

Sven Lütticken
**World History
and Earth Art**

01/13

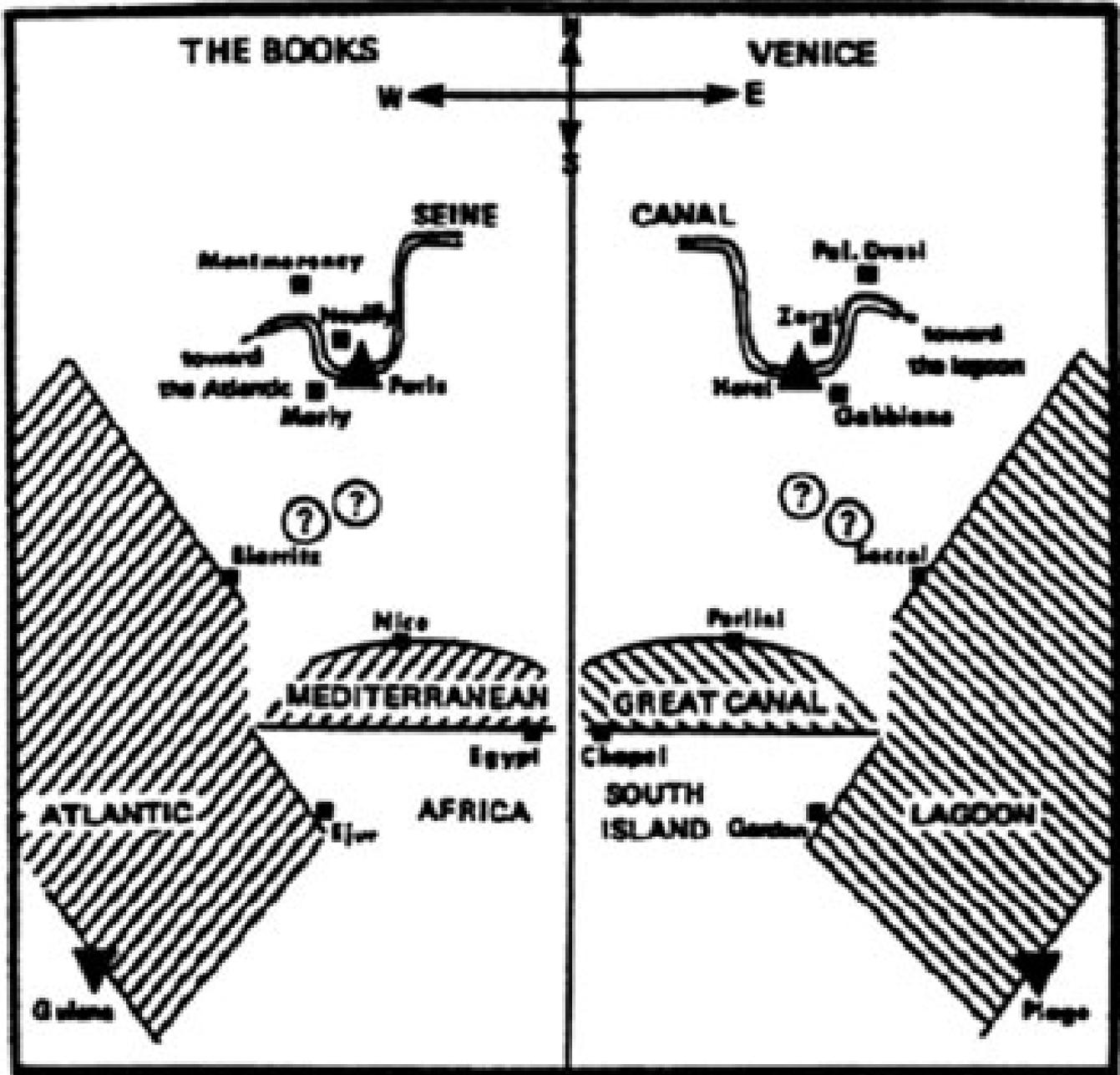
e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 [Sven Lütticken](#)
World History and Earth Art

In the last decade of the twentieth and the first of the twenty-first century, the nascent discourse on “global” art took two seemingly incompatible forms. On the one hand, “the end of art history” as a discipline dependent on Western narratives was pronounced, while on the other, some scholars sought to reinvent the discipline beyond Western parameters and forge a “global art history.” Hans Belting represents the first approach, noting in 2009 that “global art often escapes the arguments of art history, as it no longer follows a master narrative and contradicts modernity’s claim to be or to offer a universal model,” and seeing in various attempts to engage in global art history only so many confirmations of his diagnosis that “global art has continued art’s exodus from art history.”¹

Such debates now seem largely obsolete, overtaken by the facts of “actually existing globalization” in the art world. Nonetheless, some of the issues raised obviously remain. As Belting put it, “global art carries an internal antagonism with it, as it strengthens resistance and turns identity claims against the ‘free’ flux of media and markets in the age of ‘hypermodernity.’ ... The planetarization of information may have removed old borderlines but the same media make old and new contrasts even more visible.”² Antagonism and information, and antagonism as information: Belting’s words could function as an introduction to Jonas Staal’s smartphone app, *The Venice Biennale Ideological Guide 2013*.³ Antagonism on a large scale (rather than between isolated individuals) means history. Not, perhaps, art history in any traditional sense, but still a form of history in which art may play some role. What art is and what it can do, however, is itself transformed in the process.⁴ The guide partakes in that transformation, but it merely hints at some crucial questions that I will try to develop a bit further.

