Documentary(‘s) challenges in the Anthropocene

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Abstract: This article engages with the obstacles confronting documentary-oriented artists when engaging with the multifaced problem of the era of climate change. The label ‘documentary’ evokes several assumptions and suggests that such artworks represent events in an objective, neutral and unmediated way. Consequently, the premise of representing reality-as-it-is is attached to these kinds of documentary artworks. Despite the large body of theoretical reflections on the limitations of the documentary mode, these false assumptions and promises endure. By revisiting the genealogy of the documentary tradition, and with particular reference to Hannes Dereere and Silke Huysmans’ 2019 performance *Pleasant Island*, this article points at some challenges and possible solutions for documentary artists to cope with the overwhelming complexity that characterises our current period.

Introduction

The conditions and consequences of the Anthropocene ensure some challenges for artists engaging with the aesthetics of what is culturally understood as a documentary approach. The first challenge has to do with the dominant assumptions attached to the label *documentary*. The term is rooted in two traditions coming from different artistic disciplines: film and theatre. Within theatre, the documentary mode relates to a longstanding tradition, heralded by the ideas developed by Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator in the 1920s and 1930s. Brechtian theatre intended to dismantle hegemonic forms of representation and encouraged the spectator to take a critical position towards the bourgeois values conveyed by the popular theatre plays of the time. Brecht’s theatre aesthetics aimed to enquire into the determining and defining conditions of life by ‘showing the showing’ and ‘complex seeing’ (2018, 72). In a similar vein, Piscator defined documentary theatre as ‘a dramatic art which distils from reality – historical or contemporary – a work of art that meets the requirements of a drama and attains in content a degree of actuality and political force rarely possessed by previous dramatic literature’ (1968, 349). This positivist faith in theatre to expose ideological blind spots,

as advocated by Brecht and Piscator, crumbled with the emergence of postmodernity (Reinelt 2009, 8). But as theatre scholar and dramaturge Daniel Schulze (2018) observed, the roots of this belief in empiricism and positivist notions of reality resurfaced in the first decade of the new millennium as documentary theatre gained renewed success and popularity. The post-9/11 period was marked by documentary theatre productions aiming at re-establishing trust and truth in the institutions and media that had been questioned through postmodernity and expressing an urge to search for realities that were tangible, direct and authentic. The types of verbatim theatre, testimonial plays, tribunal plays, documentary theatre (re-)emerging at that time aimed to present different narratives and gave voice to minority discourses by presenting truths and histories that had been hidden or ignored before (Schulze 2018, 192–97). The plays and performances of David Hare, Nicolas Kent, Robin Soans (in the United Kingdom), Milo Rau, Rimini Protokoll (in Germany) or the work of Lebanese-American artists Rabih Mroué and Walid Raad are illustrative of this new, emerging wave of documentary-oriented theatre and performance. And although this new generation of documentary theatre makers eschews essentialist notions of truth and acknowledges the performativity of the treatment of documents, what they share with Brecht and Piscator is a (new) belief in theatre as a medium with which to dismantle hegemonic modes of representation.

Within the realm of film, in Bill Nichols's definition of the genre, the documentary draws on and refers to a historical reality while representing it from a distinct perspective. According to Nichols, documentaries are about events, histories and stories that happened in the real world to real people (2017, 5). Archival footage,

photographs, audio recordings and photographs serve as proof and help the viewer to get a grasp of what happened. Because of this interest and engagement with reality, the documentary was, and still is, connected to forms of (investigative) journalism, historiography, social sciences and anthropology. Because of its connections with these disciplines, the documentary is often considered as objective, neutral or truthful. Aware of these flawed connotations, Nichols reverts to documentary-pioneer John Grierson's definition of documentary as 'a creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson 1933, 8). Although Grierson's principle is acknowledged by most filmmakers and supported by the critical work of numerous film scholars, Nichols insists on how this obvious tension between actuality and creative treatment of this actuality persist and continue to raise questions about documentary assumed as a neutral, truthful and objective mode (2017: 7). As Michael Chanan noted, for example, the history of the documentary film demonstrates how filmmakers moved away from strict forms of observational filming, third-person narration or the traditional documentary stance of impersonality to insert an individual or personal point of view that no longer pretends to tell the truth (2007, 5). Nonetheless, Chanan observes, in mainstream documentary models 'the impersonal director, hidden behind the voice of the commentary' still serves 'as both anonymous intermediary and gatekeeper', mediating subjects and subject matters (2007, 7). Notwithstanding the evolutions the documentary mode went through, and a conjoined corpus of critical theories elaborating on these new modes, such as Nichols (2017) and Stella Bruzzi (2006), the assumptions of documentary as objective or neutral persist today. At the turn of the century, these connotations were expanded and amplified due to the popularization of the documentary in the realm of popular culture. On the one

