

On Marie Cloquet's Squared Circle, and beyond

Ory Dessau

To some extent, Marie Cloquet's practice follows Gerhard Richter's famous conception of painting after photography, obtained by the German artist through the imperative not to use the latter 'as a means to painting, but to use painting as a means to photography.' Marie Cloquet not only paints over photographic prints, she also paints with photographic fragments by tearing up photographic prints into patches and welding them together on a material support in a way that amounts to an image situated on the verge between collage and décollage. However, Cloquet's art practice stays away from the confrontational method of collage artists who juxtapose elements anchored in different contexts, as well as from the advertisement billboard aesthetics of décollage artists, to explore and reiterate the inconsistency of a single image, a single sight. Cloquet's recent work pushes forward and develops the inner logic of her practice as a constant exchange between photography, painting, and (dé)collage. In the last four years, this exchange has abandoned the confinements of a mere pictorial production, and expanded into real space. Cloquet's recent works are no longer bound by a frame, nor are they necessarily mounted onto the wall. Instead, they function as a free-standing sculptural screen (or panel) that addresses the viewer, relying on and responding to the architectural givens of the physical exhibition space. This is clearly exemplified by the current version of the work *Squared Circle* (2024), originally conceived in 2020 as a cylindrical, 360-degree panorama of a volcanic landscape enveloped by a closed cube whose four visible facets were covered by images of derelict urban environments. Each of the facets was perforated with a round hole through which one could observe a segment of the volcanic landscape.

The 2020 version of *Squared Circle* was moving the viewer back and forth in a sort of zoom-in/zoom-out between the near urban environment, in itself publicly overlooked and therefore somehow remote, and the remote volcanic landscape, in itself hidden and inaccessible yet never fully suppressed and insistently resurfacing. *Squared Circle* (2020) functioned as a mechanism of interconnectedness reminiscent of contemporary communication systems governing our world, and as a manifestation of distance and sharp borders. At the same time the work exposed how behind every image (or space) lies another, seemingly unconnected latent image (or space) awaiting to appear. The work's current version opens up the enclosed squared circle, and reemerges as a curved screen unfolding panels of the urban environments and the volcanic landscape in an intertwined, semi-cinematic sequence running through two of the exhibition spaces of Zebrastraat. Cloquet's *Squared Circle* features some of the main aspects of her practice, above all, the fact that she deals with natural landscapes and man-made

environments on the same level, demonstrating how they both belong to one (interrupted) continuum.

The distinction between nature and culture, or rather, between the natural state and the cultural/civilised state, was obviously created by culture. While occupied with the artificial conditions of social life, philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) were speculating on a pre-social life while perceiving a hypothetical abstraction about human nature prior to the cultural state of civilisation. This led to a fundamental split in early modern philosophy of nature vs culture, of a natural, untouched, harmonious world presumably preceding the artificial, constructed, relational world of society.

By entwining urban environment and volcanic landscape, Cloquet's work deconstructs this dichotomy of nature vs culture, elucidating how our notion of nature was born out of culture, how our idea of uncorrupted nature was retroactively invented by culture, it also establishes an opposite perspective subjecting culture to nature, namely, to erosion, disintegration, dissolution, and eventually, disappearance. Cloquet's practice ridicules culture's pretension to permanence, persistence, and immortality. In this sense, her work can be regarded in affinity to the field of studies known as the Anthropocene. Literally, the term "Anthropocene" means the "age of man". It refers to the imprint of human kind on nature, distinguishing the age of man from previous geological epochs. The Anthropocene points to a profound transformation in our ecosystem, in light of which human life is part of an experiment conducted on planet earth and its inhabitants. The thought of the Anthropocene undermines the distinction between the human and the natural. It no longer considers water, land, and air as the transparent backgrounds of all human activities, but as operative factors, in relation to which world history cannot be exclusively described as a battle between ideologies and social forms. The Anthropocene examines human culture and political life from the point of view of nature.

Cloquet's work renders nature and culture indistinguishable from one another through the concept of "the ruin". The ruin allows her to incorporate a derelict human environment into the law of nature, according to which everything is ephemeral and temporary. In Cloquet's work, the ruin is both content and practice. The works not only depict ruins, they are topographies of a ruin, an enactment thereof. A correspondence of form and content, they stem from discarded sights, but they are also made as an act of ruining, patching together torn fragments of discarded sights marked by the wreckage of history and human damage, or by natural disastrous phenomena. When applied with liquid paint, and layered with areas of chromatic intensity, Cloquet's cracked topographies of ruin undergo revivification, springing out. More than a means of smoothening the cracks, Cloquet's recent works utilise colour as a means of adapting to the cracks, living with and from them. The colours applied to the surface recall the

biblical story of Moses hitting a rock, which then produced water for the Israelites suffering famine. The coloured areas turn the rocky topography into a wellspring.

By working through and with the materiality and visibility of the ruin, Cloquet's practice suggests an ethical stance, defying the underlying concept of human history as a linear progress in time. Cloquet's work avoids the false image of overcoming and reconciliation. It conducts a process of accumulating fragments and broken pieces into a multi-temporal topography where the ruins of the past continue to prevail in the present. It offers a mode of remembrance and recollection. In contrast to the aestheticised ruin of Albert Speer (1905-1981) who designed buildings as glorious future ruins, Cloquet's ethical approach to ruins reflects humility, taking into account the frailty and fragility of life and culture. It locates the topography of ruins as the consequences of pursuing growth, and as a way to oppose this pursuit while lingering on the catastrophe of history, while pointing to the catastrophe to come. Her work could be considered an expression of silent urgency with regard to the instability and turbulence all of us face nowadays. Rather than positioning itself as an external representation thereof, Cloquet's work is determined by the logic of the world as a persistent, continuous ruin. For Cloquet, the topography of the ruin enables her work to circulate through different times, at once looking forwards and backwards, bringing together different places, superimposing the near and the remote, defining each in terms of the other.