solid, Liquid, Vapor' by Esther Kokmeijer. Her work acts as a case study to demonstrate how romanticized images on Instagram, including her own work, form a hyperreality.

Introduction

The first encounter I had with the work of Esther Kokmeijer (Brantgum, 1977) was in 2014 at the Dolf Henkes Award exhibition at TENT Rotterdam.¹ From that moment I was intrigued by her work and the links to science and scientific expeditions. Four years later she had her first big solo exhibition in the Netherlands at Tent Rotterdam: 'Solid, Liquid, Vapour.'² The central theme was water. The exhibition was all about how human beings relate to the natural environment. For her work, she traveled to the Marshall Islands, China and the North and South Poles. This exhibition showed works that emerged from these travels.

I wondered why this artist from the Netherlands would be so interested in and concerned about the culture and nature in these remote places. A few reads on her artistic practice taught me that Kokmeijer is driven by curiosity and wonder.³ She focusses, as she explains, on the world at large: global commons, the natural dynamics of the world in all her connectedness. She aims to express this in a variety of ways, for example in journeys, installations, photo series, interventions, documentaries, film essays and books. She is fascinated by the borders between culture and nature, artificial and natural, and tries to map these intersections. In addition to this, she is interested in the possibilities of art and science to reinforce each other. Therefore, her projects are often in collaboration with scientists. By joining scientific projects, she intends to open up alternative routes to lucid and, as she calls it, visual comprehension of scientific research. A main subject in her work is the human influence on climate change. Kokmeijer, and the people she collaborates with, have the conviction that sustainable alternatives to the disastrous approach to nature, through colonialism and global capitalism, are urgently needed. In her work, she shows the beauty of nature. With this, she hopes people to reflect on their relation to nature and to realize that drastic changes are needed to save the planet.

Kokmeijer's artistic project excites and raises many questions. For example, what does she mean with the intersection of nature and the man-made? To me, this is an important and even fundamental question in studying the work of the artist. From my profession as teacher in biology I see human kind as a part of nature. In my opinion the artist

¹ TENT Rotterdam, "Dolf Henkes Prijs 2014."

² TENT Rotterdam, "Esther Kokmeijer – Solid, Liquid, Vapour."

³ Esther Kokmeijer, "Artist Statement."

has beautiful intentions with her work: finding back our position in respect to nature and reconnect human kind with nature. She aims to create a starting point for a sustainable and harmonious way of living with nature. In the artist's work, this often results in a beautiful, untouched and aesthetically pleasing image of nature. In my opinion, the artist is influenced by the aesthetics of the Romantic era of the Western world and this counteracts her own, environmentally conscious statements. In my view, these romanticized images even replace nature. I see the artist's work as exemplary for the travel and nature photos that can be found on Instagram and. I would even say her photos simulate nature. From this follows the main question in this research: 'How does Esther Kokmeijer's romanticized imagery in 'Solid, Liquid, Vapour' contradict her own statements on nature and function as simulacra in today's world? My aim in this thesis is to point out, with 'Solid, Liquid, Vapour' as case study, how aesthetics deriving from the Romantic era are still influential in the ways Western people depict nature and how this is harmful to nature.

In the first chapter I discuss the exhibition 'Solid, Liquid, Vapor.' It is a visual analysis of the exhibition. Here, I discuss the structure of the exhibition and the exhibition strategies that have been applied. The chapter also demonstrates how the artist's travels and the aesthetics of her works are related to values that emerged in the Romantic period. In the second chapter I demonstrate how I see the Romantic concepts of Wanderlust, the 'noble savage' and the Sublime in the artist's work and how they achieve the opposite of what she aims for in her written ecocritical statements. They show beautiful images of nature and no environmental problems. In this thesis, the Romantic notion of nature plays an important role. The Westerner walking through a forest nowadays does that in a totally different one than someone living in the 18th century or someone from an indigenous forest culture, so says Maarten Doorman.⁴ This not because it is maintained and preserved by nature institutions, threatened by acid rain or even reduced as a result of deforestation, in contrast, it is because the experiencing of nature is a completely different one. Many Westerners who seek for nature, for example by walking through a forest, immerse in this nature. Not seldom they would experience a feeling of exaltation or mental peace.⁵ For Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and many of his contemporaries it was an escape from the man made, the

⁴ Doorman, *De Romantische Orde*, 11.

⁵ Ibid.

polluted cities, in times of industrialization.⁶ It is the industrialization associated with the global capitalism Kokmeijer writes about, mentioned above. This aimlessly wandering through nature can often be seen in today's Western society, in which many people like to travel, to seek for the most beautiful, natural place, or a local culture.

In the third chapter, I discuss how pictorial mediation has come to stand between man and nature since Romanticism and how this has led to a simulated nature. In my view, this started with the picturesque and has led to a simulated image of nature through social media platforms like Instagram. The work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) by postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) forms the theoretical backbone in this chapter.⁷ When preparing for a travel and looking for inspiration, this is often found on the social media channels, of which Instagram is a very influential one. A simple search on Instagram for keywords like 'nature', possibly in combination with 'travel,' shows it in a single glance: the Romantic concept of nature is alive and kicking. It is impossible to ignore the many paradisiacal pictures. Not seldom these pictures show the grandeur of nature, embodied by a forest, lake or mountain view. Often there is just one person in the picture experiencing this grandeur. Just like, what probably is, the most iconic Romantic painting: 'the Wanderer above the Sea of Fog' (1817) by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840; fig. 17). The photographs themselves often seem to be more satisfactory than the actual visit. Just like many of the photographs made by the artist. This brought me to Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. He states that we live in times where the signifiers (media like internet, television and screens in general) have become reality, in opposition to the signified (which is everything that is represented through those media). To put it more concrete: images constitute the world we live in. This would mean that makers of these images create our reality. I see the artist's photos as exemplary for the pictures that can be found on Instagram. In this chapter, I discuss how all these photos together form a hyperreality of nature that is more compelling than real nature. For centuries man has been looking for nature, but it seems to be increasingly difficult to find it. I conclude the thesis with a reflection on this ongoing quest for nature.

⁶ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 18.

⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3-12.

CHAPTER 1

Solid, Liquid, Vapour: a Visual Analysis

In 2018, Kokmeijer had her first big solo exhibition in Tent Rotterdam.⁸ This exhibition will be the starting point for this thesis. In the second chapter I will analyze visual works from this exhibition from a Romantic theoretical framework and confront them with the artist's texts. Before I do so I find it necessary to get a clear image of the exhibition itself, the themes the artist deals with and how this brought me to the notion of a Romantic perspective on the artist's work. In order to obtain this clear image, the first chapter will consist of a thorough analysis of the exhibition. To start with, I will discuss how the exhibition was set up as a whole. Which exhibition strategies and techniques of display were used and how did this come through to me as a visitor? How did the artist combine her visual works with texts providing information on her travels and projects? In this chapter, I will give a description of a how, as a visitor, I moved through the exhibition, met the works of art presented in the exhibition space and how I could relate them to each other and to myself.

After the analysis of the exhibition in its entirety, I will introduce and explain the term 'Romantic,' which plays an important role in this thesis. Next, the three sections of the exhibition will be addressed: solid, liquid and vapour. Each of these sections deals with a certain phase of the element water. At the same time, they represent the three big research projects of the artist. The section 'Solid' is about her works emanating from her travels to the Arctic and Antarctic, 'Liquid' deals with her ongoing project about the Marshall Islands, and 'Vapour' represents her works on weather modification in China. Because all of the artist's works arise from her travels, every subchapter starts off with a brief description of these travels, the projects she works on and her findings. From there, a selection of works of each of the sections will be subject of thorough visual analysis. I chose the works that I see as key works and thus as representative for each section and the artist's practice itself. Although the statements she makes in her texts are an essential part of her work and the artist's motivation to travel, they will only be discussed indirectly in this chapter. These statements will be discussed more in-depth in the second chapter. I chose for this approach because her visual works communicate something quite different than her texts do. In my

⁸ TENT Rotterdam, "Esther Kokmeijer – Solid, Liquid, Vapour."

opinion, the artist's non-textual works exhale a strong sense of Romanticism. With this visual analysis, I aim to make clear why I connect the artist's work to the Romantic era.

1.1 Exhibition strategies

The title 'Solid, Liquid, Vapour' represents the division of the exhibition in three thematic sections. Visiting the exhibition, this three-way division became clear to me quite quickly when I entered the main hall of the exhibition space. There was a clear thematic division within the space itself. On the left the works dedicated to her travels to Antarctica were situated. On the right side, the works that dealt with her project in China. At the back of the space, all the works related to the artist's project on the Marshall Islands were displayed. Upon entering, it was noticeable how the artist and curator had taken into account the aesthetics and visual qualities of the exhibition as a whole. Most of the walls were white and in some rooms the walls were painted a bright blue (Fig. 1). The colors were in keeping with the overarching theme of the exhibition: water. This use of color provided visual tranquility and also ensured that the exhibition formed a whole. Despite the fact there were many different things to see, the presentation looked tidy, maybe even serene. The display was visually coherent and did not impose itself on the viewer. Besides the use of color, the exhibition space was divided into light and dark areas. The dark spaces contained large projections, among other things. These spaces were a lot smaller than the light spaces and therefore more intimate in terms of atmosphere. In these spaces there was the possibility to sit or lie down to let the exhibition take effect. Non-luminous works were here provided with a spotlight, drawing attention to it. Most of the works were shown in the bright rooms. So, there was the opportunity to actively move through the exhibition, but one could also opt for a moment of contemplation.



Fig.1. The use of wall colour, ©Aad Hoogendoorn, 2018.

Regarding the artworks themselves, the exhibition was a heterogeneous spectacle. The artist uses a wide range of media. A striking feature is the frequent use of maps, recent but also much older (Fig. 2). In thought, it brought me back to a time when there was no Google Maps or GPS yet. Doing this, the artist seems to profile herself as an explorer from another era. Also striking was the use of museum cabinets. These were old-fashioned, the type of cabinets one can also find in the more traditional museums (Fig. 3). In these displays, the artist presented her correspondence materials with various agencies, as well as artifacts from the Marshall Islands. As a result of the use of old displays and maps, the exhibition at the same time came across as a kind of old-fashioned museum for science, ethnography or natural history. This gave the exhibition a kind of educational character.



Fig.2. The use of maps, ©Aad Hoogendoorn, 2018.



Fig.3. The use of old museum displays, ©Aad Hoogendoorn, 2018.

This educational character was enhanced by the texts. All the works presented were provided with texts. In most cases these texts explained the artist's travels and the projects she undertakes while being on the go. Thus, the texts explain the works and give them a fundamental layer of conceptual meaning. These texts are important because the works on display are actually derived from the journeys she makes. These journeys are always the basis for her work. Without the texts it would not be clear what the works signify within the larger project and in relation to each other. In these texts the artist makes a clear statement about human interaction with the environment. I will elaborate on these statements in chapter two. In most cases these texts are put on the wall as stickers and explain the works shown. Some texts are placed in a glass display and are to be seen as self-contained works of art. 'Agreement with Nature' is an example of this.⁹ The work consists of the texts of four international treaties, which set down the agreed terms of human interactions with 'Global Commons.' This is a term used for the Earth's shared natural resources, such as the oceans, the atmosphere and the Antarctic in particular. The texts are printed on wafer-thin porcelain to indicate the vulnerability of the treaties. Remarkably, these works are presented in a modern, glass museum cabinet in contrast to the aforementioned Marshallese artifacts, which were presented in an old-fashioned museum display. Other correspondences, such as

⁹ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

those with the Dutch government, in which she asks if she can take a piece of ice from Antarctica, are also presented in modern displays made of glass.

Besides a large projected video work that I will discuss later, the exhibition also contains a few smaller TV screens on walls (Fig.3). These show video clips and photos of the artist's travels. For example, she shows images of her symbolic search for the center of gravity of Antarctica. She also shows photos from her ongoing project 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging' (Fig. 12). Together, these images are a visual diary of her journey to the Marshall Islands. The images provide the viewer with an idea of what the journey looked like. They bring the voyage back to life, providing the viewer with the possibility to see what and how the artist experienced the travel.

Much of the exhibition consisted of objects that were found and brought home by the artist from one of her travels, most often artifacts. For example, she presents a rain missile, she found in the mountains near Beijing. Rain missiles are rockets that are used to manipulate the weather. She presents it as an anthropological find, including a photo of the object showing how she encountered it when she walked through the mountains. It seems the photograph has the function of evidence. She also shows various traditional objects from the Marshall Islands. Some of these objects are part of a larger work or have received a subtle adjustment. A striking feature is the large hail cannon hanging in the middle of the main hall (Fig. 4). This work is called 'Butterfly Effect.' The title refers to the idea that a small, seemingly unimportant event, such as the vibrating wings of a butterfly, can set something of much greater consequence in motion. In her comparison, usage of the hail cannon, an object with which to influence the weather, can have great effect. The artist has placed butterfly cocoons in the cannon as a symbolic reference to this. The objects, together with the aforementioned maps, ensure that the artist presents herself as a combination of collector, adventurer and anthropologist.



