POINT OF DEPARTURE

Chase County Kansas, USA

Jeroen van Westen and Anne Ausloos
Ton Haak, Bill Mc Bride 2013
EARTH - Sites and Structures

POINT OF DEPARTURE, is a concept for EARTH - Sites and Structures, developed by the artists Jeroen van Westen (Heeten, the Netherlands) and Anne Ausloos (Antwerp, Belgium).

In this first phase Anne Ausloos en Jeroen van Westen worked in close collaboration with Ton Haak and Bill McBride (both from Matfield Green, Kansas). Laura Berman (Kansas City, Missouri) was observing their progress; she will be one of the future participating artists.
Some landscapes are epic, and the prairie is often talked about in that way: the myth of how the west was won. But the subtle beauty of this empty landscape can probably better be read as poetry. The big story of cowboy romanticism fell short; farming is hard, ranching not without complications. The prairie, once covering 1/3 of the US, is in its more or less original form only recognizable in The Flint Hills in Kansas. Nature is no longer to be conquered but to be conserved. It is exactly that combination of culture -if not in decline then in transition- and nature which demands close observation and reflection.

Inhabitants from the small Chase County Flint Hills “ghost town” Matfield Green who are involved in (The Gallery at) Pioneer Bluffs and the Center for Living Education (restoring “The Bank” to open a new art space) asked for ideas on how art can contribute to the renaissance of the small community. There is no post office, no (real) bank, no shop, no bar or restaurant, no school; freight trains pass by, as do the few vehicles on quiet Highway 177, a scenic byway. Most of the about forty houses are occupied, with half of them inhabited by “old-timers” and the remaining by old as well as more recent newcomers. Some are (also) used as a weekend or vacation rental. Only a few houses are beyond repair.

Something started to happen about six years ago: empty houses were restored, a few retreats opened, Matfield Green became a point of departure for people to enjoy the Flint Hills. If they wish, it is the perfect spot for quiet observation, and personal and/or cultural reflection on the changes this land and rural community are going through.

Matfield Green invited the arts to come over and to explore the Flint Hills for opportunities, to uncover and create conditions for a more focused observation leading to reflection, and inspiration for new possibilities to live in balance with the prairie, this beautiful ecosystem. This is what EARTH - Sites and Structures is about, an artistic research and development project for Chase County.

Anne Ausloos  
Jeroen van Westen  
April 2013
Point of Departure - uncovering

For Point of Departure we selected seventeen sites and structures, each representing others, thus iconic for Chase County. Artifact sites and structures are no longer part of culture and not yet part of nature. They are still there, in between, but open for a new meaning to be added upon the “after image” of their origin. By cutting out the artifacts in the photos of the selected sites, the earlier relation between site and structure (= between nature and culture) is, in a way, open for new attitudes and new understandings. The silhouette is the after image of what once was and now can be something else.
artifacts: the art reclaims a reality. To stress this point we gave new titles to all a performance: for a work of art. To point for) a sculpture, an installation, a need for the original functionality, the structure, and because there is no longer refreshing of the formal aspects of the structure, the focus shifted from structure to site (from culture to nature). To go to the point before the structure was built and used, Point of Departure goes back to the drawing board: the first technical drawings of the structures. Following this refreshing of the formal aspects of the structure, and because there is no longer a need for the original functionality, the structure can be viewed as (a starting point for) a sculpture, an installation, a performance: for a work of art. To stress this point we gave new titles to all artifacts: the art reclaims a reality.
Point of Departure -
Works for EARTH

Light Drawings, Anne Ausloos

Artifacts slowly return to nature, decay creates cracks and holes in roofs, walls, and ceilings. Objects in the spaces fall apart, they are no longer cupboards, buckets, chairs; they are no longer in place. Light reflects in unexpected forms. New compositions can be seen as surreal drawings created by shifting light. These light drawings are captured in photography. After being touched by the light and returned to darkness some of these objects are collected to be taken home to the studio. This interaction between the artifacts, the process of decay, the movement of sunlight, things left behind and the ones taken home, is steered by the eyes of the artist and returned to spectators and visitors in a different location, at a different time, and in a different form. Displacement and time are strong strategies in seeing the ordinary with “new eyes” disclosing new meanings.
Point of Departure -
Works for EARTH

Sentinel, Anne Ausloos & Jeroen van Westen
(proposal)

The prairie is essentially horizontal. The rolling hills are endless, a vast sea of grass under a big sky. It is hard to tell distance or to keep bearings. There are few landmarks (mostly cellphone towers). In this naturally horizontal landscape the landmarks, “cultural towers”, are “archipunctual” connections between earth and sky. In their vertical loneliness they don’t radiate power like a castle would, but they look like guards, keepers of the lands, sentinels.

This tower on Highway 177 south of Bazaar is shiny, constructed with salt-glazed stone in rich sand-colored ochers (and aren’t the prairie hills in fact old sea bottom—salt, sea, sand?). There is a crack running from top to bottom connecting the inside with the outside. The stones the tower was built with still look like new, the crack painfully shows it is being neglected. A shiny ring at the top reclaims the tower and returns it to the community. A soft light shining from within beckons the passer-by during the night. Take a seat, lean back, look at the tower. Step inside, look in, look out, look up, observe the land, the sky; discover the text in the ring at the top. Listen how voices resound in the tower.
PRAIRIE AND SEA PLANT NO OTHER HEDGEROWS THAN THE SKY

PRODUCED BY AN AUTODESK STUDENT PRODUCT

POINT OF DEPARTURE

EARTH SENTINEL - Anne Ausloos and Jeroen van Westen in progress Matfield Green Chase County Kansas 2013
Point of Departure - 
Works for EARTH

Sky Deep, Jeroen van Westen & Anne Ausloos

Nothing is what it seems to be looking at this concrete slit in the earth. The tapered walls play tricks on your eyes, and the angle matches our perception of perspective. Entering from one end you are stopped by a steep drop. Looking down into the drop results into looking out into the other entrance. Upon entering this second entrance under the stone roof one is immediately almost blinded by light coming from the end of the narrow tunnel into the earth. The walls are warm red, the roof is a natural stone, the light is striking. The binding element in this work is a mirror, placed at an angle in such a position that it is almost impossible to see oneself in the mirror. The mirror is a window between the depth of the earth and the sky above for anyone standing in the earth. At the equinox, sunrise and sunset are almost exactly in line with Sky Deep.

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Next to Matfield Station a 3D drawing is uncovered. The prairie is the essential home of the free. Yet, it is by framing that you can observe the true vastness of sky, hills, and the harsh conditions in which the bluestem tall grasses grow. Looking up through the square frames still standing, one can see clouds race by, while on the ground the lines frame many plants, thus creating beautiful “paintings” changing over the season. Take all the lines together and one feels like being in a different world and in a transparent connection with the rolling horizon.

The seventy freight trains per day add to the soundscape and connect the place to history and the whole world; the lettering on the containers adds to the sensation of being in a transcendental garden between worlds. The stockyard originally built by the Santa Fe railroad company, signed by fire, reclaimed by the art, will now be open to public.