hand, as Nichols argues, the way the documentary impulse rippled outward to the internet aided a process of cross-pollination where these emerging forms trade conventions and borrow techniques from the documentary tradition (2017, xiii). The arrival of the internet and sites like Facebook, YouTube and Vimeo, as Nichols observes, are 'responsible for the proliferation of mock-, quasi-, semi- and pseudo-documentaries embracing new forms in tackling fresh topics' (2017, 5). On the other hand, this omnipresence of the documentary images and videos distributed through Facebook, Twitter or Instagram started to radically change concepts of reality. When anyone can make 'authentic' pictures and videos, there is no longer one reality, but many mediated realities. With the introduction of the internet, social media and mobile phones the most intimate of spheres are pervaded by documentary media images. Consequently, as curator Maria Lind and documentary artist Hito Steyerl observed, these documentary images 'have not only entered collective imagination but have also profoundly transformed it' (2008, 11). More than a decade after their claim, the omnipresence and dominance of documentary images today confirms Lind's and Steyerl's diagnosis. Social media, and by extension the internet in general, has proven its hegemony as a powerful platform to share, archive and manipulate documents to create a multitude of parallel realities and worlds.

A second challenge has to do with the increasing and overwhelming complexity of many issues characterizing and determining our current time. More than ever, our world is shaped by global politics, economic instability, migration and the ecological breakdown. According to philosopher Nick Srnicek and sociologist Alex Williams, these complex systems differ from past ones because 'their effects are so extensive and

complicated that it is difficult to place our own experience within them' (2016, 13). As they go on to argue, the effects of the nonlinear dynamics, divergent outputs, and the elusiveness of the scale of these systems gives the sensation of 'outpacing the narratives we used to structure and make sense of our lives' (2016: 13). What such an overwhelming complexity brings to the surface is our inability to make 'a mental picture of how individual and collective human action can be situated within the unimageable vastness of the global economy' (14). This inability also affects the common idea of what the documentary promises to do.

When faced with the overwhelming complexity of the Anthropocene, one wonders if the documentary mode traditionally associated to theatre and film as trustworthy, objective and neutral is equipped to cope with the challenges posed by the current planetary breakdown. Bearing in mind documentary's reliance on the critical examination of reality and the representation of reality, can it evoke critical awareness of future catastrophes in a visual culture (from media images on TV-news to photographs in newspapers, from cinema to images on social media) already saturated by sensationalist and spectacular images, such as the spectacular imagery of the bushfires in Australia of 2020? As Michael Chanan noted, documentary has 'politics in its genes' (2007. 16), and since Grierson's days, there has been a strong consensus for its political commitment, its potential to raise social and political awareness and to evoke empathy for those in precarious and desperate situations (Hongisto 2015, 101). But can it raise such awareness for those slowly affected by the warming of the globe? With sensational and spectacular images such common tropes in popular culture and in the arts (e.g. Ai Wei Wei's 2017 film *Human Flow*), how can the documentary mode

address the violence produced by globalization and capitalism that, as Rob Nixon has contended, 'occurs gradually and out of sight, is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive' and where the repercussions are played out 'across a range of temporal scales'? (2011, 2). Can the spectator, when observing the situation from the outside, be considered a critical observer of the consequences of the Anthropocene? And does not such a position contribute to the illusion of the auditability and manageability of climate change?