Fig.4. 'Butterfly Effect,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

As I stepped into the main hall, my eye was not only drawn to the great hail cannon. The darkened space behind it also aroused my interest (Fig. 4). In this space, a construction of wood with blue hammocks was set up. It was the installation 'Regarding the Waves.' The work was part of the 'Liquid' section, which dealt with the Marshall Islands. Visitors were invited to take a seat here. In the 'Vapour' section the work 'The Perception of Clouds' was situated. This installation consisted of a so-called rain chapel made of salt blocks (Fig. 5).¹⁰ There were also several installations at the beginning of the exhibition. These were outside the main part of the exhibition, on the window side (front) of Tent. These works seemed to fit less well within the three main themes (they did not arise directly from the artist's travels), although they were concerned with the element water. These works are eyecatchers and I think this was the main reason why they were placed on the window side. One of these works was 'Icosahedron,' a geometric figure symbolizing the element of water (Fig. 6).¹¹ According to the artist, many cultures attribute spiritual dimensions to such figures, consisting of energy fields that one could perceive. In this installation the artist, in collaboration with water physicist Elmar Fuchs, did a performance. Here, the energy fields were measured in the icosahedron.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.



Fig.5. 'The Perception of Clouds,' ©Aad Hoogendoorn, 2018.



Fig.6. 'Icosahedron,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.



Fig.7. 'Airgloo,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

The installation 'Airlgloo' consists of fifty discarded, white air conditioners that are stacked and together forming a kind of igloo (Fig. 7).¹² The air conditioners are placed in such a way that they heat the inside of the igloo while the space outside the igloo is made ice cold. Via the installation the visitor can observe in a fairly direct way how the control of the temperature in one place results in an effect on the temperature in another place. In the same room as 'Icosahedron' and 'Airlgloo' the work 'Rock - Paper - Scissors – Water' could be found (Fig. 8).¹³ The work is a text on the wall consisting of these words. Just like the two works mentioned above, this work has water as its theme too. Still, in my view, the work is somewhat out of tune with the works in the main hall. The work is a variation on the game rock - paper - scissors, in which paper wins from rock, rock from scissors and scissors from paper. According to the artist, water always beats everything and everyone.

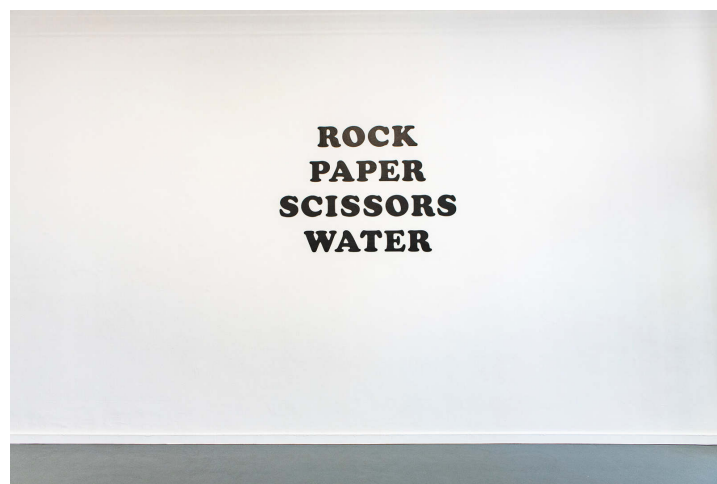


Fig.8. 'Rock – Paper – Scissors – Water,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

The wonder and fascination of the artist with nature and the human interaction with it play a major role in the exhibition. During the exhibition, this bewilderment also came across to me. The aesthetics of the works seemed to speak for themselves in most of the cases. The exhibition was versatile, both in terms of display strategy and the usage of various media. It gave me the idea of the artist actually meaning to show, in every possible way, how beautiful nature is. The spaciousness of the rooms was optimally used for this by the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

installations and large objects, that were often placed in the middle. This invited me to explore this space and view the installations from all sides. These works were so far apart from each other and the wall that I never felt compelled to look at two works at the same time. The same goes for the works on the walls. Each work was literally given space. Despite the fact that there was a great diversity of works, the exhibition never had a messy or restless character. There was always room to distance oneself from a work and give it the chance to let it have effect. Many of the works are narrative in a direct way and are records of the artist's travels. It provided the other works with context, giving the exhibition great cohesion, despite the diversity in works presented. Art review website Jegens & Tevens mentions the fragile and symbolic side of nature that is shown in the exhibition, which I noticed too:

But because of the emphatic use of materials, everything also has a fragile and symbolic charge. International treaties regarding the sea and the protection of the Antarctic are printed on thin porcelain and placed in a bed of cornflower seed. And a hail cannon used by farmers in an attempt to control rainfall is populated by butterfly dolls in the exhibit.¹⁴

The artist aims to point the viewer at the beauty of nature in all its fragility. She does this with overwhelming large-format images of nature, but also in a more subtle way with photos of stones that she found but was not allowed to take, or ripples in the surface of the ocean. She always shows beauty. Nature is always shown in an aesthetic way in her visual work. It is never ugly, nasty or scary. She often shows this beauty of nature in a poetic or symbolic way. In this subchapter I discussed the appearance of the exhibition space, the types of art works, the ways in which they were displayed and the impression it made on me. To me, the works came across as Romantic. In the next subchapter I will explain what I mean with this.

¹⁴ Jegens & Tevens, "Esther Kokmeijer en het material van de wereld," (I translated this citation from Dutch).

1.2 The Romantic attitude towards nature

Before I discuss a selection of works and explain how they lead me to Romanticism, it is first relevant to explain what I mean when I say 'Romantic': what is the Romantic attitude towards nature and how did it arise in the 18th century? During the Romantic period (ca. 1760-1830)¹⁵ a new attitude towards nature arose, catalyzed by the Industrial Revolution. The latter would play a crucial role in the experiencing of nature from that time on. Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a prominent figure in this, who reacted quite pessimistic on the recent technological progressions.¹⁶ He posed that human kind was spoiled by all modern developments in science and the arts. They would not lead to happiness or knowledge of the self, but to distraction and corruption. He described many of these ideas in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality* (1754) and novels *Julie* (1761) and *Emile* (1762).¹⁷ In his novels he sketches an image of a rural, much simpler life, in which the characters are happy. These are people in their natural state: wandering through the quiet woods, without permanent residence and not bothered by technology or war.

Immersing oneself in nature, one always had to go there to experience it. Travel was a necessity for experiencing nature, nature was special and it was seen as always 'somewhere else'. Although travel was required, Rousseau would not see it as a necessary evil, on the contrary:

Never did I think so much, exist so vividly, and experience so much, never have I been so much myself, if I may use that expression, as in the journeys I have taken alone and on foot. Walking stimulates and enlivens thoughts. The sight of the countryside, the succession of pleasant views...absence of everything that makes me feel my dependence, of everything that recalls me to my situation - all these serve to free my spirit, to lend a greater boldness to my thinking, so that I can combine them, select them and make them mine as I will, without fear or restraint.¹⁸

Wandering, and travelling in general, were seen as positive activities. They would be good for the mind and one would truly feel to be alive. Rousseau had much followers in this and

¹⁵ Maxwell, Trumpener, *Cambridge Companion*, 7.

¹⁶ Rousseau, "First Discourse," 46.

¹⁷ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 17-21.

¹⁸ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 158.

many people would feel the same joy as he did, writer Rebecca Solnit points out in her insightful book on the art of walking.¹⁹ Travelling became an emblem of the simple man living the simple life, in harmony with nature and far from modern society. Thus, travel (without too much adornment) became something essentially good to do. This type of travel became common during the 19th century, almost like a religion, it was practiced through all layers of society.²⁰ In this time, the Grand Tour had become a standard feature for the English gentlemen, in which they would see the artworks and monuments of France and Italy.²¹ Writer and social philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who became famous for his book about his two year residency in a forest hut (*Walden*, 1854), wrote in the same lovingly way Rousseau did.²² Yet, Rebecca Solnit explains, for him the Romantic natural experience seemed to be something actually natural, instead of a historical construct. This specific way of looking at travel and nature had become the standard and still exists today. It is the result of three centuries of cultivating of beliefs, tastes and values, Solnit explains in her book.²³ Philosopher Maarten Doorman clarifies how Romanticism still heavily influences the world in general and, more specific, the arts.²⁴ He mentions how Romantic concepts like authenticity, emotionality and the aesthetic experience are relevant up until today. However, so Doorman claims, they are so omnipresent that they hardly get noticed. Our contemporary desires, so he explains, are often Romantic desires. Immersing ourselves in nature is one of them. I see these desires reflected in the work of the artist. In the next three subchapters, a selection of works, from each section of the exhibition, will be subject of visual analysis. In each of these subchapters I will discuss the ways in which the works exhale Romanticism and how they lead me to research the artist's work in the light of the aesthetics of this era.

1.3 Solid

In this section I discuss the artist's works emanating from her travels to Antarctica and the North Pole. These works are grouped in one of the three sections under the denominator

¹⁹ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 17-21.

²⁰ Ibid., 117.

²¹ Ibid., 106.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Doorman, *De Romantische Orde*, 123-131.

'Solid.' Three works, which in my view are exemplary for the artist's Romantic attitude, will be subject of visual analysis. From there I will explicate why I see these works as Romantic, in their ways of visualizing and in the attitude with which they are made. I will discuss the following works: 'Terra Nullius - Ownership and Pioneering on Ice,' 'Stillness, Brash Ice, Pack Ice, Growlers, Bergy Bits and Icebergs,' and 'Stone I Would Have Taken.' Since 2013, the artist works as expedition photographer on the MS Fram from the Norwegian Hurtigruten shipping company, which sails to the Arctic and Antarctic on a regular basis. For the artist, this job was an excuse to visit this part of the world. She then decided to set herself the symbolic task to find and visit the center of gravity of this continent.²⁵ Up until today she did not reach this goal. For the artist, it is the main reason to keep going to Antarctica regularly and visualize these travels in her work.

'Terra Nullius - Ownership and Pioneering on Ice' (Fig. 9) consists of a collection of maps depicting Antarctica. The work demonstrates the artist's fascination for this particular continent. To be more precise, as Antarctica is an inhospitable continent, it demonstrates the hankering for a nature that is still wild, difficult to reach and with harsh circumstances. To me, this seemed as if the artist was preparing for a great and dangerous adventure; an expedition to this perilous part of the planet. Although the maps show the same part of the Earth, none of them look the same. They are made in different periods in history: some of these maps are more than a hundred years old, others are relatively recent. The maps also differ in the countries of their manufacture. Although Antarctica is a continent not belonging to any nation, this collection of maps shows how many countries have dealt with the continent over the years. The maps display how all these countries have had the ambition to mark their presence on the continent with expeditions and scientific research stations, among other ways. In a way that seems demonstrative, the artist has stripped many of the details in the maps with correction tape. As a result, the maps show Antarctica as a blank area that has yet to be discovered and mapped out properly: terra nullius, as the title of the work says. It underlines the artist's desire to discover an untouched part of the world. This longing for a pristine and undiscovered Antarctica seems very similar to the common interest in the Antarctic during the Romantic era. Literary theorist Geoffrey Brackett describes this fascination and explains that "By the turn of the eighteenth century, the

²⁵ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

speculative excitement about the southern continent had become significant”²⁶ and relates it to James Cook's exploration of the southern region of the planet which “in effect united the last of the human populations that had been separated since the polar caps had melted some 11,000 years ago.”²⁷ For artists during the Romantic era, the polar regions embodied a place where the Romantic aesthetics, especially the sublime (which I will discuss in the second chapter), could be experienced.



Fig.9. 'Terra Nullius – Ownership and Pioneering on Ice,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

This craving for adventure is also evident in her video work 'Stillness, Brash Ice, Pack Ice, Growlers, Bergy Bits and Icebergs' (Fig. 10). It consists of a life-size projection on one of the walls in a darkened room within the exhibition space. The video shows tranquil, gliding images of icescapes from the North and South Pole. Here, it is not the craving for adventure or the preparation for an expedition that is presented, but the journey itself. The images move slowly and while passing the viewer's eye. The effect is relaxing and meditative. This effect is enhanced by the accompanying music playing in the video. The music was composed by Rutger Zuydervelt, also known by his artist name Machinefabriek.²⁸ This music made the work stand out and made it appear on the radar of Acloserlisten.com, a review

²⁶ Brackett, "At the End of the Earth," 19-33.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

website specialized in instrumental music. The review discusses the first version of this video work ('Stillness 1'), which was sold on a USB stick and it says:

Postcard aside, the USB stick is only the size of a tie clip, but it holds some of the loveliest images you'll ever see, and with the right cords, can be played on a large screen TV. This is the best way to watch *Stillness*, as these images are vast, nearly beyond comprehension, the result of multiple trips to the Arctic and Antarctic. Esther Kokmeijer has done a magnificent job capturing the grandeur of the ocean, the icebergs, the frozen landscape. Best of all are the indefinable blues: hues best reflected in light and shadow.²⁹

The reviewer is overwhelmed by the magnificence of the natural beauty displayed by the artist. The video also had an overwhelming effect on me. Watching the video, I became fully absorbed in it. The images showed gigantic ice floes that were both beautiful and had the potential to be dangerous. It is the experience of beauty that, in the 18th century, came to be known as the Sublime.³⁰ The term was coined by philosopher Edmund Burke in 1757 in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. I will go into this in more detail in the second chapter.



