10. Dutch Peat

Tom Sintobin

"Unland"

The Roman historian Tacitus is claimed to have said that "peat is land that is not to be ridden and water that is not to be navigated" (Tonnis 8). Neither liquid nor solid, "wet lands," as peat lands, fens, bogs, and moors are commonly called (Proulx), obstruct conventional means of transportation and thereby escape human control in this respect. This hybrid matter also resists categorization in several other ways. Peat lands, for instance, seem to resist the opposition between past and present since they consist of accumulating dead plant and sometimes animal matter that does not fully decay due to the acidic and anaerobic conditions of the bog. This is especially true for so-called high moor peat, which is characterized by peat moss (of the *Spagnum* family), a plant whose bottom part is dead while its upper part keeps growing. One could say that high moor peat is dead and alive at the same time. As Penné and Sepp (298) have argued, this undecidedness turns peat lands into a prime example of what Roland Barthes has called "the neutral": phenomena rebelling against "the yes/no (+/-) model," baffling "the paradigm" (6).

In the Netherlands of the nineteenth century, this undetermined place was called "onland" (Van der Woud 40), or "unland" in English. In line with "ancient Judeo-Christian belief," this dangerous place was treated as a divine gift for humans to use "as they wish" (Proulx 14). And use it they did: as a soil to cultivate buckwheat and to create new agricultural land, as substrate for horticulture, and as a reservoir of cheap fuel in the form of peat. It has even been argued (and contested) that the Dutch Golden Age would not have been possible without huge reserves of peat (de Zeeuw). Non-functional meanings have been ascribed to the bog as well: it was a place of mystery, and, from 1850 onwards as Paulissen et al. have shown (7), increasingly became seen as a biodiverse and beautiful place embodying old values (Sintobin and Corporaal 160), to which people are attached (Paulissen et al. 7), and that deserves protection (Schouten et al. 58).

Even nowadays, peat lands continue to provoke conflicting responses. A good example is the debate on De Deurnsche Peel, a nature reserve in Noord-Brabant. Nature and water agencies Staatsbosbeheer and the Waterschap Aa en Maas herald

peat lands as the one thing that could stop global warming due to their capacity to store CO2 and advocate the full restoration of biodiverse peatlands in their original state with the help of the European funding program LIFE+. Locals, however, fear the return of desolate, mosquito-infested wetlands and prefer to preserve the new wooded ecosystems and cultural heritage that have resulted from centuries of peat cutting (De Graaf). This chapter, however, does not study peat as an object of representation but the ways in which artists are exploring its possibilities as an artistic material in its own right, a practice that is clearly gaining prominence in the twenty-first century. It will focus on the use of peat in three different contexts: in choreography, in art-in-nature projects, and in galleries.

Choreographing Peat

Föld, a modern dance choreography by Krisztina de Châtel, premiered on 24 June 1985 in the Amstelkerk in Amsterdam and has been staged regularly in the Netherlands (e.g., 1985, 1997, 2005, 2012) and abroad (e.g., Paris, 1985; Hungary early 1990s and 2005). The latest series of reprises started on 9 May 2022 at Internationaal Theater Amsterdam (and was followed up by performances in cities such as Alkmaar and Maastricht). "Föld" is the Hungarian word for "Earth," and during the performance the dancers gradually break through the circular wall of earth that limits their movements. Peat was chosen, according to De Châtel, because normal soil was too hard, humid, and coarse. Although peat poses its own challenges—it dries out and is expensive—it "feels soft and fine and yet sticks to everything: mouth, eyes, nose and sweaty body" (Embrechts).[1] Demonstrating the interaction between earth and bodies is the entire idea of this choreography. De Châtel talks about "struggling" ("strijd leveren") and stresses that costumes were discarded if the peat did not stick to them. Indeed, *Föld* has been compared to ancestral rites, in which primeval man fights (Schenke) and cultivates the earth (van Nieuwpoort). The idea of a universal fight of man with nature has not changed over the years, but present-day commentators seem to interpret it differently, for instance by stressing that the heap of peat represents our planet, which is not being cultivated but rather destroyed by man/the dancers (Colée). Other commentators argue that this fight should not necessarily be interpreted as a victory for man (Embrechts). This new interpretation was not an effect of changes in the choreography—De Châtel changed just one move and decided to use only male dancers—but of shifting contexts of reception. Judging from the large audiences and the standing ovations the performance drew in 2022, this theme is currently more appealing than ever according to De Châtel.

