

AFTER NATURE

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After Nature takes its name from the title of a small book of granite-edged narrative verse penned by that most melancholic of German writers (but honorary Englishman), W.G. Sebald. More specifically, the phrase 'after nature' appears in the first of Sebald's three prose poems, a meditation on Matthias Grünewald, which observes of the painter's 1505 *Crucifixion* that its landscape, a recessionary abyss, one which 'reaches so far into the depth/that our eyes cannot see its limits', likely had its visual precedent in a solar eclipse of 1502, an event, as Sebald narrates it, which Grünewald would have seen and

*so will have become a witness to
the secret sickening away of the world,
in which a phantasmal encroachment of dusk
in the midst of daytime like a fainting fit
poured through the vault of the sky[...]*

Sebald begins this passage by explaining that

*Most probably Grünewald painted
and recalled the catastrophic incursion
of darkness, the last trace of light
flickering from beyond, after nature[...]*

It is a fitting passage for an exhibition which takes as one of its central themes perceived catastrophes and their representation; but in some ways the choice of Sebald's text as accompaniment and catalogue (in a rather ingenious move, an added dust jacket contains the requisite curatorial essay, acknowledgements and works list) is a detrimental one, because, as a work of art, it undercuts – and outstrips — what *After Nature*, as a show, would like to achieve.

This is not to suggest that it is somehow the art itself that is lacking. We in the US have had to wait a long time to see one of Werner Herzog's contributions to the art of film find its way into a museum. So the decision to open *After Nature* with a recut version of *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), Herzog's sublime vision of Kuwaiti oil fires (from the first Gulf War) as fruits of some sinister alien harvest, can only be described as inspired. Likewise, Artur Zmijewski's digital video, *Okno za Okno (An Eye for an Eye)* (1998), in which two maimed individuals receive assistance in everyday tasks, such as walking and washing one's hair, from an able-bodied counterpart, presents an unsentimental testament to the limitlessness of human care (and as if a coda to this, Tino Sehgal's solo performer writhing in slow motion on the floor around the corner reminds one of the despair that stands just offscreen in Zmijewski's lesson of hope).

What these and certain other of the best works in the show share is traffic with physical facts: infernos, mutilation, other people; Zoe Leonard's

Tree (1997) is just that, with some assistance from steel cables and supports; Roberto Cuoghi's national portraits, some of so-called rogue states, emerge from admixtures of everything from lead to wax to cocoa butter.

But what *After Nature* really wants to traffic in, ultimately, is a specific kind of fantasy. As curator Massimiliano Gioni, admits, '*After Nature*' is 'an exhibition of prophecies and visions', one that 'wants to act as a machine for producing myths by inventing stories, even lies'. Citing Herzog, but perhaps following Grünewald's lead, Gioni notes in closing that the exhibition 'is an attempt to blur the distinction between artworks and documents... that facts only create rules, while fictions can lead to new ecstatic truths'. In other words, what comes after nature is religion – to which the many undated and untitled *Sermon Cards*, scrawled by the Reverend Howard Finster, can more than attest.

One cannot stress how very contemporary is this disillusionment with the modern world, a disillusionment nowhere more manifest than in calls for retreat into the premodern (what else does it mean to 'reduce' one's carbon footprint?) that are at the same time indistinguishable from certain coercive forms of reenchantment (fundamentalisms of every stripe, Islamic and Judeo-Christian as well as environmental). But the fantasy that is religion, of truth 'revealed' rather than forged, is not the answer, nor the art, that we need, just as it is neither for Sebald's autobiographical 'I' in his own *After Nature*. (One of Sebald's earliest works, *After Nature* was published in English only in 2002, after the author's death.)

There, in the final of the three poems, the narrative again turns to a work of painting, this time Albrecht Altdorfer's 1529 depiction of the Battle of Arbela, an epic scene of warfare between East (King Darius of Persia) and West (Alexander the Great). The mood struck is not one of taking sides. Rather, in the final lines, attention again falls to the receding landscape:

*The Nile Delta can be made out,
the Sinai Peninsula, the Red Sea
and, still farther in the distance,
towering up in dwindling light,
the mountain ranges,
snow-covered and ice-bound,
of the strange, unexplored,
African continent.*

Here, eclipse is replaced by the undiscovered, darkness for the Dark Continent, but nowhere, in either case, are we confronted with anything except the natural, as opposed to supernatural, world itself. It may indeed be a place of cruelty and sadness, or of madness and melancholy, but it is the only place. And to entertain the delusion that there is anything that comes 'after nature', in the temporal, otherworldly sense, is to fall prey to a far bleaker darkness than could ever arise from blotting out the sun.

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After Nature, 2008 (installation view).
Photo: Benoit Pailley.
Courtesy New Museum, New York