Fig.10. 'Stillness, Brash Ice, Pack Ice, Growlers, Bergy Bits and Icebergs,' ©Aad Hoogendoorn, 2018.

²⁹ A Closer Listen, "Esther Kokmeijer."

³⁰ Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, 159.



Fig.11. 'Stone I Would Have Taken', ©Aad Hoogendoorn, 2018.

In her work 'Stone I Would Have Taken' (Fig. 11) the artist photographs the stones she finds during her hike to Antarctica.³¹ Because many countries have agreed upon the protection of Antarctica, this continent must remain untouched. Because of this, she only takes pictures of the stones. These are the stones that she would otherwise have taken as a souvenir. In the work, which consists of ten framed prints, the five photographs on the left of each print show her hand with the stone at the location of finding. In these photos, the stones have been cut away. The five photos on the right show these stones, cut out following their silhouette, without the context of their finding place. The search for interesting or beautiful stones on Antarctica shows the artist's urge to discover and perhaps even appropriate the land. By not actually taking the stones with her, she acknowledges the unaffectedness of the continent. Ironically, she does go there herself to let us reflect on the beauty of this place. The photographs are presented in a grid, which gives the work a sense of neutrality and an almost scientific clarity. The work tells the viewer that the artist, acting like an explorer or researcher, is occupied mapping the 'unknown' territory of Antarctica.

³¹ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

1.4 Liquid

The section 'Liquid' dealt with the artist's travels to the Marshall Islands. First, I will briefly introduce this project. Subsequently, I discuss three works that, in my view, are exemplary for the visual messages the artist propagates in her work: the visual diary of 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging,' 'The Path through the Waves,' and 'The Backbone Swell.' After a visual analysis, I will explain why I think they radiate Romanticism. Since 2018 the artist is involved in a big ongoing project called 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging.'³² For this project the artist travels to the Marshall Islands, accompanying a group of scientists. Both the artist and the scientists are concerned with the disappearing of an ancient navigation technique employed by the islanders, in which they use the swells and waves of the ocean to find their way. They want to save this tradition from extinction. For this they work together with the local inhabitants, of which Alson Kelen, a canoe builder, is a key figure. He is seen as the keeper of knowledge on sea navigation. Together they strive to build a bridge between the western world and the indigenous culture.

'Deep Meaning of Voyaging' is the title of the artist's overarching project concerning the Marshall Islands.³³ She records the journeys she makes for this project in photo sequences. She shows these photos on TV screens in a small, separate room at the back of the exhibition (Fig 12). The photos are provided with texts in which the artist explains what can be seen on them and what her journey is about. Here again, I focus on the visual language of her work. In my view, the photos all, more or less, exhale the Romantic attitude. Yet, I have selected, also for practical reasons, four of the photos that show this best. The top photo shows the Marshall Islands as an untouched paradise: blue sea, palm trees and pristine nature. To me, it came across as artificial. I had a hard time believing this would in any way be representative of this place. It is the type of nature that the Romantic-minded traveler would hope to encounter. From a Romantic theoretical perspective, I will explain this longing in more detail in the second chapter. The pictures also show local inhabitants. These people have been portrayed as if they are in close contact with their old traditions and the natural environment. A girl plays a ukulele and does so with apparent ease, as the wind blows in her hair and the boat moves on. Showing music making confirms this notion of

³² Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

³³ Ibid.

harmony with nature. Traditional decoration can be seen on the sail of the boat. In the bottom photo, next to the pristine surroundings, an authentic Marshallese boat is shown. The artist has, by means of picture framing, ensured that only ancient traditional culture of the islanders and pristine nature could be seen. Western influences (the Marshall Islands were an American colony not so long ago) have been left out of the pictures. In one of the photos, the artist can be seen handling the rudder of a traditional canoe. For a short moment, she behaves as one of the locals and shows this to the public.



Fig.12. 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

Like the photo sequence, the installation 'The Path through the Waves' (Fig. 13) presents the Marshallese as 'other' or 'exotic.'³⁴ On the wall, various objects are mounted which Kokmeijer received from the islanders. They are all traditional objects made from natural materials from the local, Marshallese surroundings. The objects include shells, necklaces, an amulet and stick charts. The latter are ancient navigational instruments made from sticks, coco fiber and shells (Fig. 13). Stick charts are used to memorize the ocean swells. Covering

³⁴ Ibid.

the objects, a projected computer simulation of the wave movements, made by TU Delft, can be seen. This presentation juxtaposes Marshallese traditional objects to the latest Western wave technology called SWASH.³⁵ This simulation provides a general basis for describing wave transformations from deep water to a beach, port or harbor, complex changes to rapidly varied flows, and density driven flows in coastal seas, estuaries, lakes and rivers. To me, it was remarkable how 'The Path through the Waves' stresses differences between cultures. The visual message I read in the work is the confirmation of the image of Western civilization being highly developed, with all sorts of technical possibilities. At the same time, the work portrays the Marshallese as different or even primitive. Like the characters described by Rousseau, the Marshallese are portrayed 'in their natural state' living the 'simple life.' Therefore, I consider this imaging Romantic.

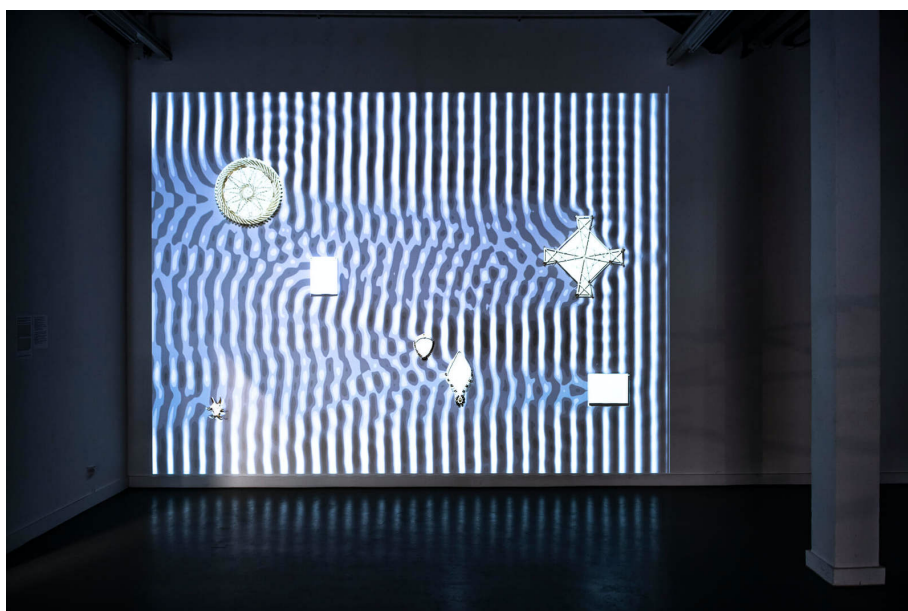


Fig.13. 'Path through the Waves,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

The last work I will discuss is 'The Backbone Swell,' which consists of four photos that focus on the surface of the ocean (Fig. 14).³⁶ The title refers to a strong swell in the Pacific, the most important wave movement for sea navigators to get to feel and know. The photos have a large depth of field: the foreground is out of focus and further on in the photo it is extremely sharp. In other photos, the background is less sharp than the foreground. Every

³⁵ TU Delft, "SWASH."

³⁶ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

wrinkle in the surface can be seen. The photos show the versatility in forms the ocean is capable of taking. The different shapes that the water can take are shown in detail in the photos. As if they were portraits of the ocean. The grazing light falling on the waves, I think evening or morning light, enhances this effect. For me, it brings to mind the carefree enjoyment of watching the sun set on a paradise location. Once again, the artist shows the untouched beauty of the ocean, demonstrating the Romantic desire for remote, paradise places.

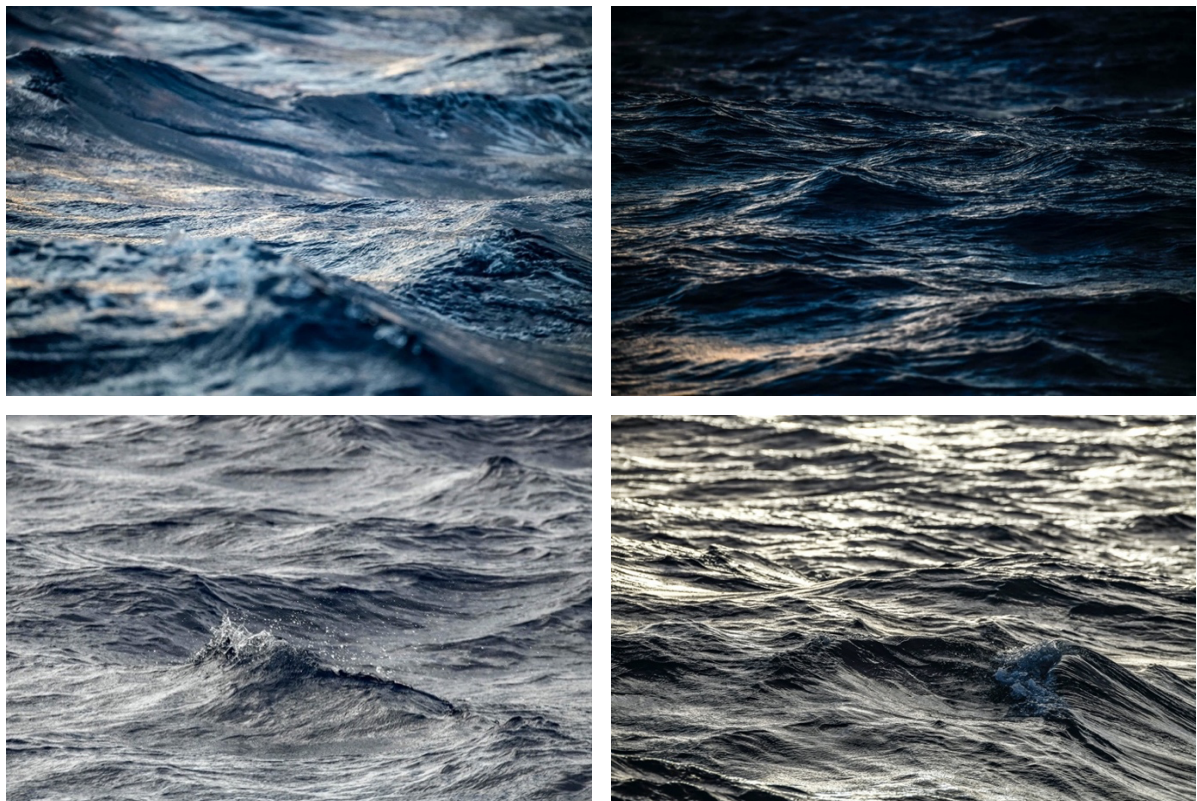


Fig.14. 'The Backbone Swell,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

1.5 Vapour

Vapour refers to the artist's works resulting from her travels to China. In the exhibition, these works are classified under the heading 'Vapour.' I discuss one work that in my view is typical of the visual messages it conveys: 'Vapour.' The visual analysis will help to explain why I think it exhales Romanticism. The theme 'Vapour' encompasses the works that have emerged from the artist's research project on the human influence on the weather in

China.³⁷ China is very ambitious in the field of weather influencing, the artist explains, and has a leading role from a scientific point of view. The artificial weather intervention center of the China Meteorological Administration (CMA) possesses the power to let it rain in places where it is deemed necessary.³⁸ In 2014, this was the reason for the artist to travel to China.³⁹ She spent six months at the Institute for Provocation (IFP) in Beijing to research weather modification. One of the things she did here was participating in a meteorological course. One of the things she did during this course was making a field trip to a base where cloud seeding, as the process is called, is tested and performed. In the spring of 2016, she went back to search for a used weather missile. In order to do this, she crossed the mountains near Beijing, heading for a village that is known for their ancient rain dances involving drum rituals. She found a used missile and brought it back to her Chinese residency to cut it in three pieces. The three pieces were separately smuggled to the Netherlands.

