

Westfälischer Kunstverein

Rothenburg 30,
48143 Münster
westfaelischer-
kunstverein.de

Öffnungszeiten:
Tue-Sun 11am-7pm

Admission: 4 €,
Concessions 2 €,
Members: free admission

Femke Herregraven
„A reversal of what is expected“
7 July - 16 September 2018

In her first institutional solo exhibition “A reversal of what is expected” at the Westfälischer Kunstverein, the Dutch artist Femke Herregraven (b. 1982 in Nijmegen) takes a close look at the concept of catastrophe. Derived from the Greek, this term was initially not negatively connoted in any explicit sense, but meant instead a reversal, an unexpected change or (quite literally) a movement from a higher to a lower position. One is reminded here of the structure of Classical Greek tragedy, in which the protagonist is heading towards ineluctable catastrophe, the outcome of which he determines and its resolution supposedly resulting in catharsis for the audience. In this context, it also emerges that the impending catastrophe is not really a sudden, singular event, but rather a continual unfolding process, which undermines existing systems and leads to regulation of one kind or another. The semantic shift in the meaning of catastrophe - from the poetic to the ecological - made its first appearance in eighteenth-century dictionaries.

The above forms the connection between Herregraven's long-standing research and work on the interface between ecology and economics. For more than eight years now, she has been analysing the internal logic of international finance and has explored how finance has not only generated its own value systems, but also since long inscribed itself into the workings of geopolitics. This overall state of being networked, this invisible and yet omnipresent influence of finance and trade, serve Herregraven as a complex meta-narrative to understand our human existence in society today. International finance reveals itself hereby as a driving force behind the dissolution of a traditional differentiation between our physical, real world and its virtual counterpart. Herregraven's unique practice comprises the challenge of developing visualisations for intensively-researched, complex issues and connections. As a result, she herself moves between these worlds, for example, when she undertook research trips to the Danakil Depression in Northern Ethiopia or to the volcanoes, Agung and Batur, in Indonesia; however, she also works, as it were, journalistically by compiling and sifting through endless amounts of digital data, which she analyses and continues to process, for instance, in the interactive scenarios of **Sprawling Swamps** (2016-ongoing).

For a long time now, natural catastrophes have also become a financial instrument, a factor within the overall system of trade, investment and betting on the future. With its so-called 'catastrophe bonds', 'cat bonds' for short, catastrophic events are insured against via the capital markets, that is to say, that the occurrence of a catastrophe no longer just affects the populace in the immediate vicinity, but occasionally it also entails considerable profit or loss for the investors.

An actual “natural” catastrophe has then a virtual effect on geographically-remote individuals and corporations, too. Thus, nature and also climate change together merely become further factors in international trade and capital markets, which can be calculated and predicted.

In **Corrupted Air** (2018), Femke Herregraven has compiled a list of all cat bonds dating from 1996 to 2018 and placed it alongside the first mortality table from John Graunt’s *Bills of Mortality* published in London in 1662, a mere three years before the outbreak of the Great Plague. The list doesn’t incorporate the ages of the deceased, but catalogues the causes of death and thus illuminates the re-emergence and distribution of particular symptoms and pandemics. As such, it is for Herregraven a precursor of today’s predictive modelling: for life expectancy and also losses which can be insured against nowadays. Since 2017, the plague is listed as risk in the first cat bond ever issued covering pandemics. If certain parametric triggers are breached, such as the outbreak occurring within a particular period, in a specific region, etc. and the insurance companies are called upon to fulfil their obligations, then the investors will lose their money invested in the financial markets. If the catastrophe doesn’t occur, then the high-risk investment is rewarded with even higher profits. One glance at the illuminated panel quickly reveals that only Western potential catastrophes are insured. The history of the plague is traced in three small light boxes, visually demonstrating that its spread went hand in hand with the development of trade: the Silk Road from Asia to Europe paved the way for the plague. The connection between trade, catastrophe and insurance apparently has a long tradition. In the fourteenth century, Genovese Merchants were not only responsible for the first (trade) insurance bonds, but also for the first import of the plague from China to southern Europe.

