

A
POINT
ON THE
SURFACE
OF THE
EARTH

two renaissance philosophers
a contemporary artist
and a walk in the woods

MEL GOODING

our searching gaze and watchful steps merge

herman de vries

THE RODD LECTURE 2009

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This pamphlet
is published by
The Institute of Humanities & Creative Arts
University of Worcester
in association with
The Sidney Nolan Trust
and is a record of Professor Gooding's lecture
at The Sidney Nolan Trust
on 25th September 2009

I NATURE AND POLITICS

THE BROADER PURPOSES of much contemporary art that engages with natural objects in the environment are to change (in a variety of ways) our consciousness of the true nature of the fragile world within which we take our place alongside every other living thing, and to foster a deeper understanding of it. Beyond those two interlinked purposes, there is a third, usually implicit but equally important, which is to add to the pressures—intellectual, moral and political—that might stimulate a change in the attitude of human beings, including politicians, economists and the global business community, towards the management and use of natural resources. In this way, the work of artists might contribute in some degree to bringing about a change in those processes—essentially economic—that constitute the primary activity of human life. We may think of these things in aesthetic, moral or spiritual terms, or simply in terms of practical human survival, but there is nothing about this artistic activity that in its broader implications is not political.

Human consciousness of the *fragility* of nature is, by and large, a modern epiphenomenon. For in the millennia of human history, or certainly for the period in which there has been a specifically human consciousness of 'nature'—of a world 'out there' so to speak, separable from 'human nature' as such—the world has been conceived as potentially infinite in its provision of what is required to satisfy human requirements, and, historically, those requirements have always had an absolute priority in human interactions with the natural world. Such interactions have not always been destructive of the natural fabric.

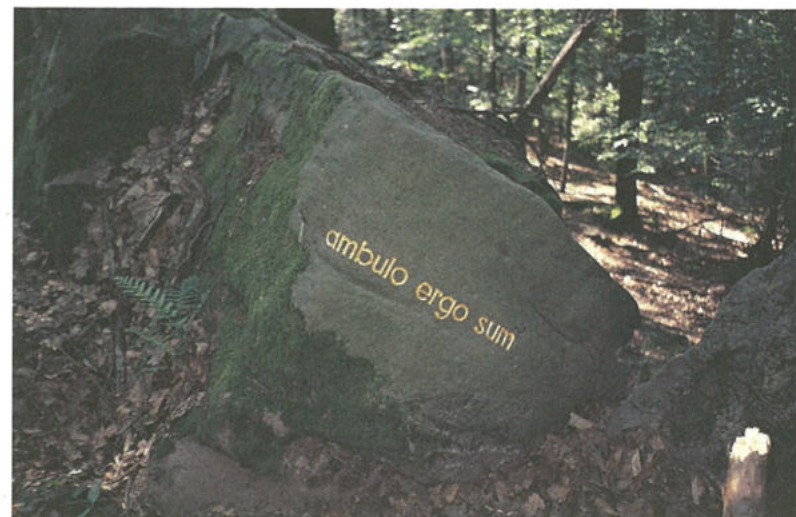
Consumption of natural resources in the modern era—the epoch of capitalism—has been based largely on an outlook that took for granted the solidity of the firmament and an unceasing plenitude of resources. Of course, natural disasters occurred, but they were local, and recovery always possible. Forests, coal and oil fields might be exhausted, but there were always new seams to open, new oil fields to drill, new ways to exploit the land. Where there had been trees let there be sheep and cattle; where there had been prairies let there be agribusiness cereals, and when intensive monoculture had destroyed the top-soil, leave a desert behind and move on to fresh woods and pastures new. Until very

recently it seemed to the modern mind that the destructive exploitation of natural resources could be justified on the grounds of Nature's apparent inexhaustibility. We thought it no more possible that the cod on the Great Atlantic Banks, or the herrings in the North Sea, might one day be exhausted than did the North American Indians that the teeming buffalo on the Great Plains would one day disappear for ever.

Now that we are acutely aware of planet earth's vulnerability and we know of the finitude of earth's resources, its continuing destruction is nothing more—or less—than a terrible consequence of the inability of human institutions to take the measures required for its necessary conservation. This is to say that the rapid and apparently irreversible depletion of its resources is a consequence of a complex and disastrous political failure; or—even worse—it is a consequence of a failure of politics as such, the failure of the human race to create the institutional structures within which to negotiate and plan its own survival against a history of conflicting claims and under-regulated short-term exploitation. If it is the latter, we are in for the darkest of dark times.

We live now in a world in which the very elements upon which life depends—air, water, the soil and the mineral earth—are being wasted, damaged, polluted or excavated at an exponential rate; the biosphere itself is endangered by the rapid and continuing increase in greenhouse gases, and its ozone canopy is depleted and pierced. Never has there been a time in all human history when the quality of our understanding of our condition in nature—of the nature of our historical being in the world—has been more crucial to our survival as a species and to the survival of other species in the complex network of biospheric interdependence. Art and science together constitute our most developed engagement with the living planet we inhabit: both will necessarily reflect the philosophy—the idea of nature—that underpins an understanding of that engagement.

