"Earthly Things": Ecocriticism, Globalization, and the Material Turn[1]

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ABSTRACT This paper first offers a concise consideration of the most promising strands in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities today. Most of these, which are responding to environmental destruction and climate change, are characterized by an affinity with posthumanism and/or materialism (e.g. Alaimo, Colebrook, Morton), often in the face of the need to radically rethink the nature of humanity within a global, geophysical frame (Chakrabarty, Dimock, Morton). In the second part of my paper, the case of Dutch environmentally inspired art allows me to explore the problems in the artistic articulation of such a much-needed global, materialist approach.

Ecocriticism in the Netherlands faces an interesting challenge.[2] The heavily industrialized, densely inhabited Netherlands is very much a constructed landscape, forged in centuries of close interaction between men and nature, and there is very little untouched nature left. On the one hand, the Dutch like to boast of the fact that they have wrought their country with their very own hands; on the other, since the beginning of the twentieth century, and especially after the mid-century, they began to mourn the fact that they have no real nature left, and that their landscapes are empty (Lemaire 1970). The polder is a good example of the pained ambivalence with which the Dutch look at the emptiness of their constructed environment. For that reason, I would like to use it as the starting point for my discussion of the potentials of ecocriticism for the Netherlands. I will begin by considering

1. This essay is based on a paper presented in Nijmegen 2010, and on parts of a longer essay published for a seminar in Beijing, 2011.
2. But see my 2010 essay on Dutch ecocriticism. In the Benelux, ecocriticism is slowly beginning to take shape in the work of, for example, younger and more senior scholars such as Franca Bellarsi, Astrid Bracke, Véronique Bragard, Ben De Bruyn, Peter Heymans, Kate Huber, Tom Idema, Catherine Lord, and many others; during conferences on animal studies (Utrecht 2012), exhibitions and events such as *Ja Natuurlijk* (The Hague, summer 2013, organized by Ine Gevers); by theorists of bio-art such as Rob Zwijnenberg. A related form of research is done by the interdisciplinary *New Visions of Nature*-group in Nijmegen, with a stronger philosophical focus.

the most promising strands in ecocriticism today. Many of these, which respond to global environmental destruction and climate change, are characterized by an affinity with posthumanism and/or materialism. The case of Dutch environmentally inspired land art in the Flevopolder (a space created as recently as between 1955–1968) will then allow me to explore the problems in the artistic articulation of such a much-needed global, materialist approach.

Ecocriticism, Nature, and Matter

Ecocriticism is an emergent research field, that, according to Ursula Heise, "has evolved in literary criticism and cultural studies since the early 1990s" (8). It builds on "[m]odern environmentalist thought, which has been intensely engaged with questions of the local and the global since its inception in the 1960s and 1970s" (8). Greg Garrard's 2004 introduction to the field also shows how ecocriticism has evolved from the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (see also Glotfelty 1996), to a much broader field, and it is now becoming clear that ecocriticism is an avowedly political mode of analysis (3). In his 2011 introduction, Timothy Clark talks about the space of ecocriticism as a "crucial, exciting but sometimes bewildering intersection of issues" (1)—and he refers to issues such as the relation between Western philosophical and religious traditions and environmental destruction, the nature of human identity and human community. These are issues that are "simultaneously but obscurely matters of science, morality, politics, and aesthetics" (8). Basically, ecocriticism aims at rethinking the "huge issue of what relationship human beings should have to the world" (8). It is this broad scope that makes the field at the same time difficult to oversee and incredibly inspiring. As Clark has it, since the rise of postmodernism, we have taken leave of the grand narratives as a way of understanding the world. This has also left us with a sense of disorientation. Ecocriticism's attraction lies in the fact that it represents an effort to reconnect with the larger perspective, without giving up the important insights of postmodernism and poststructuralism. It is for that reason, too, that ecocritics begin to describe their field as *environmental humanities*. The environmental crisis is multi-dimensional, as it embraces at least biological, economical, scientific, technological, ethical, political, and cultural issues. As the past few decades have shown, the crisis cannot easily be solved by scientific, technological, and/or political means alone. Cultural dimensions have to be addressed too. The humanities, which have a long-standing expertise in the analysis of the ways in which cultural

discourses and practices are intertwined with the social, material, political, and the sciences, therefore offer an indispensible contribution to the rethinking of the human relation to nature.