1. Art of the Nation-State, Art of Global Capital

The Venice Biennale is an anachronism in the strong sense of the term: rather than being simply obsolete, it derives a form of heightened contemporaneity from its partial outmodedness.⁵ As a world’s fair with national pavilions, the Biennale is clearly a product of the classic era of the nation-state and of imperialism. The point of departure for the *Ideological Guide* is that the Venice Biennale’s topography forms a topological world map that is a truer representation of the global division of power than conventional maps. Indeed, the countries with the largest, most central, and most bombastic pavilions are the giants of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century colonial



This diagram from Mathews and Perec's "Roussel and Venice" purports to show "a point-to-point correspondence" between the topography of Raymond Roussel's books and that of the city in which his alleged love affair took place.

expansion: the United Kingdom and France, the troublesome latecomer Germany, and the earliest – and by the nineteenth century, largely defunct – colonial Empire, Spain. It was only after the era of Japanese colonialism, after World War II, that Japan joined, even though the Italian fascist regime tried to get its ally to commit to a pavilion in the 1930s.⁶

If the absolutist state of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries treated its inhabitants as subjects who just “happened” to live on its territory, the modern conception of the state as a nation sees it as the objective form given to “a people,” expressing that people’s rights, historical destiny, and characteristic traits.⁷ Decisive steps toward the modern nation-state were taken in the Americas, where, as Benedict Anderson had argued, “imaginary communities” were formed in the public sphere produced by print capitalism: in this way, the inhabitants of the European absolutist states’ foreign dominions came to think of themselves as Americans, as Venezuelans, as Brazilians, whose interests were not those of the “motherland.”⁸ American colonies asserting their independent statehood thus represented a crucial moment in the early history of the nation-state, yet in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the latter inherited the crown of colonialism from its absolutist predecessor.

The French Revolution imported this model to Europe and radicalized it to an extent that produced a conservative backlash, with the Vienna Congress seemingly restoring order to the continent. The European nation-state hovered between particularism and universalism, supposedly uniting a consistent population, a people, a *Volk* – yet happily conquering other *Völker*, and depriving them of their nationhood. Such conquests could be justified either by the nation’s universal mission, as in the case of France after the Revolution, or by the innate superiority of its particular people, as in Nazi ideology – or by an admixture of the two, as in the notion that it was Europe’s mission to bring civilization to benighted Africans. The European nation-state was thus as cultural as it was political a concept; it aestheticized the political as it ideologized the cultural. The state may not always have been democratic, but the creative potential of “the people” supposedly manifested itself in an art that was seen as intrinsically national; German art, in particular, was insistently defined in opposition to French art, with the later being frivolous and sensual, and German art “deep.”

Today, we find ourselves in a world dominated by capital without borders, in which companies such as Starbucks and Amazon manage to get along by hardly paying any tax at

all, and in which a band such as U2 uses Holland as a de facto tax haven while its singer plays the role of concerned Citizen of the World.⁹ However, as Hardt and Negri have rightly stressed, this does not mean a real retreat of the state; in fact, it marks an apex of Big Government, as legislation is crucial in facilitating the circulation of international capital. Even while the welfare state and the cultural infrastructure of European countries are being dismantled, the state proves its indispensability by creating not a situation in which “the market” can act according to quasi-natural and universal rules, but in which the right rules allow for certain types of business and financial practices to flourish. Of course, this “Big Government” is itself formed under the pressure of lobbying and a relentless ideological barrage, and the resulting capitalist globalization does exactly what it is meant to do: instead of making “labor relationships equal in countries throughout the world,” it “[generalizes] the perverse mechanisms of unevenness and inequality everywhere.”¹⁰

One symptom of the perverse mechanisms of inequality at the Venice Biennale that sadly exceeds the bounds of the *Ideological Guide* is the flotilla of mega-yachts moored just off the Giardini. Whereas the prize-winning Japanese pavilion celebrated precarious collaboration and community in the face of disaster, the Big Boats speak a different language, that of global wealth redistribution from bottom to top – of accumulation by increasing inequality, as the widening of the income gap comes to function as an alternative for actual economic growth.¹¹ Blue-chip art becomes the perfect investment in such an economy. As Marina Vishmidt put it,

The “spectrality” of value in an age where accumulation is more typically pursued via finance than production contributes to an “abstraction” of social life where the material conditions for the reproduction of life, such as labour, are de-valorised, and notions such as “creativity” and “community” are held up as ideas. Art then becomes a sphere where these two tendencies, the ideality of money and the ideality of community, come to take a central place.¹²

Particularly during the preview and opening days, the Venice Biennale becomes in the process an impromptu community of lived abstraction and frantic accumulation; a market for the sharing of information that may or may not have to do directly with the art on display.

Capitalist globalization has produced a warped geography of art, in which museums scramble to open franchises in Gulf States. With

the basic outline of the Giardini reflecting a previous moment of globalization, dominated largely by a few Western states, the Venice Biennale is, again, in part anachronistic.¹³ Yet Staal's contention that it is a "better" world map than conventional maps is valid precisely because of the temporal dimensions and the historical layers that accrue when "rising" states, or indeed subaltern states and non-states, demand visibility in Venice and need to be accommodated within or on the margins of the old imperialist geography. The result is a unique, scrambled topography that oddly doubles the "topological" nature of Venetian urban fabric as described by Harry Mathews and Georges Perec, who noted that in Venice "one is never quite sure which way is north or south, where the link between two points is a matter of continuity and/or discontinuity of surface, just like the space of topology, which disregards direction and measurement."¹⁴