'The business of art', wrote D. H. Lawrence 'is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe at the living moment.'¹ An idea of nature is a view of, or more precisely, a *proposition* about, the relations of the phenomenal world—the whole complex of objects and events in space and time—to human experience. Art and science alike register or reveal aspects of the human relation to Lawrence's 'circumambient universe', and the ideas and perceptions that works of art



ambulo ergo sum, 2005, Steigerwald (photo: Bruno Schneyer)

and science convey are subject to constant modification and change. To put it another way, every scientific discovery and development, however great or small, and every work of art, in whatever medium, changes to some degree our consciousness of the world in which we live, and our attitude towards it.

Nature is neither things *nor* processes: it is the complex of their dynamic relations; a complex which necessarily comprehends the relations of human beings to the natural world of which they are a part. That we human beings have our 'human being'—what Heidegger termed our 'being-on-the-earth'—*within* and as *part of* that complex of biospheric interrelations is an idea of nature and human nature that held sway in primitive and in classical societies, and which has been revived in the late twentieth century. But for nearly four-and-a-half centuries—the epoch since the Renaissance—we have lived with the implications and consequences of a very different scientific and philosophical world-view. It is a view that has seen itself as confirmed by advances in mechanical technologies, advances (an aptly military metaphor) which have been generally regarded as extending human possibilities of understanding, and the consequent possibilities of an increasingly successful economic exploitation of the natural world.

Modern Western civilization, thus armed (in every sense of that word), has run roughshod over every kingdom of the natural world—animal, vegetable and mineral—arrogantly claiming to represent an imperative at once imperious and imperial: the necessary certainty of increasing prosperity and unceasing progress. From the inception of this dominance—ideological and practical—there have, in fact, existed other views, other voices, *contrary* voices, but until recently they have barely been heard in the clamour of progress, and when acknowledged, they have been often contradicted and dismissed. (Climate change denial, and its political and media manifestations in the leading industrial societies, is the most recent case in point.) Among the most compelling of those contrary voices in recent years have been those of artists who have worked in a variety of ways within the landscape and with natural objects.

Among the foremost and most comprehensively coherent of these is the Dutch artist, herman de vries. de vries has for many years lived in a small undistinguished village in Bavaria, close by the edge of a large forest which is itself but a tiny survival of the great European forest which once stretched from the Alps to Scotland, and has over the millennia been felled, cleared and forgotten. This fragment of the original Bavarian forest, known as the Steigerwald, herman de vries calls his studio. It is where he goes to gather materials, to make works, to meditate, to think. More importantly perhaps, *not* to think: *the studio*, a work made by de vries in 1975, comprises a photograph of the artist walking into the forest and a text: 'i went into the wood to think something, but forgot to think and didn't find it necessary to draw any conclusions from this'. We shall return to this.

II DE VRIES AT DIGNE-LES-BAINS

Something very remarkable was already well under way when, in 1998, de vries was first invited to visit Digne-les-Bains, a small spa town in the French Alpine region of Haute Provence, with a view to creating work in the area around the town, to make a publication and create an exhibition at the local museum/art gallery, Musée Gassendi. The invitation came from the imaginative and energetic director of the museum, Nadine Passamar-Gomez, on behalf of the Centre for Art as Research

into Nature (CAIRN), an agency which pioneers creative collaboration between the museum and the Réserve Géologique de Haute-Provence, an extensive national park of mountains, valleys, rivers and streams, within which Digne is situated. CAIRN's activities focus on the promotion of contemporary art as a means of deepening public understanding of the natural world as a whole, and an awareness of the ecological richness of the region.

