

# MAARTEN VANDEN EYNDE

## *Half Earth*

FEBRUARY 22 - MARCH 30  
TU - SA 11 - 18h

For this fourth solo exhibition entitled *Half Earth*, Maarten Vanden Eynde is occupying the three spaces on the gallery's ground floor. Travelling the world in order to understand it better, he recently engaged in a process of profound reflection about the issue of plastics in our oceans, embarked on fertile research into the importance of raw materials in North-South relations during his journeys to Congo and began studying the impact of nuclear weapons when travelling to New Mexico, the location of the first atomic bomb test. Our era is marked by continual change. Everything is changing fast, and the speed at which the change is occurring does not allow us time to adopt the detachment necessary to understand what is actually happening. *Half Earth* is a presentation of works opening up a debate by highlighting certain dangers that are threatening the future of Mankind.

In the left-hand room, the visitor begins with a macabre encounter with *The Last Human*. The partial clearing of this human skeleton illustrates the archaeologist's work, and refers to our ancestors found in a foetal position. But on closer examination, is this an ancestor or a man from the future, with his skull crammed with electronic components (fuses, condensers, diodes, ...) beneath our feet? Incessant innovations that have punctuated our era for over a century have given rise to the emergence of a new man.

In a long essay on the evolution of the world and the body, the philosopher Michel Serres poses some insightful questions: "When, through his body and death, he changes the relationship with self, through agriculture and the climate, his relationships with the world, and through communications, his dialogue with others, is it still the same human being?" Are we in the presence of that man from the future here, hyper-connected, having himself turned into a circuit? The two small works, titled *Immortality Drive*, consisting of seeds and showing the motifs of the first monolithic integrated circuit chip seem to suggest this.

We now know that Man's industrial activities are leading to global transformations of the environment, one consequence of which is the extinction of living species. Scientists concur about using the term of Sixth Extinction because the number of living species now disappearing is comparable to the five extinctions on a massive scale which marked the Earth's geological past. *And Then There Were None* is a work which confronts us with our own image, admittedly distorted, and observes us at the same time through more than hundred glass eyes used by taxidermists. Finally, the gypsum flower, a form of crystallisation found in deserts, is made in this case from silicon wafers which are the basic semiconductors of electronics. When nature and science meet.

In the right-hand room, *Overview Effect* is the work consisting of a globe deployed in space like a peeled fruit. Maarten Vanden Eynde has literally formalised the division of time and space by cutting out the thirty-eight official different time zones, limits dreamed up by Man. Our ways of travelling around the planet have evolved tremendously, and the use of fossil fuels on the grand scale have been a major part of that. One of the crucial questions is how to interpret where we live, here and now?

This work also poses the question of virtuality. Our era is reinventing spaces. Where does a discussion via Skype take place between three participants, each on a different continent? This appearance of the virtual in our everyday life has a profound effect on the acquisition of knowledge. In *Material Matters*, an intentionally naïve series, Maarten was assisted by a Congolese painter, Musasa, in reproducing the learning panels which have accompanied whole generations of schoolchildren worldwide. These panels no longer depict the human body or the cacao bean, but the raw materials mined predominately in the D.R. Congo for industrial purposes (gold, uranium, copper, cobalt etc.). Copper, for example, which occurs in malachite, a semi-precious stone widely used in the D.R. Congo to make trinkets for sale to tourists, is transformed in this case into a grenade to remind us of the issues and conflicts affecting the African continent as a result of natural resource extraction. We observe that the thread of the colonial era is present in this exhibition, with a work like *Cornutopia* (referring to the Horn of Plenty), made of Bakelite, which represents a hollow elephant tusk. This work evokes both the threat hanging over the largest terrestrial mammal and the outstanding success of the plastics industry in the 20th century, including Bakelite, the first plastic ever made, developed by the Belgian chemist Leo Baekeland. *Natural Capital* balances nature and science with this branch that grows into a ruler, an item that fluctuates between old-style schoolmaster's weapon and shaman's magic wand.

The major work *Half Life* is presented in the rear room. Starting out from a life-size reproduction (133 cm) of a radioactive waste container used in Belgium, Maarten Vanden Eynde has imagined a logical reduction (division of size by 2 at each stage) to reach a capsule 5.19 mm tall before disappearing in oblivion. The original containers are made of clay from Boom, a strata of clay at between two hundred or even four hundred meters deep, and one of the possible geological layers for Belgium to store nuclear waste in the future. It is rather logical that Maarten has used clay from that area to make these 9 capsules illustrating what we hope to be the gradual disappearance of this toxic waste. This work raises the issue of anthropocentrism and the relationship that Man develops with his environment. Darwin enabled us to understand that evolution is the result of selections and mutations. The fittest living beings, assisted by judicious cross-breeding, have developed the capacity to survive. A very powerful tendency is encouraging humans to manipulate genes to curb random influences. By intervening in genetic mutation, Man is thus producing a new living being, which will take humanity into another era. This is a temporal change of direction unprecedented in history. The work *The Great Decline* is hung on the wall, and is a composition made of hundreds of seeds following the plan of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway. This vault could be considered a sort of plant Noah's Ark, as it contains more than a million samples of seeds intended to conserve genetic diversity. This place provides a kind of protection against accidental losses of varieties in genetic banks. Formally, this work is reminiscent, admittedly on a larger scale, of the Lukasa (memory boards), which are panels of wood covered in multicoloured elements, which were used as topographical, mythical, societal and chronological archives in the Luba kingdom in the D.R.Congo. Which takes us back to the idea of a circuit ...

Born in 1977, Leuven (Belgium). Maarten Vanden Eynde lives and works in Brussels (Belgium) and Saint Mihiel (France). In 2017 he received the Public Prize of the Belgian Art Prize, whereby his work was presented at Bozar.

The work of Vanden Eynde was shown in several countries and contexts of which the FRAC Lorraine, Metz and the Musée Barrois, Bar-Le-Duc (France), the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung (Taiwan), the Cornell University, Ithaca (USA) and the Hordaland Art Center, Bergen (Norway), at the fourth Biennale of Lubumbashi (R.D. Congo) and the Palazzo Reale in Milan (Italy). In Belgium his practice was presented a.o. in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels, the CAB Art Center, the Museum M, Leuven and during Manifesta 9, Genk but also with his solo exhibition in the M HKA in Antwerp.

In 2020 his first monography will be published.

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