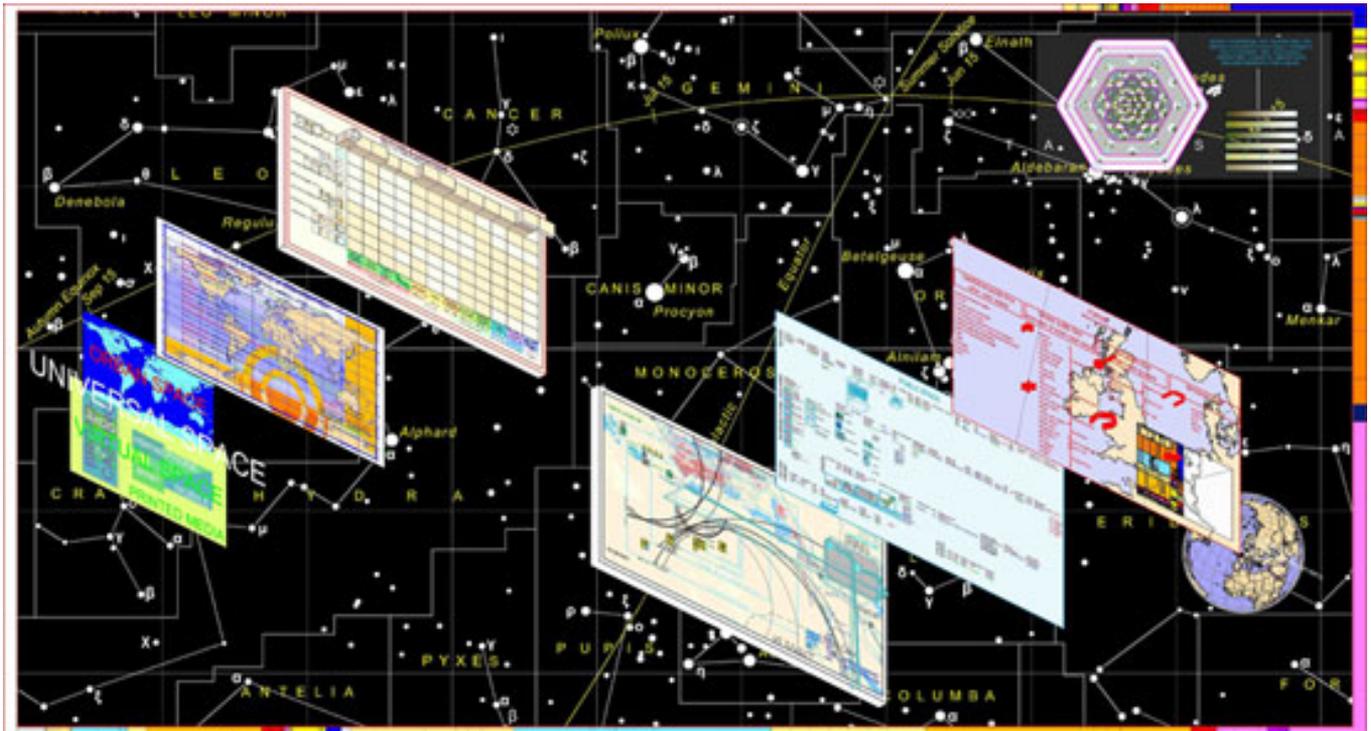
Mathews and Perec's 1977 essay "Roussel and Venice" takes as its starting point a (fictitious) prose sketch for a play allegedly written by Raymond Roussel in the wake of a (fictitious) 1895 visit to Venice with his mother, during which the eighteen-year-old is said to have met (and fallen for) the sixteen-year-old Ascanio Grifalconi. On the basis of this text and of Roussel's work in general, Mathews and Perec

propose a "secret topology." Not only did Roussel discover in Venice, "for the only time in his life, a place that embodied his own sense of reality: an illusory theater carved in stone." He discovered this theater in the company of Ascanio, and Mathews and Perec pretend to surmise that this young Venetian was the only real lover Roussel had in his whole life. Venice became Roussel's world map, and while his books with all their grotesque events may be set somewhere else – for instance in Africa – these locations are really topological projections of the Venetian geography. "There are then two superimposed topographies in Roussel. One corresponds to the world of his books and generally respects geographical reality (there are imaginary towns and countries, but the continents are all in place); the other is the secret world of his Venetian life." Mathews and Perec obligingly provide a mirrored map that shows how this works. The Africa of the *Impressions d'Afrique* in this way is just an "othered" part of Venice, a part south of the Canal Grande that used to have luxuriant gardens, where Roussel may or may not have found sexual fulfillment. Appropriating the language of colonial exoticism, the authors conclude that "he made this place his 'Inner Africa,' the dark nocturnal continent of his desire."¹⁵ Mr. Kurtz, I presume?

In the *Ideological Guide's* text on France,



A user browses the smartphone app of the Venice Biennale 2013 *Ideological Guide*.



Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office, *Urban Space: Panels*, 2006 –2013. Photo: Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office. The image represents Deleu’s attempt to map global public space on all possible scales as a precondition for design on an “urban” scale in which the urban coincides with the orbis.

that “middle power in spectacular decline,” Stephen Wright connects the autonomy given to France’s colonies with the autonomy allotted to art: “Geopolitically, France has colonies in every time zone of the planet; the legitimacy for maintaining these ‘overseas territories’ within the colonial fold relies on the claim that they enjoy some degree of administrative ‘autonomy’ – a logic that requires a particularly elastic understanding of ‘autonomy.’” Wright polemically connects this elastic understanding to art: for the French elites, “the less traction autonomy is liable to gain in a given sector, the more it is to be encouraged. And the paradigmatic sector is that of art.”¹⁶ The promise of emancipation is thus betrayed in geopolitics and cultural policy alike, and art must live with the suspicion that its autonomy is tolerated and even feted to the extent that it is *purely art, just art, only art.*

Stabilization, the slowing-down of decline through a considered and non-controversial selection, seems to be the secret watchword for the Dutch as well as the French pavilion. Among other things, *The Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennale* is also a move within the Dutch culture wars. It is a virtual counter-pavilion, and in that sense not too dissimilar from the way in which alumni of the Jan Van Eyck academy have created a Berlin-based association whose aim is to continue the kind of work that has become largely impossible at the current, reprovincialized Jan van Eyck academy.¹⁷ A well-behaved and normalized culture is once more called to the rescue; if it is not quite to unify “the people,” it can at least perhaps unify the national art world, as Jonas Staal and Vincent van Gerven Oei argue in their polemical text in the *Ideological Guide*. As an artist who prides himself on “being non-political,” an “artist celebrated for his craftsmanship, commercial entrepreneurship and poetic construction,” Mark Manders is practically “an artist with no enemies, suitable to facilitate each and every political agenda. Manders is thus the perfect instrument for the Dutch cultural sector in demise to regain its respect from politics. How else can we perceive this solo exhibition than as a tool to re-establish the authority of the Dutch cultural elite?”¹⁸

This elite, some may remember, was shaken by the hold that right-wing populism came to have on Dutch cultural politics, and by the ensuing cutbacks, but on the whole decided to effect a return to a semblance of normality, content to keep playing the game of diminishing returns as long as possible. This involved clinging to compromised forms as only partially believable but oddly reassuring signs of subjectivity and interiority. Manders’s installation, with its fragmentary monumental sculptural faces, was like a return to the