The work 'Vapour' is an installation consisting of several parts (Fig. 15.). Firstly, the missile that she found in the mountains near Beijing and then sawed into three pieces. The three separate pieces are mounted next to each other against the wall of the exhibition space. Above the missile, a large photo can be seen showing the missile as it was found by the artist in the mountains. Below the missile a display has been mounted against the wall with documentation material about her stay at the IFP and the course the artist took there. On another wall hangs a television showing a video and a sequence of photos (Fig. 16). They are images of the artist's stay in China, the hike she made and the course she took there.⁴⁰ Together they tell the story of the artists' journey. They narrate how the artist made a hike through the wild mountains near Beijing, found a missile and smuggled it to the Netherlands. The large photo shows a simple mountain path with lots of greenery around it, showing the rural side of China. Again, nature seems untouched here. Yet, one dissonating element is present: a bright blue missile. This contrasts in color with the green background, makes the object stand out. It is a remarkable find. The object does not seem to fit in this environment at all because it is a man-made object in a natural, rural environment. At the same time, this object, a high-tech product underscores the naturalness and rurality of the context in which it is found.

³⁷ TENT Rotterdam, "Esther Kokmeijer – Solid, Liquid, Vapour."

³⁸ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The upper left photo shows the artist and is made by Derrick Wang.



Fig.15. Part of the installation 'Vapour,' ©Aad Hoogendoorn, 2018.



Fig.16. Photo from the installation 'Vapour,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2016.

To recapitulate, this chapter has introduced the exhibition 'Solid, Liquid, Vapour,' the visual work of the artist, the themes dealt with and my reading of it. Although the artist is concerned with the relationship between man and nature, most often however it is her own desires we see reflected in her work: a craving for adventure, beauty and the unknown. I focused on her visual (non-textual) work because it is so different from her textual work. Her visual work propagates something very different than her textual work. This creates a field of tension that is hard to negate. On the one hand, I see her visual work, as well as the attitude with which she approaches the world, as heavily influenced by Romanticism. On the other hand, the statements she makes are not 'Romantic' at all, but demonstrate a critical attitude towards the ways in which humans treat the planet. This ambiguity in the artist's work will form the subject of the next chapter. It will start with the artist's statements, in which she demonstrates this critical attitude. From there, these statements will be confronted with three Romantic aesthetic concepts that I see mostly reflected in the artist's work: Wanderlust, the notion of the 'noble savage' and the Sublime.

CHAPTER 2

Romantic aesthetics versus Ecocritical Statements

The exhibition 'Solid, Liquid, Vapor' led me to a discussion of the artist's work in light of Romanticism. The works, part of the exhibition, gave me an idea of freedom, a sense of the vastness of the world, seeking the unknown and its uncertainties. The following part of the artist's statement on her website confirms this notion:

Curiosity and wonder are my primary motivation. The world at large, in all its connections and movements, forms the main focus of my work, finding expression in journeys, installations, interventions, photo series, documentaries, sculptures, film essays, books, and performances among others. I'm questioning the origins of nature through mapping the intersections between man-made and 'natural' forms of reality.⁴¹

In the last sentence of this quote the artist talks about questioning the origins of humans and nature as if they were a unity once. Whereas the artist aims to reconnect man and nature, the idea of such 'reconnection' seems to come straight from the Romantic era. Here is the dilemma, on the one hand, the artist is engaged with the idea that human and non-human life should be reconnected, but on the other hand, she does this in such a romanticized way that the message may be lost in the (too?) beautified visuals. This field of tension is the subject of this chapter.

In order to investigate this, first the artist's statements will be discussed, which I would call ecocritical, rather than Romantic. Here, her intentions will become clear. Her statements deal with the human impact on the Earth. Therefore, I will also introduce the concept of the Anthropocene in this section. This term is more and more used by academics to indicate the geological period in which humans are seen as the determining factor in shaping the Earth. In subchapters two to four, I demonstrate how I see the Romantic aesthetic concepts of Wanderlust, the 'noble savage' and the sublime represented in the artist's work and how they bring about the aforementioned field of tension. In each subchapter, these concepts will be explained, employing artworks from the Romantic period. Subsequently, these works will be compared to the artist's work to clarify how I see

⁴¹ Esther Kokmeijer, "Artist Statement."

the artist's visual work reflecting this Romantic aesthetics and how this consistently contradicts her own statements about nature.

2.1 The Ecocritical Texts of Kokmeijer

Where, on the one hand, the artist's visual work seems to radiate Romanticism, her texts, on the other hand, demonstrate a contemporary environmental awareness that I would call ecocriticist. I will firstly explain what ecocriticism is and why I label the artist's statements as ecocritical. In particular, I will discuss the term Anthropocene, a concept widely used by ecocritics, and why it is fruitful employing this term when testing the artist's statements against her visual work. In the introduction of the *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication* (2019) ecocriticism is described as an "academic discipline or movement" which employs "environmental approaches to textual analysis and cultural studies."⁴² Literary theorist David Mazel summarizes the development of the field of ecocriticism, referring to it as "the study of literature as if the environment mattered."⁴³ English professor Ken Hiltner highlights the efforts of ecocritics since 2000 to avoid romanticizing nature and to take up such issues as social justice, the impact of colonial development, the global expansiveness of ecological issues and the ontological question of 'nature.'⁴⁴ Ecocriticism emerged from literary studies and is now embraced by art historians as well. This field of study deals with art that thematizes nature and our environment in general and is thus opposed to the romantic take on nature. Although I consider the artist's work Romantic, this is not what people discuss when the artist's work appears in the media. It is usually about her realistic view of the deteriorating condition of the Earth and her desire to make a difference in this. The online art magazine *Jegens en Tevens* also emphasize this ecocritical attitude of the artist's work:

Kokmeijer wants to take us along in her observations about the physical state of the world. To this end, she has mapped out her own route in the TENT exhibition rooms. It immediately becomes clear that Kokmeijer is concerned about the current state of our planet, and about the role we play in it.⁴⁵

⁴² Slovic, *Handbook Ecocriticism*, 1-13.

⁴³ Mazel, *Early Ecocriticism*, 1.

⁴⁴ Hiltner, "Second-Wave Ecocriticism," 131–133.

⁴⁵ Jegens & Tevens, "Esther Kokmeijer en het material van de wereld," (I translated this citation from Dutch).

The artist's texts make statements about the environment too. When the artist herself speaks about her work, it is always this aspect of her work that is addressed:

I wonder how 'landscapes' are given shape by people and vice versa.

In my work as an artist, explorer and designer, I mainly focus on the interaction between humans and their natural environment. In many of my works the 'Global Commons' play a role. A term typically used to describe international, supranational, and global resource domains. Global commons include the Earth's shared natural resources, such as the high oceans, the atmosphere and outer space and the Antarctic in particular.

How do we relate to and work with the elements and our environment? How do they exert influence on us? More importantly, what are humanity's effects on geological and biological processes? What can we learn from indigenous knowledge systems, can it deepen or induce a more sustainable relationship to our natural environment, and will it bring more solidarity with the landscape?⁴⁶

A recurring theme in her statements is human interaction with the Earth. In her statements she is idealistic: she hopes to learn how people can deal with the natural environment in a sustainable way in the near future. She explains how humankind has been shaped by its surroundings, but has itself increasingly become a determining factor in the shaping of the Earth. Since 2000 academics even speak of this in terms of geological time scale and call it the Anthropocene. This term is used to signal and discuss the impact of collective human activity on biological, physical and chemical processes on and around the surface of the Earth.⁴⁷ With this, a geological and historical time is indicated in which humanity is the most determining factor in shaping the Earth, explains historian Alan Mikhail.⁴⁸ The Anthropocene as a concept has been discussed widely in both philosophical and scientific terms. However, never has the impact of human activities been seriously discussed as a potential force in the bigger picture of the geological time scale. Although the concept was taken seriously and has been part of ongoing widespread academic debate, there has never been consensus. In particular the idea of humankind adding up to the geological time scale was never fully accepted. Partly this is because of the duration of human civilization, which is extremely

⁴⁶ Esther Kokmeijer, "Artist Statement."

⁴⁷ Crutzen 'Anthropocene,' 17–18.

⁴⁸ Mikhail, "Enlightenment Anthropocene," 211.

brief from a geological perspective. Also, the modification of Earth's surface by humans is often seen as small when compared with the alterations resulting from natural processes taking place over relatively long geological time spans.⁴⁹ Another point of criticism is speaking of humanity as a whole, while greenhouse gas emissions are not evenly distributed across humanity. Mikhail states that "the numbers are clear. Twenty percent of humanity is responsible for eighty percent of all greenhouse gas emissions" and "about a sixth of the world's population has consumption levels so close to zero that they do not even register in the measure of greenhouse gas emissions."⁵⁰ Also problematic is the central position given to humankind in the Anthropocene, which complicates equality between man and nature. However, since the term was coined, the Anthropocene had a more positive reception and has been widely (and is increasingly) used in academic debate, says paleobiologist Jan Zalasiewicz.⁵¹ More and more, certain types of anthropogenic changes may now be compared with those of "the great forces of nature," writers Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen and John McNeill explain.⁵² According to many academics, the Anthropocene should be seen as beginning at the end of the 18th century, says Mikhail.⁵³ He explains how analysis of air trapped in ice from this time shows growing concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane.⁵⁴ He then points out how this event coincides with the invention of Watt's steam engine and the beginning of the Romantic period. Since this time, these carbon dioxide and methane concentrations are increasing. Also, from this time onwards, Western man, polluting their environment, has the greatest impact on the Earth. In my view, this impact on the planet and the Romantic attitude towards nature, which both emanate from Western civilization, are closely related to each other. Pollution of the environment resulted in a desire for unpolluted (authentic) nature, which could often be seen in the art of this period. The romanticized visualization of nature is still dominant today and contributes to the human impact on the planet. Although the artist's statements on nature demonstrate an awareness of the current state of the planet, her visual work communicates the Romantic desire for untouched nature. This has exactly the opposite effect of what the artist and

⁴⁹ Berry, "Psychozoic," 16.

⁵⁰ Mikhail, "Enlightenment Anthropocene," 211.

⁵¹ Zalasiewicz, "Stratigraphy of the Anthropocene," 1036–1055.

⁵² Steffen, "The Anthropocene," 614–621.

⁵³ Mikhail, "Enlightenment Anthropocene," 211.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

ecocritics aim for. In each of the next three subchapters, a Romantic aesthetic concept will be the point of departure. Thereafter will be demonstrated how I see this aesthetics in the artist's work and how it contributes to the human impact on the planet, thus contradicting her own statements.

2.2 Wanderlust

First my aim is now to make clear on the basis of the notion of Wanderlust how the artist's work does exactly the opposite of what she envisions in her statements. I will explain the Romantic concept of Wanderlust and subsequently demonstrate how I read this in the work of the artist. I will mainly revert to the project 'Vapour', which has been introduced in the first chapter. To support my argument, the artist's work will be compared with Casper David Friedrich's work 'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog.' Not only does the artist's work seem to be a visual echo of Friedrich's painting, I also choose for this comparison because it is a key work from Romanticism in which the Romantic attitude towards nature and travel can be read from the work.

Professor in German literature Theodore Gish discusses the Romantic concept of Wanderlust and explains how fleeing urban areas to wander through nature became a dominant symbolism in Germany in the post-Industrial Revolution period.⁵⁵ In later years the term became known as a strong desire to travel and explore the world. Gish explains about the origin of the aesthetic concept of Wanderlust that:

The early German Romanticists enthusiastically believed that *Sehnsucht* was an intimation of ultimate reality. Because of its absolute nature, however, many of them realized that it was bound to encourage in their art a certain semblance of imperfection. In order, therefore, to account for this unavoidable incompleteness within Romantic art, the notion developed that a sense of *werden*, of progression or 'becoming' should be the dominant aesthetic character of this new art.⁵⁶

Here, Gish describes Wanderlust as a necessary process of becoming that arises from a feeling of incompleteness, which is the result of an unattainable ideal: *Sehnsucht* (nostalgia).

