

Like a Rolling Stone

Vincent van Velsen

Moving around has been one of Pieter Paul Pothoven's main occupancies during the past few years. He has been living in Amsterdam, New York, Lebanon and Beetsterzwaag. Currently he is based in Maastricht. Later this year he will move to Den Helder, but only for a short stay. In 2009 he travelled as far afield as Afghanistan to visit the mines of Serr-i-Sang* as part of his research that eventually culminated in the projects *In Absentia* and *Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang*. Stepping into the historical lacuna of knowledge that has existed over several centuries, Pothoven aims to address the material, societal, historical as well as economical meaning of lapis lazuli.

Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang

Lapis lazuli is one of the most sought after gemstones in the history of mankind. For over 6000 years, since the lapis lazuli mines began operation, its deep celestial blue has embodied royalty and honour, gods and power, spirit and vision. It is a universal symbol of wisdom and truth, mentioned in the Bible, and having an important position in ancient Egypt, where it was used in Cleopatra's eye shadow and in the decorations on Tutankhamen's death mask. The value of the lapis lazuli stone is indisputable. Ground and processed into powder, it produced the intense ultramarine colour favoured by the painter Michelangelo and his fellow Renaissance colleagues, who

used it to depict the dress of the Holy Virgin Mary. Throughout history the colour has indicated the presence of the stone itself and recalled images of both lavish exchange value and profound spirituality.

In the spiritual realm lapis lazuli is considered a powerful stone for activating the higher mind and enhancing intellectual ability, stimulating wisdom and good judgement. It also promotes intellectual analysis for archaeologists and historians, problem solving for lawyers, and creating new ideas for inventors and writers. At the same time the knowledge of the origins of the stone itself has been limited for centuries. Marco Polo briefly mentions the same Afghan mines where in 1936 German geologist Karl Brückl arrived. He was the first to photograph the mines and surrounding landscape – with a Leica 35mm camera. His scientific report *Die Minerällagerstätten von Ostafghanistan in the Neues Jahrbuch für Mineralogie* (1936) was accompanied by seven photographs, which from then on provided a visual reference for a greater audience. This report, together with its important position within numerous historic writings and narratives, triggered Pieter Paul Pothoven to start his own journey to the mines of Serr-i-Sang.

In Absentia

The mines are located in rough and bare premises above the timberline of northern Afghanistan. The surroundings are reminiscent of the surface of the moon, while the continuous explosions caused by mining – which is done by dynamite in order to increase findings, production and outcome – combined with the sound of the Kokcha-river constitute the acoustics of an ominous thunderstorm. This is where the In Absentia photographs were taken. They refer to Brückl's revelations and metaphorically represent the dark and fairly unknown circumstances in which the stone is obtained; as a further reference to Brückl the pictures were taken with a Leica camera. They also address the void in the collective memory of the West, and historical hiatus that this depiction of the mines literally portrays. Constituted *in absentia*, the true meaning of the mines remains elusive.

At the same time Brückl's endeavours are intertwined with the manifold manners that landscape photography influenced the way the public was able to discover distant areas. Brückl's lightweight Leica 35mm was specifically developed for its portable qualities while at the same time having the ability to capture the landscape properly. In that sense it can be viewed as a symbol of great importance for the visual appropriation of space under late-colonial reign. There exists an inherent interconnectedness between light and photography, similar to shedding light onto a subject and providing knowledge to the public. In *Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang* Pieter Paul Pothoven is literally shedding light onto the essence and insides of a lapis lazuli stone; sharing a knowledge base, as well as a visual component. Besides

questioning the tradition of exploration, he shows his ‘travel-findings’, via both photographs and slide-projectors. These works – again – relate to Karl Brückl, and a more general academic manner of disseminating knowledge, as well as to the vernacular cliché that used to fill post-holiday evenings.

Limen

The layers of the unknown are equally, but differently apparent in *Limen*. A limen is a sensory threshold below which a stimulus cannot be perceived. The ancient Egyptian mirror presented by Pieter Paul Pothoven used to be covered with a thick layer of corrosion, thereby no longer able to reflect the image of its beholder. Isolated in this way from its viewer, the mirror’s meaning was instead rendered through the cultural contextualization inherent in the distribution, conservation and display of ancient artefacts. The layers of corrosion that were added over the centuries created an impossibility of usage in its original ritualistic and religious manner. At the same time this type of useless object is highly valued due to its fetishized origin, provenance and rarity. Relating to the dispute on preservation between architectural theoreticians John Ruskin and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and the gap between use *value* and *preservation value* as described by Noémie Etienne, here the valorisation of ancient artefacts within a western context is addressed. This is highly entangled with museology, detachment, originality and unimpairedness while, on the contrary, in other traditions the use value is of utmost importance. Pieter Paul Pothoven interacted with these notions and brought the mirror back to its ‘original condition’ to again make it function as a mirror; releasing the object from both corrosion and antique exchange value. Through his own manual labour, he reclaimed the function of the object and the possibility of intimate engagement with it while at the same time imbuing it with renewed artistic value.

* The spelling of *Serr-i-Sang* comes from Karl Brückl’s *Die Minerällagerstätten von Ostafghanistan*, while the commonly used spelling is *Sar-i-Sang*.

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Vincent van Velsen (1987) is a critic, writer and curator. He frequently contributes to magazines such as *Metropolis M*, *Volume*, *Tubelight* and *Archined*, aside from working with artists, galleries and institutions such as *Platform BK*, *We are Public*, *SMBA*, *Kunsthuis Syb* and *Castrum Peregrini*. Together with Alix de Massiac, he won the second edition of the curatorial prize organised by the Dutch Association of Corporate Art Collections (VBCN).