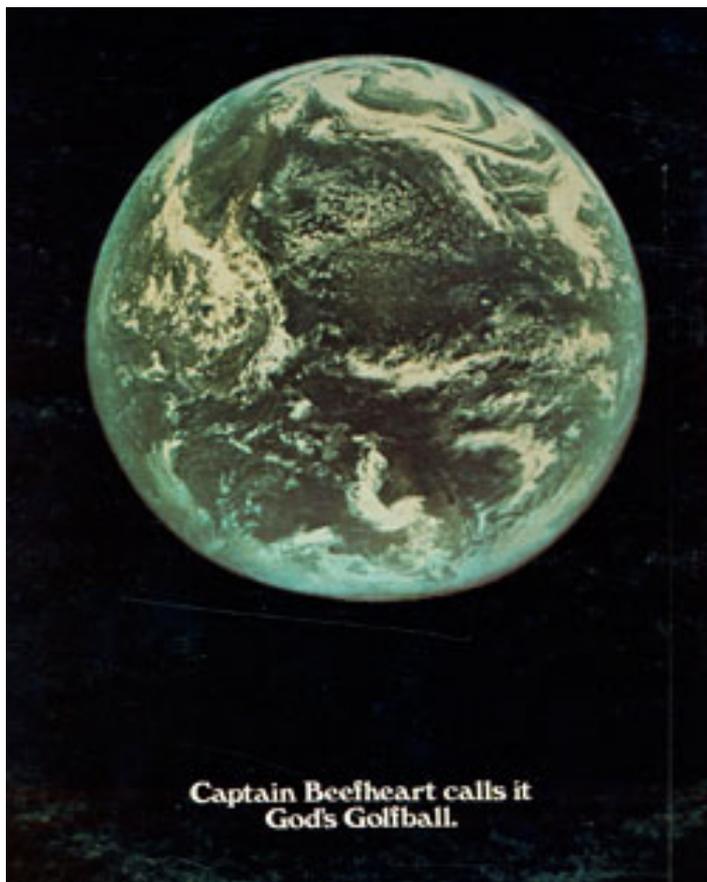
anguished and fractured language of interwar “rappel à l’ordre” art – for instance the “magical realism” of Dutch artists such as Carel Willink or Pyke Koch. In a new time of crisis, art once again takes on the form of “an implicit and explicit restoration of privileged forms of experience, a quest whose reactionary implications are instantly plausible.” As the author of this remark, Benjamin Buchloh, admits, “shoring up what is being threatened with disappearance might be a perfectly fine *private* motivation,” but hardly a promising “strategy of cultural and critical politics.”¹⁹

The problem with retrograde moves such as these is not so much that they are problematic, but that they are *not problematic enough*. It was symptomatic that just about every other conversation I had in Venice at one point derailed into discussions about Renzo Martens and his Institute for Human Activities, culminating ultimately in a long talk with Martens himself. Taking on the antinomies of uneven development, of actually existing globalization, but presenting the logic of gentrification as the only available alternative for developing a former plantation in Congo, the Institute project cannot only be attacked (which it often is) for perpetuating colonial relationships, but also for equating development with the purposive economic rationality of Richard Florida-style gentrification ideology.²⁰ If Martens is able to shed or at least modify and modulate the persona in which he has become entrapped, and if the project ultimately manages to go beyond some late-postmodern fatal strategy of ironical overidentification and to problematize its own contradictions without grinding to a halt, it could become truly problematic; exemplary. Even in its present, tentative form, its spectral presence in Venice constituted a kind of virtual counter-pavilion much like the *Ideological Guide* itself, and in dialogue with it.

2. The World is Not Enough

The *Ideological Guide* is an alternative and interactive world map. It shows the world, but not the earth. In Sabu Kohso’s words, the world and the earth “are different existential and epistemological dimensions and there are fissures or folds in-between.” The world historical process is a process of representation, whereas the earth is not representable in principle; it is a Deleuzian body without organs, or “our absolute unconscious” which “resurfaces only on the occasion of catastrophic disaster or revolutionary insurrection.”²¹ In an essay written in the aftermath of Fukushima, Kohso notes that the “global nuclear regime” teeters “between revolution and disaster. First of all they both derive from the same capitalist expropriation ...

one is positive and one is negative; one is identifiable ... one is human and another is non-human (or the earth).”²² The revolution and disaster are “one Event in the ultimate dimension” – the dimension where the world and the earth interact.²³



Detail of cover art for the LP *Whole Burbank Catalog*, a 1972 Warner Bros. Records. The sampler album parodies the *Whole Earth Catalog*.

Kohso lambasts “the world historical process” as a “totalizing process or a dialectic process which inexorably and tacitly assumes a synthesis, while the planetary movement is not a totalizing process, but an omnipresence.”²⁴ States are the protagonists or vehicles of world history par excellence. While Hegel defined “world history” as “*der Fortschritt im Bewußtsein der Freiheit*,” this progressive movement of Spirit manifested itself in its objective form in the *state*, in successive states, going from despotic to bourgeois and enlightened. Incidentally, Deleuze and Guattari, who opposed the earth to the *territory*, noted that the state is not purely on the side of reterritorialization; it also has a deterritorializing function. As in the era of colonialism, in the age of globalization the state is an agent of the deterritorialization of capital, while producing new territories of poverty and exploitation in the process.²⁵ As the subject of world history, the state spoliates the earth. Thus it acts in what I would call the dialectic of earth

and world; between capitalist accumulation and the natural and human potential it depends on, produces and exploits, transforms and stunts.