From 'birdshit island' to 'pleasant island'

This text does not claim to provide an all-encompassing answer to these reflections. Rather than conceiving them as questions urgently waiting to be answered, it apprehends them as challenges and concerns coming from the discord of these two documentary traditions. This contribution aims to address these issues with the help of *Pleasant Island* (2019), a documentary performance by the Brussels-based artists Silke Huysmans and Hannes Dereere, which is part of their trilogy on the topic of mining and extractivism. In *Mining Stories* (2016), the first part of the trilogy, Huysmans and Dereere revisited the Mariana dam disaster of 25 November 2015, in Brazil's lucrative mining region of Minas Gerais. For Dereere, who lived in Mariana for seven years as a child, this was a return to the region of her childhood. She and Dereere arrived shortly after the disaster and recorded the stories of the victims, workers, local politicians and members of the management of the mining company. To explore what kind of conditions lead to such a catastrophe and how to cope with its consequences, the duo also spoke with economists, environmental activists and eco-fiction specialists. The

audience listens to these audio recorded testimonies through a looping station that Huysmans uses to shuffle through this heterogenous collection of recordings. The transcriptions of these testimonies are projected on wooden panels at the back of the stage so the audience can follow the recorded conversations. By using these interviews and sound recordings instead of video footage of the catastrophe, Dereere and Huysmans approach this unfortunate event and the conditions that have led to such catastrophe in a way that goes against the expectations evoked by the label 'documentary performance'. The audience does not get to see footage of the actual site where the events occurred. The performance does not reconstruct the initial catastrophe. Instead, *Mining Stories* focuses on the way local communities deal, through storytelling, with the loss of their homes, family and friends, and reflects on the conditions of the mining industry worldwide that prompts this economic sector to take more and more risks, endangering its workers and the surrounding communities and environment.

The position of Huysmans in *Mining Stories* is another interesting element in relation to the figure of the documentary maker, observer or outsider, given her personal history with the affected community. In *Mining Stories*, Huysmans remains silent on stage, finding her way through the conversations, opinions and statements by operating the looping station as DJ. The way she silently works with the testimonies and, as a DJ, edits more coherent parts of a larger narrative onstage allows her as one of the authors of the performance to relate and engage with the subject matter in a more subjective way. The making of the poetic interplay of voices in the performance is made explicit and opens up an invitation to the audience to join Huysmans in the

journey through the stories and events of Minas Gerais. Spectators can feel overwhelmed by the conflicting views, which trouble the idea that a full overview of the situation is possible. One is, as spectator, allowed to be in a state of ambivalence after hearing these stories and to suspend one's judgement concerning lines of responsibility in Brazil's mining industry. *Mining Stories* reiterates how complex and messy this situation is.

Pleasant Island, the second documentary performance in Huysmans's and Dereere's trilogy, deals with a similar topic and expresses the same ethical approach. While doing research on the impact of extractivism, the duo encountered the story of Nauru, a tiny and remote island in the middle of the Central Pacific. Nauru was once one of the most prosperous places on the globe due to the flourishing phosphate mining industry. The rock formations on the island, containing the phosphate, looked as if they came from bird droppings piling up for centuries, which gave the island the name 'Birdshit island'. However, eventually, decades of phosphate mining turned the island into an industrial graveyard. The mutilation of the landscape, soil and environment makes agriculture – and thus living – impossible. Today, the islanders survive because of the logistic and financial support of Australia. In return, Nauru houses Australia's refugees and illegal immigrants. As a part of the 'Pacific Solution', as the Howard government introduced it in 2001, Nauru has become an open-air detention centre for asylum seekers pending their resettlement, with the Nauruans employed as guards in exchange for extra financial aid. By detaining them far away from Australia, the Australian authorities aim to discourage refugees from undertaking dangerous journeys by sea. Canadian writer and activist Naomi Klein reported on the situation in her book

This Changes Everything and described living on the island as living in a 'sacrifice zone', a decimated area where the environment and its inhabitants are sacrificed for the purpose of economic gain (2015, 144). It was her analysis that encouraged Huysmans and Dereere to visit the island. Whereas journalists and activists may face many difficulties in applying for permission to travel to Nauru, the fact that Huysmans and Dereere presented themselves as artists was not seen as a problem for the local authorities. The only restriction they faced while visiting was a prohibition on the use of cameras to take footage of the island and the islanders. Due to this limitation, Huysmans and Dereere used their smartphones to document their visit and the encounters they had on the island.