1 All references in this paragraph are to newspapers consulted through the online database Nexis Uni, which does not mention page numbers.

Art-in-Nature

De Châtel merely selected peat for its particular qualities, more specifically for its impact on human bodies. The original context of the material does not play a role; peat just happens to be the best material to enable her to tell a universal story. This is different for artists participating in outdoor projects, in which peat art is put into the environment its material stems from. In 2003, for instance, the exhibition *Peatpolis.nl* was held in Barger-Compascuum. This village has considerable symbolic value since it lies in the heart of what was once the largest high peat land in the Netherlands and Germany, the Bourtanger Moor. This large-scale artistic project under the curatorship of Adri de Fluiter is an example of "art-in-nature." "The surroundings and the work of art form such a unity that a unique situation arises that cannot be exchanged for anything else" (De Fluiter 95). Seventeen Dutch and international artists took up the challenge to help create an art city in this high moor reserve by making use of peat.

In their descriptions as preserved in the book *Peatpolis.nl*, most of the artists refer to the history of wetlands. There are references to different pasts: Celtic (Jan van Lisdonk), prehistoric (Anton Watzeels; Michael McGillis; Lorna Green), mythical (Miriam Monchen, Yvonne Struys), and also to that of peat workers (Miriam Monchen; François Davin; Arno Arts) or to peat lands as a spa (Wenche Kvalstad Eckhoff). Simultaneously, many artists stress the actuality and physicality of their relationship with peat. In line with folk beliefs, peat is treated as a living organism that has eyes looking back at the visitor (Carlotta Brunetti) and a skin (Mark Evert Kramer). Cherie Sampson writes about the "presence of my body in the interior of a peat hut" as "an encounter with a personification of nature that is devouring, life-giving and female" (39). Kvalstad Eckhoff's manifestation had people actually taking mud baths (22–23), and Johan Sietzema describes himself trudging through the peat bog (59).

Since this exhibition was plagued by bad weather, working on it became an extremely bodily experience indeed. Several artists testified to their hardships: Arno Arts's building site was flooded by the endless rain, so he had to drain it; Michael McGilles discovered that the logs he had to work with were much smaller than he had assumed and had irregular shapes, making it hard to stack them (Van Ruiten "Op internet"). Miriam Monchen still remembered twenty years later that the peat logs she was working with were warped because of the rain. For visitors, *Peatpolis.nl* was a bodily experience as well. Seeing it all required a five-kilometer walk through the mud. Even the former Queen Beatrix, after arriving by helicopter, had to wear boots to be able to visit the site (Van Ruiten, "Boer Bob"). All this shifted attention away from peat as part of an ecosystem to peat as an artistic material, with its own characteristics and demands that differ from other artistic materials such as language, marble, and bronze, which enable the erecting of monuments for eternity.

Even before the end of the exhibition, Monchen's artworks were knocked down by the wind (figs. 1 and 2).

Fig. 1. and Fig. 2: Miriam Monchen, Veenwieven [Women of Peat Lands], before and after the storm. Photograph: ©Miriam Monchen.

Almost a decade after *Peatpolis.nl* and unrelated to it, artist Henk de Lange started using peat after a stay in Ireland. An early work of his was *Natuurtempel* (*Temple of Nature*), which was constructed in Appelscha in 2012 and became part of the Land Art project in Flevoland a year later. Standing three meters tall, this construction of peat blocks reinforced with iron stayed there for eight years. De Lange was fascinated by the transformation his artwork underwent. Its angle changed, as did its texture, depending on the weather, showing cracks in times of frost or heat. Parts of it started to crumble, and plants and moss grew on it. Galleries that want to exhibit art made of peat that has not yet dried out completely need to moisten it regularly, De Lange stresses.

