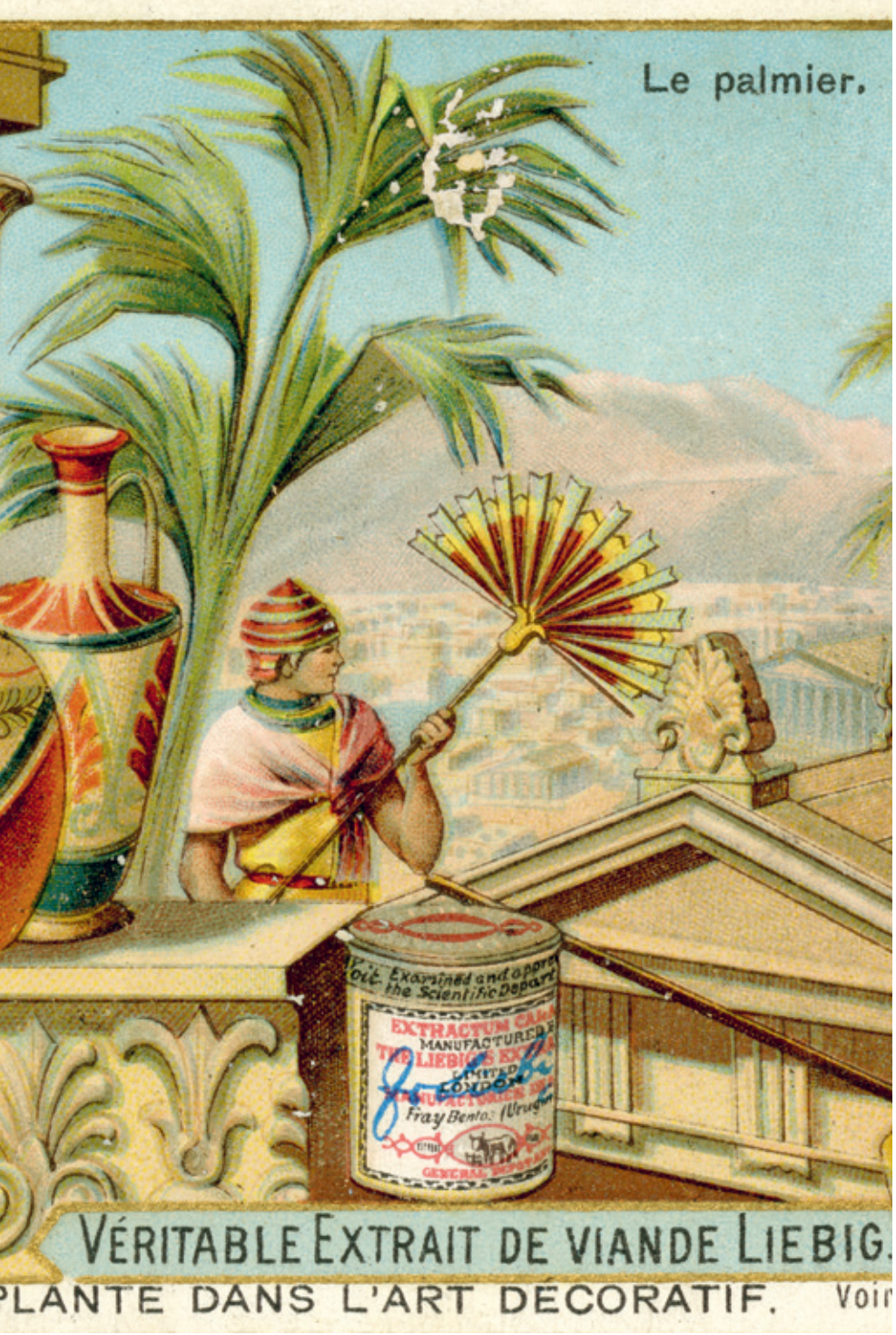
PARADISE
Kortrijk
2021
Triennial for contemporary art

MER. B&L



'Le Palmier' (detail), from the Liebig series 'La plante dans l'art décoratif', end of 19th Century. Courtesy Bruno V. Roels.