As in *Mining Stories*, *Pleasant Island* is a documentary performance sharing collected stories alongside illegal footage of Nauru. What stands out in *Pleasant Island* is the way these stories are staged. In silence and almost undisturbed, Huysmans and Dereere 'face' the audience with their smartphones in hand, scrolling and swiping through the audio and video recordings made on Nauru. Both smartphones are connected to a large screen standing next to the performers so the audience can see every click and action made on the smartphone's interface. The history and present state of the island is mediated and narrated through and by the software and apps on their mobile phones. Huysmans and Dereere address the audience by writing in their digital notebook app. The recorded conversations stemming from their encounters are played through the media player. Videos of newspaper clippings and Australian news reports briefly present the history of Nauru since the British landed there at the end of the nineteenth century. Scrolling through WhatsApp conversations is Huysmans' and

Dereere's way of showing they are still in touch with some of the people they encountered. The idyllic beach-wallpaper is accompanied by live music played on the guitar-app. What first appears as mere scenography determines the performance's dramaturgy and the way Nauru is represented: a very fragmented and blurry representation of the island, its inhabitants and its environment.

Apart from a short video of the artist's arrival on Nauru, taken from the side window of a car driving next to the shores, and blurry footage of a remote and abandoned industrial site with the sound of heavy wind as a soundtrack, the viewer does not get to see more of the island. Huysmans's and Dereere's deliberate choice not to give a more complete picture of the island is a first step to contravening conventional documentary aesthetics. The artists' refusal to provide an overall image of the situation returns in the type of audio-recorded encounters we hear through the smartphone. These are rather short and fragmented and do not stem from a predefined questionnaire. Apart from a first name, we do not learn about the people's background, biography or profession. Despite the absence of such information, the polyphony of testimonies brings the different temporal, historical and political layers of Nauru to the surface. The story of Mary and Corinne, for example, outlines what Nauru once looked like. Recalling their Indigenous ancestors, they talk about how the island has changed since successive waves of colonizers have controlled and squandered the country's wealth. Islanders Ingo and Stuart recount how the Nauruan government invested most of the mining revenues into trust funds. To continue the Nauru government's luxurious lifestyle, real estate seemed like the perfect way to live off the funds while winding down phosphate mining, a plan that failed and forced the Nauruan government to find

new financial sources. After being a prime money-laundering haven in the 1990s, nowadays the island 'hosts'– as the islander Kenneth describes it – 'Australia's problem', and has become an offshore refugee detention centre.

The way the stories are structured in *Pleasant Island* runs parallel with the island's painful history but does not proclaim a truthful depiction of the past, the present, and the awaiting future. The concatenation of testimonies does not crystallize into a single message or moral claim imposed by artists. Although present onstage all the time, Huysmans and Dereere do not address the audience by speaking live. The viewer learns about their thoughts and aims, and the conditions which have generated the performance, when they write in the digital notebooks on their smartphones. The hopeless situation in which the Nauruans, the Indigenous people and the asylum seekers find themselves is related through the various stories we hear, on which the artists do not comment. As in *Mining Stories*, there are no voices overruling others. The shortness of the testimonies and the lack of a visual or biographical referent contributes to this non-hierarchy. In doing so, the fragmented narrations undermine 'the emotional weight of storytelling with truth-telling' that is often combined and foregrounded in documentary theatre, together with 'a sense of experiencing something happening right in front of our eyes' (Martin 2006, 14). In this way, compassion is evoked for the troublesome situation people find themselves in. But a limited focus on the individual traumas can lead away from the complex developments that brought Nauru into its current situation. The presentation or staging of certain individual traumas is accompanied by a specific politics: who decides whose stories can be told? How can one tell his or her story? How are these stories recorded and stored?