The field is, of course, divided on the question of what the nature of the larger perspective on the (human and more-than-human) world should be. North American mainstream ecocriticism has traditionally identified the main cause of the global environmental crisis as the modern *alienation from nature*; the solution would therefore be a return to nature. The fundamental problem is said to be the Western dualist way of thinking, in which man is opposed to nature, and culture to nature. Instead, the interconnectedness of human society and nature should be acknowledged. This traditional approach analyses the present-day experience of meaninglessness and emptiness as the alienation caused by modernity.

There is, however, a growing range of critical approaches, often developed outside the metropolitan centres, that offer a different view of the problems that ecocriticism should address. In this interdisciplinary view, the environmental crisis is, in addition to being psychological and cultural in nature, also (or primarily) economic and political. Environmental destruction should therefore be studied together with exploitation, poverty, and global power relations.

These different views point at one of the many productive problems that haunt ecocriticism as a field. One the most provocative, challenging ecocritics today, Timothy Morton, identifies one of the main problems as the metropolitan tenacious fantasies of wholeness, interconnectedness and organicism that can, for example, be recognized in the Romanticist syndrome of what Morton calls the Beautiful Soul, that is, the blissful, illusionary immersion in nature's harmonious wholeness (*Ecology* 183–84). However, this aesthetical immersive illusion is founded on a paradox. It is predicated on one's distance from the environment, for it is only at a distance that one can retain the illusion of being a passive, neutral witness to the often intense, violent processes that make up the environment that is already largely destroyed and dying (183–84; 196). For Morton, the problem here is that the environment is imagined as the ever-present, supportive background of human life–a reassuring ground (203), rather than as a disconcerting destroyed, dying, shapeless, slimy, abhorrent presence. Instead of celebrating the endless vitality, diversity and change, and the inexhaustible plurality of nature, as some Romanticist ecocritics propose, it would be much more productive to acknowledge and mourn the traumatic, irretrievable loss of biodiversity and vulnerable ecosystems, and come to terms with emptiness, and the precarious

instability of the environment and our human selves. Such an alternative approach, that Morton dubbed "dark ecology," dismisses the belief in nature's boundless capacity for self-restoration. It is therefore also highly critical of the Deleuzian notion of the potential availability of endless choices, options and in-between states (Morton, *Ecology* 183). Morton, who points at the association between this notion and the consumerist demand for endless options, argues that the environmental crisis demands to be *acted* upon: action based on critical, dualist choice. Timothy Morton's dark ecological approach, and his alternative conceptualization of the world's strange interrelatedness (that is, as "mesh" in Morton, "Mesh"), is much more helpful to understand the countless ways in which environmental, economic and technological processes and practices intervene in each other, than the Romanticist concept of harmonious interconnection.

The intertwining of the economic, political, social, technological, cultural, and environmental dimensions of globalization is elaborated on most rigorously in postcolonial, non-metropolitan ecocriticism, but it marks metropolitan approaches as well. It is even at the very basis of the new metropolitan planetary awareness that emerged in the 1960s. This insight responded to both technological *and* environmental developments. Images like the much-quoted photograph "Earth Rising," made by the Apollo VIII-crew in 1968, and manipulated for greater emotional impact,[3] gave a huge impetus to the often anxious imaginations of the globe as a small and vulnerable sphere. Metaphors such as "Spaceship Earth," first used by R. Buckminster Fuller in 1963 and Kenneth E. Boulding in 1965, were already around, but these pictures gave them a new depth.[4]