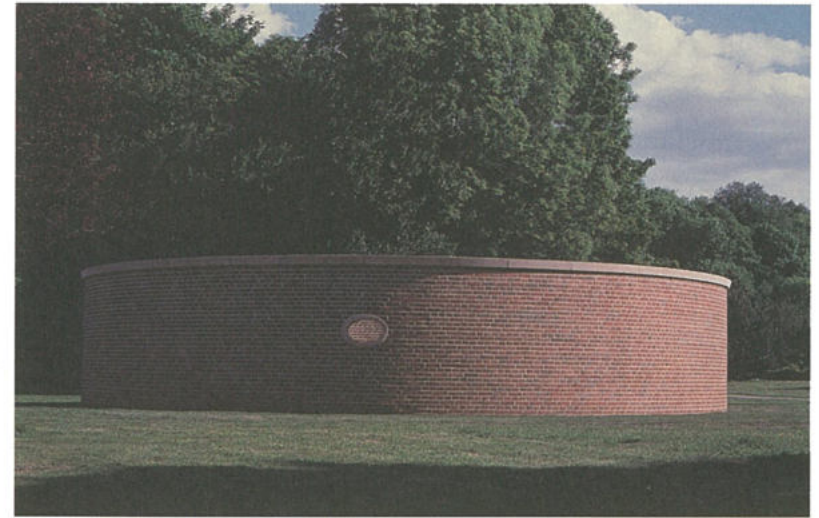
de vries is an artist whose life-work has concentrated on the human consciousness of the nature of nature. In terms of both its informing ideas and its practical programme, CAIRN, under the direction of Passamar-Gomez, accorded closely with de vries's own personal philosophy and practice as an artist; it was in this respect a perfect organization within which he could work. It had already sponsored work *in situ* by a number of internationally significant artists, including Andy Goldsworthy and Mark Dion. Digne and the Réserve offered an ideal terrain in which de vries could develop a new and coherent complex of works responding to a specific environment, one very different from the Dutch coastal polders of his early life, and from the intensive agricultural surroundings of his home village of Eschenau in Bavaria or that of his nearby forest-studio. de vries made his first visit to Digne in April 1999 and began at once to explore the surrounding mountains and valleys, collecting earth and plant samples and prospecting sites for possible works. From his first visit he had determined that as part of his commission from CAIRN he would create a *sanctuary* in the Réserve Géologique.

de vries's art-concept of the *sanctuary* is of a 'sanctuary' for nature itself, a space protected from human interference and depredation. His *sanctuaries* consist typically of some small piece of land enclosed in such a way that no human trespass is possible. What happens in such a space—what is propagated, what grows, what vegetation is succeeded by what—is a consequence of natural processes: each plant grows from seeds carried by the wind, by birds or by other creatures; each is fertilized by the actions of bees and other insects able to enter a space made inviolate to humans. Each *sanctuary* is, then, a little 'wilderness'. It is what it is; it is not an experimental project, or a preserve or reserve with a scientific or conservatory purpose: it is a work of art, a symbol; it is emblematic; it presents us with an *image* for contemplation. It is also real; it is, as de vries would say, 'the thing itself'.

(Our idea of 'wilderness', incidentally, is usually related to an idea of scale. de vries reminds us that every modern 'wilderness' embodies an *idea*, whose true meaning is not to do with scale but with our sense of reverence for the beautiful actualities of any unspoiled natural terrain free of excessive human interference and depredation. Awe may be inspired by the vastness and wildness of the great wildernesses—mountains, jungles, deserts, the Arctic and Antarctic—but we may also feel something closely akin to that when we look down into a rock pool or look with a magnifying glass into the mould that covers a woodland floor. There is no wilderness left on earth—however vast or small—that can survive without protection from resource exploitation and without a delimiting barrier to unauthorized interference; that is to say, without, becoming what is, essentially, a *sanctuary*.)

The first of de vries's *sanctuaries* (1993) is situated on a grassy knoll of unutilized ground at a busy road junction in Stuttgart, the rich city of Mercedes and the motor car, and consists of a circular enclosure of pointed steel stakes, each resembling a Roman spear with a gold spearhead. In this protected space the ground is safe from the city maintenance department whose task it is to tidy up and destroy 'weeds'. It is a tiny wilderness, an exemplary or emblematic sanctuary for nature. Such plants and wild flowers as colonize it will be left in peace, such trees as will seed themselves there will grow to the height that natural circumstances will determine. What happens in this untouchable little domain is visible to all who cross the road and care to look; to those speeding by on the road it will be as below notice and insignificant as any other piece of 'waste ground' glimpsed from a car window.

de vries's second *sanctuary*, built for the second decennial Skulptur Projekte 4 at Münster in northern Germany in 1997, is a perfectly circular brick wall with no entrance to an inner sanctum, which is visible through four oval oculi piercing the wall at eye-level at the cardinal points, the nominal directions of the winds. Writing of this work de vries emphasized the specifically spiritual dimension crucial to his concept of the '*sanctuary*': '[the word] comes from the Latin *sanctus*: "sacred, holy, venerable", "inviolable, untouchable, exalted" . . . ; *sancio*: "to sanctify, i.e. to make inviolable through religious consecration . . .". The ground in the *sanctuary* is, then, not merely an ecological reserve protected against human interference; it is to be regarded as a holy ground, a place to be revered.



sanctuary, 1997, Münster (photo: Roman Mensing)

The idea, thus introduced, of natural sanctity and reverence for all kinds of life, utterly free of all convention or doxology, is central to de vries's entire artistic and philosophical project. Its intellectual and spiritual sources may be found in all human cultures, and it finds secular expression in a text de vries quotes from Wittgenstein: 'what is mystical is not how the world is, but that it is. That of which we cannot speak does exist; it shows itself, it is the mystical.'² The wall of the Münster *sanctuary*, being perfectly circular, without beginning, without end, is an image of everything and of nothing. Inscribed in gold in the sandstone crown above each of the oculi is a Sanskrit text from the Tsá-upanishad: *this is perfect, that is perfect, perfect comes from perfect, take perfect from perfect, what remains is perfect*. Looking into the interior of the *sanctuary* we may well remember another text of de vries: 'physics and metaphysics are one'. (This, of course, is a paraphrase of Wittgenstein's famous dictum: 'Aesthetics and ethics are one':³ a proposition with which de vries concurs without qualification.)