The *Ideological Guide* shows us – and allows us to performatively explore – world history as an asynchronous mess. Alliances, entanglements; we’re stuck with “actually existing world history.” With its focus on nation-states, including “blocked” nation-states such as Palestine, the guide’s map is the opposite of the “Whole Earth” image that had such galvanizing force in the 1970s – and which has recently been re-excavated in a number of projects, from David Senior’s archival presentation at the MoMA to Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke’s *The Whole Earth* exhibition to Wouter Davidts and Stefaan Vervoort’s project on Luc Deleu and T.O.P. Office, whose practice took the Whole Earth icon as its point of departure.²⁶ NASA’s “Whole Earth” photo, which provided a “holistic” image of the world as an integrated system, did not of course show the states and the ideological blocks that were engaged in a nuclear stalemate; it showed the earth, not the world. In the age of Fukushima, world history in the guise of the state (say, the Japanese state, or the French, both dependent on nuclear energy) threatens to annihilate or mutate the earth.

Around 1970, in the heyday of systems theory, moon landings and photographs taken from space appeared to make visible the earth as a single, unified system. In fact, physically speaking, the earth has characteristics of both open and closed systems, as it exchanges energy with the universe, but usually not matter.

Smithson emphasizes its closed aspect and underlines the fact that human acts increase its entropic drive, leading to disequilibrium and systemic collapse. “Perhaps, the moon landing was one of the most demoralizing events in history, in that the media revealed the planet Earth to be a limited closed system, not unlike the island in *Lord of the Flies*. As the Earth thickens with blood and waste, as the population increases, the stress factor could bring ‘the system’ to total frenzy.”²⁷ In Smithson’s apocalyptic scenario, the earth-as-system in the end all but coincides with the world-as-system, resulting in a socio-natural ecology in disrepair. Peter Fend and Ocean Earth would draw drastic conclusions from Smithson’s work and “Earth Art” in general: artists had to take the lead in monitoring (via satellite) and intervening in the global ecosystem. Lessons learned from the art of the 1960s and early 1970s now had to be applied on a large scale and with practical effects in mind, for instance by creating marshlands to shape birds’ migratory patterns or by devising ways to harvest kelp.²⁸

If the guide – to reiterate this point –

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Sven Lütticken
World History and Earth Art

appears to be solidly on the side of the world, disregarding the dialectic of world and earth, there are still significant, symptomatic acknowledgements of this dialectic, as well as symptomatic elisions. Just like the guide reads many pavilions against the grain, as symptoms of a country's political and economic situation, in this respect one has to submit the guide itself to a similar operation. The text on Japan mentions that Toki Tanaka "[recontextualizes] the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster in 2011" and "tries to make ultra-diplomatic conversation with the viewers on our behavior and its uncertainty," while the text on Iraq stresses that "commissioner Chalabi is known as an author, but more widely as the daughter and supporter of, her father, Ahmed Chalabi, perhaps most notorious for being on the CIA's multi-million dollar payroll for decades and playing a central role in advocating and pushing for the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq."²⁹ This obviously ties into the global hunt for resources and the neocolonial use of Iraq for primitive accumulation via Halliburton and Co. – though the guide does not develop this. As in the conflicts that are publicly re-performed in Jonas Staal's *New World Summit*, in which representatives of illegal organizations make

08/13

their case, we are dealing with a form of world history that wavers between catastrophe and revolution.

For one of the more interesting off-site pavilions, that of the Maldives, the guide has not yet provided a main article at the time of writing, but the rubric "Ongoing Disputes and Conflicts" notes: "Political and religiously motivated unrest. In 2012, in the wake of opposition protests, the first democratically elected president resigned. He later declared he had resigned at gunpoint and he does not recognize the new government."³⁰ However, the guide largely leaves out the ecological dimension that most people in the West now associate with the Maldives, as the country that will be the first to drown due to rising sea levels. This narrative is questioned in the pavilion by Khaled Ramadan's video *Maldives to Be or Not*, which suggests that the political ecology of the country is much more disastrous than the environmental ecology. It is precisely the intersection and interaction between the two that Ramadan's video explores, while the guide – even if one acknowledges that its task cannot be to duplicate the pavilion – drops the ball. If, in the case of Japan, the text discusses Fukushima, the guide has no separate rubric for nuclear energy – rather, more



Khaled Ramadan's 2013 film, *Maldives to Be or Not*, explores the interaction between the country's political and environmental ecologies.

specifically, a category stating whether a country has a “nuclear force” or not. In the case of Japan, of course, the answer is “no.” After Chernobyl, in 1986, a post-Situationist pamphlet argued that it is a fatal mistake to differentiate between military and civilian or “peaceful” uses of nuclear energy; it is in both cases a matter of warfare, of war against the global population in the service of a world-economical system that perpetuates itself at all costs.³¹

It is perhaps worth recalling that at the end of WWII, the nuclear bomb briefly came to function as a kind of anticipatory mockery of the Whole Earth image: it’s not the whole earth but the bomb that will bring us together. Shortly after the end of World War II, the Swiss author Denis de Rougemont, who was to become one of the mainstays of the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom, published his *Lettres sur la bombe atomique*. In this book, de Rougemont reports on the final months of 1945, which he spent on the American East Coast, where he encountered two cultures: that of art, as exemplified by Marcel Duchamp, and that of (nuclear) science. Duchamp, identified here only (and rather misleadingly) as “a surrealist painter,” did not let the explosion of the first nuclear bombs change his convictions: science is nothing but a mythology, its “laws” are man-made myths and have no bearing on reality. The explosion of the Bomb did not prove that science had actually penetrated the core of reality: “Some proof – they had arranged for it!”³²

During a stay in Princeton, de Rougemont found himself surrounded by the scientists who had “arranged” the explosion; here Einstein – the Moses of the atomic Earth – walked by his window. For de Rougemont, the Bomb heralded the end of war and contained “possibilities for a global union.”³³ What was needed in the face of global nuclear annihilation was a “planetary thinking”: “To the planetary weapon thus corresponds a universal community that relegates nations to the status of mere provinces. Let yourself get carried away for a moment in this revolving game of symbols: the Earth, the Globe, the Ball, the Head, the Bomb, and the Unit regarded always and everywhere as a round object – apple, sphere or golden scepter, whether the Universe, or the Empire, or the Atom. Here, extremes mirror each other.”³⁴ As many science-fiction films would reiterate, it takes a planetary threat to create global unity. Illustrated by Matta – who, as the introduction states, “was always drawn to modern physicists’ work on wave propagation and radiation, and to the huge transformations that scientists had imposed on matter” – with drawings of emaciated beings in some non-Euclidian forcefield.³⁵ De Rougemont’s manifesto stands as a compromised attempt to

think global unity not through the earth but through its worldly and otherworldly double, the Bomb.³⁶

