

herman de vries



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from earth

The *earth museum* in the house at Eschenau holds over seven thousand samples of earth, gathered by de vries or sent to him from all over the world [now housed at the Musée Gassendi, Digne-les-Bains, CS]. Begun in 1983 [= 1976, CS], it is a unique collection; it is extensive and diverse, and although it has no scientific purpose it constitutes a compendium in which every type of earth (limestone, sandstone, peat volcanic, marl, ash, etc., etc.) is represented, and which visibly demonstrates the endless variety, beauty and subtlety of the colours of earth. Each specimen is dried into a powder-like consistency, securely bagged, boxed and labelled with its date of collection and its place of origin; each represented in the earth catalogue by a rubbing made by hand on paper, identified by source, and carefully kept in identical Solander boxes [...].



fig. 1 earth rubbing (*journal de la palma*, 2009).

The philosophical idealism that lies behind this is, for de vries, as he would put it 'a metaphysics without the physics'. On the contrary, he would assert that 'the things themselves' - les choses mêmes - speak themselves, have a reality that is concrete. A specimen of earth is not a represented concept, it presents itself as mineral material, its history and its nature are, to use the *mot juste*, manifest in every handful. Crushed to a powder, reduced to its basic mineral 'suchness', rubbed down with the tips of the fingers into a simple rectangle of colour, the earth itself is transformed not into the sayable abstraction of the word, but into a material sign of its self-ness. It is an important aspect of the work that it declares the method of its making, that its unconcealing is unconcealed. It enters thus the domain of art but an art that speaks of the irreducible actuality of the thing itself.

All of the *journals* that de vries has made on his travels and sojourns - in India, south-east Asia, North Africa, the Seychelles, the Canaries, Provence, the Greek islands, Scotland - have included rubbings of the local earth. (He has, also, of course, made many rubbings of earth collected in the vicinity of Eschenau.) Often, returning from a journey, or in

preparation for an exhibition, he creates works that belong to the generic series from earth, presenting rubbings sometimes as a single rectangular image-object more often in grid-arrays of various magnitudes. In certain exhibitions (the 2001 exposition at Digne, for example), the presentation of from earth (usually with a sub-title that indicates the origins of the samples) becomes a central element sometimes involving a floor-based grid arrangement or a carpet of earth. In his library of earth colours, each of seven volumes (issued over several years by the Paris-based Lydia Megert Editions) consists of ten sheets or more with individual earth rubbings of a particular colour range - brown, grey, yellow, lilac etc. *from earth* continues to be of central importance to de vries's artistic philosophical project.

It is tempting to think of the typical *from earth* array as a form of implied or abstract landscape art, in which the pigments that create the images are drawn from the very countryside whose name is given as sub-title. This might especially be so in a case such as the work shown at Digne-les-Bains (Haute Provence) entitled *de la terre, pays de cézanne* (2001). Such an inference is not justified by reference to either the technique or the presentation of the rubbed earth works. In the manner of their making de vries adopts a formulaic procedure, its simplicity consistent with everything else he does as an artist; it involves rubbing the sample with his fingers into a finely absorbent paper in an invariable up-and-down motion to create a distinctly vertical roughly square or rectangular image. This portrait format militates forcibly against a reading of the colour rectangle as a simplified landscape, with foreground, recession and horizon.

The presentation of the earth samples in grid configuration also in itself clearly precludes topographical allusion, and has, moreover, in these works, political implications. Historically speaking, European landscape painting has often been ideologically inflected in such ways as to be expressive of aspects of a specifically national political and social vision of the native land. The 'view' of the land taken in much, especially academic landscape painting has also, incidentally, tended to perpetuate a one-way spectatorial prospect of the land. It is a view that can be traced to the Cartesian dualism (discussed earlier) that has provided the philosophical underpinning of both the Enlightenment and modern exploitation of the natural world. In *from earth* de vries is concerned above all to dissociate himself from both kinds of ideological perspective, and to find an art form that registers ecological concern, love and wonder.

[...] Each individual colour rectangle in *from earth* (whether presented singly or in multiples) is in fact a soft-edged cloud of colour-texture, an indefinite image with indistinct boundaries. We are thus confronted not by an analogy for the demarcation of the land, the arbitrary mapping of human territories, but by a neutral sign for the elemental substance. The geographical subtitles, denoting the sites of collection, may refer to political entities - a city, a region, a state - but what we see carries no evidence, betrays no hint of historical circumstance. What we see is a specific example of generic earth, a universal phenomenon, the very element which gives the planet its name, and which, with the fire and gas that forged its mineral character, is akin to the physical substance of countless other planets in the universe. Against the poignancies of the historical-geographical, and the divisive portioning out of the earth's surface, it asserts the absolute of timeless actual.

[top](#)



fig. 2 from earth : deutschland (2006)

more works

earth rubbings

1994 [vergleichende landschaftsstudien](#)

2006: [from earth: deutschland](#)

installations

1992 [polska ziemia](#)

2006 [unterfränkischer sandstein](#)

projects & sanctuaries

earth museum



The [earth museum](#) now housed at the Museum Gassendi, Digne-les-Bains holds over 7, 000 earth samples, gathered by herman de vries or sent to him from all over the world. Begun in 1976, it is an extensive and diverse collection, and although it has no scientific purpose it constitutes a compendium in which every type of earth is represented.

TEXT CREDITS

Passage from Mel Gooding, *herman de vries : chance and change* (Thames and Hudson : London 2006) 96-101.

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IMAGE CREDITS

fig. 1 earth rubbing (*journal de la palma*, 2009)

Photo: Bruno Schneyer, Zeil am Main

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