

from earth
herman de vries

cairn gallery 1990

Relations of Nature (Sign, Specimen, Sacrifice)

There are utterances which speak of truths so exactly and powerfully that they bear repetition without danger of falling into hackneyed cliché. One such is the writing we know as the *Testimony of Chief Sealth* (usually called Seattle). In 1854, Sealth responded to the overtures of the European settlers to treat and sell native American land with a haunting testament which is both hymn and lament. In one passage¹ he reminds us of something we too readily misplace:

This we know. The earth does not
belong to man; man belongs to the
earth. This we know. All things
are connected like the blood
which unites one family. All
things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls
the sons of the earth. Man did not
weave the web of life, he is merely
a strand in it. Whatever he
does to the web, he does to himself.

herman de vries in his life and his art seeks to give dramatic contemporary expression to these precepts. Seized by the conviction that binding (and binding on) all things there is an interconnected actuality of process and becoming, beyond the feints and shadows of language and thought, he seeks to plunge himself into reality, to soak up the sense and substance of things as they are, and through making a virtue of human vulnerability to be at one with the world. Although we may not always realise it, indeed although we may shy at the thought, Nature is inescapable. de vries's purpose is to make us aware, in the present circumstances, of the actuality of existence, of the natural ground on which we all depend, no matter what our beliefs and values.

This is the end to which de vries's artistic practices are geared. His work may have a familiar, almost domestic, feel to it. He will pick or cut grasses and flowers, dry them, mount them for show. He will mark the haphazard fall of leaf and seed, each destination testimony in his eyes to the conspiracy of unseen currents. He will try the taste of leaf and fungus, noting what is good, what less good, not, however, from necessity but from that same species of curiosity that holds nothing natural to be foreign to his nature. Yet however ordinary these practices may be, they are by no means cosy. Plants especially have been familiar companions on the path to an enlightened vision beyond words (although, judging by the very earliest of artist's marks, deep in caves, these experiences are themselves not beyond record).

Consuming the natural world – cooked, smoked, chewed raw, swallowed fermented – is sacred, also, and has been widely taken to provide a way for us to touch a real world beyond language. The experience is vividly evoked by the writer Paul Bowles in a letter to the American composer Ned Rorem:²

“Whatever mescaline does, it doesn’t seem to make one coherent. But neither does it supply any feeling of there being an interior, unreachable cosmos. It says: See where you are? Look around. This is what it’s like. Can you stand seeing it? Touching it, smelling it? Fortunately one draws no conclusions, since everything is far too real to mean anything.”

de vries’s art pursues its quarry of presenting the material of the world as directly as possible, in a form in which it is far too real to mean anything. He cannot rest content with signs of nature, for signs point without getting their fingers dirty. Signs keep us at arms length from the world, indifferent to its actual state. Like some born-again Paracelsus, he meticulously itemises his experience of his relations with the natural world, fleshing out his tally of plants and soils with lore and science, gathering together a vast herbal, a compendium of natures, a litany which is both a celebration and an inventory of signatures.

In this undertaking he confounds recent intellectual fashion, which invites us to glory in a world which is given over to a regimen of signs. Fishing, so the story goes, yielded to steel, and steel to signs and images; the inherited industries have ceded their economic advantage to the Heritage Industries. Sometimes, indeed, it seems so. Sometimes the routine ecstasies of the modern world seems scarcely more than the buzz we get from the hurly-burly of bustling signs. “Take away the signs and there is no place there” is a lesson that some have learned from Las Vegas.³ Alongside my usual road into London, there used to be a hoarding which proclaimed: “A Sign Is A Fine Investment”. Izzy wizzy, let’s get busy.

There is desperate need to break free from the incoherence of the perpetual enchantment these doctrines promise, and de vries’s work can be seen as offering escape routes. (The power of images is sometimes held to reside in some measure in their being “no substitute for reality”, as if they found a potency in such irremediable deficiency.⁴ It must not be forgotten, however, that images are also channels, doorways to an actuality they never pretend to be, but onto which they give. Their power is the power of granting access, their intensity the intensity of the threshold. The force of an icon is measured not by the number of candles that burn before it, lighting its face, but by the litter of wax on the floor.) The dirt at our feet – is there a more vivid example of the nourishing ground of existence? – is not represented in some image or text, but rubbed into the paper we behold, its earth colours revealed in gritty pastel hues, not merely indicated. (And what colours these are; an unimaginable palette is to be found at my feet, offered at any one place.)

