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Exhibition Review

Bosk

Curator: Bruno Doedens

Leeuwarden city centre, Obe pavilion

8 April–27 August 2022

*Review by Jan Woudstra
The University of Sheffield*

Bosk: Finding new narratives to support transition

Droughts, floods, other evidence of climate change and an increasing desire for social justice have created a focus on the environment and, more generally, our relationships with each other and other living beings. There is overwhelming agreement that our value system needs to be challenged to facilitate transition to the low-carbon societies we aspire to and which we need to survive. Yet 'short-term' economics continue to dictate much of what we do and think and unless we question this, we will see little progress. We have no intention of damaging the Earth, yet the self-regulatory Earth system is being pushed over the threshold due to our careless actions. Fortunately, an increasing number of people feel the need to address the environmental urgency to combat global warming and to transition to sustainable ways of life. But this change is very slow. These were the deliberations of land artist Bruno Doedens (b. 1959) who in the Bosk-project in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, questioned how we might speed up the process of transition and how we might stimulate a desire for a stable future (Fig. 1). What are the new narratives that might help us mobilize the social energy? And how can land art be used as a medium for increasing ecological awareness?

Doedens, who qualified in landscape architecture at the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam, founded landscape consultancy DS with Maike van Stiphout,¹ which became famous for its 1995 grass sculpture parks in Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.² He left conventional practice in 2005 with the ambition to push the boundaries of the profession through the medium of landscape art, which he developed in various ways, with a particular affinity for creating temporary landscapes along the coastline.³ This led to an association with Joop Mulder (1953–2021) on the island of Terschelling, where they developed several projects as part of Oerol, an annual theatre and art festival.⁴ So when Mulder was asked to provide ideas building on the legacy of Leeuwarden's 2018 Cultural Capital designation, Doedens was a natural choice, and he continued the project after Mulder's sudden death.

Bosk

The notion of Bosk emerged as an idea in 2020 and was further developed during a 2021 residency at the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam into a written manifesto entitled *Planet Paradise*.⁵ This investigated the origins of the environmental dilemma and aimed to provide engaging solutions that were not detrimental to the Earth (Fig. 2). The notion of a 'walking wood' provided such an example: 'If trees can walk, we can change . . .' (Fig. 3). At a practical level this consisted of 1,200 trees planted in 800 containers largely by the municipality. On each of the 100 days that the exhibition lasted, some of the 4,000 volunteer

collaborators would shift 150 of these containers to new positions around the city centre; they were ultimately moved into permanent positions throughout the region (Fig. 4). This process of engagement and wonder was intended to question our relationship with nature and with the Earth, thus rather than being a burden on the planet, humanity would transcend into an enriching species. The question arises as to how this might be accomplished.⁶

New narratives

Planet Paradise concluded that we act according to the stories we believe. The domineering narrative that continuing economic development is always positive as otherwise this leads to recession, needs to be challenged with a different narrative. Doedens believes that cultural events with radical imagery can be important to encourage a process of self-reflection and exploration of our relationship with nature (Fig. 5). The act of gradually moving trees around the city mobilizes 4,000 of those who already believe in the need for greater urgency in transitioning, and they provide a clear positive message to observers that if this is possible, anything is possible (Fig. 6). This is clearly inspired by Joseph Beuys's project *7000 Eichen* (1982–1987) and categorized by the project as 'merry activism' (Fig. 6a).⁷ The underlying objective, and that of Arcadia, the arts festival of which this project is a part, questions the kind of world we wish to inhabit and leave behind as responsible ancestors. To Doedens this is primarily communicated through the senses, and he believes that by sensing it is possible to change thinking and then influence action. An exhibition on the project aims to change 'ego[tistical]' thinking into 'eco[logical]' thinking. Held in the Obe pavilion on the square opposite the leaning Oldenhove tower in Leeuwarden, it narrates the environmental challenge through the lifespan of the butterfly (Fig. 7). Commencing as a hungry caterpillar, a reference to the rashness and boundlessness of adolescence, it only thinks about its own needs and pleasures without consideration of the cost to the Earth. While it becomes richer and fatter, the Earth becomes impoverished and polluted. With the chrysalis stage representing the environmental challenges, the emergence of the butterfly symbolizes resurrection, hope, longing and harmony. As Gaia's messenger the butterfly requires to be treated with care, respect and consideration for generations today, tomorrow and in the future, to facilitate a life in harmony with nature. The opportunities are there, the challenge of transitioning is ours. A series of happenings organized alongside the main project adds artistic voices and creates additional narratives that explore aspects of our relationship with nature. This opens with a simulation of a soundscape of a wood with hundreds of human voices that 'hum, swell, fizz and reverberate'; and includes a court case investigating the relationship between man and nature; an exposition of what the local area would look like if nature were a priority; a sculpture exhibit inspired by natural processes of growth and decay; a musical poetic narrative that takes us from the Big Bang to 2121; and a rhythmic carnival of music inspired by Haitian voodoo ceremonies that reminds us of the importance of the adaptation of local cultures in order to achieve sustainable practices.