In the Parc Géologique de vries explored the area to the north of Digne in the wooded mountains above where the River Bès runs fast through a spectacular narrow valley, and found what he was looking for at Roche-Rousse. Here, high above the valley road, were the remains



le sanctuaire de la nature de roche-rousse, 2003,
Réserve Géologique de Haute Provence (photo: Jill Hollis)

of a ruined farming hamlet that took its name from the distinctive reddening of the limestone rock faces in the locality. Here in times past men had lived and worked; now the place is deserted, and nature has reclaimed its ground. As de vries has written: 'all changes. change brings chance. change, c'est la vie. without change, no chance. nature gives and takes.' For a while in the last century (the area was acquired by the nation in 1904) the Réserve foresters had used for shelter and for protection from the wind what remained of the limestone buildings that had been built into an overhanging rock. The derelict site perfectly suited de vries's purposes, for its present loneliness and desuetude were a poignant reminder of the vanity of human wishes, of the truth that 'all things shall pass', and that human purposes and human habitations find their place as natural events and interventions within the natural cycle. Roche-Rousse, having this history, spoke eloquently for de vries of contingency and eternal return, ideas that connected his work there to the heart of the Buddhist and Vedic philosophies that had long nurtured his own thought.

The *Sanctuary* at Roche-Rousse encloses with gold-tipped pointed railings the crumbling ruins of the farmhouse, at one point passing through an original masonry wall, thus preventing any further access

to them, and allowing them time to complete their ruin without human intervention, and protecting the plants that will grow without disturbance within the palisade. de vries declared the forest woodland around the *sanctuary* 'le bois sacré'—the sacred wood—and its boundary is marked on each of the pathway approaches to the site itself by steel stakes sharpened like spears, with gold tips. Each of these emblems of protection has inscribed on its shaft the word *silence*: silence is also a form of protection to wild and natural things. As the visitor approaches the sanctuary they induce a sense of ceremony and occasion, they induce the solemnity appropriate to the place and its meditative purpose. What distinguishes this *Sanctuary* from other works in this genre (if that term may be considered appropriate) is the richness and complexity of its natural, historical and artistic context, and also, by happy chance, a particularly appropriate philosophical association.

III AGAINST THE 'COGITO' PRINCIPLE

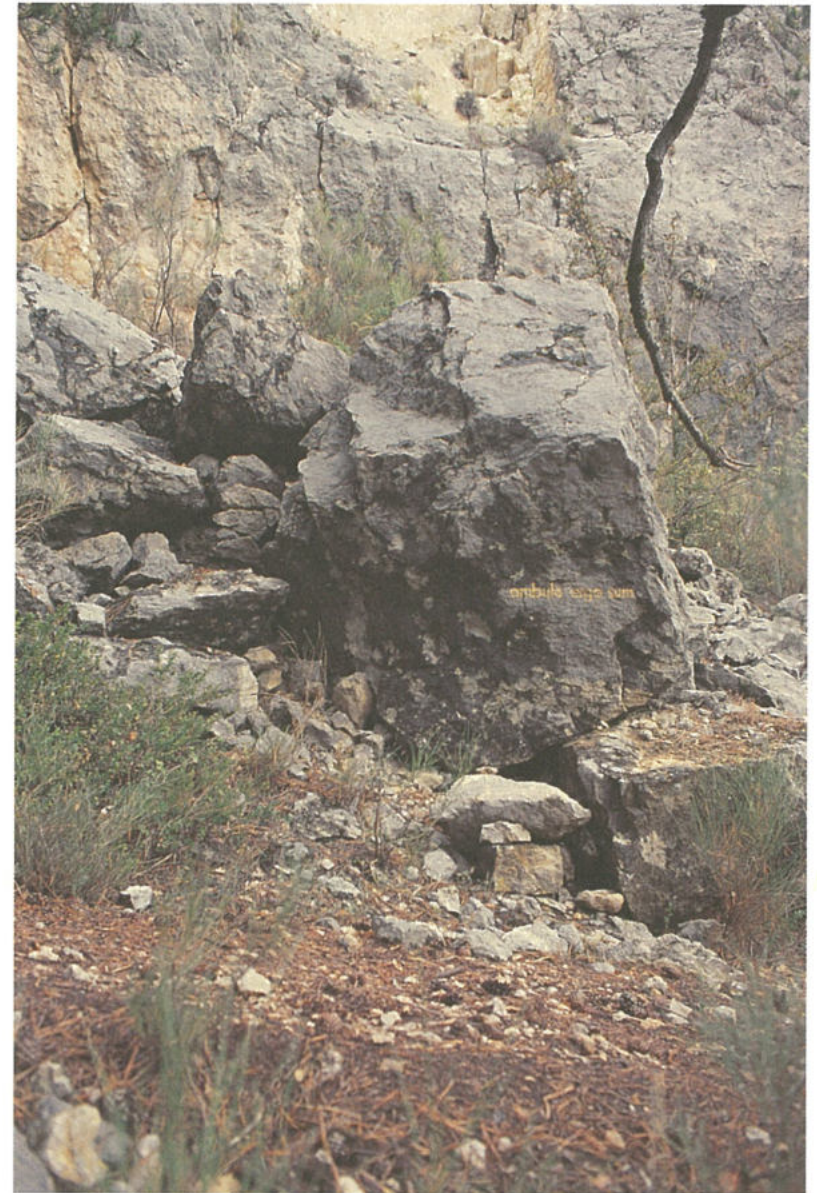
To reach the sanctuary at Roche-Rousse requires a rugged and demanding walk up through the woods from the road, a discipline that is itself preparatory to the meditation appropriate to the *Sanctuary*, and itself, conceptually and actually, a part of the total work. Not far from the sanctuary on a fragmentary boulder close by the path de vries has set a simple carved inscription in gold: *Ambulo ergo sum*. By this point on the steep pathway climb up to Roche-Rousse, the sense of self as embedded in the physical experience of the body may well be especially acute, and serve to confirm the truth of the observation at its simplest level: 'I walk therefore I am.'