Preface

Patrick Ronse & Hilde Teerlinck

According to recent studies, approximately nineteen percent of the Earth's surface will be uninhabitable by 2070. Today this is only 0.8 percent. The northern Kenyan province of Turkana is one of the first areas in danger of becoming uninhabitable, because the temperature has risen by 1.8 degrees in the last fifty years. Turkana is even cynically dubbed a 'climate canary' in some reports. It is an inhospitable region where, in recent decades, there have always been droughts, but the situation has never been as bad as it is now. In the past, the people of Turkana have always been able to regain their strength after periods of drought, and they have been able to rebuild their herds. But due to this changing climate, thirteen-year-old girls are increasingly married off for dowry. It is a painful observation that women are among the greatest victims of global warming in Turkana.

Turkana is one of the most forgotten areas in East Africa. The first European to visit the area did so in 1888. The people of Turkana were one of the most prosperous in East Africa in the nineteenth century. However, the British colonial administration considered the district 'of no value to anyone, except the Turkana' and as 'the most worthless district to Kenya'.[1] 'Fact is that the British colonisation destroyed Turkana', says historian John Lamphear in an interview with *De Standaard*.[2] 'Their livestock, hundreds of thousands of animals, were taken from them, their leaders got eliminated, and then the province was hermetically sealed off for decades to protect the "primitive people from any foreign influence". A bit like protecting wild animals in nature reserves.' Or when the Darwinian notion of 'the survival of the fittest' leads to extinction.

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Turkana offers a prime example for all the ways that climate, colonialism, poverty, famine, and a total lack of interest play leading roles in undermining the safety and well-being of the affected populations, and in worsening the vulnerable position of women. Gregory Claeys puts it aptly in his essay *Paradise Lost?*: 'The paradise it now seemed we had lost

1. *Kenya Land Commission – Evidence and Memoranda*, Vol. II (London, 1934): District Commissioner's Letter, 19 September 1932. H Rayne, *The Ivory Raiders* (London, 1923), p. 49.
2. Kasper Goethals and Olivia Kortas, 'De regen had er al moeten zijn', in *De Standaard Weekblad* of 27 March 2021, pp. 18–25.

was our very planet, the green and pleasant land which has been our home since life began. In search of a life of ease and prosperity, we have destroyed the natural world around us.'

In recent years almost everyone has had to face the question of which direction they want to take both as a person and as a society. The answer can go in any direction, both socially and politically, because our society is characterised by confusion, chaos, and uncertainty. Though those uncertainties have always been there, what is new, however, is that we are confronting ourselves more and more with these uncertainties. Kendell Geers writes that: 'We can despair in the face of moral panic, paranoia, and fear, or we can embrace the gift that is the Luxury of Uncertainty as an invitation to change direction with a reset of habits.' (p. 179) In his essay 'Waiting for the Barbarians' he writes that the 'war' we are currently waging against the coronavirus is much more a war against our habits: 'The war is against our ancestors and the habits we inherited from them, a war against division, segregation, and alienation. Healing begins with the understanding that fear (not hate) is the opposite of love and for as long as we hate ourselves and live in fear of our nature, we will forever thrive on violence and destruction'. In his essay, Geers talks about our alienation from nature, the seasons, our food... Our bodies have become lies, and all bodies that fall outside of the norm are quickly written off. We have forgotten that we are one of so many guests on this planet, and not the host or hostess. He draws a comparison between, on the one hand, the opinion that the Romans had of the Barbarians, and on the other, the opinions that the West has of the African continent. Geers' reasoning is based on the difference between oral and written traditions. Our worldview has been strongly influenced by Western historiography. And then there is also the difference between an animistic culture that respects life, and a materialistic culture that is based on making profit. This resulted in the polarisation of European 'civilization' vs. non-European 'barbarism'. And language plays neither a neutral nor an innocent role: 'The invaders copy/pasted their own language, values, morals, and systems, calling them universal, and at the same time the naming reaffirmed the importance and dominance of Rome, England, York or London as the point of reference'.

