

Back to the Future

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When you enter the gallery, it is very likely that you roll your eyes and think: "hell no - the Anthropocene strikes again! Such a reaction can have several explanations, which will hopefully become clearer throughout the following text and on the basis of the thoughts of great and courageous thinkers a little later. One thing, however, is sure: the artist himself does not care about the precise definition of this supposed geological age of humans. What's more, he has his own interesting hypothesis about where the beginning of the end lies and could thus, without probably knowing it, direct our gaze to the light at the end of the tunnel.

Born in 1969, Stefano Cagol is literally a child of the 1960s counterculture. Discussions and protests about environmental politics, equal rights and anti-war are in his DNA, like bedtime stories. Perhaps that is why they are so deeply rooted in him and always take him back there. Back to the future.

Right at the beginning of the exhibition is the video of *The Ice Monolith*, a work that Cagol exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2013 invited by the Maldives National Pavilion. The video shows what visitors, passers-by and inhabitants of the lagoon could see with curiosity or upset on the Grand Canal: a 1,500-kilo block of ice, taken from the 'eternal ice' of the Alps, slowly but inexorably melting under the sun of the Serenissima and the eyes of the people. The essence of Stefano Cagol's work, a disarming and unsettling directness and simplicity, unfolds before your eyes. At the same time, the work opens up a series of connections and possible levels of interpretation that can only be compared to the opening of Pandora's box. The drastic rise in sea level threatens both the tropical islands of the Maldives and the lagoon city, where the artist from Trentino can confront the distant paradise, while in the Alps, which he calls home, even the glaciers are disappearing. Everything is connected and interconnected.

In the same room as *The Ice Monolith* is a second video, currently on view at the Venice Biennale, as part of Malaysia's participation with the exhibition *Pera + Flora + Fauna*. The artwork's title is *Far before and after us*, and we see the artist shining a shimmering, almost prophetic light into a rugged, snowy mountain landscape. Prophetic because this work perfectly suits the artist's thesis of the 'way out of darkness' mentioned at the beginning. As the titles of this exhibition and the video work already suggest, Stefano's conception goes far beyond the *Anthropos* epoch. While scientists are debating whether the Anthropocene is a geological epoch¹ – at least since the 34th International Geological Congress in 2012 – and, if so, when the beginning, its 'golden nail',² should be set, Cagol has developed his theory. He thinks we can combine the start of the Anthropocene with the discovery of fire by our ancestors. At that moment, humans began to rise above other living beings and became able to manipulate, transform matter and thus produce much more energy than is biologically needed to survive. In this way, Cagol not only conjures up the aforementioned Pandora's Box - which was, after all, nothing more than Zeus' punishment for Prometheus' theft of fire - but also joins a Western tradition that once again allows him to travel into the future: the theory of the four elements. First mentioned by Empedocles in the 5th century B.C.³ and later cleared by Plato and Aristotle, it states that the substance of the planet is composed of four elements: fire, water, earth and air. This idea is based on the unacceptability of the great question of meaning, which somehow wants to be satisfied by various attempts to order everything, then as now. Precisely for

¹ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, 2017

² *Ibid.*

³ Philip Ball, *The Elements: A Visual History of Their Discovery*, 2021

this reason, the idea of the four elements has remained with us to this day, or rather, it indirectly returns to us: Hildegard von Bingen and Paracelsus built their entire thought and thus also the foundations of modern medicine on it, the alchemists from it sought to achieve the total transformation of matter, and even modern chemistry, which has scientifically refuted this particular idea of the elements in various ways⁴, in the end, undertook nothing more than the dissection of the earth (in the sense of our home planet) into more than four parts and even smaller parts, afterwards flooding the scientific agenda again with the need for a holistic and interdisciplinary view of the world⁵. Stefano Cagol would argue, at this point, that everything repeats itself and that we are forever rowing backwards.

Perhaps also because of this, the exhibition you are visiting is a mix of old, new and unprecedented works by the artist, connected by the topic, while a chronological order is obsolete. The artist proposes to talk about the age of the consequences of human activities more than the epoch of the human being, in a word: anthropogenic.

It immediately endears him to me and makes me think of Donna Haraway's or Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's attempts to take the air out of the sails of the dreadful *homo sapiens* for the removal from the centre of a new era, but rather by aiming for connections with new, other living beings⁶, even in the midst of the ruins created by human beings⁷. Furthermore, Cagol confirms a fundamental statement of Bruno Latour's terrestrial manifesto⁸, which will be further related to his work later on: there are already enough facts that affirm the acute and omnipresent reality of climate change, but these do not seem to work. It is why very good stories must take the place of facts.

Cagol is an excellent storyteller and knows the power of images and imagery. In the saga *The time of the flood*, 2019-2021, he uses the biblical imagery of the Day of Judgement to create an 'us' that should metaphorically build an ark together. Also connected to this is the SOS appeal and the glimmer of hope in *Signal to the Future*, 2020, with which the artist illuminates a paralysed city (Brixen) in the midst of the pandemic.

Cagol recalls the destructive and persistent power of the human being in *The Bouvet Island*, 2017-2022, sculptures facing the story of an island in the South Atlantic, far from everything and everyone, which is nevertheless not safe from the consequences of the *Anthropos* and nuclear experiments. Other proofs of the absurdity of the human being's conception of greatness and importance, along with the renewed transformation of matter – which seems to be the leitmotif of the artist's thinking – are the latest works *Monuments to the flow (of matter)*, 2022: waste transformed by the human being, placed on a pedestal and declared a monument. The artist's latest multimedia work, filmed a few weeks ago in the Canary Islands, is *The flow of matter*, 2022, in which Cagol explores the journey, the movement of matter, represented in the case of the Canary Islands by the formation of dunes of Sahara sand that migrates more and more into the air due to climate change and altered winds.

⁴ Böhme Gernot, *Böhme Hartmut, Feuer Wasser Erde Luft. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Elemente*, 2004

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 2016

⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, 2015

⁸ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, 2018

But let us return to Latour and the power of images and art: in his terrestrial manifesto, the French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist explains that the real challenge of the climate crisis is that of the agenda, i.e. the question of who can and will act. Politicians have failed. After the disintegration of the modern dream (from local to global, they prefer to take again shelter behind nationalism and the past (from global to local)⁹. Cagol, on the other hand, without knowing it, may already be part of the solution, using the power of his stories and images, travelling through time and relativising space, transforming matter and attracting attention. After all, McLuhan was right: 'the medium is the message.'¹⁰ In this sense, Joseph Beuys must be mentioned, last but not least, as he is so relevant to the artist, and there is an indisputable link. Cagol's works certainly fit into his idea of Soziale Plastik, social sculpture, and despite the apocalyptic connotations, they leave a glimmer of hope at the end. Why? Because he is probably a kind of shaman capable of conjuring up violin melodies from sound recordings of nuclear tests (*Monito. Monition. Mort Nucléaire*, 1995-2022).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964