Transitioning

The importance of trees in urban environments is being acknowledged more and more with new findings regularly reported in academic papers and summarized in popular publications, such as Peter Wohlleben's international bestseller *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (2017). This has created a

new fascination with trees as living and social beings, which is being added to by the consideration of trees as a solution multiplier in dealing with environmental issues, and particularly in sequestering carbon (Fig. 8). Indeed, trees have become a favourite item in many a politician's toolkit, which unfortunately often lacks imagination and conviction other than pure economics. While the latter are a traditional starting point and provide a basis for policy there are many other aspects and values that need to be considered to achieve a broad support base.⁸ It is here that Doedens' project contributes and explores multiple narratives to support change. Doedens notes how trees have also been on Earth much longer than humanity, which is compared with being an adolescent, one that needs engaging stories to be stimulated into action (Fig. 9). The artist's narratives are challenging and cause us to rethink the human relationship with nature. They not only provoke visual surprise and provide a basis for discussion, they also form an effective and positive way through which to communicate the ills of humanity and the almost unsurmountable problems we are facing. While the issues have been raised before and there have been other artists and professional landscape architects who have challenged residents and provided solutions, it is always encouraging to see fresh attempts that clearly achieve a broad support base through relatively simple means and effective communication. As a strapline, 'If trees can walk, humanity can change' provides a hopeful starting point and one we need to instigate the transition required to sustain human life on this planet (Fig. 10).

Yet despite the best intentions to reuse all materials, a project like this also comes with an environmental cost: the construction and supply of timber containers, the soil and plants to fill them, the weeding and watering, the custom-made steel carts to walk the trees around the city, and the disposal of containers and carts at the end of the project (Fig. 11). The organizers of the project questioned what we can learn from trees as mirrors of the changes in society. Perhaps it is that we are willing to overlook minor environmental 'misdemeanours' such as these, in the same way that we exempt our own flights to foreign holiday destinations. Clearly if we want to be truly sustainable, we ought to restrict any excessive use of resources. The question then is how do we convey the message in a way that excites, surprises and engages—as this project does—in a way that elicits urgent change? The increasing quantities of trees planted everywhere surely reflect our growing environmental concerns, but without taking much more drastic decisions and approaches in general it is going to be of little effect (Fig. 12). If Bosk has in some way sped up transitioning, then it has been a success (Figs. 13 & 14).

Captions

Figure 1:

Land artist and landscape architect Bruno Doedens has questioned how we might speed up the process of transition and how we might stimulate a desire for a sustainable future.

Photo: Floris Leeuwenberg, 2022

Figure 2:

Project visual of the square opposite the Oldehove tower, Leeuwarden. The idea for Bosk emerged during an artist residency in which Doedens wrote his manifesto *Planet Paradise*, which investigates the environmental dilemma and searches for engaging solutions.

Source: Bruno Doedens

Figure 2a:

Trees in containers were to be 'walked' along a 3.5-km route around the city centre.

Source: Bruno Doedens

Figure 3:

Doedens provided the notion of a walking woods, arguing that 'If trees can walk, we can change'.

Photo: Sanne Kerkhof, 2022

Figure 4:

On each of the 100 days that the exhibition lasted, some of the 4,000 volunteer collaborators would shift 150 of these containers to new positions.

