



Robert Hengeveld, Annotated Work Study, Natural Revision, 2010. Mixed media on frosted mylar.

Front Gallery

Robert Hengeveld: Natural Revision

The nose of the blessed one will become a little shorter. (And it might glow.) 1

The Aleph. The Puddle. The Halo: Robert Hengeveld's Natural Revision

In preparation for writing this, I met with artist Rob Hengeveld at his Toronto studio. It was piled with a hobo *bricoleur*'s cache of armatures, motors, artificial turf, chunks of plastic Christmas trees, the sparkling intimation of a waterfall, a rough chorus of dollar store cuckoo birds, an inflatable deer, flattened cardboard boxes and acres more.

In Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Aleph," his protagonist (also named Borges) recounts the tale of Carlos Argentino Daneri who is writing a master tome in which he intends to "set to verse the entire face of the planet."² He is literally writing the world:

Daneri ... had already dispatched a number of acres of the State of Queensland, nearly a mile of the course run by the River Ob, a gasworks to the north of Veracruz, the leading shops in the Buenos Aires parish of Concepción, ... and a Turkish baths establishment not far from the well-known Brighton Aquarium.³

In the cellar of Daneri's home is what he calls an "Aleph" which he explains as "one of the points in space that contain all other points." In order to write his account of "life, the universe, and everything," Daneri regularly consults the magical Aleph—an inch-wide, iridescent sphere—"the only place on earth where all places are." At the end of his brief story, Borges makes note of its relation to the Jewish esoteric knowledge and practice of Kaballah, in which Aleph is in a sense the ultimate synecdoche.

The aesthetic of Hengeveld's expansive, gallery-wide landscape of veld, hillock and grotto is gestural. There are crystalline moments of reference to the sight and sound of specific landscapes, but they are draped loosely across make-do infrastructure. The gaps and small yawning chasms matter: the mild-manneredly abject step away from verisimilitude allows the work to resonate and leaves room for us to fill in the blanks.

In "Partial Magic in the Quixote," Borges describes the troubling gesture of the exhaustively complete map that by necessity includes itself in its replication. For Borges, the upsetting element of this mode of representation (the microcosm) is that we become implicit in it, which destablises our being:

These inversions suggest that ... we can be fictitious. ... [The] history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they are also written.⁸

Douglas Adams recounts an apologue to illustrate a certain understanding of human relation to the natural world as something made for dominion and exploitation:

A puddle wakes up one morning and thinks: "This is a very interesting world I find myself in. It fits me very neatly ... In fact it fits me so neatly, ... [it] must have been made to have me in it." And as the puddle continues to narrate this story about this hole being made to have him in it, ... the sun rises, and gradually the puddle is shrinking ..., and by the time the puddle ceases to exist, ... it's still trapped in this idea that the hole was there for it.9



Robert Hengeveld, Installation Study, Natural Revision, 2010. Synthetic material and objects

In Natural Revision, with his aesthetic shifts from realism, and proffering of maudlin, pre-fab palimpsests of the natural. Hengeveld has redrawn the borders of the hole that hold the puddle, and in so doing, proposes an equitable relationship based more on wonder, cohabitation and the aspirational. This is a move from literal representation to the littoral—the inhabitation of a new borderline where lines are not clear and cannot necessarily be known, and thereby controlled.

In his short essay "Halos," philosopher Giorgio Agamben reiterates Walter Benjamin's version of an ancient parable in which "the world to come"—the messianic afterlife—is exactly as we know it here, but with the most minute of changes. These minor shifts are present not (only) in "real circumstances, in the sense that the nose of the blessed one will become a little shorter,"10 but (also) in a shimmer of change to their sense and their limits: "It does not take place in things, but at their periphery, in the space of ease between every thing and itself."11 It is in this littoral space that Agamben wedges Saint Thomas's thoughts on the halo, the modification to perfection, the augmentation of the beatified, as the random heightening that indicates the blurring of boundaries and borders of being.12

In Hengeveld's Natural Revision, a fake rock seemingly hovers above the ground, slowly rotating and brightly underlit, casting its glow onto the surrounding floor. This is a punctus and an aesthetic counterpoint to other elements in the installation. With its actual halo it makes concrete the proposition here: the borders are blurred, we are implicit in this unfinished, gestural microcosm, and these unclear edges are indications of not only the idea of heightened being but our relationship with it.

–Katie Bethune-Leamen

Notes

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, "Halos," The Coming Community, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53.
- Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph," The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 2004), 1-3.
- 3 Ibid, 2.
- 5 This phrase is the title of English satirist Douglas Adams's 1982 novel Life, the Universe and Everything (London: Pan Books, 1982).
- 6 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph," *The Aleph and Other Stories*, 1933-1969, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 2004), 3.
- 7 Jorge Luis Borges, "Partial Magic in the Quixote," Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1962). 8 Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle, "Sartor Resartus" (1833) as quoted in Jorge Luis Borges, "Partial Magic in the Quixote," Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1962), 196.
- 9 Douglas Adams, "Parrots, the Universe and Everything," University of California, Santa Barbara. Lecture April 5, 2001. http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v= 7G8HBuDigc&feature=related>
- 10 Giorgio Agamben, "Halos," The Coming Community, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53.
- 12 Agamben also describes the halo as an indicator of the "transfiguration of the commodity into enchanted object" as a (Marxist) sign of the Industrial Revolution's presentation of the commodity fetish. See Giorgio Agamben, "The Universal Exposition," Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 38.

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday 25 March 2011, 7 PM

RIOS

Robert Hengeveld is an installation and multi-media artist whose work explores the boundaries between reality and fiction, and where we find ourselves within that relationship. He is currently living and working in Toronto, Canada. He completed his MFA at the University of Victoria in 2005 and received an AOCAD from the Ontario College of Art and Design. Current and upcoming exhibitions include *Kentucky Perfect* at Galerie Sans Nom (Moncton); *Wile Wild* at the MacLaren Art Centre, (Barrie); *Witness* at the Harbourfront Centre (Toronto), Latitude 53 (Edmonton) and Hallwalls Center for Contemporary Art (Buffalo).

Roman Signer was born in Appenzell, Switzerland in 1938. He studied at the Schule für Gestaltung in Zurich and Lucerne from 1966-1971, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Poland from 1971-1972. His works have been shown in museums and galleries worldwide, as well as the Venice Biennale (1976 and 1999), Documenta 8 (1987) and Skulptur Projekte Münster (1997). He is the subject of numerous books, monographs and catalogues, the recipient of many awards, and in 2008 was a finalist for the prestigious Hugo Boss Prize. In 1996, he collaborated with director Peter Liechti on the film Signers Koffer (Signer's Suitcase), which documents a series of his action sculptures and interviews with people he encounters during his travels performing the work.

Kathryn MacKay is a visual artist, film curator and projectionist. She is the programmer at the Images Festival, a co-founder and programmer of the screening series Early Monthly Segments, and has curated programs for the Cinematheque Ontario's Free Screen and Independents series. She has had solo exhibitions of her paintings at the Engine Gallery, the Fountain Gallery and at the Arts and Letters Club Toronto.

Katie Bethune-Leamen is an artist who also writes. She holds a MFA from the University of Guelph. Her recent solo shows include Older, Sadder, And All In White This Time at Latcham Gallery (Stouffville) and Dazzle Shizzle at MKG127 (Toronto). Recent group shows include Cognitive Dissonance at Cottage Gallery (Los Angeles) and On n'enchaîne pas les volcans at Point de Fuite (Toulouse). She will be completing a residency in May/June 2011 in Reykjavik, Iceland.



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