Being aware of such ethical questions, Huysmans and Dereere try to mirror in their handling of the stories what documentary filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha coined as 'to speak nearby, rather than speak about' (Balsom 2018, no pagination). Such a speaking, as Trinh explains elsewhere, 'does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place' (Chen 1992:,87). Trinh claims that by acknowledging 'the possible gap between you and those who populate your film' one can 'leave the space of representation open so that, although you're very close to your subject, you're also committed to not speak on their behalf, in their place or on top of them' (Balsom 2018).The deliberate choice of the artists not to show people's faces as photographs or videos during the performance contributes to the creation of such a space and avoids the danger of what art historian and cultural critic T. J. Demos refers to as 'a voyeuristic objectification of the state of victimhood', seen in more popular documentary forms (Demos 2013, 172). Demos advocates against this dominant and widespread representation of diasporic subjects, migrants or refugees and insists on 'a visual or poetic opacity that holds the potential for subjects to exist politically beyond the condition of traumatic experience and exposure' (2013, 172). In *Pleasant Island,* the conventional idea of visual identification and empathy is hampered by the absence of visual representation of the interviewees. Furthermore the Indigenous islanders themselves also complicate images of victimhood in *Pleasant Island.* Their resigned voices outline the ambivalence of the situation most Nauruans find themselves in, where no single perpetrator is responsible. Although they had no other choice in the past, they were part of the system that excavated the island's natural resources. It was the 'addiction' of the generation after the colonization, as

Nauruan islander Annie argues, that continued and intensified this unwanted transformation of the island. This sense of ambivalence returns in relation to the deal with Australia to detain refugees pending for their resettlement. Although it provides an income for many of Nauru's inhabitants, some of them, like Corinne, realize they 'shouldn't get rich from other people's backs'. The resigned character of the stories demonstrates how the islanders realize that their situation does not differ that much of the asylum seekers and their own lack of financial resources keeps them on the island as well. Although the risk of becoming debilitated, passive or fatalist is more than understandable, such fatalism is countered in *Pleasant Island* by the testimony of Iranian refugee Shahram. Pending his reprocessing and resettlement, Shahram opened an Iranian restaurant. On Nauru, a healthy food culture is absent. The first wave of extreme prosperity made the transfer of Indigenous fishing techniques and knowledge obsolete and decades of extractivism makes agriculture impossible. The islanders are dependent on Australian food supplies of mainly less nutritious canned meat and vegetables. Therefore, Shahram's choice to start a restaurant could be seen as an inspiring sign of human resilience.

The overall emotional thread through the stories in *Pleasant Island* resonates with Glenn A. Albrecht's notion of 'solastalgia': 'the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory' (2019, 39). The continuation of extractivist practices after Nauru's independence, in favour of corporate interest and financial speculation contributes, in Albrecht's words, to 'the gradual erosion of identity by the sense of belonging to a particular beloved place' (Albrecht 2019, 39). Such distress caused

disastrous mental health problems for many of Nauru's current inhabitants, whether Indigenous or refugees. This was sadly illustrated by the closure of Shahram's restaurant due to mental health problems some weeks after Huysmans' and Dereere's visit. The impact extends well beyond the individual level and is an example of Nixon's claim that such assaults on a nation's environmental resources not only cause a physical but also an imaginative displacement. The situation of the Nauruan community is an illustration of what he defined as 'spatial amnesia': a community that 'is, under the banner of development, physically unsettled, and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time, and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory' (2011, 151). With the national museum containing Nauru's history going up in flames years ago, with a landscape filled up with industrial relics and a sea level that is steadily climbing by about five millimetres per year since 1993, 'what future do we inherit for our children', islander Stuart muses?

What comes after the showing of showing the complexity?