Photo: Floris Leeuwenberg, 2022

Figure 5:

The artist and volunteers, 2022. Doedens believes that cultural events with radical imagery can be important to encourage a process of self-reflection and the exploration of our relationship with nature.

Photo: Jan Woudstra

Figure 6:

The act of gradually moving trees around the city mobilizes 4,000 of those who already believe in the need for greater urgency in transitioning, and they provide a clear positive message to observers that if this is possible, anything is possible.

Photo: Lucas Kemper, 2022

Figure 6a:

Doedens was clearly inspired by Joseph Beuys's project **7000 Eichen** (1982–1987) and he categorized this type of project as 'merry activism'.

Photo: Floris Leeuwenberg, 2022

Figure 7:

An exhibition that aims to change 'ego[tistical]' thinking into 'eco[logical]' thinking is held in the Obe pavilion at the square opposite the leaning Oldehove tower, Leeuwarden. It narrates the environmental challenge through the lifespan of the butterfly.

Photo: Jan Woudstra, 2022

Figure 8:

Measuring growth at Bosk. There is a renewed fascination with trees as living, and social beings, which is being added to by the consideration of trees as a solution multiplier in dealing with environmental issues, and particularly in sequestering carbon.

photo: Jan Woudstra, 2022

Figure 9:

Doedens notes how trees have been on Earth much longer than humanity, which is compared with being an adolescent, one that needs engaging stories to be stimulated into action.

Photo: Jan Woudstra, 2022

Figure 10:

Doedens discovered that in order to be able to sustain human life on this planet we need new narratives that instigate an urgent transition.

Photo: Jan Woudstra, 2022

Figure 11:

Yet despite the best intentions to reuse all materials, a project like Bosk also comes with an ecological footprint: the construction and supply of timber containers, the soil and plants to fill them, the weeding and watering, the custom-made steel carts to walk the trees around the city, and the disposal of containers and carts at the end of the project.

Photo: Jan Woudstra, 2022

Figure 12:

The increasing quantities of trees planted everywhere surely reflect our growing environmental concerns, but without taking much more drastic decisions and approaches in general it is going to be of little effect.

Photo: Jan Woudstra

Figure 13:

Bosk project, 2022. If Bosk has in some way sped up transitioning, then it has been a success.

Figure 14:

Oldehove square, final event. The urgency clearly is to act together, facilitated by inspiring narratives.

Photo: Bart Lindenhovius, 2022

[Between 7-8:]

Figure extra:

A series of happenings alongside the main project adds artistic voices and includes a court case investigating the relationship between man and nature.

Drawing: Heleen van den Broek, 2022

Figure extra:

Other events include music, song and dance, including this ballet, engaging different audiences with Bosk.

Photo: Ruben van Vliet, 2022

¹ DS landschapsarchitekten, [dslandscapsarchitekten, dslandscapsarchitekten.nl/bureau/](https://dslandscapsarchitekten.nl/bureau/), accessed July 2022.

² Tilla Durieux Park, Berlin, 2003: publicspace.org/works/-/project/c088-tilla-durieux-park; Henriette Herz Park, Berlin, 2001-2: stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/planen/staedtebau-

projekte/leipziger_platz/de/realisierung/oeff_raeume/h_herz_park/index.shtml, accessed July 2022.

³ Bruno Doedens, Land artist, brunodoedens.nl/en/, accessed July 2022.

⁴ Joop Mulder (1953–2021), oerol.nl/en/joop-mulder-1953-2021/, accessed July 2022.

⁵ Bruno Doedens, [*Planet Paradise*](#) (2021), winterschool.planetparadise.nl/wp-content/uploads/in5-archives/html5_output-1/html5_output/assets/downloads/PlanetParadise_Essay.pdf, accessed July 2022.

⁶ Arcadia, 'Bosk', arcadia.frl/en/projecten/bosk/, accessed July 2022. This and email correspondence with Doedens provided the main source material for this piece.

⁷ [*Bosk Groeiboek Informatie & Inspiratie: Wat kunnen we leren van bomen als Spiegel voor de samenleving?*](#) (2020), arcadia.frl/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Bosk-Groeiboek-December-2021.pdf, accessed July 2022.

⁸ Jan Woudstra and Camilla Allen, [*The Politics of Street Trees*](#) (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), see introduction.