

ON RADICAL ECOLOGY AND TENDER GARDENING

Johan Grimonprez
A new Order, A New Earth
 Garage Rotterdam
 21 November 2020 – 17 January 2021

International acclaimed artist Johan Grimonprez (1962, Roeselaere, Belgium) created an impressive, associative vlog of video works that examine ideas of ecology and sustainability from a broader, social angle entitled: *On Radical Ecology and Tender Gardening*.

This database full of videos and archive material is currently being exhibited at Garage Rotterdam, in the exhibition *A New Order, A New Earth*. It serves as an informative instrument on one of the biggest challenges society faces today: the wellbeing of the earth. With that, the work, made in 2012, becomes more relevant than ever.

Grimonprez's critically acclaimed work dances on the borders of practice and theory, art and cinema, documentary and fiction, demanding a double take on the part of the viewer. Grimonprez achieved international acclaim with his film essay, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* that premiered in 1997 at Centre Pompidou and Documenta 10 in Kassel. Grimonprez's curatorial projects have been exhibited at museums worldwide, such as the Hammer Museum (LA); the Pinakothek der Moderne (Munich); the MoMA (NY); Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich; the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Gent; the Whitney Museum in New York and the Tate Modern in London. In 2022 the prestigious ZKM, Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Karlsruhe is hosting a solo exhibition of Grimonprez.

On Radical Ecology and Tender Gardening
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Extracts from an interview with Johan Grimonprez by Belgian artist Pieterjan Gijs on *Radical Ecology and Tender Gardening* (2012)
Pieterjan Gijs (P.G.): Where does the term 'radical' fit in? The videos and the solutions they present aren't especially radical in themselves. Although they are certainly inventive, creative and often strikingly simple.

J.G.: The term 'radical' has multiple layers. It refers to the fact that overconsumption and the pursuit of profits have brought our biotope to a radical state. Things are completely back-to-front.



^ *Radical Lawn*, Johan Grimonprez, video still from *On Radical Ecology and Tender Gardening* (2012)

Look at how policy toward seeds is dominated by companies like Monsanto and by the lobbying industry; and how they're making it almost illegal to grow your own vegetable garden. Or the way Barbara Van Dyck was sacked from her research job at a Belgian university for criticizing BASF's illegal practices in the Flemish potato sector. Critical dialogue is precisely what a university should be offering, yet faculties are increasingly acting like an adjunct to big business. (...)

P.G.: Tell me more about the way you choose the clips: how selective are you about your categories and whether or not to include something in the vlog?

J.G.: It has a lot to do with conceiving an ecology for the 'information dystopia' that dominates the net. The overload of information traps you right back into that pattern of overconsumption. A lot of thought goes into selecting the videos. For each one that's picked, ten or twenty were considered. But things tend to surface at a given moment, like the tip of an iceberg. (...)

P.G.: What's your take on this alternative? You mentioned a paradigm shift: is it something political?

J.G.: I drew a lot of inspiration from recent research into empathy in disciplines like economics, psychology and cognitive sciences. In *The Age of Empathy*, the primatologist Frans de Waal argues that society has been ruined by the ideology of unfettered competition and greed celebrated by Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s. You hear a lot about 'survival of the fittest' in social Darwinism; but that's actually a distortion of Darwin dating back to Herbert Spencer, who used it to justify British imperialism. Darwin himself argued that cooperative behaviour is as essential to evolution: survival goes hand in hand with cooperation.

A new paradigm is emerging, which focuses on empathy and conflict resolution rather than greed and selfishness. Empathy in the sense of solidarity: how can we work together? What is it that unites us? Who is the 'we' in our society? We have to dig deeper – hence 'radicalis' – if we're going to redefine the current paradigm.

P.G.: Many of the videos in the vlog offer concrete solutions that really could bring about immediate change. How come so few innovative ideas find their way into practice?

J.G.: They often don't work in a profit-driven climate as they clash with the interests of big corporations. A typical example is Paul Stamets, who uses fungi to break down radioactivity and oil. His technique could have been deployed to tackle the spill in the Gulf of Mexico. But the Halliburton lobby cornered the clean-up rights and made profit by spraying the oil slick with extra toxic chemicals. Stamets' technique could also have been applied to clean up the nuclear disaster at Fukushima. Or there's Akinori Ito's recycling machine, which recycles plastic back into gasoline. If it were produced on a large scale, the unit price would fall enough to make it economically viable. Or take the small-scale character of permaculture that is at odds with the commercial imperatives of agribusiness, merely fixated on profit-driven monoculture. One-dimensional solutions are insufficient. Perhaps we should follow Bhutan's example and adopt Gross National Happiness as our yardstick, instead of GNP, which is grafted onto an economic model.

On Radical Ecology and Tender Gardening is on view at Garage Rotterdam until January 17th, 2021. The exhibition also includes work by Pinar & Viola and Viola Renate. The exhibiton highlights posthumanists theories and the fundamental change in our view on nature.