I would argue that the most in-depth and influential non-metropolitan intellectual and imaginative projects to rethink the global within a frame that includes ecology can be found in a postcolonial context, often by literary and cultural theorists. The late Martinican writer, theorist and activist Edouard Glissant, who had been working in this field

3. Sidney Dobrin showed in a 2011 lecture at the ASLE-conference in Bloomington that the photograph was turned 90 degrees.
4. An illuminating historical example of how these images tied in with the growing environmentalist movement and the interest in sustainability and do-it-yourself in the US, is the counterculture catalog Whole Earth Catalog, which showed this and comparable pictures on its covers. The outsize, then very popular Whole Earth Catalog, inspired by the ideas of Buckminster Fuller, was published regularly from 1968 to 1972. "Standing with one foot firmly in the rugged individualism and back-to-the-land movements of the Sixties counterculture and the other in the nascent global community made possible by the Internet, the Whole Earth Catalog offered an integrated, complex, challenging, thought-provoking, and comprehensive worldview" (Brand). Technology, especially the rise of the Internet as a means of global interconnection, and environmentalism, are firmly intertwined in this early example of emerging twentieth-century planetary awareness.

since before the 1960s, explored the environment as the site where a fragmented, corrupted colonial Caribbean identity was created, but also as a site of resistance and cultural and bodily survival. If colonization and globalization result in the erasure of local differences for the benefit of a homogenizing transnational economic system, then ecology can be the site of the defense and re-installment of local difference. Glissant's later work was especially concerned with developing a poetics to express the global dynamics that connect the world, and I will come back to this below, but the environment (or rather, as he has it, to avoid the suggestion of harmonious, unharmed integrity: surroundings) remained a central theme. In contrast to Morton, Glissant *did* explicitly appropriate Deleuzian concepts to develop his poetics. The same goes for another important Caribbean writer and thinker, Cuban Antonio Benítez-Rojo, who used Deleuzian concepts (e.g. machine) together with musical and natural images to conjure his dizzying imagination of the economically, environmentally, and politically connected globe: "Nature is the flux of an unknowable feedback machine that society interrupts constantly with the most varied and noisy rhythms" (16).[5]

Glissant and Benítez-Rojo were not the only postcolonial scholars that considered ecology indispensable to the reconceptualization of the global. More and more postcolonial scholars consider environmental issues crucial to their work. A highly promising approach is presented by postcolonial scholar and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. In a 2012 essay, he states that "the current conjuncture of globalization and global warming leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once" (1). In other words, the traditional human subject of globalization can no longer be fully theorized through the postcolonial concepts of identity and difference, because they fail to address the huge *scale* of the events that mark the new epoch; humankind has become a geophysical force of its own. Before him, literary theorist Wai-chee Dimock already published studies that were shaped by a comparable concern with scale (e.g. 2006).[6] Timothy Morton, too, is concerned with scale, for example in his work on hyperobjects (2013).

Not all of these scholars would identify themselves as ecocritics, but

5. For the many affinities between this Caribbean work and ecocriticism, see for example Licops, DeLoughrey, and Bongie. In both fields botanical metaphors are used to imagine their model of globalization (the mangrove, for example, or the rhizome-following their theoretical inspiration Gilles Deleuze). Moreover, the Caribbean understanding of the world as boundless but wayward interconnectedness, resonates with the ecocritical insistence on nature's connectedness.
6. Flemish scholar Ben De Bruyn was inspired by her approach to embark on an innovative rereading of Dutch-language literary works.