Rather than draw a stem of grass, de vries will unearth it, root and all, from the soil, and present it as is. A particular stem, always, of course, a fescue, say: and, in being presented so it is inevitably altered. Materially, it dries and withers and dies. Conceptually, it is announced not as itself but as one of its kind. The material of the world is given us with its attendant processes marked as intervention, transformation and decay. A patient, painstaking violence censes this art.

To know the taste of a pear, wrote Mao Zedong, one must change the pear by eating it. And with the exaltation of curiosity, the thirst for knowing, must go responsibility, in recognition that the will to know cannot leave things as they were. Shuffle the signs as we will, it is silly to pretend the world is unchanged; only in a sense is it. At some level and perhaps only after many removes, our talk does connect with the world it refers to, and it is a virtue of de vries’s work that he rubs our nose in that dirt, too.

de vries neither creates nor copies. He is no professor of signs, but rather sets out to captivate us with his specimens of things as he finds them. Signs may be conjured only on condition of absence, yet he gives us the very thing itself, plant or earth. He has no truck with images, either, for we recognise this plant, this earth, not by their resemblance to plant or earth, but from their being plant or earth. Neither sign nor image, but a token of the thing itself, this art represents itself as bearing the direct witness of the trace. Yet although we have plant or earth, they are given to us nonetheless as incomplete: the plant no longer grows, flowers and seeds, and the earth rubbed into the page will not nourish it. The sample is not the thing itself even though it speaks immediately, as it were, of the substance of the thing itself. Separate, the sample nonetheless still participates in that of which it is a sample. For the artist concerned with the relations of nature this is both unwelcome and gratifying. It is troubling because samples are no longer part of what they refer to, and cannot be made whole again. Just as the carpet I buy is not to be made of samples stitched together, so specimens lifted (however gently) out of the world cannot be patched back. They themselves are sacrifices, as every sample is a small sacrifice, and that is how this art can be viewed, not as sign or image, but as offering. The sacrifice sweats the religious attitude to the extent that it leads us to overcome the anguish of death, suggests Bataille in his meditation on eroticism,⁵ but he is unhelpfully vague about whose death, and how chosen. At the root of our difficulties in the face of the agony – and hope – of our times is, many people believe, the question: How can I keep faith with people if I choose against cherishing each grain, stem and stamen of nature?

What is agreeable about an art of specimens is that here the stuff of the world is allowed to work on us. If the power of the image rests in what has been termed its failure to substitute for reality, the power of de vries’s sampling of our world lies in its presenting us with a vision of how the world is for us, and, in important respects, for itself. The ability of the single plant both to be a sample and to represent its type

affirms the teeming population of the category itself, and so the sacrifice invokes a sense of fecundity, of plenty, of the generosity, as it were, of nature.

The repetition of signs induces amnesia. The proliferation of samples, however, induces euphoria. The sign declares nothing about the truths of its object, whereas each fresh specimen, since it partakes of the substance of its object, affirms in a way the continued existence of its referent. Inspecting the sample tells something of the thing itself. Today, more than ever before, with the world so conspicuously precarious, we can be grateful for an art of such reassurance, just as we may also be properly troubled by its testimony to the continuing inclination for human beings to be moved to compassion and awe by acts and arts of sacrifice.

The earth is the ash of our dead, but not of ours alone. Each flower fuses the strength of our unremembered past, and transforms the violations of history into moments of unassuming recognition. A folksong from the Opole region of Poland, probably dating from around the time of the First World War,⁶ for me memorably expresses something of the way in which the living flowers are taken to recall these otherwise unmarked graves.

A ty, boze kwiece,
kwitnijze w okolo,
niech sie synochowi
choc' lezy wesolo.

You little flowers of heaven,
Please blossom all around him.
So that my poor little son
Can sleep happily on.

The art of herman de vries, shaped from everyday gestures of preservation and remembrance, tunes our ear to the unaffected poignancy of such an intimacy of nature and culture.

David Reason Canterbury, January 1990

¹See Roger Moody (ed): *The Indigenous Voice*, vol I, Zed Books, London, and The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen, 1988; p 46.

²Quoted by Robert Craft, *New York Review of Books*, 23 November 1989; p 12.

³See Robert Venturi et al: *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1978; p 18.

⁴This opinion is held by E. H. Gombrich, for example, and expressed most recently in "The Edge of Delusion", *New York Review of Books*, February 15, 1990; p 6.

⁵Georges Bataille: *Eroticism* [1962] (trans. Mary Dalwood), Marion Boyars, London, 1987.

⁶Translated by Celia Skrine. These words are set by Henryk Górecki in his Symphony No. 3 (1976), the "Symphony of Sorrowful Songs".