In his more recent critique of the visible effects of video-installations, photographs and (documentary) films presenting the catastrophes of colonialism, capitalism and the Anthropocene, Demos opposes what could be seen as the 'sumptuous visual spectacle' and 'a mark of disaster porn which ultimately plays on the viewer's privilege to be able to view distant suffering up-close, doing so from a voyeur's safe position of relative comfort and security' (2018, no pagination.). Demos is among a number of critical voices who aspire the idea 'to negotiate with the limits of representation, to embrace the uncertainty of the documentary image, to acknowledge the productive effects' (Lind and Steyerl 2008 16). Aligned with these critical takes, many artistic practices

incorporate a high degree of self-reflexivity and self-criticism in the way they deal with sensitive and complex subject matters. But what does such a critical and self-reflexive attitude mean and imply when faced with human complicity in a system responsible for current ecological breakdown grounded in a long and complex history of extracting and exploiting natural resources, in favour of the progress and welfare of a limited group of people, mainly situated in the West?

In addition, the capitalist system that flourished due to decades of extractivism is nowadays disseminated and entangled in every aspect of our lives. As cultural critic Rey Chow provocatively stated: aren't we facing a 'vulgarization of reflexivity', an impasse whereby the freedom of thought associated with reflexivity nowadays finds itself in 'an endless fragmentation and reification of thought' and almost becomes synonymous with an inclination towards 'pornography' or 'medial exhibitionism' (2012, 24–28)? A similar risk lies around the corner in relation to complexity. In the ambition of cultural practitioners to encompass our complex reality, 'complexity porn' – as Srnicek and Williams described the paralysing effect of over-complexity – can become an excuse for intellectual and political relativism (Bauwens et al. 2018, 78). It could be argued that there is nothing wrong with an artist addressing the way we are entangled with a system that endangers the future of mankind. Although we have a responsibility, being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the current challenges tends to disavow the differentiated responsibilities and the differently located effects of the capitalist system responsible for our current state. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw, T.J. Demos calls for a 'mode of intersectionality', insisting on 'the inseparability between environmental matters of concern and socio-political and economic frameworks of

injustice', 'underscored within multiple struggles for decolonization', the refusal 'to divide overlapping systems of oppression', and challenging 'the essentialization of one or another term in isolation' (2019b, 1).

In *Pleasant Island*, Huysmans and Dereere maintain a balance between these poles of over-complexity, disproportionate reflexivity and the risk of exploiting and fetishizing victimhood. Key to their balancing act is the well-conceived use of the smartphone in the performance. What served as a mnemotechnic instrument while visiting Nauru becomes the central object for designating our entanglement with what Demos described as ecology-as-intersectionality. First, the consistent use of the smartphone throughout the performance gives a twenty-first century update to the documentary mode's predilection for the use, manipulation and reconfiguration of various media determining dominant modes of representation. As the most dominant producer and bearer of knowledge of the last decade, the smartphone became the most determining intermediary between us, the world we inhabit and in the way it is represented. Knowledge that is – due to the format of the device – inherently fragmentary and elusive. The resulting fragmentary representation of Nauru, as documented by the artists' smartphones, is made transparent as we follow every finger movement and click. Echoing the Brechtian imperative of 'showing the showing', Huysmans and Dereere allow the viewer to see them tapping the search bar, scrolling through the folders with interviews, images and YouTube videos, in the performative act of swiping the touchscreen.

Secondly, the prominent presence of the smartphone in the performance goes beyond a mode of storytelling. It also refers to the way our current dependency on these

devices forges new extractivist industries to provide raw materials for telephones, computers and electric vehicles. In *Pleasant Island*, Huysmans and Dereere refer to this unstoppable hunger through the inclusion of the story of seasoned entrepreneur Gerard Barron, the phlegmatic CEO and chairman of DeepGreen, a mining company doing deep-sea or sea-floor mining. We learn more from Barron's mission to help wean humanity off fossil fuels and transition to a circular resource economy through an interview with Huysmans and Dereere and his company's promotional video. 'The overarching ethos of DeepGreen', as Barron proclaims in the performance, 'is helping the world to move away from fossil fuels and to bring prosperity, jobs, and education'. By offering the Nauruan government this business opportunity, Barron claims it could contribute as a community to the development of new types of batteries that will be needed for a sustainable future. 'It is normal that people are sceptical because land-based mining wasn't great', Barron explains. 'But it is not going to be that way', he iterates. By embedding Barron's story as a reference to the more recent economic policy of the Nauruan government, Huysmans and Dereere demonstrate how the aggressive extraction of resources and the opportunistic financial speculation of the Nauruan government is now followed and complicated by what Demos refers to as 'the financial co-optation of green capital' or 'Green New Colonialism' (2019, no pagination), where, despite the successive economic solutions that brought prosperity for a limited time to a selective elite, neo-liberalism persists in the wake of colonialism and imperialism.