The proposition will be recognized immediately as a contrary riposte to the most famous dictum of René Descartes, and perhaps (for reasons that will become apparent) the most famous single statement in modern philosophy. 'I walk therefore I am' is often misattributed to the scientist and philosopher, Pierre Gassendi, who was born in 1592 in the tiny hamlet of La Grau, close by Digne, and inside the borders of the national reserve. In fact, the statement occurs as a provocative and sarcastic reduction by Descartes himself of Gassendi's *Objection* to the 'Cogito' principal in the *Objections and Replies* appended to *Meditations on First Philosophy*, first published by Descartes in 1641.⁴

Gassendi had countered the 'Cogito ergo sum' argument, as re-stated in the *Second Meditation*, by first paraphrasing Descartes' own formulation: 'I am, I exist, is true each time you pronounce it, or that you mentally conceive it.' He continues: 'But I don't see that you needed all this mechanism, when you had other grounds for being sure, and it was true, that you existed. You might have inferred that from any other activity, since our natural light informs us that whatever acts also exists.' This down-to-earth response to Descartes' agonistic mentalism was powerfully and dismissively repudiated in the great philosopher's scathingly sarcastic reply: 'When you say I could have inferred the same conclusion from any of my other actions, you wander far from the truth, because there is none of my activities of which I am wholly certain (in the sense of having metaphysical certitude, which alone is here involved), save thinking alone. For example you have no right to make the inference: I walk therefore I am, except insofar as our awareness of walking is a thought [. . .] from the fact that I think that I walk I can very well infer the existence of the mind that so thinks, but not that of the body which walks. So it is in all other cases.'

Against the mechanistic dualism of Descartes, logically deduced, Gassendi adduces the truth of an empirical 'common sense', grounded in the experience of everyday actuality. The sharp edge of Gassendi's objections and the sometimes acerbic brusqueness of Descartes' responses to them are indicative, of course, of a gulf between two thinkers whose approaches to reality are fundamentally at odds. In his *Objection*, Gassendi addresses the great philosopher playfully as 'O Mind'; in his *Reply*, Descartes sarcastically responds to his antagonist as 'O Flesh'. This exchange between Gassendi and Descartes effectively ended their friendship for many years.

Descartes is the supreme advocate of the deductive approach to reality; he is the natural philosopher of absolute doubt, bent on the rigorous testing of knowledge by the reduction of enquiry to first principles. It is what the mind itself deduces that discovers truth, leading, on the resolution of logical problems, to absolute certainty. Gassendi, on the other hand, was committed to the assiduous gathering of facts and their investigation by inductive observation of material phenomena, sceptically arranging them to create an un-dogmatic picture of how the world might be, a picture that might change with each new discovery.



ambulo ergo sum, 2000, Roche-Rousse,
Réserve Géologique de Haute Provence (photo: Jill Hollis)

