

“The work is getting darker”: Hans de Wit’s “The Approach”
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It is April 2013 as I write, and a group of experts have just convened in Gainesville, Florida, for a symposium to discuss the recent invasion of southern Florida by giant African snails. With no natural predators in this country, these rat-sized mollusks are feasting on plants and gnawing through calcium-rich stucco houses. At this time, over 117,000 snails have been collected in Florida; yet, since a snail can produce about 1,200 eggs a year, we should consider the current situation to be quite mild in relation to the impending threat. As the rain season begins over the next two months, a flood of snails will wake from hibernation and emerge from the swampy underground en masse. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has officially described the whole situation as “a slick mess.”

Earlier this year, these chthonic crawlers also infested Hans de Wit’s new series “The Approach.” Their deep violet shells emerge from the sea and earth, defined by dark pencil and thick watercolour paint. In one instance, they are alien invaders affixing themselves to curious earth-like globes and surrounded by a creamy and violet cosmic space smeared with a sticky, watery residue. In another, they have triumphantly joined anti-government demonstrators of the 2010 Kyrgyz Revolution to swarm a now-famous newspaper photograph of fallen riot police. Gobs of purple detritus litter the scenes like excrement. Deserted cityscapes are split apart with streams of blue liquid filled with small white spheres—a representational reflection of the cosmic starry night above, or a sea of eggs. Monumental architectural constructs sink into swampy marshlands and are smeared over with gooey slime. “The work is getting darker,” Hans de Wit writes, “and I cannot help it.”¹ These scenes appear surreal or otherworldly, yet to see “The Approach” as a world of science fiction imagination would be erroneous.

¹ Hans de Wit, email to author, November 8, 2011.



Foreshadowing this series is a self-portrait photograph of Hans de Wit, lunging forward in a snow-covered park to peer into a long, white viewing instrument that stands nearly as tall the artist. His hands brace the tool intently against the ground as he gazes down through the telescope to look into the earth. It is a channel into a netherworld. The earth seems to darken as the light creeping into the tunnel is muted; the artist's view focuses further into the bowels of the earth, shadowed from the sun. Rather than the panoramic views of his "Arcanum Arcadia" series (2009), which offered vast landscapes referencing the catastrophic romanticism of J.M.W. Turner or Caspar David Friedrich, what is featured in "The Approach" is full-frame and up-close; at times, the image even seeps through the picture plane and settles onto the surface of the paper substrate. Where the images are devoid of humans, the perils of earth float to the foreground. As the artist looks closer, everything grows darker. "I deal a lot with reality and very concrete forms which I try to translate into my 'world,'" Hans de Wit describes. "I hope that spectators feel and see what is happening in the image, through the image, in their imagination, where fear and happiness exist, and I want to trigger this 'bridge!'"² What can be found in the muddy earth under a rock or in a dark swamp? Snails and toads and rot, the burrowing of worms displacing and chewing through the terra. This is not an alternate reality, but a virtual one—a world of things previously unseen, but no less real.

We have an impulse to rationalize these scenes, to pull them into the sun and critique any deviances as mere fantasy. But allow me to instead pose that the profundity of "The Approach" can be grasped within some of the modern and contemporary philosophies in *geophilosophy*, a concept created by Nietzsche (expanded on by Deleuze and Guattari, and later by Nick Land, Nicola Masciandaro, and Ben Woodard) to describe a philosophy of place. Masciandaro defines the geophilosopher as "one who philosophically experiences rather than flees the earth, who passes through by remaining with it. Geophilosophical experience entails facing, more and more deeply, the fact of earth as the place of philosophy, and more profoundly, experiencing earth as facticity itself, the site of thought's passage to the absolute."³

² Ibid.

³ Nicola Masciandaro, "Becoming Spice: Commentary as Geophilosophy," in *Collapse VI: Journal of Philosophical Research and Development's Notes, Geo/Philosophy* (Urbanomic, 2010), 28.



To delve under and through the earth, to examine life's swelling beneath the surface and coming forth from it, was the task 17th-century painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck undertook with his invention of the *sottomosco*. As a subgenre of still-life, the *sottomosco* worked alongside natural science's theories of spontaneous generation to explore the dark territories where life emerges. It frequently featured "formless" creatures (such as toads and snails) on the forest's floor and on the edges of land and water; the earth was a mysterious fertile ground for life (and thought). As the art historian Karin Leonhard describes: "the toad seems to creep out of the soil or an earthen burrow, or would it be better to say: out of the brown pigment and sticky paint of oil color? Marseus chose to depict the animal when it leaves its subterranean hiding place and presents itself on the ground, and in doing so he demonstrated a momentary state of incompleteness of form."⁴ The "incompleteness," or formlessness, advocates the perspective of something occurring "in the dark realm of the underworld," which the exclusive use of rationality cannot explain.⁵

The *sottomosco* subgenre occupies a minor place within art history and quickly became archaic. Through the pivotal development of microscopes and the discovery of microorganisms, the ground has become increasingly demystified. Earlier perceptions of the earth as a living and fluid entity were replaced by scientific and philosophic theories which have, almost exclusively, identified it as a "cold dead place enlivened only by human thought—either as a thing to be exploited, or as an object of nostalgia."⁶ According to these views, the earth is a ground for reason to stand upon and colonize. Yet, as the contemporary field of geophilosophy and the artworks of Hans de Wit demonstrate, it has become increasingly necessary to reorientate ourselves to the "dark fluidity" of a ground in flux—to muddy the boundaries between land and water, actual and virtual, form and formlessness, growth and decay.

Like the African snails in southern Florida, the chthonic creatures that remain with the earth in "The Approach" are empowered by their special ability to maneuver beyond the terminal limitations of a ground. The earth is enlivened, porous, and transmutable. This series is not apocalyptic but survivalist. Within it, Hans de Wit has demonstrated flexibilities necessary to pass through the earth—visually, physically, and philosophically—and bridge new terrains. By evidencing the instability of the earth and the tension within contemporary relations of experience, "The Approach" images the "slick mess" of present reality, yet it also demonstrates the potentialities of slickness—not quite solid or liquid, but slime.

⁴ Karin Leonhard, "Pictura's fertile field: Otto Marseus van Schrieck and the genre of *sottomosco* painting," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 34.2 (2009/2010): 102.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ben Woodard, *On an Ungrounded Earth: Towards a New Geophilosophy* (Punctum Books, 2013): 2.