Thirdly, the representational and political complexity embodied by the smartphone provides an entry point for Huysmans and Dereere to reflect on their own

position as artists and individuals. Their consistent use of smartphone technology and aesthetics cannot be reduced to a mere Brechtian gesture to uncover the theatrical apparatus. If (self-)reflexivity is 'reduced to a question of technique and method' and leaves the regulating conditions of the social and political intact, then, as Trinh T. Minh-ha hA argued, it merely 'serves to refine and to further the accumulation of knowledge' and will be equated with 'the status of scientific rigor' (1990, 93–95). Similarly, Hito Steyerl has pointed out more recently how

> many documentary articulations seemed to erode or even attack unfair power structures, but on the level of form, by relying on authoritative truth procedures, […] have intensified the aura of the court room, the penitentiary or the laboratory within a field of art (2007, no pagination).

Following Steyerl's words, it could be argued that it is the topic that remains the object of assessment and dissection, not themselves or their authorial position as artists. This is aligned with a common critique by theatre scholars on Brecht's cultural-materialist approach that kept 'faith in the possibility of a kind of objectivity' whereby 'ideology is unmasked and discarded in favour of more probing critical/theoretical techniques' (Youker 2018, 7). On what kind of grounds could or would a theatre maker make a claim to such objectivity? Do artists treat their own self-proclaimed objective stance with the same suspicion and scepticism as they do the dominant discourse they oppose? The use of the telephone in *Pleasant Island* is for Dereere and Huysmans a way to bring their position as artist and individual to the stage as an object of enquiry and marks how they are complicit to the extractivist system they want to surface and scrutinize in their performance.

Indeed, it would have been easy for *Pleasant Island* to criticize the way our compulsive and addictive use of the smartphone makes us complicit in sustaining the extractivist economic model. Contrary to such a predictable approach, an ambivalence similar to that seen in the islanders' testimonies is expressed here. For Huysmans and Dereere, WhatsApp allows them to keep in touch with those they encountered on the island. As the stories of refugees Sahram and Faheem illustrate, for them, and by extension for all islanders, their smartphones are the only way to keep in touch with the outside world. As demonstrated in one scene in *Pleasant Island,* where an app providing yoga and meditation exercises is used on stage, the smartphone can even bring peace and tranquillity for Nauruan people. In an illustration of Klein's observation on 'how the climate crisis challenges not only capitalism but the underlying civilizational narratives about endless growth and progress within which we are all, in one way or another, still trapped' (2014, 149), the only way the Nauruans can break out of isolation, via their smartphones, is through economic activities such as deep-sea mining, which will cause similar damage to Nauru's surrounding ecosystems as the years of phosphate mining did.

This ambiguity ensuing from the consistent and prominent use of the smartphone in *Pleasant Island* articulates how we are inscribed in a system where, as Timothy Morton has noted, 'there is nowhere to stand outside of things altogether' and where there 'is not a place of defensive self-certainty' (2013, 5). One cannot step out of our current situation and observe, assess and reflect from a safe distance without taking into consideration one's own actions. This implicated situation pierces the Brechtian act of distancing. The smartphone becomes a common factor between the authors and the