Upon entering the larger exhibition space, the reference to the world of trade and high finance is immediately visible, both formally and thematically. Catastrophes also happen in stock markets. **Pull Everything, Pull Everything** (2018) engages thematically with the so-called ‘Flash Crash’ in 2010, which brought stock market trading in the US completely to a standstill within minutes. In this work, Herregraven focuses on ‘high frequency trading’, HFT for short, trading at the speed of light in which bonds switch owners in milliseconds. Movement is everything. Without movement there can be no markets and therefore no value. On one monitor of the two-channel animation, Herregraven presents, typical trading desks, a configuration of several monitors, which provide the trader with all necessary information to compete. In a set up precisely tuned to the movement of the human eye and its capacity to process information rapidly, these monitors are, as it were, both a portal and a cave for traders. On the other channel, one can read subsequent reflections by one of the high-frequency-traders on the catastrophic event that had just occurred. It depicts the existential crisis which befell the traders with the abrupt void on their monitors: a trader is quoted saying: “I lost faith in capitalism”, or at least he lost faith in what they had built. The capital markets, high frequency trading, the entire invisible international system of high finance, which connects the whole world and appears to define it, is perceived as an ersatz-religion, as a paradigm, which determines our environment and bestows meaning. The suspended construction Herregraven has chosen for this work integrates a typical monitor arm, which serves the purpose of fixing and adjusting the screens on the desk and simultaneously alludes to a stylistic device from classical theatre: the so-called *Deus ex Machina* (God from the machine), that is to say, the appearance of a God (customarily from above) with the aid of some kind of stage apparatus. In Classical Greek tragedy, conflicts that could not be resolved purely by human agency required the intervention of an omnipotent, omniscient power. Often this intervention was sudden and surprising and almost without motive, which contributed to today’s colloquial understanding of the term.

Hinged Collisions (2018) revisit the connection to the divine idea, that is to say, its veneration. Formally speaking, these works are reminiscent of winged altarpieces, and in a similar way to medieval painting's use of individual small pictures, they endeavour to suggest temporality. The black wooden CNC-machined reliefs are framed in server racks. In their format, colour and usage, these racks allude to monitors and their configuration on the desks of traders. The content of the reliefs also reference different catastrophes (in the original sense), that is to say, the moment of reversal and paradigm shift. In addition, the motifs themselves represent an important shift in the history of images: none of the motifs have been derived from an illustration, image or a photograph as we know them. Herregraven makes use of data and code, which is automatically generated, analysed and processed, and intervenes further as a human entity in this chain of communication in order to ask what actually constitutes an image nowadays. Data can be converted into pixels so that we can see it. However, this visible form is completely arbitrary and serves to aid our better understanding. Nowadays, machines – such as satellites – gather data, which they stream to other machines. This data is neither meant for nor be legible to the human eye. The graph visualising movement on the stock market is not required by a computer, but we need it in order to understand data generated by machines. Although the **Hinged Collisions** are not predicated upon our reality, we still think that we can recognise landscapes or figurative elements. For Herregraven, the dominance of data collection over the image *per se* poses new questions of its own: what is an image nowadays, when it is no longer about *what* we see but rather about the value of the underlying data that we *cannot* see? What are the consequences for the image and its time-honoured task of representation? Does this not mean that we are forcibly alienated from our own environment if we are no longer able to recognise it in images?

Herregraven uses the apt expression 'optical mining' in this context and thereby posits an analogy between the exploitation of natural resources – as in coal mining – and today's algorithmic mining of, for example, satellite images by hedge funds to secure a minimal temporal head start in terms of information which can be translated into profit.

For example, the largest relief, **Hinged Collisions – Why Humans Weep**, deals with an geological and ecological transformation in northern Ethiopia: the Danakil Depression, situated on the Eritrean border, a unique tract of land which lies partially below sea level and where three tectonic plates meet. Herregraven undertook a research trip there in 2017 which led to the development of several new works. The thematic focus here is also the context of catastrophe in the face of change, which is not necessarily to be seen as negative. Millions of years ago, tectonic plates collided with one another and created the African continent. On the basis of volcanic activity, it is to be expected that this connection will drift apart within the next few million years and split the continent in two separate parts.