This "liveliness" is precisely what attracts De Lange to this material. Even fully dry, peat is not easy to work with, he explains, because its consistency is unpredictable, with branches sticking out of it and hard or soft parts showing up unexpectedly. It is therefore of little use to plan the theme of the artwork in advance. On the contrary, it is necessary to leave room for spontaneity since the material itself indicates into what it can be transformed. De Lange's *Dodo*, for instance, was originally intended as part of a series of human figures, but he had to change his idea halfway through. Peat also poses physical demands. De Lange has a half-open workplace for his art and wears a face mask, for manipulating peat generates much dust. On the other hand, the fact that peat is light allows him to keep working with it de-

spite his joint complaints. De Lange makes use of peat from the north of Germany or Estland, but very occasionally also Dutch peat, which he buys from Staatsbosbeheer or from a renovation project in Friesland that got rid of old peat blocks that had been insulating the roof.

Peat Art

Dioni ten Busschen has worked with peat since 2010 and, as stated on her website, makes "sculptures, objects, furniture and wall coverings" inspired by the "natural environment of the peat." She has a permanent exhibition in the Peatart Gallery in Amsterdam but also regularly exhibits in other cities in the Netherlands, as well as in Sweden and Germany, often in peat history museums. Religious motifs play an important role in her work, with works such as *Holy Stone*, *Self-Sacrifice*, *Lamb of God*, *Fertility Mascot*, *Table with Funeral Gifts*, and *Praying Hands* (ten Busschen). There are also body parts (*Noor Mees*, *Hand* [fig. 3]) and objects (*Dish Large*, *Small Primal Pot*). The potential meanings of these works are closely related to the peat material. Although these artworks do not directly refer to peat lands, it seems logical to interpret them in that context because of what they are made of.

Fig. 3: Dioni ten Busschen, Hand, peat, 10x12x10 cm, 2011. From The Forgotten People of Soosaare. ©Dioni ten Busschen.

Hand, then, is automatically seen as a mummified hand, all the more so because of the very intricate and parchment-like surface structure of the material. *Self-Sacrifice* shows a person who took her own life by jumping into the swamp, while *Dish* turns into a representation of an archaeological find in the bog. This also results in very complex meanings, as is the case with *Lamb of God*—a Christian sacrificial symbol that coalesces with a heathen sacrificial place. In other words, peat as a material seems to play a much bigger role in the process of signification than clay, for instance, would do. Ten Busschen herself mentioned that she does not have a background in working with clay and that she found that clay "pushes you too much in the direction of what it is not." Peat has agency, according to the artist; in my talk with her, she said that the material "told me how it wanted to be treated" and that peat "did not like" being outside. Ten Busschen stresses that peat is a challenging material to work with. It demands patience and the respect and love that a thousand-year-old material that stems from a living organism deserves. This slowness of processing forces one, she claims, to reflect on what it means to use materials altogether, regardless of the objects they happen to constitute. In other words, working with peat draws her attention to any materials as "the stuff that things are made of," as Ingold formulates it ("Materials" 1).

Ten Busschen works with peat from Estland that has been harvested in a sustainable way, that is, without destroying the living top layers. Another one of her projects, *A Second Peat-Art Life for Plastic Waste*, in which she covers compositions of waste plastic with peat to turn them into useful objects, also stresses sustainability. In a sense, peat is used to neutralize one of the most prominent kinds of waste in our present-day society: just like peat locks up CO_2, it prevents plastics from falling apart into microplastics. Ten Busschen creates the twenty-first-century equivalent of natural peat: it becomes an archaeological site, stopping time and preserving entire units of the past.

Hein van Delft started using peat in 2015 after encountering it in De Deelen near Heerenveen, a bog where peat was cut until 2021. As a garden and landscape architect, Van Delft has always been fascinated by natural materials. Walking, especially in the northern part of the Netherlands, allows him to find things to experiment with by way of trial and error. "Letting materials slip through my fingers" is crucial for Van Delft, and "in the case of peat this is connected to an entire history, to see the relics of plants or wood that has been a tree centuries ago, to feel it and to think of how I could express something with it." He calls peat a very dirty material to use: it pigments anything that comes into contact with it. Initially, he would experiment with it in his bathroom before he acquired a studio.

