

The Song of Low Technology

We have already grown used to a certain type of exhibition discussing ecology: in a clean white box, images that use data modelling to trace the source of environmental damage are neatly arranged alongside charts accusing industrial giants of evil actions, or apocalyptic post-humanist sculptural installations. Yet in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen's virtual exhibition 'Breakdown Economy', all of this is subverted, and replaced by a noisy, filthy, chaotic underground scene. Machines rumble, dense smoke billows through the factory building, alcohol bottles are piled high, seaweed floats on top of a turbid aquarium... Our cyber avatars enter a dingy, scorching hot virtual space, where we smoke, drink and throw away rubbish to our hearts' content, amidst industrial relics abandoned by our age.

In a space converted from a derelict factory in Rotterdam, the large-scale installation by Atelier Van Lieshout, *'Disco Inferno - Happy End of Everything'* (2020) generously provides alcohol, roast chicken and thousands of cigars. Three diesel-powered machines form a revolving bar, a smoking platform and cooking facilities, like the three-headed dog that guards the gluttonous ghosts in the *'Divine Comedy'*, glowering and barking furiously, greedily devouring everything. Alongside the carnival-like celebration of pleasure, the danger and violence of the machines pushes the sensory experience to extremes: the emptied alcohol bottles can immediately be thrown into the pulverising mill and transformed into powder, the drop hammer beside the smoking platform may crash down at any moment, and the high temperature incineration and cracking furnace in the cooking facilities can not only roast meat, but also refine diesel and petroleum from waste plastic.

This dust-filled vision of the early industrial era provokes a sense of nostalgia, but also of unfamiliarity, since the machines of today are no longer fearsome behemoths — they avoid fossil fuels completely, and are gradually becoming more civilised and 'user-friendly'. Yet underneath this veil of sophistication, economic societies are still dependent on the exploitation, extraction and stockpiling of

resources: hi-tech, digitalised ‘mining’ still sticks closely to the vocabulary of the previous industrial era, and still follows the production principle of extracting what’s useful and abandoning the waste, as in centuries gone by — it’s simply that the raw materials have now changed from stone to silicon and rare earths. We have never got away from the scenario of the quarry! Van Lieshout’s machines brutally rip this veil to shreds, revealing the discrepancy between technological progress and historical progress, and beginning a brand new type of mass production: here, everything — whether natural resources or waste products — becomes part of a colourless, pitiless and undifferentiated cycle.

While these monstrous machines demonstrate this alarming production/recycling process, in contrast, the consumer goods enshrined around them, from the final stage of the production process, are infused with the promise of a beautiful life. These objects were chosen from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen’s collection, from cups made up of two parts, of different colours and materials, that can be rearranged at will, to the garden dining table set launched by Ineke Hans in 1997. The former represent the urban lifestyle of the 1970s, which, while advocating DIY and individuality, also resulted in the large-scale use of plastic; the latter, in its reuse of synthetic materials, was a pioneering environmentally friendly product. It’s a change that seems to reflect the results of the design sector’s constant soul-searching on ecological issues over many decades. These days, sustainable design is already so commonplace that it’s become almost a cliché, and technological innovation has outlined an idyllic ‘green way of life’ for us, prompting us to imagine a beautiful, sustainable future. But is this just another fetishistic fantasy, meticulously woven by science and technology?

As if in response to such doubts, Studio Klarenbeek & Dros have used biodegradable seaweed to recreate these objects. But rather than standing grandly on a base, like the originals, they have been thrown into a degeneration tank, and downgraded to mere samples for observation by monitoring equipment. ‘Degeneration’ refers both to decay in material terms, but also implies ethical degradation. Algal blooms were once viewed by James Lovelock as the products of attempts by the earth’s ‘Gaia’ to regulate its own temperature. Although their

destiny of saving the world has now been disproved, faint traces of their theological glow remain in Klarenbeek & Dros' work. Under the microscope's magnification, these objects resemble buildings that have sunk to the bottom of the sea and are gradually decomposing, being slowly digested by snails, a species that existed long before the advent of humankind — and converting large quantities of carbon dioxide into oxygen, industrial products becoming sacrifices to Gaia... In the process of exposure on the monitor, the 'beautiful future' has silently descended into a terrifying scene, like something from a horror movie.

We can see clearly that the flames rising from the machines and the seaweed floating around in the degeneration pool — which stand as metaphors for traditional fossil fuels and new types of bio-energy — are no longer in opposition here. Or, to put it another way, they have freed themselves from the status of scientific symbols, and been mixed together, in a pre-industrial, even pre-scientific scene. There is more than a hint of the poetics of Gaston Bachelard here: the corrosive core of fire has metamorphosed into constantly degenerating algae, and everything becomes food for the fire (*pabulum ignis*). On the wall of the factory, Koehorst in 't Veld's poster installation '*Background*' (2020) charts (or further blurs) the complex history of human use of these two forms of energy over the past 70 years, including not just the high points of the plastics industry's high points, but also the practical challenges involved in using bio-resources in industrial-scale production. Consequently, rather than yelling about 'nature-centrism', or simply claiming that one particular kind of future should replace another kind of future, we must view reality as a more intricate, chaotic organism.

Bruno Latour believes that the hypocrisy of modernism lies in the fact that it purifies nature into something transcendent, and divides the heterogeneous into the two polarities of subject and object; whereas, in fact, nature is known to humans by means of scientific instruments and laboratories, and so humans are always participants in nature. Although there are only three groups of works on show in '*Breakdown Economy*', they nonetheless raise many questions that go beyond the dualistic view of humans and nature, and echo Latour's 'non-modernism' argument: when machines can convert the waste from human

activities into a continuous stream of fuel, in the end will it be the oil that runs out first, or the human waste used in this energy cycle? When the passionate green revolution can turn consumer goods into important contributors in the ecological chain, will we no longer feel guilty about our consumption, and no longer need to wait for angels to redeem us?

The questions that are raised are all based on one premise, which is that the environment of ‘purification’ must disappear, and we — that’s right, I’m saying ‘we’ a lot in this article — must spring into action, and stop getting mired in metaphysical debate. The obsolescence and decay displayed in the exhibition are a rejection of the elitism and hegemony that are concealed behind the magic of high technology. ‘Low technology’ is the opposite of metaphysical — it has no technological black box, its only strategy is to decompose, to crush, to digest, and, via such clumsy methods, to reduce everything to the smallest possible unit. At this point, if we pause for a moment and our mouse stops moving, our computer screen will be ‘polluted’ by white blocks, designed by Koehorst in’t Veld, which resemble pieces of plastic sliding over the images on the screen, one by one, and gradually block our view. This is another cunning aspect of *Breakdown Economy*: as a virtual exhibition, it can use such a brief pause to mock and dissolve itself — the entire exhibition is simply an illusion created by data.

This is a metaphorical pause. Let us revisit Faust’s ending: immediately before he dies, this character, who represents the process of capitalism’s progress over three hundred years, mistakes the sound of Mephistopheles digging his grave for people digging dikes; when he says: ‘Stay, thou art so fair’, death immediately overtakes him, and in this moment, modernity is also shattered as a result. If, as Walter Benjamin suggested, it’s only by destroying illusions (‘phantasmagoria’) that historic redemption can be achieved, then this exhibition enthusiastically embraces the the moment of their destruction. Perhaps it’s only when illusions disintegrate, and there’s no place to hide, that we may finally have the opportunity to re-negotiate the future of economic production.