An example that aptly illustrates our Eurocentrism — a world of ideas focused on and biased by our Western civilisation — is the map of Leo Africanus (c. 1494–1554). Leo Africanus was a Moorish diplomat and explorer who was captured and later worked for Pope Leo X. His map of Africa goes against the Mercator projection (1569) — the world map we are used to seeing in our atlases — and is oriented to the south, which places Europe at the bottom.

In our current time it has become painfully clear that we are all connected by the air we breathe. These are times of prejudice and generalisation, of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, of incessant forest fires, of fake news, times where the US Capitol is attacked to do little more than just take selfies, and where social media may have become more powerful than the president of the United States. Times where we don't take the messages of the 'climate canaries' seriously.

With this dystopian world and utopia in mind, we asked thirty-two artists what paradise means to them. Art offers hope, and it can be a catalyst for change. Some artists created new work for *Paradise Kortrijk 2021*, others preferred to present already existing artworks. They interpret the concept of 'utopia' through their work, and they demonstrate the success — and sometimes failure — of their quest for paradise.

Frank Albers distinguishes four types of utopia in his unsurpassed novel *Caravantis* (Amsterdam, 2014). The 'nostalgic utopia' places the real paradise in the past and is actually lost once and for all. Humans have undoubtedly dreamt of a perfect, carefree society for a long time, and have long thought that this paradise was far behind them. The *eschatological* utopia states that we have to attain paradise by following the idea that our efforts are rewarded. The afterlife in Christianity, the Olam Haba (literally: 'the Coming World') in the Talmud, and Jannah (the Islamic equivalent of paradise) are examples of this. Since the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516, the word 'utopia' has become a synonym for 'paradise', as well as for something that's ideal, unrealistic, and unattainable. The title of the publication is a play on words of the Greek *eu-topos*, meaning 'good place', and *ou-topos* or 'non-place'. Thomas More (1478–1535) held up a critical mirror to society. He posited the idea that Utopia was not unattainable, but that it was elsewhere in a fictional place. More's Utopia is an example of a *socially critical* utopia. For his final type, Frank Albers used the somewhat confusing term *humanist utopia*. It consists of the great nineteenth-century ideologies, including liberalism, socialism, and communism. Nazism and Stalinism were less humane, but in this context 'humanistic' mainly refers to the fact that these ideologies had to be realised by humans in order to exist.

In 'Paradise Lost?', Gregory Claes sketches man's quest for the ideal world. Utopian thinking goes back a long way, back at least as far as a Sumerian clay tablet from around 1500 BC. The Greeks also described the ideal State: both Hesiod (Greek poet, c. 750 BC – c. 650 BC) and Plato (c. 427 BC – 347 BC) referred to it in their writings. In Christianity,

Locations

Artists

BELFORT

“Paradise is here, now.”

Ryan Gander

Spending Time, 2021.
Vending machine, stones, jesmonite, porcelain, 183 cm × 80.3 cm × 9.5 cm.
Courtesy of the artist

Saving Time, 2021.
Vending machine, stones, jesmonite, porcelain, 183 cm × 80.3 cm × 93.5 cm.
Courtesy of the artist

Within your own margins, 2021.
second-hand books stamped with ink. Courtesy of the artist

In search of time, 2021. Bronze. Courtesy of the artist

Advice from the artist’s father, 2021.
PVC plastic, window vinyl, disband composite aluminium. Courtesy of the artist

Paradise: The Speed of Change and the Motif of Time

In a world where change happens at a colossal speed, our understanding of time and the things we value are also beginning to change. If you had five days left to live, would you spend it on Instagram? If you were dying of starvation, would you exchange your sports car for a meal? If you knew a war in your country was imminent, would you spend today cleaning your house, or spend it with your family? These are depressing questions, but they do give us an understanding of how money, in the imminent future, will no longer be the currency with the greatest value. Time and attention are our greatest assets. Time is the subject of our time. Historical and stereotypical notions of paradise project images and ideas of luxury beach holidays, a life with no struggle, but for some a glass of water is a luxury. Necessities, comforts and luxuries are identified on a sliding scale by different humans in different situations. The idea of 'Paradise' is always something in the future, something unattainable. I would like to propose that we think of 'Paradise' with a different perspective on the timescale in which we live. If we are unaware of whether tomorrow will be significantly better or worse than today, we should perhaps understand paradise not as some distant unachievable reality, but as today, as the moment we presently occupy. Paradise is here, now.

