

Moments Before the Flood: Carl De Keyzer

It seems to be an accepted fact that the sea level will rise dramatically before the end of the century as a result of climate change, partly through the fault of us humans. Prognoses vary from a few decimetres to a few metres.¹ *Moments before the Flood* (working title) is a visual, photographic investigation into how Europe is coping with a difficult-to-gauge threat. The coasts of Europe are the areas in which the repercussions of this threat will be felt. This is the zone in which the mainland no longer feels as “main” as it once did, where the Old World is foundering and where the future is a threat to the past. Whether it’s the rocky coasts of western Ireland, the salt marshes and mudflats off the northern Netherlands, the harbours of the Baltic Sea, the volcanic coasts of Iceland or the beaches of the Aegean Sea, Europe’s coast seems to be decidedly unstable. The coast is the question mark of the mainland. And that’s what makes it so fascinating a subject for photographic research that tries to depict uncertainty. This project doesn’t just focus on a possible future hazard; it also takes in the various forms of coastal protection in Europe throughout history and how today Fortress Europe copes with other swells and floods.

The 65,000-kilometre-long coast of Europe is dotted with useless coastal defences from bygone days. Many represent enormous investments in materials and man-hours, but most never served any purpose, either because the “enemy” didn’t show up, or, when the enemy did appear, the construction proved hopelessly outdated. When the Germanic people invaded the Roman Empire the once-famous *Limes* were quite insignificant. And even the Atlantic Wall failed to stop the Normandy Landing.

Before the Flood poses the question: is Europe prepared for the possible dramatic rise of the sea level and to what extent will its efforts eventually prove futile? Are the dyke reinforcements and sea defences the new variants of the old forts and defence lines? Perhaps there’s a parallel here with the much vaunted millennium bug that was expected to turn all computer systems on their head in 2000. Eventually the threat was not so serious, or was it perhaps because we were so well prepared for it? To a great extent, this research programme is all about this latent tension, the incapacity to define just how real a threat actually is and how efficient are our defences against it.

For four years I want to spend four months every year travelling the coasts of Europe. The type of photography I have in mind (and which I have already been somewhat experimenting with during the preparatory phase) focuses on empty landscapes, desolate beaches, deserted hotels, wintry piers, bleak harbour cranes, disconsolate cliffs and dramatic cloud formations. I aim to consciously document ominous images of doom, in true David Lynch style. The tension in the images will not depict catastrophe but the exact opposite, the absence of catastrophe. This subdued tension can make tragedy of trivia. I don’t want to photograph the disaster I want to photograph the disaster waiting to happen. And I want to ascertain to what degree the waiting and the accompanying fortifications are giving structure to the definition of

¹ The 4th report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the so-called experts organisation of the United Nations, which in 2007, together with Al Gore, were presented with the Nobel Peace Prize, stuck to a maximum of sixty centimetres.

Europe in this new millennium, in the same way that Kavafis' famous poem, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, served the wellbeing of the civilised people. Like Godot gave credence to absurdity by not showing up at all.

Before the Flood will try to be an outstanding photographic work about waiting, portraying the uncanniness of the indefinable and the uncertain. It literally makes Europe uncanny.

In an iconic sense there are parallels to be drawn with the artistic direction of my photography. Each of my previous projects, books and exhibitions referred to an historical genre of visual culture. The book, *God Inc.* carried visual references to covers of *Life Magazine* from the 1960s, because this publication epitomised American, middle-class conservatism and all its fears and aspirations. *Trinity*, my most recent piece of research, drew inspiration from the three supposedly inferior genres of artistic painting: "tableaux d'histoire", "tableaux de guerre" and "tableaux de politique".

In *Moments before the Flood* I'm looking for links with marine scenes from Dutch and British art. Not necessarily because the sea is also the subject matter, of course, but mainly because in painted art there is clearly a bizarre tension between threat and domesticity. The most dramatic of sea battles, for example, are commonly depicted with dozens of galleons, but these canvasses often belonged to series of paintings meant to adorn mantelpieces. Here again is the attraction of the threat, the charm of the danger and the appeal of the horror.

This is why *Moments before the Flood* flirts with beauty in an ambivalent manner. My whole oeuvre is characterised by distrust when it comes to aesthetics. Beauty for the sake of it has always made me wary. There must, at the very least, be a double layer, preferably, a false bottom even. And now there is one. The images I want to make within the framework of this project will be massive, both in terms of size and resolution. I intend to work with 65 million pixels, an unheard of degree of detail, facilitated by the latest technology that for the first time makes it possible for a photo to be sharper than a painting. In reality this makes it possible to view photos at different levels and from different distances.

In this project beauty serves as a lure, a way of getting the viewer closer to the image and drawing him or her into it. That's necessary too, because on closer examination what purported to be an aesthetic image was actually a raw, hard subject. And the coarseness is evident just beneath the surface of that lure. The very same ambivalence is also found in those huge canvasses of Rothko. While they are often admired for their restful palette and composition, which sometimes relegates them to evergreens on postcards, Rothko stressed time and time again that he needed such a huge format and that his work must be viewed from a distance of half a metre. The contemplative serenity the viewer thought he was beholding from ten metres away turns out to be a neurotic mishmash of brushstrokes, a hopeless struggle with the materials and an ocean of paint, not in which to float but to drown.

Flirting with beauty is something I see as a vital new development in my work.

Waiting for the barbarians » Konstandinos P. Kavafis.

http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_for003193401_01/_for003193401_01_0073.htm