If one project in the Japanese pavilion proposes “unplugged painting” – painting made and seen without the use of electric light – the reality is of course that the Japanese pavilion, the Biennale as such, and the *Ideological Guide* are hugely dependent on electricity, and hence to some extent on nuclear as well as fossil energy. The Global Village foretold in the ’60s by McLuhan, a notion that was eagerly picked up by the counterculture and fed into the *Whole Earth Catalog*, is a global village of uneven distribution and use and abuse of resources, in which seemingly “clean” technology is in fact hugely energy-consuming.³⁷ As an app and a web site, the *Ideological Guide* is itself the product of a technoscience that has at least some of its roots in Californian “Whole Earth” culture. As Franke’s “Whole Earth” show stressed – taking cues from Fred Turner – the *Whole Earth Catalog*, with its “access to tools,” appealed to a fractured and contradictory counterculture in which romantic “back to nature” ecology coexisted with an interest in information technology as the basis for a new horizontal and networked DIY culture.³⁸ Stewart Brand himself falls firmly into the camp of libertarian techno-enthusiasts (with a New Age touch), and for him the lesson of the Whole Earth image was *not* that this Blue Planet is all we have. In the 1970s, Brand became an ardent proponent of space colonization, working in tandem with (then and current) California governor Jerry Brown.

While gently mocking techno-utopians who claimed that space colonization could solve all problems on earth, Brand was in fact far more derisive of environmentalists who rejected the idea out of hand, suggesting that the whole earth did indeed have to be left behind by a new breed of pioneers:

The use of the term “Space Colony” has been expressly forbidden by the US State Department because of anti-colonial feelings around the world. So NASA has shrugged and adopted “Space Settlements” – unpoetic terminology since the last thing you do in Space is settle. We’re sticking to “Space Colonies.” It’s more accurate; this time there’s a difference in that no Space natives are being colonized; and the term reminds us of things that went badly and went well in previous colonizations. If we’re lucky we may enact a parallel with what happened in Europe when America was being colonized. Intellectual ferment – new lands meant new possibilities; new possibilities meant

new ideas. If you can try things you think up things to try.³⁹

In the year 2013, space travel is being privatized at breakneck speed, with a kind of space tourism for the 1 percent seemingly around the corner. Bob Geldof has paid a Dutch company \$100,000 to become the first Irishman in space, and over five hundred future passengers of Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic have paid a deposit of at least \$20,000, with over half of those having already paid the full ticket price of \$200,000.⁴⁰ If this Virgin service comes perilously close to charter flights, the next step is foreseeable – and the mega-luxury yachts in Venice come to look like already rather unreal prefigurations of future space yachts à la the Heart of Gold, the space cruiser in Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The world has run out of earth. Once more, if on a small scale, space appears to offer a way out – not for colonization, perhaps, but for distantiation, for having your very own “whole earth” moment at what may very well be the far end of world history. If the *Ideological Guide* doggedly stays with the world, it may be precisely because at present, to look away from world history is to be on the side of disaster.

3. Too Much Information

Goethe's 1827 pronouncements that “nowadays, national literature doesn't mean much” and “the age of world literature is beginning” echo through recent literary theory.⁴¹ As Pascale Casanova puts it, “Goethe was the first to intuit the direct link between the appearance of a *Weltliteratur* and the emergence of a new economy founded on the specific struggles of international literary relations: a market ‘where all nations offer their wares’ and a ‘general intellectual trade.’”⁴² World literature, then, as ultimately still dependent on the nation-state – a world's fair or Venice Biennale of cultural competition; of cultural competition in the age of the *Kulturindustrie*. But as Franco Moretti has argued, in a planetary system of world literature, old forms of literary scholarship and criticism may no longer suffice. In the face of a profusion of texts, one can no longer engage in the close reading of a small number of canonized masterpieces, but rather in the *distant reading* of a large corpus: “A patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*. Still ambitious, and actually even more so than before (world literature!); but the ambition is now directly proportional to the distance from the text: the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be.”⁴³

This leads to quantitative research into, for instance, the length and nature of the titles of both Western and Chinese novels, and the

relative success of Hollywood genres on the global market – research as pattern recognition, focusing on the creation of a database of metadata. The *Ideological Guide*, too, engages in distant reading. In this, it follows the logic of institutional critique, which has long sought to unmask the sensuous plenitude of the artwork as being, in fact, a form of impoverishment: the “aesthetic experience,” narrowly conceived, leaves out all kinds of social and ideological factors that contribute to the framing – and indeed the production – of the artwork. In recent work by Andrea Fraser, this statistical drive has been intensified. When a lot of art seems to be made precisely to function as data on a kind of artistic stock market, albeit a singularly opaque one – with “algorithmic collectors” using computer programs to shape their collections, with is to say their investments. In this situation the proper response is not to revert to some realm of privileged and falsely concrete experience, but to take the datascape as material that is as aesthetic as it is economical and political.⁴⁴

Rather than analyzing the artworks in any detail, with attention to their particular aesthetic strategies and effects, most texts written for the guide analyze the pavilion and the choice of artist in terms of a country's current geopolitical and ideological situation. As Alice Haddad, a student who compiled data for the guide, put it in her report,

The app only traces the artwork's process as a pre-existing static blueprint; it is not capable to show its potential for producing something new, not that I believe this issue could have been put into mere data, in fact, generally only experience allows to fully capture the effect of a work of art, but a set of politically relevant criteria could have been suggested as a support to detect the artwork's agency, and evaluate if it is swallowed by or, on the contrary, confronting or subverting the procedures to which it is subjected.⁴⁵

While suggesting a set of politically relevant criteria is rather tricky, as successful works will likely make extant criteria obsolete or reveal their partial nature, the potential for aesthetic resistance in specific practices and artworks is indeed crucial. Here it falls to the individual user (or to couples or groups of users) to develop a dialogue between the guide's data and context, and the presence of art – a presence that may at times reveal itself powerless and purely defensive, and at other times more than that.