⁵⁵ Gish, "Wanderlust," 225-39.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

This notion of becoming is the (harsh) road to this unattainable ideal, fired by yearning. In Romantic art, this yearning is often expressed in the work. Gish says that

the Romanticists' love of music, the propensity for lyricism and rhetoric in their language, the aphoristic tendency of their thoughts, as well even as the often fragmentary nature of their literary works and their many unfinished plans attest, if only indirectly, to the importance for the romantic poet of yearning and the role of *werden* in Romantic art.⁵⁷

Also, this feeling of incompleteness has led to an unsatisfactory feeling and urge to travel and explore the world. During the Romantic period, many artists incorporated the idea of Wanderlust into their work, says Gish.⁵⁸ In German literature from this time, the most famous main characters are wandering, world famous wanderers from world literature and mythology, such as Ulysses, Cain, the Wandering Jew and Don Quixote, inspired the Romantics in their endeavors.⁵⁹ The greatest influence for the Romantics, according to Gish, was probably the poet and writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe with his novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774), in which the tragic protagonist Werther is completely guided by his feelings.⁶⁰ At the time of Romanticism, Gish explains, the wanderer symbolism became dominant and became more common in other art forms, including painting. About the character of the wanderer in the arts, he states:

As a literary figure, moreover, the Romantic wanderer operates within an anthropocentric world. By means of a vocabulary (verbs, verbal nouns and adverbs) and syntax (parallel and paratactic constructions) connoting motion, by the use of kinetic images of light, color, sound and space, finally by the inclusion of natural motion imagery (wind, cloud, water and bird images) and that of human design (mill wheels and fountains), the Romanticists created a world in flux harmoniously reflecting and encouraging the wanderer's peripatetic existence.⁶¹

Both in language (literature) and in images (visual arts) Romantic artists aim to express the notion of movement. It is striking that everything in the image serves to portray the Wanderlust of the protagonist, even nature. So, nature is used to show what people feel. As a result, people are always central, not nature. This is exactly the opposite of what

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

ecocritics want. One of the important goals of ecocriticism, as ecocritics Sabine Lenore Müller and Tina-Karen Pusse discuss in the introduction of *From Ego to Eco: Mapping Shifts from Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism*, is to arrive at a way of thinking in which not people are central, but the environment.⁶² In her statements, the artist also aims for an equal and sustainable relationship between man and nature. The following quote bears witness to this:

What can we learn from indigenous knowledge systems, can it deepen or induce a more sustainable relationship to our natural environment, and will it bring more solidarity with the landscape?⁶³

I sensed a yearning for the necessary exploration of the world, which I relate to *Wanderlust*, in many of the artist's works. As an example, I have chosen a photo from her photo diary of the project 'Vapour,' in which she researches weather modification and makes a hike through the mountains near Beijing (Fig. 18). I compare this work with the 'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog' (1817) by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840; Fig. 17), possibly the most famous painter of the Romantic era. Although it concerns different media, a painting and a photo, in my view there are important similarities that justify the comparison. In both works a distant view over misty mountains with a wandering human figure is represented. Most importantly, both images are the result of a romanticized idea of nature (unpolluted and untouched) that the artist had when creating the work. Rather than real nature, it is this idea of nature that determined the result. Friedrich had never seen his landscapes as such, but composed them with the help of many sketches.⁶⁴ At the time, Kokmeijer did not see her image as such either, because someone else took the photo of her.

In the painting, a man is seen from behind, looking out on a vast, misty landscape in the mountains, while his hair moves in the wind. The central placed figure stands between the viewer and the mountain landscape being viewed. The viewer cannot see the entire distance because of the main figure who himself looks into the distance as far as the fog allows to.⁶⁵ It is the aforementioned, unsatisfying feeling of incompleteness that can be sensed here. This makes the viewer sympathize with the wanderer (and the artist).

⁶² Müller, *Ego to Eco*, 1-15.

⁶³ Esther Kokmeijer, "Artist Statement."

⁶⁴ Hinrichs, "Das Eismeer," 133.

⁶⁵ Haladyn, "Friedrich's Wanderer," 47-61.

The photograph shows the artist, traversing the mountains near Beijing with luggage on her back. A big difference is the size of the main figure, the artist occupies only a small part of the photo. The artist is dwarfed next to the grandeur of nature. Still, the work and the natural elements that can be found in it are all about her and her travel. In the photo, the setting sun suggests movement and the passage of time. The same applies to the, what looks like patches of fog, which are volatile natural elements. However, I do not think these are actual patches of fog. I would say it is smog (as I will call it from now on) because Beijing is one of the most smog-polluted areas of the world and this area is right next to the city.⁶⁶ Yet, the artist seems to suggest an unpolluted, misty mountain area. The vast green mountains with smog make the artist's goal invisible; it is not clear where she is going. We can only see the immense depth, which suggests the artist still has a long distance to go. The goal remains unknown, as in Friedrich's painting. The artist could not see this depth at the time the photo was taken. In the photo, she misses an overview because of the dense vegetation and because she is not standing on a high viewpoint. This too can cause compassion with the main figure, as in Friedrich's painting but in a slightly different way. However, the artist was able to see the view and the smog when she selected the photo to exhibit. Her goal to "find expression in journeys" suggests there was a pre-existing idea that needed to be expressed.⁶⁷ This picture suited this idea well.



Fig.17. Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, Caspar David Friedrich, 1817, ©The Yorck Project.



Fig.18. Photo from the project Vapour, ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2016.

⁶⁶ BBC, "Beijing."

⁶⁷ Esther Kokmeijer, "Artist Statement."

For the Romantics, so says Gish, Wanderlust was always driven by an unattainable ideal. Yet people remained driven to pursue this. Gish explains this motivation as follows:

Motivated by his personal memory or by the collective memory of his age, the Romantic hero often embarks upon a *Wanderschaft*, into the spatial distance, hoping to find there the verities of the past so cherished by the Romanticists: the simplicity of childhood, the stability of the *ancient régime* or the Catholicism of the Middle Ages.⁶⁸

The cultural phenomenon of *Wanderschaft*, mentioned by Gish, is mostly applied to the so-called journeymen who would make a trip after apprenticeship as craftsmen and is closely related to the symbolism of *Wanderlust*.⁶⁹ The Romantic goals of returning to a time that may or may never have existed are unattainable, which makes the wanderer by definition a tragic figure. In most cases, the artist's work demonstrates this idea of *Wanderlust*. In my view, her artistic practice revolves around it. The works that will be discussed later in this chapter also exhale this hankering for travel. In all of her projects, the artist goes "into the spatial distance to find verities from the past"⁷⁰, for example, in her project 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging,' in which she searches for an old, authentic Marshallese tradition that is in danger of being lost. During her Polar expeditions she goes in search of untouched wilderness in Antarctica; the type of nature as it would have been everywhere in a distance past. The remarkable thing is, by reaching such 'untouched' nature, she instantly makes it a 'touched' area. She says the following about her project 'Vapour' in Beijing: "taking the weather modification base in the suburbs of Beijing as a starting point, I crossed the mountains towards a village that I discovered to be known for their ancient rain dances involving drum rituals."⁷¹ Here too, the artist's long journey seems intended to find something original from the past in today's world. As was the case with the Romantic artists, these ideals can seldom be fully satisfied. She did not witness such a rain dance or drum ritual.⁷²

Now that climate issues have become a bigger problem, this ideal image of pristine nature is probably even more unrealistic for the artist than for the Romantic artists at the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

⁷² Mister Motley, "Esther Kokmeijer."

time. The photograph, like Friedrich's painting, suggests the Romantic ideal of remote and untouched nature, but it is not. By not portraying the nearby city and leaving it open as to whether we are dealing with smog or fog, the artist suggests the existence of an untouched nature. In her aforementioned statement, the artist claims to be concerned with the human impact on the planet, including its atmosphere. It is remarkable in my view that she walks through one of the most air-polluted areas in the world, the smog can even be seen in the photo, and does not address this problem in her work. In my view, this shows how dominant the Romantic attitude is in the artist's work and how contradictory it is to her intentions to do something about the climate problem. Because of their Romantic nature, works like 'Vapour,' along with most of the artist's work, encourage people to travel to visit these kinds of places. As a result, they would contribute to the human impact on the planet rather than foster awareness of the deteriorated state Earth is currently in.

2.3 The Noble Savage

So, according to Gish, the wandering Romantic artist seeks for something authentic from past times. The noble savage is an example of this. I will firstly explain what the noble savage is, discuss an example from the Romantic era and then demonstrate how I see the noble savage in the artist's project 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging.' Next, I confront her visual work with the statements she makes to show how this contradicts her desire for a sustainable symbiosis between humans and the Earth. For this, I will also draw from postcolonial sources.

The idea of the noble savage can best be described as a myth, rather than a concrete concept. So says ethnomusicologist Ter Ellingson, who wrote extensively on the topic.⁷³ He argues that the noble savage is a longstanding myth, of which the origin has never been satisfactorily identified. Along with the oriental, the idea of the savage formed an ethnographic paradigm in Europe, closely related to colonialism, which has existed for hundreds of years. He states:

The "savage" and the "oriental" were the two great ethnographic paradigms developed by European writers during the age of exploration and colonialism; and the symbolic opposition between "wild" and "domesticated" peoples, between "savages" and "civilization," was constructed as part of the discourse of European

⁷³ Ellingson, Noble Savage, 14.

hegemony, projecting cultural inferiority as an ideological ground for political subordination. For most of the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the American Indians constituted the paradigmatic case for the “savage,” and the term was most widely applied to them.⁷⁴

Although the noble savage is usually related to the Romantic era, it is not a Romantic invention. The term noble savage was coined in 1609, about half a century before Rousseau, by Marc Lescarbot, a French lawyer and ethnographer, as a concept in comparative law, so Ellingson explains.⁷⁵ The word savage suggests the (former) existence of a ‘wild’ culture, living in the closeness of nature. The term was not seen as negative, rather it was used as a glorification of people who supposedly had not lost touch with nature. However, the idea of the noble savage during the Romantic era did receive a great impulse and a renewed connotation through the forementioned works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁷⁶ Still, he never used this term.⁷⁷ He spoke at length about the beauty of a simple life in harmony with nature. Yet, the noble savage can be seen as a Romantic aesthetic concept because the idea (although the term was not used) has been fully embraced by many Romantic artists who used it in poems, literature and visual arts. In North America, as Ellingson points out, Native Americans were generally the subject, but for the Romantics, any culture that seemed to live closer to nature than themselves could suffice as noble savage.⁷⁸ The 1770 painting ‘The Death of General Wolfe’ by Benjamin West is a clear example of an artwork in which the noble savage plays a main role (Fig 19). Native Americans, wearing traditional clothes, can be seen in the front left of the painting. They are portrayed not as aggressive or wild, but as noble, honorable people who were seen as a culture living more in harmony with nature than the non-Native Americans. West demonstrated this closeness to nature by depicting the Native American with bare feet, only wearing a striped trade blanket, his bare back painted with snakes, his hair decorated with feathers and *wampum* (a string of beads or shells).⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 15-16.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Fryd, “Death of General Wolfe,” 72-85.



Fig 19 The Death of General Wolfe, Benjamin West, 1770, ©The Yorck Project.

After the Romantic era, the idea of the noble savage, although controversial, has remained dominant in Western society. This is because, according to Ellingson, anthropology scholars, including John Crawford, appropriated the term from the second half of the 19th century:

We will see the concept of the noble savage virtually disappear for more than two hundred years, without reemerging in Rousseau or his contemporaries, until it is finally resurrected in 1859 by John Crawford, soon to become president of the Ethnological Society of London, as part of a racist coup within the society. It is Crawford's construction, framed as part of a program of ideological support for an attack on anthropological advocacy of human rights, that creates the myth as we know it, including the false attribution of authorship to Rousseau; and Crawford's version becomes the source for every citation of the myth by anthropologists from Lubbock, Tylor, and Boas through the scholars of the late twentieth century.⁸⁰

Although Kokmeijer is no anthropologist, she adopts strategies from this field in her work. The previous chapter showed how she researches the culture of the Marshall Islands and presents Marshallese artifacts in her exhibition. As many anthropologists at the beginning of the 20th century were influenced by Crawford's romanticized version of the noble savage,

⁸⁰ Ellingson, *Noble Savage*, 15-16.

the artist seems similarly influenced by this concept. In her project 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging' she researches the ancient tradition of wave navigation. She states the following about this:

One aspect of wave navigation and navigation with natural resources in general, is the essential connection with your surroundings. I believe that if we would find back our connection and understanding of 'our natural surrounding' that we would care more for the Earth. I think that learning from indigenous knowledge systems can help us to deepen this connection.⁸¹

One strategy of anthropology is to live together with a culture to get to know it better. The artist does this with the underlying goal of learning from the Marshallese. Ultimately, she wants people to learn how to coexist with nature and thus reduce their impact on the planet. It is as if she wishes to return to a time before the Anthropocene. The visuals of 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging' will not lead to a more respectful relationship with Earth, in contrary. I will explain why. In 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging' the artist does not show the situation on the Marshall Islands as it factually is, although the documentary style does suggest this. The pictures are idealized, romanticized and everything seems perfect (Fig 20.). In reality, there is a lot going on. "Due climate change there are many islands and even complete nations in the Pacific in danger of disappearing,"⁸² the artist explains. This prospect makes it "important for the inhabitants of the Pacific Ocean-scape to unite and transmit cultural and empirical knowledge of the ocean, which could get lost if forced migration,"⁸³ she stresses. Knowledge about wave navigation is in danger of being lost and there is only one person left who knows anything about how this technique works.⁸⁴ This is Alson Kelen, a canoe builder, climate activist and director of the *Waan Aelōñ in Majel* programme, which aims to "raise public awareness, while transferring knowledge and appreciation of Marshallese culture."⁸⁵ So, the Marshallese are living in a problematic situation, rather than in paradise.

⁸¹ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Canoes Marshall Islands, "Mission Statement."