their work helps to shape and develop the interdisciplinary inquiry into the relation between human beings and the world, which is the research in which ecocriticism participates (and the broadest description of ecocriticism, or the environmental humanities, available). It is clear that this work is not only concerned with the literary imagination of nature. It is much more ambitious. A striking common thread in these varied explorations is the effort to move beyond a traditional anthropocentric perspective. As such, these projects are affiliated to other contemporary theories on the nature of agency and matter, which often adopt a posthumanist position.[7] Together, they point at a much larger shift in the humanities. The shift is often described as the material turn, as it aims a return to ontological questions to rethink the nature of reality and matter in a critical response to what is seen as the overly textual approach in deconstructivism. Scholars working in this tradition may build on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, or be inspired by recent developments in the sciences; while for some, Alain Badiou, Bruno Latour, and Slavoj Žižek are leading scholars, others will be inspired by the work by Donna Haraway, or Katherine Hayles, and/or the work done in the intersecting fields of science and gender studies, that often goes by the name of new or feminist materialism (e.g. Stacey Alaimo, Karen Barad, Claire Colebrook and Elizabeth Grosz).[8] My discussion of the material turn must necessarily restrict itself to some main insights in this latter body of thought. Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz helpfully differentiates new materialism from earlier approaches to the relation between the human and the environment, notably psychoanalysis and phenomenology. These latter approaches are, as Grosz argues, both concerned with the manner in which the body experiences and is experienced, and given significance (*Volatile* 116). They also differ in important points. Psychoanalysis, especially Lacanian psychoanalysis, opposes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology because it "tries to restore the co-naturalness of man to his world, who centers on the corporeal presence," as Lacanian Jacques-Alain Miller emphasizes (16). The main point of critique would be "that there is somewhere a place of unity, which is the identification of the being and body [...] Psychoanalysis makes its space in the lack of this identification between being and body" (16). Much ecocriticism is inspired by the possibility of a (phenomenological)

7. Though Timothy Morton identifies himself as a post-posthumanist, with reference to Donna Haraway (Morton, "Proverbs").
8. For an overview of these approaches the reader may consult, for example, Alaimo and Hekma, Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, Johnston.

reconnection of man and nature, mind and body. It hopes to heal the very alienation psychoanalysis sees as incurable.

New materialism offers a completely different perspective. Instead of asking how the body experiences itself and the world, it may understand the body as a series of relations that connects to other relations; that is, in Deleuze's words, as a machine. The emphasis here is not on experience, but on action–this approach is interested in how the body *acts*, connects (*Volatile* 116). In this perspective, matter is no longer defined as *the real*. According to foundational theorists Merleau-Ponty and Bergson, matter is dynamic: "Active becoming is an emergent property of matter itself, its virtual development beyond its given properties" (*Time* 121). In endowing matter with agency, the tenacious dualism between man and matter, the human and environment is radically deconstructed, and this is one of the reasons why materialism can have such appeal to ecocritics.

Ecocriticism has its own way of partaking in the material turn. It does so by exploring how the humanities (and in particular cultural analysis) can contribute to the debate on matter and the environment. It seems to me that ecocriticism also occupies a special place within this movement by its insistence on researching the relation of the human to the world through a close reading of specific artefacts and events: art works, (natural) events, social protests, etcetera. Ecocriticism is not just aiming at philosophical or scientific understanding, but, as I suggested above, it aims at a cultural or social intervention, and it therefore feels the need to address cultural and social practices and debates. In the rest of this paper, I will venture such a close reading to explore whether the most challenging form of ecocriticism, that is, that which partakes in the material turn, can be useful for the analysis of the Dutch relation to the environment. What insights will such an approach yield?