spectators which, by calling into question one's own position, can no longer provide a justification for the comfortable position of a distanced viewing complexity. Instead of aiming for empathy (key in Aristotelean theatre) or alienation (crucial in Brechtian theatre), *Pleasant Island* evokes perception, emotion and action, a crossover of domains that, as Rob Nixon argued, is crucial to evoke 'apprehension' (2011, 14). 'To engage slow violence', Nixon explains, 'is to confront layered predicaments of apprehension: to apprehend – to arrest, or at least mitigate – often imperceptible threats requires rendering them apprehensible to the senses through the work of scientific and imaginative testimony' (2011, 14). *Pleasant Island* evokes such a mode of apprehension by foregrounding via personal stories of the islanders the ongoing aftermath of colonialism, the longstanding policies of unfair agreements with dubious investors, as well as the structural adjustments that produced economic dependency on the Australian government. The performance demonstrates, through its interlinkage of form and content, how the situation of Nauru does not demand a 'single-issue environmental' solution, as offered by DeepGreen, but what Demos has articulated as a 'radical restructuring of our politics and economics by prioritizing equality, social justice and multispecies flourishing' (2019, no pagination). Pinpointing structural causes does not mean losing sight of the human side of the current events. Huysmans' and Dereere's choice to tell the islanders' testimonies speaks to Nixon's observation on the power of how: 'arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects' might both foreground and insist on climate change's long lasting emotional, psychological and social impact on local communities (2011, 3). And being onstage as performer and author is Huysmans' and Dereere's way

of carrying on where Brecht's theatre stopped. In his uncovering of theatrical apparatus, he wanted to shock and educate the bourgeois audience but as an author it could be argued that Brecht himself and his ideological agenda remained unquestioned. Huysmans' and Dereere's performance, on the contrary, is rooted in a mode of self-questioning which is entangled in both the form and the content of *Pleasant Island*. Found in their work with the islanders and the onstage representation of their research process, their self-questioning does not eschew critical takes on their own roles as author. Such a self-reflexive, transparent and low-key authorial stance becomes an invitation to the spectator to take a similar attitude and to understand a different model of documentary complexity. I believe it is just this kind of mutual relation that will help us to cope with the consequences of the Anthropocene and, more importantly, with the very notion of the Anthropocene itself.

Thinking emergencies together

The Anthropocene has become synonymous for the West's sense of emergency 'to act now' to stop climate change. Drawing on the calls of Indigenous activist groups and liberation movements, Demos, like others, underscores how

> by situating emergency in the near future, and by narrowly defining it as carbon caused, it's as if the disaster hasn't already occurred in past invasions, slaveries, genocides, all perpetuated in ongoing land grabs, displacements, and extractivism, as the traditions of the oppressed have ceaselessly shown (2019: no pagination).
>
> .

The figure of Gerard Barron, the Elon Musk-like prophet of deep-sea mining in *Pleasant Islands*, attests to how global climate emergency can be redirected to market-friendly solutions which reaffirm the ruling order, losing sight again of local precarious communities. Following Demos, the challenge is 'to render these complexities proximate and mutually informing, centring them honestly and sensitively, by thinking emergencies together, and collaborating on solutions across difference' (2019, no pagination).

The history, the present state and the uncertain future of Nauru demonstrate how, as Amitav Ghosh has noted 'those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us' (2016, 62). The story of Nauru, which illustrates on a microscale the challenges we face globally, might seem exceptional and for some even exaggerated. Considering its relationship with Nauru, Australia's recent confrontation with massive fires in the southwest, almost ironically, exposed how their 'Nauruan scenario' is becoming undeniably present on a wider scale but a different pace. Already today, similar scenarios –with the same building blocks but in a different order – are rolling out all over the world. Performances like *Pleasant Island* help not only to insist on how climate change does not affect everybody in an equal way, but also to articulate different historical responsibilities that brought us to this unequal situation.

Captions:

Figure 1: Hannes Dereere and Silke Huysmans, *Pleasant Island*, 2019. Performance. © Cindra Stuyen

Figure 2: Hannes Dereere and Silke Huysmans, *Mining Stories*, 2016. Performance. © Ilse Philips

Figure 3: Hannes Dereere and Silke Huysmans, *Pleasant Island*, 2019. Performance. © Ilse Philips

Figure 4: Hannes Dereere and Silke Huysmans, *Pleasant Island*, 2019. Performance. © Nuno Direitinho

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