In the 350-odd native Australasian aboriginal languages, there have never existed words for time, past, present, or future. We live in a capitalistic reality, where as humans, our only measurement of success is in growth, profit, and achievement. The problem with this, of course, is that to install a sense of achievement (one of our greatest current gratifications), we must solicit more. More bedside lamps, more cars, more transport networks, more people, more food, more... In ancient Greek language there were two words for time: 'chronos' and 'kairos'. Chronos refers to chronological or sequential time, whilst kairos speaks of a proper or opportune time for action, or a readiness. While chronos is quantitative, kairos has a qualitative, permanent nature. The only way for us to exist as a species is to value the ephemerality of time, not the physicality of stuff; to concentrate on being, to exist in balance and stasis with time, not in an accelerated reality in search of a 'Paradise'.

Maybe, like all the ancient cultures that have gone before us, we should learn to appreciate and own our time. To live one day at a time, to make the most of the day, to take pleasure in the passing. We should try at least to live in a state of stasis, not growth.

Ryan Gander's artist statement about his work for **Paradise 2021**.

Ryan Gander brings his statement to life in installations that reveal themselves throughout the city. The works *Spending Time* (2021) and *Saving Time* (2021) are a pair of black vending machines where you can purchase objects at a fixed, minimal, standardised price. Alluding to the theme: 'the economy of time, money, and attention', whoever throws in money can become the owner of a stone the artist's children collected from the beach, or a cast of these stones in black jesmonite with mass produced watches wrapped around them, or porcelain recreations of stones embossed with a geotag of GPS coordinates, or the ISBN of a book, or numbers indicating an important moment in modern history. *Within your own margins* (2021) presents a series of second-hand books for sale at the Oxfam Bookshop in Kortrijk. Each book bears the artist's stamp in black ink with one of two texts: 'Attention is your greatest asset', or 'Within this volume time and space will be radically transformed by you'. *In Search of Time* (2021) consists of ten bronze sculptures. Using the same motif as the jesmonite casts in the vending machine, Gander placed these bronze editions in obscure, unusual locations throughout the city. There's a map that guides you from the city centre to these places that you would normally pass by carelessly — a short walk. As if on a treasure hunt, Gander invites you to discover urban stories and forgotten parts of the city. *Advice from the artist's father* (2021) shows a variety of public signage situated around the city, displaying a saying often repeated by the artist's father when the artist was a child, reminding the viewer of his original statement to 'appreciate and own our time'.

Ryan Gander (°1976, United Kingdom) studied Interactive Art at Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom) and obtained a postgraduate degree in the arts from the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht (the Netherlands) and the Rijksacademie van de Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam (the Netherlands). Gander's artistic language ranges from installations, sculpture, and photography, to performative readings, publications, inventions, and interventions. He investigates the process of art creation, and the cognitive process of art perception. His body of work is a labyrinth of intertwined artworks that are often based on existing events or people. In recent years his work has been exhibited worldwide, including ILLUMInations at the 54th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale (Italy); Documenta 13 (Germany), and Palais de Tokyo in Paris (France) in 2012, High Line (New York) and the ACCA in Melbourne (Australia) in 2015, the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Deurle (Belgium) in 2016, The National Museum of Art in Osaka (Japan) in 2017, and most recently Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art (UK) and Sydney Biennale (Australia) in 2018. The artist has published books, curated exhibitions, and has written and presented television programmes on and about contemporary art and culture for the BBC. He has won several prizes, such as the Zürich Art Prize (2009), the ABN Amro prize (2006), the Baloise Art Statements Prize at Art Basel (2006), and the Dutch Prix de Rome (2003).