It delighted de vries to discover that so sympathetic a figure as Gassendi should have close connections with Digne and have been born within the area of the Réserve Géologique. For the significance of the polymath Provençal philosopher-scientist lies not in the immediate cogency or otherwise of his *Objections* to the *Second Meditation* but rather in his humane scepticism and his passion for nature. A vastly and variously learned European intellectual, Gassendi always returned to his beloved native valley after his many academic sojourns in Flanders, Paris and elsewhere in France. He stands for a feet-on-the-ground (!) materialism, and an insistence on *being* as corporeal; he stands for a conception of phenomenal nature as *experienced* through the senses, through subjective engagement and empirical observation rather than as something apprehended *a priori*, whose reality is validated through logic. Gassendi's mode of operation—intuitive, experiential, based on sense and sensibility, is in this sense closer to—or perhaps, analogous to—that of modern philosopher-artists such as de vries, Richard Long, Hamish Fulton or Giuseppe Penone.

There is a deeper point than commemoration to de vries's inscription of *ambulo ergo sum* on a rock in the middle of the sacred wood. Descartes' 'Cogito ergo sum', and the dualism it predicates, in which mind and body are conceived as separate, and the mind placed in ascendance over the body and all other material creation, is the clarion call of the Enlightenment. Its original formulation in Part 4 of Descartes' great and famous treatise *Discourse on Method* is followed by its elaboration in the final two sections of that work. Descartes sets out to demonstrate that birds and beasts (and, by extension, butterflies and insects, not to mention the lower order of plants) are nothing more than natural *automata* without mind or soul, and he asserts the ineluctable dominion of man over all animal, vegetable and mineral creation, which awaits its further and more successful exploitation by man as a consequence of new sciences and more effective technologies:

'For [the laws of physics] caused me to see that it is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful in life, and that, instead of that speculative [i.e. metaphysical] philosophy which is taught in the schools, we may find a practical philosophy [i.e. one that is scientific, based in mathematics and physics] by means of which, knowing the force and action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens and all the other bodies that *environ* us,

as distinctly as we know the different crafts of our artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature . . . *the new arts and crafts* [by which he means the new mechanical technologies] *will enable us to enjoy without any trouble the fruits of the earth and all the good things to be found there . . .*'⁵ (emphases added)

It is a view that has given philosophical heft to those who have found—and continue to find—divine sanction in that most oft-quoted and influential of texts, verse 28 of the first chapter of Genesis: 'And God said, be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth . . .'. This has been, and remains, the key justificatory text for evangelical capitalism at its most brutally exploitative, and of capitalistic evangelism at its most crassly arrogant.

This language of use and employment, of mastery, domination and possession, is that which has accompanied not only vast improvements in the material lot of much of humankind—we in the West, especially, have been the beneficiaries of technological advance and practical improvements—but it has also justified, and continues to justify, the systematic despoliation of the planet, the destruction of its physical integrity and the rape of its natural resources. It was a language inscribed, also, in the crude economism of state communism to justify the most brutal exploitation of natural energy reserves, and the creation of monocultural collective economies where small-scale farming had previously obtained. It continues to inform a great deal of destructive entrepreneurial and industrializing effort in every continent of the developed and undeveloped world.

Crucially, the Cartesian formulation frames a conception of the natural world as *other* or *alien*, a place to which man has come, has seen and must conquer: ' . . . finally,' wrote Descartes, 'I should deal with man because he is the spectator of all.'⁶ This division of the spectator from that which is surveyed opposes the objective *observing* of a world, which is essentially separate from the surveyor, to a subjective *being* within nature, in which observation is part of that being-in-the-world, and which shapes and colours what is observed. In the former—Cartesian—view, the eye is conceived as a window between the primary reality of the

mind and the secondary reality of the external world (hence among many things the importance of optics to the Renaissance physicists, and of perspective and the *camera obscura* to the Renaissance artists). In the latter—which I here associate with Gassendi—the world is conceived as primary reality, a reality of which we are an actively embodied part, a place where we find, in Gassendi's words, 'the truth of existence'.

It is precisely the idea of the eye as surveyor (which term links the political cartographer and the prospecting mineralogist) that links Cartesian dualism to the exploitative distancing of man from nature that characterizes the art of the Picturesque, with its emphasis on the processes of *composing* 'the prospect'—that which is seen. The world presents itself to such an observer as, precisely, a *picture*. The picturesque is concerned not with the actualities of nature but with the satisfaction of a premeditated desire to see it in a certain idealized light. This was the premise that underpinned the making of the proto-romantic landscape garden and park, in which nature, we might say, was, paradoxically, tamed to *look* wild. Mass tourism—the basis of an essentially destructive but short-term profitable economy for many parts of both the first and the third world—has always been based in large part on the principles of the picturesque. Hence, the significance of the camera, with the primacy it gives to the 'objective' single viewpoint, to the modern tourist.