Two Ways to Argue that a Location's Meaning Is Determined by the Global

Let us then return to the most artificial environment imaginable in the Netherlands, the polder, and in particular the Flevopolder, with its oppressive, empty materiality. The Flevopolder, a huge polder (almost 100,000 ha) that was created between 1955 and 1968 as a part of a large scale Dutch project of land reclamation, is an environment from which nature and history seem to have disappeared—and that therefore seems to have become meaningless. Not only artists, but also the politicians and administrators that are responsible for the region felt the urge to encourage citizens to connect with their surroundings, and towards the end of the

twentieth century they enlisted artists to see to this task.[9] In the words of Dutch writer Willem van Toorn, they were asked to enhance the *readability* of the empty landscape. Some artists answered the challenge by visualizing the maritime history of the region, before it had been transformed into land: American artist Mark Drion, for example, created *The Shipwreck* (2001) by placing a demolished ship in a forest, and abandon it to nature. Other artists opted for another strategy. In the following, I will consider the merits of two strategies that try to re-establish the significance of a local landscape, not by delving up its history, but in a spatial sense: first, by situating that place within the larger global context that created it; and second, by recreating a sensual connectedness with its environment.

Caribbean scholars of globalization and postcoloniality proposed highly productive approaches to the question how empty landscapes can be given meaning again. Glissant argued that the Caribbean landscape's significance lies in its being a knot within a global network of economic, environmental, political, and cultural relations—a network energized by the dynamics of what Glissant calls Relation. The seemingly empty postcolonial landscape has retained its specificity as the multilayered, opaque, creolized crossroads of global relations. Its history may be erased, but its significance lies in its capacity for transformation, that is, its relationality. This global, relational view of the world's interconnectedness seems highly relevant for an ecocritical approach to the polder. The insight in the need to tune in with the world's interconnectedness to restore the landscape's significance also seems to lie at the base of a famous artwork in the Flevopolder. World famous deconstructivist American architect Daniel Libeskind, who also designed the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed a labyrinthine meditation garden. *The Garden of Love and Fire* (1992) consists of five canals and paths, which cross each other at different angles and point at different cities elsewhere in the world: according to Libeskind, Salamanca (the home of 16th century mystic poet Juan de la Cruz), Paris (where Jewish poet Paul Célan spent the latter part of his life), and the new, nearby city of Almere.[10] In Libeskind's words: "These lines [...] signify a world location in which love (Juan de la Cruz) and fire (Paul Célan) intersect in Almere's future" ("Project Brief"). Thus, this polder location

9. This project culminated in a much more ambitious enterprise to enlist internationally renowned artists to create a highly prestigious artistic environment, that would ensure the region's international prestige. A critical observer suggests that the region's citizens were less enchanted with the artwork, as the many acts of vandalism would show (see Maas).
10. Or, according to others: Salamanca, Almere, and Berlin (Libeskind's home).

becomes significant because Libeskind connects it with spiritual places elsewhere in the world; it is revealed to be a knot in a network of (spiritual, not economical) global relations.

However, Libeskind's deconstructivist work is not meant to renew a sense of its immediate location, but to convey a sense of the disorientation of today's world; of its emptiness, and the "collapse of perspective in the world" (Vidler 223). As Libeskind has it, "[w]e no longer operate with the right angle" nowadays (Erbacher and Kubitz).[11] This observation resonates with Glissant's and Benitez-Rojo's remarks on the non-Euclidean chaos of globalization. A visitor to Libeskind's *Garden* will indeed be disoriented. One is invited to wander around, follow the paths that lead away from the labyrinthine structure. But paths that seem to lead into a distance just stop. The sight lines run dead against the trees. The website dedicated to this artwork suggests that a visitor, disoriented, may then ponder life's uprootedness (van Diggelen, "Libeskind").

As Anthony Vidler explains: "Libeskind ellipses, his wandering paths, and warped spaces without perspective and ending blindly can only be seen as so many tests of our ability to endure the vertiginous experience of the labyrinths that [...] make up the form of our modernity" (224).

For Libeskind, the warped references to emptiness sometimes refer to that unspeakable abyss, that void, in modern history, the Holocaust. In this artwork, there is another unspeakability at work. In case of fog, when the garden's materiality dissolves, the garden will project light, which should evoke the sense that "we are surrounded by a world full of amazing and powerful signs" (*Space* 76). But we can never control these signs—our understanding is accidental and fragmented. "The twenty-first garden is one in which cosmic laws momentarily appear before the lover of nature, but only to manifest that the fire-inspired head of the universe is perpectually turning" (78).