Fig. 20 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

By showing images in which the islanders seem to live in perfect harmony with their natural environment, demonstrate to be skilled in navigating the ocean and by not showing the problems that prompted her research, she sends out a contradictory message. To me, the photographs look like holiday brochures or pictures, as they can be found on social media platforms like Instagram. The photos connote that the Marshall Islands are a beautiful place to be, because they show how pristine nature and an authentic culture, that successfully lives in close proximity to this nature, still exist today. From a postcolonial perspective, tourism theorist Sean Smith argues that this idealizing emanates from the Romantic attitude and how it is harmful for the island's nature and its inhabitants.⁸⁶ Smith describes how the Pacific in general, for many years, has provided European imperialism with a kind of *tabula rasa* for their fantasies, where the conventions and imaginaries of the colonial endeavor were freely exercised.⁸⁷ This would eventually translate to the real seizure of land in the development of resort enclaves that are priced to exclude local inhabitants, he argues. This is exactly the imaginary way the Marshall Islands get portrayed so regularly by

⁸⁶ Smith, "Instagram Abroad," 172-191.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

the artist. Her photographs show the archetypical features of a tropical island destination: sun, blue skies, beach, palm trees and clear water. Some of the artist's pictures could represent any tropical island (Fig. 20). Postcolonial theorist Uma Kothari describes these tropical destinations as "ahistoricized," stripped of their unique identity and "devolved to the genericized imagery of the tropical exotic."⁸⁸ It is the tropical exotic many people would like to visit for a holiday. The artist's photos encourage to go there and book a flight to enjoy this paradise and meet these beautiful people. Even if you would not book a trip to the Marshall Islands, the images are still reassuring: the human impact on the Earth is not too bad and things are still going well on these flood-prone islands.

Although the notion of the noble savage might seem respectful, because the Romantics see it as an ideal, it does not mean there is equality. The idea of the noble savage is based on the idea of the civilized (distanced from nature) Western man versus the uncivilized (close to nature) 'savage'. From a higher hierarchical position, the Romantic Westerner looks down at the savage. Like Ellingson, the artist also mentions and criticizes colonialism and capitalism which have resulted in inequality and, as she puts it, a disastrous approach to nature:

Currently the traditional knowledge is undergoing a revival, initiated by grassroots organizations and in collaboration with scientists and activists from the diaspora. This involves the revitalization of knowledge and culture, but also the conviction that sustainable alternatives are included for the legacies of the disastrous approach to nature through colonialism and the global capitalism that the region today struggles.⁸⁹

The quote demonstrates that the artist wants to work on countering the climate problem, in collaboration with the Marshallese. She is convinced this is the key to a sustainable approach to nature. Equality between Marshallese and non-Marshallese people is a fundamental condition for this collaboration. The artist's photo series embody the Romantic idea of the noble savage, and with it inequality and the suggestion of an existing paradise. This brings about the exact opposite of what the artist wants to achieve, according to her own statements. The artist's photographs do not add up to a sustainable approach to nature. Rather, they contribute to the human impact on the planet.

⁸⁸ Kothari, "Reworking Colonial Imaginaries," 248–626.

⁸⁹ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

2.4 The Sublime

Like the aesthetic concepts discussed previously, the sublime is a core concept within the romantic tradition. Firstly, I will elaborate on the term. Next, the artist's works 'Stillness, Millions of Winters, Two Summers' ('Stillness one') and 'Stillness, Brash Ice, Pack Ice, Growlers, Bergy Bits and Icebergs' ('Stillness two') will be compared to Friedrich's 'Das Eismeer', and lastly I will explain how the idea of the sublime counteracts the artist's statements.

In the Romantic period, the beauty of nature could also be reflected in the dangerous sides of nature. Philosopher Edmund Burke, who published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1757, made the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful.⁹⁰ Where the beautiful embodies smoothness, elegance and gracefulness, in the sublime we can also find the opposite: disharmonic, irregular and terrifying shapes. In the sublime, these shapes can be overwhelming beautiful at the same time. All things terrifying (especially in nature), related to something terrible or having comparable effects, like fear or horror, can be a source of the sublime. One can, for example, think of an incredible storm at sea or a destructive river. The sublime dwarfs a personage and effectuates an experience of vastness, almost too big to grasp. The sublime is both uneasy and pleasant, often called "a delightful horror."⁹¹ The sublime formed an important theoretical foundation for Romantic artists and gave legitimacy to their artistic expression. The Arctic and Antarctic turned out to fit in very well with the aesthetics of the sublime. According to literary theorist Geoffrey Brackett, the North and South Poles influenced the Romantics during the 18th and 19th centuries.⁹² According to art historian Nina Hinrichs, attempts in the 19th century to find a north-west passage between the Atlantic and The Pacific were a great source of inspiration for Romantic artists.⁹³ This was also the case for Caspar David Friedrich and it inspired him to paint 'Das Eismeer' (Fig. 21), which he finished in 1824.⁹⁴ The painting shows a vast ice scape with a wrecked ship, dwarfed by giant, sharp ice floes. Friedrich has never visited this area and the painting is

⁹⁰ Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, 159.

⁹¹ Ibid, 82.

⁹² Brackett, "At the End of the Earth," 25-30.

⁹³ Hinrichs, "Das Eismeer," 133.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 134.

largely based on his idea of what the Arctic looks like. Writer Sarah Moss says that the Arctic is sublime in itself and says about the aesthetic qualities of the area:

The literary geography of the Arctic is traditionally eerie and sublime, offering a strange space of moral and physical extremes. It is either light all the time or dark all the time. Strange lights sing in the sky and ice blurs the difference between earth and water. Travelers may be reduced to cannibalism or exalted to heroism but in any case, will come back changed and perhaps not at all.⁹⁵



Fig.21. Das Eismeer, Caspar David Friedrich, 1824, ©The Yorck Project.



⁹⁵ Moss, "Romanticism on Ice," 1-17.



Fig.22. Stills from 'Stillness, Millions of Winters, Two Summers' (right above) and 'Stillness, Brash Ice, Pack Ice, Growly Bits and Icebergs' (other images), ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2013-2017.

By creating images in which the grandeur of the Poles can be experienced, Kokmeijer too places herself in the visual tradition of Friedrich and other Romantic artists, described by Moss. Her works 'Stillness' one and two. (Fig. 22) show moving images of the Arctic and Antarctic. The works show how untouched and inhospitable this area is. In contrast to Friedrich's painting, there is no wrecked ship to be seen. The artist herself is on the ship from where she shot the images. Displaying these on a large screen makes the viewer feel very small in relation to the large and potentially dangerous pieces of ice. Although it is not directly visible, the continuous movement through the cracking ice suggests vastness. Even though the ice floes are gigantic and potentially dangerous, as in Friedrich's painting, the artist shows these areas in all their beauty. It is dangerously beautiful, like the sublime. However, the artist's intention is not at all to show the danger and threat of the Polar regions. On the contrary, the Poles themselves are in danger of disappearing and she wants people to consider the vulnerability of these areas:

The meditative images invite reflection on the unparalleled beauty of this glacial ecology, which appears both vulnerable and resilient.

Stillness is a cinematic meditation on the changing polar landscapes and their fragile and quiet beauty.⁹⁶

The statements above demonstrate an awareness of current environmental issues. Most problematic in my view is how the artist wants the viewer to reflect on the changing Polar landscape while watching a video that does not make this visible at all. The artist seems to

⁹⁶ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

show that circumstances have not changed that much around the Poles since the early 19th century. It is still a vast and inhospitable area, almost impossible for humans to grasp. It appears visually immutable. The artist continues the Romantic visual narrative of the Poles being a danger to humans and not the other way around.

In fact, the human influence on this area has very much increased, says Brackett. He describes the Romantic era as a period in which a transition took place. There is a shift from imagination (Brackett calls this “myth”) to scientific reasoning. Before Romanticism, the Poles were unassailable. In the Romantic period, human impact on the Poles grew and myth has gradually been taken over by science, Brackett explains (Fig. 23). The graph shows this shift. As mentioned earlier, this era is often marked as the beginning of the Anthropocene and Brackett’s explanation fits this marking very well. After the period of Romanticism, mankind explored more aggressively and became even more influential in the Polar regions. The Romantic era was precisely the period in which people were in awe of the danger of the Poles and at the same time made many attempts to defy the dangers of the Poles. Thus, since Romanticism, knowledge on the Poles increased and the area was more and more approached in a scientific way. It is the scientific consciousness that also speaks from the artist’s statements. She is even working on a scientific journal on the Polar regions, called *Antarktikos*.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, the Romantic myth, in which the sublime is central, still lives on in the visual work of the artist.

⁹⁷ Antarktikos, “About.”

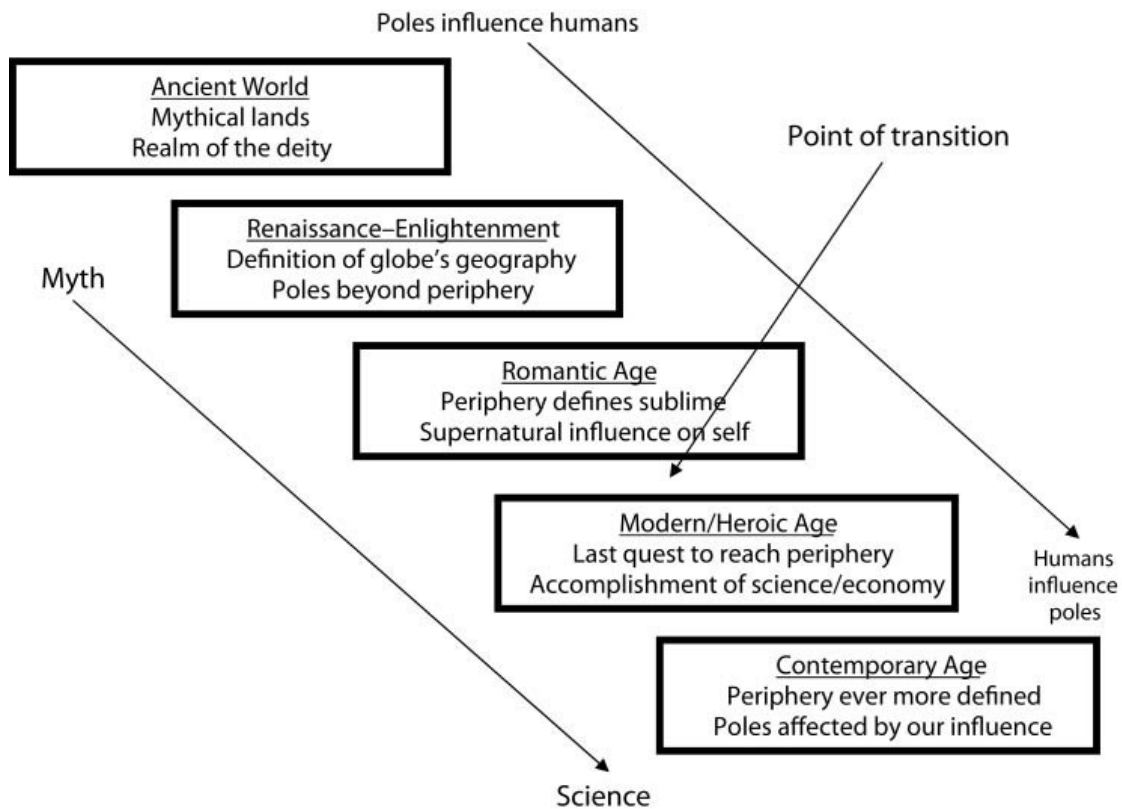


Fig.23. Knowledge, imagination, and the world, © G.L. Brackett, 2010.

Not only does the artist present an image that is unrealistic, she presents an image of nature that is not about nature itself. Ecologist Seh Jae Chun wrote on the influence of the sublime on our current desire for untouched wilderness and explains how “the relationship between humans and nature is here that the nature can be manipulated and preserved for the benefit of humans, not for the intrinsic value in nature.”⁹⁸ Thus, the aesthetics of the sublime enforces the notion of a wilderness being out there, a possibility to flee and escape city life. Wilderness as presented by the artist, is a place that is very different from one’s own place and can only be found somewhere else. By continuing the Romantic visual tradition of the sublime, the artist puts humankind in a central position, demonstrating that the ice is still there in abundance and, thus, contributes to the melting of the Polar caps. This brings about a threat in a different way: not the danger of getting trapped between ice floes, but the danger of flooding. This is ultimately a greater danger because the effects are felt on a global scale, as became clear in the artist’s project ‘Deep Meaning of Voyaging.’

⁹⁸ Chun, “Ecology,” 139 – 161.