The quantitative and statistical turn is of course not limited to art and literature. A prime

10/13

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Sven Lütticken
World History and Earth Art

commodity today is the mass of data and metadata that every denizen of the industrialized and post-industrial parts of the world produces; a data trail that is as interesting to Amazon as it is to the NSA, as vital for insurance companies as it is for the CIA. The Snowden revelations uncovered the extent to which global but ultimately American corporations collude, either willingly or unwittingly, with “national” agencies that seem completely out of bounds and beyond control. By moving through Venice with the app on one’s smartphone, one is also a moving dot, creating a data trail – locating oneself in a worldwide grid. One is producing – producing information – even by walking. Using the guide may help one to become a critical viewer, but this critical viewer is also a thoroughly implicated one. The implications of this remain to be worked out.

11/13

artists, curators, and theoreticians that help the user to explore the ideological framework of each national pavilion. Additional data provides further commentary on the political background, selection procedure, and financing of each of the exhibitions on display and their relation to each other. *The Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennale* is supported by: Kadist Art Foundation, Paris; Center for Visual Art, Rotterdam; Farook Foundation, Dubai; PhDArts, Leiden; and Promoveren in de Kunsten, Amsterdam. The travel grant is a co-initiative of Casco, e-flux, and Kadist Art Foundation.



This rendering of 2005 international phone-call traffic from telecommunications research firm, Telegeography, maps the globe’s international telephone traffic flows through the United States. Image: Telegeography.

If various historical and neo-avant-gardes have stressed qualitative experience over the alienating quantifications of capitalism, now the qualitative has become “embedded in daily life,” the abstract so concretized, that – in McKenzie Wark’s words – “the qualitative avant-gardes have to re-imagine possible spaces for alter-modernities based on this transformation of everyday life in all its forms into a gamespace of quantified data.”⁴⁶ There is no substantial technological difference between using any other GPS-based map and the guide, but as an exercise in radical cartography the guide attempts to transform seemingly immovable quantities into uncertain qualities. The suspicion of appearances that this breeds must also be turned against the guide itself, against its presuppositions and its perhaps unintentional effects.

×

Upcoming issues of *e-flux journal* will feature further essays developed around the *Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennale*, a project by Jonas Staal in the form of a free iPhone and Android app providing insight into the political, economic, and general ideological infrastructure of the Biennale. The guide offers critical reflections by prominent

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Sven Lütticken
World History and Earth Art

Sven Lütticken teaches art history at VU University Amsterdam, where he coordinates the Research Master's programme Visual Arts, Media and Architecture (VAMA). Sternberg Press published his book *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle* (2009) and *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (2013).

12/13

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Sven Lütticken
World History and Earth Art

1
Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate," in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums*, eds. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddesieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 38–73. Text online at <http://www.globalartmuseum.de/media/file/476716148442.pdf>.

2
Ibid.

3
Disclosure: With Andrea Fraser and Henk te Velde, I'm supervising Jonas Staal's PhD at PhDarts in The Hague. My partner, Binna Choi, is director of Casco, which sponsored the *Ideological Guide* travel grants.

4
Both my partner and I were unable to install the guide app on our phones during our Biennale visit. I had finally bought my first ever smartphone, but didn't have a working internet connection yet: my wife's phone was too old and did not have the right operating system. I am thus writing on the basis of my use of the guide after the visit in order to arrive at some general considerations (that would no doubt have been enriched if I'd gotten the thing to work in Venice).

5
In use the term "anachronism" here in the non-pejorative sense, that of "anachrony," as it has been developed by Georges Didi-Huberman.

6
See <http://venicebiennale2013.ideologicalguide.com/pavilion/japan/>.

7
On the absolutist state, see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 2013 [1974]).

8
Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991 [1983]): 37–46.

9
The band moved its publishing entity to the Netherlands, thus avoiding having to pay tax on their songwriting royalties. See <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/u2-not-feeling-the-love-over-tax-29331241.html>.

10
Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (London: Penguin, 2005): 164.

11
Gopal Balakrishnan analyzes the situation in terms of a looming "stationary state"; Foster and McChesney in terms of stagnation. See Balakrishnan, "Speculations on the Stationary State," *New Left Review* 59 (Sept.–Oct. 2009): 5–26; John

Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, *The Endless Crisis: How Monopoly-Finance Capital Produces Stagnation and Upheaval from the USA to China* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012).

12
Marina Vishmidt, "Situation Wanted: Something about Labour," *Afterall* 19 (Autumn/Winter 2008): 22.

13
A further complication is that modern art has been largely metropolitan rather than *völkisch* or *national*; "for the avant-garde, Paris is closer to Buenos Aires than to Lyon; Berlin more akin to Manhattan than to Lübeck." (Franco Moretti, "Modern European Literature: A Geographical Sketch," in *Distant Reading* [London: Verso, 2013], 34.) The British Pavilion is de facto the London Pavilion and the French Pavilion the Paris Pavilion.

14
Harry Mathews and Georges Perec, "Roussel and Venice: Outline of a Melancholic Geography," in Harry Mathews, *Immeasurable Distances: The Collected Essays* (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1991), 91.

15
Ibid., 90, 91, 95.

16
Steven Wright, "The Autonomy Archipelago," *The Venice Biennale Ideological Guide 2013*. See <http://venicebiennale2013.ideologicalguide.com/pavilion/france/>.

17
See <http://www.janvaneyckassociation.org/>.

18
Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei and Jonas Staal, "Suppressing the Extreme-Right: Mark Manders as Unifier of the Dutch Cultural Elite," *The Venice Biennale Ideological Guide 2013*. See <http://venicebiennale2013.ideologicalguide.com/pavilion/netherlands/>.

One should add, however, that the art-world elite criticized in this text is in a defensive position vis-à-vis a cultural bureaucracy whose heroes are figures like Daan Roosegaarde (designer of sustainable dance floors and "smart highways") rather than an artist such as Manders. Staal's project rejects this dismal false alternative; it is aimed both against a fatally limited conception of artistic autonomy and against the Stalinist-Neoliberal embrace of heteronomy in the name of "the creative industries," which supposedly can rescue Holland from terminal post-industrial decline.