On the one hand, then, the garden gives a sensual, meaningful, global experience of the new, still empty polder space, but on the other hand, the sensual materiality is disturbed, confused and erased—until only an unspeakable spiritual sensation remains.[12] The very useful insight we can take from Libeskind's Garden, is the realization that space—here: the

11. Libeskind admits to his admiration for the Bauhaus ideal of modernity, of which for him the beauty lies "in the explicit *nonfittingness* of these buildings, with not only their immediate surroundings, but the Earth itself" (*Space* 21, emphasis added).
12. The tension between matter and mysticism is not resolved: "architecture, through its transcendence and materialism [...] cannot disappear [...] cannot be interpreted away" (*Space* 17).

newly constructed Dutch environment—is not immediately accessible, and that the search for an intuitive grasp of the world's, or nature's, totality, does not lead us anywhere. But the fact that Libeskind manipulates the tensions between the material significance and the spiritual significance of his garden by downplaying the specificity of the artwork's location, is an obstacle for any effort to grasp the polderscape's meaning.

This can be very concretely experienced on the site of Libeskind's Garden. The predominant sensation, in the open space of the polder, on a fogless morning, is the wind. The inhospitable structure itself does not offer any protection. At some distance, rows of trees do form a shield against the wind, even though they block the sight lines. But at the spot where the trees give way to the wide-open space of the polder itself, a group of very different structures rises from the ground. They offer an impressive sight. Majestically, they convey an immediate, intense sensual experience of the element that defines one's sense of the polder: the wind. The wind, that element neglected by Libeskind. These modern windmills, rising high in the air, catch the force of the wind and change it into mesmerizing sound and movement. Because they refer to the technology that called the polder into being, they offer a sense of continuity with the Dutch history of the manipulation of the wind, and they enhance one's immediate sensual experience of that transitionary space, set between sea, air and earth. They even comment on the ambivalence of our aesthetic evaluation of today's landscapes. These windmills are no art works, but they nevertheless embody a very different—an *incommensurably* different—way of understanding globalization, that highlights the restrictions of an approach that is *merely* interested in conceptual and spiritual connections.

Libeskind's recurring theme, emptiness, fails to resonate with the polder's specific emptiness. It is the windmills that remind us that the polder is *not* empty, that it is a material space defined by the technological and economic manipulation of the powers of nature. It is precisely this *material* history, though, that relates the polder to the larger world. The windmills suggest that Libeskind's conceptual reference to the significance of this place as a knot in a spiritual global network, that is, its understanding of the materiality of space as a frustrated spiritual flow, clashes with the windmill's material response to the materiality of the environment, which can be understood in its sensual immediacy, *and* in its historical meaning.

The Ungraspable Nature of Matter

Libeskind's strategy to give the polder meaning by connecting it, ambivalently, to a global network, resonates with Glissant's *Relation*. It would be a mistake to oppose their work (as spiritual) to other approaches that would be more explicitly concerned with matter. The specific materiality that is evoked in Glissant's work, however, understands matter not as some stable substance, but in Merleau-Ponty's sense, and also in that of new materialism, that is, as "active becoming."

My discussion of Libeskind's garden suggests that these approaches cannot be translated to ecocriticism without running into problems, and a crucial debate within postcolonial studies explains why that is so. The debate departs from the postcolonial interest in the *specificity* of places. Since the critique of the universalist approach to literature in the early 1970s, this insight forms the very foundation of postcolonial criticism. To know a place, one has to analyze the historically and geographically specific interactions between the global and local agencies that shaped that place. British scholar Peter Hallward, however, suggests that some postcolonial scholars, such as Glissant, increasingly moved away from the postcolonial interest in the specific, to the so-called *singular*, self-actualizing principle that links these places to create the global world. From this perspective, locations would be mere expressions of an autonomous singular, global force. As this force realizes itself independently from any ethical or political context, says Hallward, it is hard to see how a singular approach would help in analyzing the specific economic or political processes of globalization (e.g. 62–65).