In conclusion: in my opinion, the artist's visual work echoes the Romantic attitude and its notion of nature, which has disconnected humankind from nature. As a result, she continuously contradicts her own statements about nature. With this, she does the opposite she aims for: decreasing the impact of human life on the planet. The Romantic era has had a significant influence on current behavior of Western man, including its attitude towards nature. The Romantic attitude in the artist's work displays a desire to flee from a world in which humans pollute their surroundings, adding up to their impact on the planet. The artist's work seems to visualize such an escape. However, as such, this kind of nature hardly exists anymore. The idea of returning to this non-existing place does not nourish appreciation for nature. It does the opposite. It leads to a lack of feeling for nature and makes people more and more distanced from it. This Romantic imaging of nature adds up to the impact on the planet and makes the idea of humankind living in the Anthropocene unmistakable. Most people are aware of the deteriorated state of the Earth. This makes romanticized images, such as those of Kokmeijer, implausible. The artist creates a romanticized visual reality that exists parallel to her statements, which display an ecocritical awareness. Nature was mediated through images in the Romantic era and it still is today. I see the Romantic era as a point in history where pictorial mediation actually started to 'disconnect' people from nature. In my opinion, this started with the concept of the picturesque, which will be explained in the next chapter. Today, only few people visit the areas the artist visits and thus most people only see representations of these places, such as the works already discussed. In the internet age, a time when images continuously come to us, Romantic images like the artist's will form reality, like a simulation. The pictorial mediation has reached a climax which makes it very hard, if not impossible, to discern the real from the artificial. This notion of simulation, employing Jean Baudrillard's theory on simulacra and simulations, will form the subject the last chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Nature as simulacrum

The artist's visual work comes across as unrealistic and artificial. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the idea of nature has always been pictorially mediated since Romanticism. During this time a taste in nature arose one had to develop as a traveler or artist. One had to discover the aforementioned aesthetic concepts in nature. Subsequently, one could paint it on a canvas or simply enjoy the view. Thus, aesthetic concepts became leading in people's perspective on nature. These were closely related to the rise of tourism in the 19th century and they converged in the picturesque, described by clergyman William Gilpin in 1789. Ever since he guided people with his book on the picturesque what to look for during their travel, the pictorial mediation between man and nature has only become more dominant. In my opinion, pictorial mediation in the present time is even as dominant that it has formed a barrier between man and nature. Just as there seems to be a barrier between the visual work of the artist and her statements. While nature could still compete with the ideals of the picturesque during the Romantic period, the polluted and neglected nature of current times cannot possibly compete with the paradisiacal images that come to us en masse today. Still, people seek for the beautiful picture, only the pictorial mediation has taken extreme forms. Social media play a major role in this. The types of photos that are shared on these media, in which I also include those of the artist, are unrealistic and have nothing to do with reality anymore. The artist too posts her photos on Instagram. Although we know these are too beautiful to be true, they dominate our lives and affect us. It is impossible to find this type of nature on the Earth. I would say these photos simulate nature. This is a time where we live in a world full of simulations, says the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard. His work *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981) is central in this chapter and forms the theoretical framework.

In this chapter, I will discuss the works from the previous chapter to find out how they function as simulations and what these unrealistic images do to the relationship between man and nature. In my view, the picturesque is the beginning of the pictorial mediation between man and nature. That is why I start this chapter with a section about the picturesque. In the second section I discuss Baudrillard's theory of *Simulacra and Simulations*, in which he explains how we live amid simulations. In the last part, I discuss

how the artist's work exemplifies the travel photos that are posted on Instagram, how her photos function as a simulation and what the consequences are for the relationship between man and nature.

3.1 The Picturesque

What is 'the picturesque' and how can the dominance of mediated, idealized images of nature in the present time be traced back to the aesthetics of the picturesque? The concept of the picturesque is associated with the rise of tourism in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁹⁹ Before this increase of tourism people would consult essays or literature for their travels, from this time on more and more travel guides were written. These would tell the tourist what to see and where to see it. Clergyman William Gilpin also told how to see nature in his *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (1789).¹⁰⁰ In this book he guides the reader through Great-Britain and stresses the beauty that can be seen here. He explains how to look at nature to see its aesthetic beauty, that would otherwise go unnoticed. In this work he describes the picturesque. In a broad sense, the term can be described as 'being suitable for painting' or 'to look like a picture.' According to Gilpin, a picturesque natural landscape should be rough instead of smooth, bold instead of elegant and irregular instead of regular. Gilpin saw the picturesque in the work of the 17th-century painter Claude Lorrain (Fig. 24). Although this work was made before the Romantic period, it is clear why it was embraced by a Romantic like Gilpin. The Romantic aesthetic values discussed in the previous chapter can here be seen in a glance. Contemporary writers Uvedal Price and Richard Payne Knight assisted Gilpin in popularizing the picturesque.¹⁰¹ Writer Dabney Townsend, who wrote extensively on 18th-century aesthetics, calls the picturesque "the most direct, and increasingly, most self-aware approach to nature in the 18th century."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Buzard, *Beaten Track*, 20.

¹⁰⁰ Townsend, "The Picturesque," 365-366.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.



Fig. 24. Claude Lorrain, A view of the Roman Campagna from Tivoli, Evening, 1644-45, ©The Yorck Project.

Professor in English literature James Buzard says about the picturesque that it “arose as a mediator between the opposed ideals of beauty and the sublime,” bringing together Romantic aesthetic ideals in a single view.¹⁰³ According to Buzard, to experience the picturesque, English tourists would not have to travel very far (which was impossible because of the war with France), as it was best experienced in the English landscape garden.¹⁰⁴ This type of garden has winding paths, are hilly and contain (prefabricated) ruins of classical buildings. One could say that the picturesque made the aesthetics of nature comprehensible and accessible for a bigger audience. It became something tourists aimed for in their travels, they knew what to look for when venturing out into nature. The gaze of the tourist was guided by Gilpin's expertise and the picturesque artworks he had seen before. Writer Andrew Malcolm says about the picturesque that there is “something of the big-game hunter in these tourists, boasting of their encounters with savage landscape,

¹⁰³ Buzard: “The Grand Tour,” 176.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

‘capturing’ wild scenes, and ‘fixing’ them as pictorial trophies in order to sell them or hang them up in frames on their drawing rooms walls.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, the natural environment was always tested against predetermined aesthetic ideals. Writer Rebecca Solnit explains this emphasis on the pictorial and the existence of scenic tourism are something we might see as common and unremarkable nowadays, but that they are inventions of the 18th century.¹⁰⁶

3.2 Simulacra and Simulations

Today, pictorial mediation is omnipresent and “common and unremarkable,” as Solnit puts it. This makes the effect of images is much stronger and more imperative. The images have become the starting point more than ever. Pictures nowadays form their own reality. In this subchapter, I investigate how photographic images have become our reality by employing Jean Baudrillard’s theory of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), in which he discusses how reality in late Capitalist society is determined by representations (signifiers) instead of reality itself (signified).¹⁰⁷ Following his thinking, signs constitute the world we live in and we live in a world full of simulations.

Influenced by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard discusses the meaning of signs in his *Simulacra and Simulation*.¹⁰⁸ He examines the relations between reality, symbols and late Capitalist society. In particular, he focusses on signs and symbols emanating from culture and media. Baudrillard is interested in how these signs constitute the world we live in by existing at the same time, he calls this contemporaneity. According to him, reality is entirely constituted by signs and symbols without a physical reality accompanying these signs. He explains his idea recalling a tale by writer Jorge Luis Borges.¹⁰⁹ In this tale a king requests a map to be made so full of details that it becomes a one-to-one representation of the real territory. In the postmodern era, Baudrillard argues, the real territory ceases to exist. The only real thing remaining is the map itself. To be more precise, the distinction between the map and the territory does not exist anymore. Map and territory have become indistinguishable. The signs have become reality.

¹⁰⁵ Andrews, *Picturesque*, 67.

¹⁰⁶ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 95-96.

¹⁰⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 3-12.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 1-2.

First, I should make clear what Baudrillard means when he speaks about a sign. A sign always consists of a signifier and a signified.¹¹⁰ The signified is the actual thing, a tree for example. The signifier is a symbol representing that tree. This could be a painting of the tree, a text or a photograph. His theory of simulacra and simulations is based on this definition of a sign. Simulacra are defined as copies (signifiers) representing things that either have no original equivalent in the real world (signified) or do not have this any longer. According to Baudrillard three orders of simulacra exist.¹¹¹ He calls the first order, which he considers pre-industrial, “natural” or “naturalist.”¹¹² These simulacra are about imitations of reality and counterfeit. They are harmonious, optimistic and have the restitution or the ideal institution of nature made in God’s image as their goal. This type of simulacrum could be pictorial representation like a drawing or a painting. Baudrillard calls the second order of simulacra “productive” or “productivist” and links it to the industrial era.¹¹³ They are founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production. He describes it as a “Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of indefinite liberation of energy.”¹¹⁴ This type of simulacrum arises from the processing of a machine. This could be a wooden hut, made from trees. The distinction between signifier and signified can here still be made, although it is more difficult than the first order simulacrum. Baudrillard calls the third order “simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the mode, the cybernetic game, total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.”¹¹⁵ He links this order to postmodernity. He also describes this order as the precession of simulacra; the representation precedes and determines the real. Here, the symbol is taken to be more important or authoritative than the original entity. Authenticity has been replaced by a copy. Simulacra of the third order are digital and could be data or code language.

From the first to the third order, the simulacra become more abstract, less comprehensible. Nowadays, if we follow Baudrillard’s thinking, we live in a world that is full of simulacra. We experience the signs rather than the real. Baudrillard explains:

¹¹⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 2-5.

¹¹¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 79.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 79-83.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

It is no longer about imitation, duplication or parody. It is all about substituting the signs of the real for the real.¹¹⁶

Thus, simulacra can substitute reality and become reality. Contemporary society is full of it. Signs for the real are omnipresent and we started to live by it. This is what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal.¹¹⁷ Simulation is the imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. Still, it is more real than pretending. Quoting philosopher Émile Littré, Baudrillard explains:

Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms.¹¹⁸

Representation emanates from the equality of signifier and signified; the one copies the other. Simulation is different. It stems from the negation of the sign as value. Any reference to the real world has become obsolete. According to English scholar Dino Felluga this substitution brings about a gap between the natural world and ourselves.¹¹⁹ As a result of this, so he says, people will eventually lose touch with real nature. He explains how real natural spaces are now marked as protected, which would mean they are defined in opposition to the urban world, which is reality. Nowadays, the sign precedes access to real nature. It defines the image that we have of the natural world and we now live by that image. Today, many romanticized photographs of nature, including the photos of Kokmeijer, can be found on Instagram. Together, they constitute a hyperreality.

3.3 The Artist's Work as Part of the Hyperreality of Instagram

Travel and nature photos on Instagram are often made with a Romantic attitude which expresses the Romantic values and aesthetics. The result is an unrealistic visual language that, based on Baudrillard's theory, replaces real nature. They precede real nature and function as a simulacrum. In my view, Kokmeijer's photos are exemplary for these pictures posted on Instagram. Below I further elaborate on this: how the artist's photos are

¹¹⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 2.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 3-5.

¹¹⁹ Felluga, *Critical Theory*, 282-84.

exemplary for the photos that can often be found on Instagram, how these photos together form a hyperreality and how this leads to a deteriorated relationship between man and nature.

Mobile phone application Instagram is one of the most popular and fastest-growing social-media platforms.¹²⁰ In 2016 Forbes magazine mentions that 71% of the users, between 18 and 30 years old, use the app while travelling.¹²¹ One year later, two independent investigations pointed out that around half of the respondents use the app to get inspiration for their next travel.¹²² On the app, people share beautiful images of travel locations that have been visited. Not only is scenic tourism common nowadays, like Solnit explained, it seems to have become even more prevalent than before. Still, travelers aim for beautiful visuals and seek for places that are best suitable for taking a picture. It is the picture that seems to be the most important factor in traveling, like in the Romantic era. However, with the current state of the planet, the rise of digital photography, camera phones and Instagram, the gap between the picture and reality has become much wider.

I see Kokmeijer's photos as exemplary for the many travel and nature photos that can be found on Instagram. They contain the same Romantic aesthetics and this greatly influences our travel behavior, our relationship to nature and our idea of what nature is. Moreover, the artist too uploads her photos to this medium and is thus a part of this hyperreality (Fig. 25).

¹²⁰ CNBC, "Instagram."

¹²¹ Lane, "Millennial Travel Trends."

¹²² Parsons, "Social Media Influence."

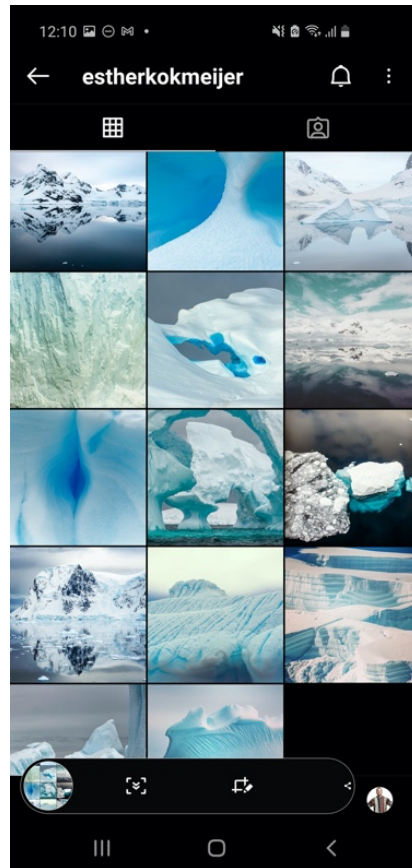


Fig.25. Esther Kokmeijer Instagram feed, ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2021.