Descartes' use of the term 'environ' is also significant, for it anticipates the widespread use of the term 'environmentalism' to describe that species of conservation that, for all its well-meaning, and its many small political victories, nevertheless perpetuates a spectatorial view of the world, a perspective which separates the human beings who are at its centre from those phenomena in all three of the natural kingdoms that surround them. This human-centric view accounts for the persistent 'environmentalist' division of the world into designated territories, with regions for industrial and agricultural development given priority, but with allowance made for the preservation of marginal 'nature reserves' 'national parks' and touristic 'wildernesses'. [*Environ*. Old French 'to surround': hence, there is man, 'the spectator of all', and there is 'the world that surrounds him'. Lawrence, we note, in contrast, speaks of the 'circumambient' universe: the universe that 'walks round' man.]

IV TRACES

By appropriating *ambulo ergo sum*, turning Descartes' sarcasm on its head, de vries affirms the unitary subjectivism of what has come to be termed 'deep ecology' in which the phenomenological has precedence over the analytical-mental. The seeing of the walker is—as de vries puts it—'the seeing of his being', an awareness of his being within the ambit of 'the circumambient universe'. The experiencing subject is a part of the living world, and the world about him cannot be separated from his experience within it. Above all, he is not the master of all he surveys. (A body of photographic works by de vries, which subverts the notion of the control of viewpoint, and determines the position of the camera by precise constraints, is entitled *the seeings of my beings*.)

The word 'silence' on the spears that protect the sacred wood around Roche Rousse now takes on another meaning: 'silence', writes de vries, 'gives us the opportunity to experience a new kind of sensibility, it gives us another, better, opportunity for contemplation: experience itself. language is a formidable resource, but it creates divisions in the unity of our existence: between you and me, between here and there, between man and tree, between tree and forest. in silence division disappears, solitude gives us the chance to experience unity.' Now we may recall: 'i went into the wood to think something, but forgot to think and didn't find it necessary to draw any conclusions from this.' This is profoundly, and pointedly, *contra*-Descartes: it amounts to 'I do *not* think, therefore I am'!

This non-assertive presence of being within the landscape is something de vries has celebrated in the works commissioned by CAIRN in the country around Digne. The latest are interventions of the most tactful kind, small texts (in the nature of *ambulo ergo sum*) engraved in rocks and stones, indicating a philosophy that is empathetic to natural process. 'they are so modest' says de vries, 'that you can easily overlook them: they should have no impact on the landscape and nature that is of such great beauty that art can easily be a disturbance. further, there have been places in the region that have been sacred forests in ancient times, places of a human relationship that i think worth indicating and recalling.' The inscription of these subtle and unobtrusive texts and signs, which de vries calls *traces*, most of which have recurred over the years in de vries's numerous statements and writings, is thus an act of homage



traces: point of view, 2005, Clue de Feissal,
Réserve Géologique de Haute Provence (photo: herman de vries)

at once to nature and to the culture of un-intrusive and sympathetic human interaction with the natural world over the millennia. (We may think here, with particular point, of the ancient inscriptions and signs of rock art, and of marks made in the nearly inaccessible darkness of caves.)

Traces include such inscriptions as Giordano Bruno's phrases, *ars vivens* ('art is living') and *natura numquat erra* ('nature never errs') and Gassendi's *veritas existentiae* ('the truth of existence'); elsewhere there is the familiar de vries watchword, *chance and change*, and a sequence of elemental questions for the walking wayfarer, *quoi? pourquoi? d'où? vers où?* (I remember Gauguin: 'where have we come from; where are we; where are we going?') More recently de vries has created *traces* of the same kind in the woods and quarries around Eschenau, making an invisible bond between the spirit of his home landscape and that of the other landscape of his heart, in Haute Provence. In the sacred woods, in the ruins, rocks and quarries in either place, the observant walker may chance upon *ambulo ergo sum*, or the Sanskrit saying that adorns the capping of the circular *sanctuary* at Münster. On rock faces in both the Steigerwald and the Réserve Géologique de vries has also inscribed the mysterious Latin palindrome incised at Herculaneum and Pompeii and found in graffiti across the Roman empire, and sometimes referred to as the satorquadrat:

s a t o r
a r e p o
t e n e t
o p e r a
r o t a s

It can be read left to right, right to left, and top to bottom and bottom to top, and may be said to mean (by the implication of its form and in extension of its unfathomable narrative) 'what goes round comes round'. Elsewhere there may be found the mathematical sign for infinity, the Hindu sign for *om*, and other characteristic texts and quotations: *es war einmal* (as once it was) and *to be to be*.