A central concept in Van Delft's poetics is connection. His art aims at showing the essential connectedness of things (landscape, nature, history, and mankind) and thus confirms Ingold's claim that a landscape is to be perceived as "an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who have

dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves" (*The Perception* 189). That is why Van Delft combines peat with fragments of the kind of clothes peat workers used to wear and with the sheep wool typical of the region. For his work *Neerslag* (*Rain*), which forms part of the 2022 exhibition for *Stroomopwaarts* (*Upstream*) in Het Tripgemaal in Gersloot, he used high peat from Estland. Van Delft admits that he would have preferred to use Dutch peat to stress the authenticity and the locatedness of his work, but that was impossible to find. Combining the three materials reveals how similar they ultimately are: the fibers of the clothing, the fluffiness of the high peat, and the strands of wool perfectly intermingle.

Van Delft explicitly refuses to work in the sentimental, idyllic, and romantic way that is so common when people or museums talk about the past. There are no landscapes left without humans, he claims, so he refrains from the nostalgic longing for a prehuman nature. This explains the specific shape of works such as *Neerslag*, but also of *De Deelen* (*The Parts*): it is reminiscent of the kind of lacquer profiles landscape architects use, testifying again to Van Delft's non-sentimental, systematic approach to landscapes. Not coincidentally, Van Delft's first exhibition was at gallery 9 in Amsterdam, which, according to its website, tends to show "abstract art, often geometrical but sometimes also organic and material."

The Liveness of Peat

Despite obvious differences, some patterns become manifest in these artworks. The artists often point out that their encounters with peat are not monodirectional. Peat pigments everything that comes into contact with it: houses (Van Delft), but also bodies and their skins (De Châtel) and lungs (De Lange). Working with peat is not purely cognitive but a bodily experience that activates all the senses (De Châtel, De Lange, Van Delft). Peat has its own demands and even agency: one has to respect it (Ten Busschen) and carefully listen to the way it wants to be treated (Ten Busschen, De Lange). It strongly responds to changes in temperature and humidity (De Châtel, De Lange, Monchen) and thus introduces unpredictability and room for spontaneity. It bears and shows the traces of its organic origins (De Lange, Van Delft, Ten Busschen) and, in doing so, draws attention to its histories, both those from the past and the new histories that are born out of the meeting between artist and material. Interestingly, the association between peat and the problem of carbon emissions, often brought up in recent debates, does not (yet) play a significant role in this artistic discourse.

While peat lands (and their uses) have nowadays almost entirely disappeared in the Netherlands, they are still very much present as signs: in the extraordinary number of place names referring to "veen," in Dutch expressions such as "turf naar de venen sturen" ("to send peat to the peat lands"—like water to the sea), in dead

metaphors that use "turf" for voluminous books or small persons, as a topic in literature and newspapers, in the branding campaigns of regions, and so on. Very few people have ever smelled the pervasive odor of burning peat that, until deep in the nineteenth century, hung over many Dutch cities. And yet, many people regularly come into contact with the real thing, possibly without realizing it, for instance when they take a bag of potting soil from the shelves of a gardening center or water their houseplants. From this perspective, peat is obviously an object with a clear function that has been disconnected from its origins. This may sound strange, since working with peat and new plants in a garden necessarily involves touching, shaping, smelling, and looking at the material, with all its irregularly shaped and sized particles—and yet it is only now through the peat artworks that I realize that, as I plant my seedlings, I am working with relics of plants that could be many centuries old. And as I let time that had stood still for centuries slip through my fingers, and peat dust color my hands, I contemplate how I am actively contributing to the destruction of my own planet by literally throwing fossil fuels to the wind. In my neighbor's garden, the radio plays: "But even sitting in the garden one can still get stung" (Faithless).

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