Hallward highlights a tension that lies not just at the heart of postcolonial criticism, but also at that of land art, ecocriticism, and even some materialist and posthumanist research. The way in which this art understands matter easily slips into a singular, spiritual approach that has lost its political relevance.[13] Before discussing the implications for ecocriticism, I will illuminate my point by briefly discussing another well-known piece of land art in the same polder as Libeskind's work. It is the famous Green Cathedral by the Dutch land artist Marinus Boezem, and it engages more specifically with the tradition of Land Art.

Land Art, which originated in the late sixties in the US, aimed at "giving a confrontation with the physicality of things outside," as

13. I have argued that what surfaces in Libeskind's art, is a mental and spiritual state, not a meaningful connection with the immediate natural environment. To be fair: this was not Libeskind's aim.

French philosopher and art historian Gilles Tiberghien explains (44). It stages a dialogue between two contradictory impulses: the modernist timeless moment, which often has a definite mystical dimension; and the phenomenological experience of the work's temporal character, its transience, transformation, and falling apart (153). Wary of essentialist notions of nature, land artists dismiss the idea that the earth can be *known* (140); instead, like the new materialists, they seek to *relate* to it. Glissant would have agreed. In 1987, 178 poplars were planted according to the ground plan of the cathedral in Reims. The artwork symbolizes the human desire to "rise to the divine and leave earthly things behind."[14] Apart from this mystical aspect, his cathedral also works with the phenomenological. It organizes light, space, and wind; sounds are an important dimension of the project. No visitor can remain unimpressed by this thirty meter-high, secluded place. Boezem also made sure to relate to this place's earlier history: he put circles of shells around the poplar stems, to remind us of the sea that reigned here just a few decades ago. References to transience shape his work in different ways. In ten years or so, the first poplars will begin to rot and collapse with old age. Nothing but a ruin will remain–and so will the cathedral-shaped open space that Boezem created in the neighbouring forest plot, as the cathedral's negative image. Though this art works with the material environment itself, and even remembers this particular spot's history, it is meant to point away from our earthly, everyday lives. Boezem's *spiritual* understanding of our place on earth eclipses the *material* insight in the new land's significance. The tensions within Boezem's artwork resonate with Peter Hallward's criticism of Glissant's singularity (which eclipses specificity), and with Dominique Lecourt's critique of posthuman efforts to rethink the human in material, technological terms; such reductionism "inspires an oscillation between the most crude materialism and the most etheral spiritualism" (qtd. in de Beer 26).

This tension between materialism and spirituality points at a very slippery problem in both environmental art, and in posthumanist and materialist approaches. While the material turn originates in a critique of the idealist tendencies in continental philosophy from Kant to Derrida (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 3–4), the actual theoretical and aesthetic practices inspired by the shift sometimes fall back on what they criticize.

14. The original text by Eva van Diggelen, on the website: "[Het kunstwerk] symboliseert het verlangen om op te stijgen naar het goddelijke en het aardse achter te laten" ("Boezem").

A spiritual approach seems unsupportive of what is also often articulated as ecocriticism's very raison d'etre: the contribution to the struggle against environmental destruction. The artistic desire for the real, for matter, for *meaning*, can easily move away from the specific, towards a spirituality that represents the end of cultural analysis, and the end of political relevance. The materialist turn can only be socially relevant when it embraces critical and social forms of materialism too.[15] Ecocriticism's contribution to the materialist turn may well lie in insights such as these.

15. Timothy Morton would wholeheartedly agree, as would many other materialist or speculative philosophers—though not always as explicitly.

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