In certain places in the Réserve Géologique, and in the forests of Faillefeu, above Digne, and in the Steigerwald, de vries has placed on stones and rocks, or on the masonry of certain buildings, a small engraved dot of gold. Each of these constitutes a virtually invisible point

on the surface of the earth, its positioning random or, rather, intuitively arbitrary, having no topographical or historical significance beyond its presence as a marker of de vries's respect and love for the terrain. Gold, which is the crucial constituent of the *traces* made around Digne and Eschenau, is used for its intrinsic beauty as a pure mineral element, for its ancient sacramental significance, and as a reminder of its usage as an index of value in its broadest sense in the cultures of both East and West. Each gold dot might also be seen as making an axis point at the junction of the sacred six dimensions by which the Hopi Indians defined a human being's presence on the earth—the four directions of the winds, downwards into the earth, and upwards into the sky—an idea that has haunted de vries since childhood. 'everything, everything represents the continuum,' he wrote in a sketchbook in 1990, 'in which we ourselves are a point—a continuum point, the continuum itself.'

Here at this point in space, we encounter the modern philosopher for whom silence is pre-eminently the beginning of an apprehension of things beyond words; the small gold points are quite specifically related by de vries to a somewhat gnomic proposition (2.0131) in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:

A spatial object must lie in infinite space.

(A point in space is an argument place.)

In this, however, they represent not arguments of the kind propounded by men in favour of their mastery and possession of the finite and measurable earth, but rather the material actuality of space itself, and its infinite reach in every dimension, including that of the imagination. They are not of the nature of the professional surveyor's point of distance, the mark made to demarcate a territorial boundary, or the limit of a measuring chain. Rather, they speak in gold of the earth's own claim to be heard and respected. Encountered in their settings, embedded in the mineral earth, surrounded by grass and trees, open to the sky, and near the flow of water, these points in infinite space invite silence, reverie, contemplation and meditation. Such a point in space might be anywhere or nowhere, at any place: seen or unseen, its 'argument' is a note in a song of the earth that has no beginning and no end.

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ADDENDUM: ROCHE-ROUSSE

le sanctuaire de roche-rousse was inaugurated in October 2003, at a ceremony in the heart of *le bois sacré* to which de vries, unable at the time to make the climb, was air-lifted by helicopter. In attendance, together with local people, Nadine Passamar-Gomez and the CAIRN staff, was one of the two hermits who live and study in solitude at a ruin nearby, close to the deserted village of Nicolas. The valleys echoed to the ringing sound of a conch blown by the artist in celebration of the dedication, and he read an address: "silence gives us the opportunity to experience a new kind of sensibility, it gives us another, better, opportunity for contemplation: experience itself. language is a formidable resource, but it creates *divisions* in the unity of our existence: between you and me, between here and there, between man and tree, between tree and forest. in silence division disappears, solitude gives us the chance to experience unity . . . union . . . yoga (from the word *yuj*, to unite) . . . the sacredness of nature, here and everywhere (but always here) gives us a chance to know this unity, because the idea of sacredness offers us a way to a change in our attitude—and chance and change always go together. in the nature sanctuary of roche-rousse there is a ruined house. inside it are a rose tree, a bush, plants, a tree, lizards, birds passing through, butterflies. . . here people lived, ate, worked, loved (i hope) and departed. now nature has reclaimed this space, and we see how we are part of this process, of the sacredness we can rediscover here here here here." (The address, written and read by de vries in French, is quoted from his typescript, translated by Jill Hollis.)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Quotations from herman de vries are from various sources in the artist's text works and statements. His formalized and poetic dicta may be repeated anywhere in his work, in books, pamphlets, catalogues, and in his works in the world at large, being regarded by him as statements that live free of specific citation, existing as (linguistic) works in their own right, aphoristic or ritual-like utterances, incantations, mantras. Wherever de vries is quoted, I have maintained his own convention of using no capital letters, adopted early in his career to signify his rejection of conventional hierarchies in written language, and, by extension, in life itself.

1 D. H. Lawrence: from 'Morality and the Novel' (1925) in *Phoenix* ed. Edward D. McDonald (London 1936)

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London 1922) propositions 6.44 and 6.522 (text as amended by de vries)

3 *Ibid.* proposition 6.421

4 Pierre Gassendi: from his 'Objections' to the 'Second Meditation', from René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge 1986). Other quotations from Gassendi's 'Objections', and Descartes' 'Replies', are from this edition.

5 René Descartes: from part 4 of *Discourse on the Method* in *Descartes: Key Philosophical Writings* trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, ed. Enrique Chavez-Arviz (Ware, Hertfordshire 1997).

6 *Ibid.*

Mel Gooding's publications include
Song of the Earth: European Artists in the Landscape
 (Thames & Hudson, London / Abrams, New York 2002)
 and *herman de vries: chance and change*
 (Thames & Hudson, London 2006)

This edition of 600 copies is published by
 The Institute of Humanities & Creative Arts,
 University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ
 in association with
 The Sidney Nolan Trust, The Rodd, Presteigne, Powys LD8 2LL

ISBN 978-1-870850-04-9

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Designed & typeset at Five Seasons Press, Hereford
 and printed offset litho on Five Seasons high quality recycled paper
 by Reprodex Printers, Hereford