19
Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Que

Faire?," *Texte zur Kunst* no. 81 (March 2011), 150.

20
The project's website is at <http://www.humanactivities.org/>.

21
Sabu Kohso, "Apocalyptic Capitalism and Planetary Omnipresence," lecture at the Studium Generale of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, March 13, 2013.

22
Sabu Kohso, "Fangs Hiding in the Green: Between Revolution and Disaster, The World and the Earth," in various authors, *Fukushima Mon Amour* (New York: Autonomedia, 2011), 52.

23
Ibid., 53.

24
Kohso, "Apocalyptic Capitalism and Planetary Omnipresence."

25
"States and Cities have often been defined as territorial, as substituting a territorial principle for the principle of lineage. But this is inexact ... State and City, on the contrary, carry out a deterritorialization because the former juxtaposes and compares agricultural territories by relating them to a higher arithmetical Unity, and the latter adapts the territory to a geometrical extensiveness that can be continued in commercial circuits." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994): 86.

26
See "Access to Tools: Publications from the Whole Earth Catalog, 1968–1974," MoMA, 2011; Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke, *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin: HKW/Sternberg Press, 2013); Wouter Davidts, Guy Chatel, Stefaan Vervoort, *Luc Deleu – T.O.P. Office: Urban Space* (Amsterdam/The Hague: Valiz/Stroom, 2012).

27
Robert Smithson, "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium" (1970), in *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 135

28
See the sections "Prior Theory" and "Founding Documents" in *Ocean Earth, 1980 bis heute*, ed. Peter Weibel (Graz: Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, 1993), 2–18.

29
Anonymous, "Welcome... To Which Iraq?," *The Venice Biennale Ideological Guide 2013*. See <http://venicebiennale2013.idologicalguide.com/pavilion/>

iraq/.

30
See <http://venicebiennale2013.idologicalguide.com/pavilion/maldives/>.

31
Anonymous, *Tchernobyl. Anatomie d'un nuage* (Paris: Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1987).

32
"La belle preuve – on avait tout arrangé pour cela!" Denis de Rougemont, *Lettres sur la bombe atomique* (New York: Brentano's, 1946): 19. See also Denis de Rougemont, *Journal d'une époque* (1926–1946) (Paris: Gallimard, 1968): 562–571.

33
In the French original: "possibilités d'union mondiale." (translations from the French by Michael Andrews)

34
De Rougemont, *Lettres sur la bombe atomique*, 90, 110

35
In the French original: "À l'arme planétaire correspond donc une communauté universelle, qui relègue les nations au rang de simples provinces. Laissez-vous entraîner quelques instants dans ce jeu gravitant de symboles: la Terre, la Globe, la Boule, la Tête, la Bombe, et l'Unité considérée partout et de tout temps comme objet rond, pomme, sphère ou sceptre d'or, que ce soit l'Univers, ou l'Empire, ou l'Atome. Ici les extrêmes se reflètent." Robert Tenger, "Note de l'éditeur," *Lettres sur la bombe atomique*, 11. Matta always maintained that he had given André Breton the idea for the "Great Transparent Ones," but whereas Breton interpreted them more literally as enormous invisible beings, for Matta they were wave-forms: "That's what had interested Breton, the idea of 'great transparencies' that I spoke about. The great transparencies in these paintings were like waves – they were, for example, economic, social, and political upheavals. [C'est ce qui avait intéressé Breton, l'idée que je parlais de grandes transparences. Ces grandes transparences, dans ces toiles-là, c'est comme des ondes, c'est-à-dire que ce sont par exemple les bouleversements économiques, sociaux, politiques.]" (Christian de Maussion, "Mythomattaque. Entretien avec Matta," *L'Autre journal* 9 [1986]: 39.) To this list, one surely has to add nuclear "events." However, the illustrations for de Rougemont's book reflect an anthropomorphic turn, characterized by emaciated figures Matta often referred to with the term "vitreux." These "vitreux" inhabit the universe of the *Grand Transparents*.

36
"à toujours été attiré par les travaux des physiciens

modernes sur la propagation des ondes et les radiations, et par les transformations gigantesques que les savants viennent de faire subir à la matière"

37
For McLuhan, of course, the notion of the Global Village had a specific meaning that became lost as the phrase turned into a meme; the Global Village was truly to be a return to the old tribal village on a global scale, as electronic media inaugurated a new age of orality and myth.

38
See Fred Turner, "The Politics of the Whole: Circa 1968 – and Now," in *The Whole Earth*, 43–48.

39
Stewart Brand, "The Sky Starts at Your Feet," in *Space Colonies*, ed. Stewart Brand (Hardmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 5.

40
See Dan P. Lee, "Welcome to the Real Space Age," *New York Magazine*, May 19, 2013. See <http://nymag.com/news/features/space-travel-2013-5/>; Sean Michaels, "Bob Geldof Set to Become First Irishman in Space," *The Guardian*, Sept. 11, 2013, See <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/sep/11/bob-geldof-first-irishman-space>.

41
"Nationalliteratur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit, und jeder muß jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen." From the *Gespräche* with Eckermann, January 31, 1827. Goethe used this concept repeatedly in the late 1820s and early 1830s.

42
Pascale Casanova, "Literature as a World," *New Left Review* 31 (Jan.–Feb. 2005): 83.

43
Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *Distant Reading*, 48

44
The collector Eduard Pomeranz cheerfully admits to buying Paul Chan's work mostly as a bit of art-market speculation, and being guided by algorithms in his purchases. See Almuth Spiegler, "Extrem berechnend und unglaublich berührend," *Die Presse* (Vienna), May 23, 2012. Available online at <http://diepresse.com/home/kultur/kunst/760017/Sammler.Ex-trem-berechnend-und-unglaublich-beruehrend>.

45
Alice Haddad, internship report, VU University Amsterdam, May 2013.

46
McKenzie Wark, "Celerity: A Critique of the Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics." See <http://syntheticedifice.word>

13/13

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Sven Lütticken
World History and Earth Art