In the three-channel video, **Terabytes Pushing Terrabites** (2017), the middle monitor runs footage of the Danakil Depression shot by the artist; this is juxtaposed with a scientific documentation on the geological peculiarity of the place (on the right), as well as a simulation announcing the exploitation of valuable mineral deposits (on the left). According to Herregraven, this is standard procedure: first science enters the stage (NASA and ESA research teams are currently exploring the Danakil Depression in order to study potential life on Mars) then investors and high finance follow soon after. The monitors have been installed on a large platform, the **Sprawling Swamps Docking Station** (2018), which is supposed to suggest precisely this impression of an unstable terrain caught up in change. This motif also permeates the interactive work **Sprawling Swamps** (2016 – ongoing), which has been installed on the other side of the platform. For Herregraven, the swamp represents the prototypical, unstable

terrain, an umbrella under which Herregraven's research over the past four years is subsumed, divided up into different projects she has been developing. Visitors can independently browse through the different scenarios, which are accompanied by spoken texts written by Herregraven, in which she extrapolates her research findings into realms of the speculative. The data server motif reappears on the back of the 'Sprawling Swamps Docking Station' in the form of ten black boxes, which seem to contain the data collected from the sites researched in **Sprawling Swamps**. Not unlike a black box flight recorder, one day this speculative forensic media might be the only reminiscence of these unstable terrains.

The video installation **28,500 Years and 1,757 Meters Apart** (2018) in the small exhibition room will be incorporated into **Sprawling Swamps** in the future as a digital scenario. In January 2018, Herregraven ascended the volcano Batur on Bali as an eruption on the neighbouring volcano, Agung was in progress. The video footage shows scenes of the ascent with head-over-heels sequences that tend to disorientate the viewer quite markedly. Herregraven collected diverse material on this trip: 28,500 year-old rock from the summit of Batur at an altitude of 1,717 meters, corral washed up on the beach from the foot of the volcano situated approximately 40 meters beneath the sea, as well as drifting detritus and traces of human existence floating on the surface of the water. Geological conditions coupled with human intervention and influence are responsible for ongoing change to this landscape, which also falls into Herregraven's category of unstable terrain. Furthermore, she speculates here, too, on a catastrophe, a change, and creates three pseudo-fossils, which have been placed in the room in front of the projection. They are "pseudo-" fossils inasmuch as they look like fossils but are composed of inorganic materials. Herregraven has created hybrids from diverse material collected from the seabed, the summit of a volcano and the surface of the sea: materials that would normally never encounter one another, or, at most, only in a speculative future.

A hint at this moment of instability, or more precisely, this tipping point, is also conveyed to visitors as a motif upon their entering the Kunstverein's reception area. In the shape of the simulation **Tipping Points** (2018), which Herregraven modelled from software and designed to calculate what conditions need to prevail for a (container) ship to capsize. The phenomenon - known as a parametric roll - manifested itself following the advent of increasingly large container ships that are now more heavily laden than ever before. Here, too, the horizon dances and revolves as it does with the ascent footage of Batur - a reversal, a change in unstable terrain, suddenly becomes conceivable.

Alongside **28,500 Years and 1,757 Meters Apart**, **Fans in Caves** (2018) are the only works to draw on an actual representative image of our environment. Herregraven came upon the "fans in caves" phenomenon in the Caribbean years ago and considered the arrangement so bizarre that she documented it with a series of snapshots. Finding an electric device in a cave - a place one tends to associate more with the origins of civilization - marks a profound tendency of mankind. Herregraven quotes the German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, whose analysis in his *Spheres* trilogy (1998-2004) concludes that man has never really felt at home in nature. Instead, he has always been at pains to create a secure environment. This can happen via non-material factors, such as culture and learning, but also - and Sloterdijk explicitly mentions this - through acclimatisation: we effectively fabricate an emotional and spiritual microclimate for ourselves. Herregraven has distributed her fans in caves quite randomly around the room. With their cabling clearly visible and due to the manner of their distribution, they suggest functionality and seem like necessary infrastructure in the exhibition cave.

With all her extraordinarily well-researched projects and artworks, Femke Herregraven attempts to illustrate the series of complex and abstruse interconnections that underpin our contemporary world but unfold hidden from view in a non-material sphere. Using the leitmotif of catastrophe, she successfully lends the exhibition a kind of choreography derived from the structure of ancient Greek tragedy. We recognise, as in dramatic tragedy, the many references indicating the impending, ineluctable catastrophe and there is one offer or another for a sudden resolution through a divine authority in the sense of a *Deus ex Machina*. However, Herregraven deviates from the classical model significantly, inasmuch as we are not supposed to learn from the protagonist's failure, accepting instead instability and change as givens.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication.

Exhibition Walkthrough with Femke Herregraven
Saturday, 7 July at 2 pm

Crypto PingPong
Lecture Performance with Femke Herregraven and Ana María Gómez López
Sunday, 16 September at 5 pm

Curator's guided tour led by Kristina Scepanski
Friday, 20 July at 6 pm
Thursday, 23 August at 6 pm

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