The artist's photographs have been carefully selected. Elements that do not fit in the artist's romanticized world view are left out of the pictures. The images show an abundance of pristine nature and few people can be seen in her photographs. It is exactly this what reminded me of the images of? travelers on Instagram and their ways of working. Here too, people like to show an idealized world, different from reality. The influence of social media is greater than ever before and creating and sharing images play a major role in this. Art is often seen as a reflection of what is happening in society. In the same way, the artist's photos demonstrate what is happening on a larger scale on Instagram.

Like Kokmeijer's photos, many travel photos on Instagram are not representative of reality. In many of these photos the Romantic attitude is clearly discernible. For example, *Wanderlust* is a well-known concept among travelers on Instagram and a very popular hashtag with almost 129,000 photos.¹²³ The messages, which are accompanied by photos that are very similar to holiday brochures, only seem to stir up the appetite for travel in

¹²³ Instagram, "Wanderlust."

other travelers. In many cases I also see the two other aforementioned Romantic aesthetic concepts (noble savage and sublime), often combined in a single image. The Romantic idea is still dominant over reality and it is often the result of this idea that we see on Instagram. For example, the photo taken by Samuel Taipale for the account @eljackson (Fig. 26) exudes the Romantic attitude. The wandering person in the photo is dwarfed by the mighty mountain scenery, something we know from Romanticism and can recognize as the sublime.



Fig. 26. 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door,' © Samuel Taipale, 2018.

The same effect as in the photo above is visible in the artist's work 'Vapour,' where the wandering artist is miniscule compared to the mighty mountains near Beijing. The artist shows us (apparently) untouched, sublime nature. In 'Stillness' she presents the Polar regions as beautiful, overwhelming, inaccessible and potentially dangerous. They are the North and South Poles as they presumably once were, even before the Romantic period. The nature of the Poles, Marshall Islands and China is presented by the artist as grand, almost incomprehensible and paradisiacal. As many travelers do on Instagram, she suggests something that does not exist or no longer exists as such. This nature is, in Baudrillard's words, a signifier without having any signified in the real world.

In the project 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging', the artist presents the Marshallese as an ancient culture close to nature. I discussed this in the previous chapter in the context of the 'noble savage'. The artist is focused on the ancient navigation culture of the Marshallese, which must not be lost. Her photos suggest that this still exists and that people there are in

close contact to nature. So, her photos represent something that currently does not exist anywhere in the world. Of course, she knows better, this is clearly reflected in her statements. The idea of an old culture that (still) lives in harmony with nature is very unrealistic. Nevertheless, the artist presents people as much as possible as a culture that coexists closely with nature. She leaves elements that do not fit in this picture out of the frame. Many travelers on Instagram take this one step further and make sure to have themselves photographed next to the 'authentic culture' and 'act like a local.' For example, wearing traditional clothes as seen in Murad Osmann's photo (Fig. 27). His wife Nataly wears a sarong and walks topless among a group of residents of the island of Palawan, an island in the Philippines.



Fig. 27. 'Follow me to the Palawan Tribes in the Philippines,' © Murad Osmann, 2018.

Tourist theorist Sean Smith calls this fantasized assimilation and says the following:

a different means by which destinations are possessed is observable in the performance of local identity. When tourists do what is recognisable – or stereotyped – as local dress, they appropriate the identity of those who call the destination home, effectively claiming the destination (temporarily) as their home, too.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Smith, "Instagram Abroad," 172-191.

Not only is a culture appropriated here, it is not real either. Smith says that "the locals' very fine clothing is hardly everyday wear, and centuries of evangelization in the Philippines, as in many other former colonies, have made female toplessness largely taboo."¹²⁵

Anthropologist Johannes Fabian says about such pictures that "the bare feet, topless women, thatched roof and jungle scenery are ostentatiously displayed in a clear connotation of Western conceptualizations of the 'pre-modern.'"¹²⁶ So, something is staged here that does not exist. It is a form of staging that the artist too used during her stay on the Marshall Islands. She appropriates the 'pre-modern' culture of the Marshallese and has it photographed. An example in 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging' is when the artist takes the steering bar and gets photographed controlling the traditional Marshallese boat in front of an idyllic view of the Pacific Ocean while the sun sets (Fig 28).



Fig.28. 'Deep Meaning of Voyaging,' ©Esther Kokmeijer, 2018.

In this picture she seems to take part in activities of the local culture. She knows how to sail on the Pacific too and everybody will know it. It looks like she is crossing the entire Pacific, in reality it probably took only seconds or minutes at the most. The photos of the artist and the

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 118.

travel photos on Instagram are in my view simulacra, in other words; copies representing things that either have no original in the real world or do not have this any longer.

Nowadays, taking photos is mainly done digitally. This makes distribution very easy, which has a major impact on our lives. The images reach us instantly, surround us and become our reality. In contemporary digital photography "the photographic simulation of reality begins at the very moment electromagnetic radiation visible to the human eye is reinterpreted by a photosensitive electronic apparatus and coded as an algorithmic image made of informational data" explains scholar in digital and emerging media Eddy Borges-Rey.¹²⁷ This is what Baudrillard calls a sign of the third order. These images, according to Borges-Rey, are "staged and subsequently mediated and negotiated, through decisions made during the production and photo-retouching stage of their simulations."¹²⁸ Although the images are unrealistic, they are often the starting point for a journey. The most idyllic travel photos inspire people to make a trip. Then, the actual travel is made and the destination gets compared to the pictures that were seen on Instagram; 'It is just like the picture!' One then might say. In reality, most often, the destination does not resemble the inspirational photos at all. The traveler gets confronted with crowded places, tourism and pollution, amongst other letdowns. Although travelers keep trying to find satisfaction in pristine destinations, they often get disappointed. They cannot find (exactly) what they saw in the photos. Viewed from Baudrillard's theory, these photos are simulations and not representations (the opposite of simulation). Baudrillard says the following about this:

The latter starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent ... Conversely, simulation starts from the utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference.¹²⁹

Thus, what can be seen in the photos cannot be found in the real world, the photos have become a reality in themselves. The photos on Instagram, including those of the artist, are simulacra and together form a hyperreality. Borges-Rey says of Instagram's hyperreality it is "a version of the world that is assumed to be real but is nonetheless distorted and

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 11.

exaggerated to the extent that it becomes hyperreal.”¹³⁰ This hyperreality is a reality that appears to be much more dominant and compelling than ‘physical’ reality. There is always a simulated image of nature that appears to us before we see the real nature. We usually see these images much more often than real nature and thus keep the romanticized idea of nature alive.

In conclusion: this chapter has demonstrated how, with the picturesque, pictorial mediation began to form a gap between the beautified image of nature and real nature. This divide, which originated in the Romantic period, is culminating in the present day through the use of digital photography and Instagram. The aesthetics of Romanticism can still be found in the images that are made, which present a non-existing nature. Due to the ability to easily upload and share photos, the use of Instagram has made this pictorial mediation even more dominant. In many travel photos on Instagram, I see the same Romantic aesthetics as in the artist's work. In fact, the artist posts her work on Instagram and is part of it. All these photos together form a hyperreality that presents us with a romanticized image of nature. The images are reassuring and therefore pleasant to believe in. In addition, it shows how deeply rooted Romanticism still is in society. The traveler maintains the dream image of ‘the unbeaten track,’ pristine nature and ‘pre-modern’ cultures by taking photos that resemble the original photos. By posting these on Instagram, this can inspire other travelers to visit the travel destination. Ironically, these kinds of ‘unbeaten tracks’ are walked by millions of people around the world. This makes nature change into a neglected, polluted nature that will only deviate more from the romanticized visuals. It is a circle that proves very hard to break.

¹³⁰ Borges-Rey, “News Images on Instagram,” 571-593.

Conclusion

The title of this thesis is "On the Quest for Nature in the Work of Esther Kokmeijer." A quest is a semi-impossible search. This word refers to various aspects that have come up during this research. First, it is the artist's own quest, for which she sets herself concrete goals. For example, reaching the center of gravity of the continents or the meeting of an ancient culture with certain knowledge or traditions related to nature.¹³¹ Underlying these concrete objectives is a second layer that the artist does not speak about. It is a quest for an image of nature that has been present in the collective Western idea of what nature is or should be since Romanticism. To me, this is evident in her visual works. Since Romanticism, people look out for a certain image of nature but cannot actually find it as they have it in mind. In order to be regarded as a full-fledged nature, it must be unconsciously tested against requirements arising from Romantic aesthetics. Nature must be grand and potentially dangerous. One should be able to be swallowed up or crushed by it (sublime). Nature must also be far away. A journey must be taken to find nature that is pristine and untouched (Wanderlust). In these remote places one could even meet people who would not have become so distanced from nature and still live closely with it (noble savage). Through these people we could restore our contact with nature ourselves. The images that we often find on Instagram testify to the same Romantic attitude. Even after seeing photos on this social media platform, real nature can never meet these requirements and will therefore always disappoint. In this conclusion, my goal is to further reflect on this image of nature in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has forced many people to look at nature differently.

Then what is the actual quest? In my opinion, the quest is to bridge the gap that has arisen between the dominant romanticized image of nature and nature as it actually is on our planet. In my view, awareness is needed in various areas for this. To begin with, it is important to become aware that we view the world through Romantic glasses. The difficult thing is that this mostly happens unconsciously. This unconscious influence is so dominant that it can even get in our way and accomplish the opposite of what we actually want. This has become clear in the case study of Kokmeijer's work, in which her romanticized visuals

¹³¹ Esther Kokmeijer, "Portfolio."

counteract her statements. While I think it is a big challenge to make this shift in society, I think the current Covid-19 pandemic has brought about a change.

While the pandemic has caused a lot of trouble, it has also caused many good things. For example, people became more aware of nature in their own environment. Almost the whole world went into lockdown and suddenly many things were no longer possible. Shops, restaurants and entertainment venues, among other things, were forced to close their doors. Travel was discouraged or even prohibited. The direct result of this is that many activities were no longer possible and people mostly stayed in their own region. One of the few things that was still possible was walking in nature. People who would normally have a drink on a terrace or go shopping were now dependent on the city parks and nature reserves. These have been very busy since the lockdown.¹³² Since this time people came into contact with the nearby nature much more. Usually, this nature is not grand, overwhelming or sublime, but small, subtle and imperfect. We no longer come into contact with tropical oases, misty rock formations or icebergs, but with overgrown roadsides, raked parks and the blossoming of our own nature in the spring. In a time when hardly anything was allowed anymore, people experienced their own nature as more beautiful and striking than usual. I see this as a new acquaintance with local nature, a nature that one would almost forget in the midst of a simulated nature.

Because we travel much less, there is much less greenhouse gas emissions. Although the total amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere barely decreased, at the start of the lockdown, CO₂ emissions fell by 17%. On the one hand, it made clear how human action can ensure that much less can be emitted. On the other hand, it made it clear that much more needs to be done if we want to reduce the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere. In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard makes a comparison with the Lascaux caves.¹³³ A replica now acts as the attraction, preventing the fragile real caves from being damaged. Like the caves of Lascaux, the remote nature is now much more left in peace because there are far fewer tourists. In the current situation, we can only experience this nature through simulations such as the overwhelming images on Instagram. In contrast to the caves, nature can recover a bit, even if only for a certain period of time. Yet, I noticed that many people are fed up

¹³² Dutch News, "Mayors urge people."

¹³³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 6.

with the large amount of screen time as a result of working from home. As a result, many people prefer real, local nature rather than simulated nature.

This research shows the friction between the romantic view of nature and nature in the present time. The title 'Climate as Artifact,' one of the artist's works is, in my view, very applicable to this thesis. First, it refers to the fact that we can manipulate nature in images, as the artist and many Instagrammers do. Second, as she presumably means, this time shows very clearly how great human impact on the environment and the Earth is. So, a large-scale change in behavior really makes a difference. Due to the long, but temporary pandemic period, we are somewhat detached from the Romantic image of nature. We have little choice and now tend to prefer the nearby nature. People gain renewed appreciation for their local nature again. Of course, I do not expect the romanticized image of nature to disappear all of a sudden. In my view, it starts with an awareness of our Romantic glasses, the human impact on the earth and a reappraisal of the local nature. We are at the beginning of a quest.

Illustration sources

Cover Image. Esther Kokmeijer 'Vapour' (detail). Downloaded November 2, 2020 from artist's website. <http://www.estherkokmeijer.nl/portfolio>

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