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Autor: U5

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Merapi «The Fiery One»

U5

It takes 3 volcanoes to distinguish a volcano from a mountain. 5 to differentiate between a sleeping and an active volcano. 9 to realise that each one has its own chemistry. 12 to first feel its spirit. 14 to learn how to talk to a volcano and 17 to turn into one.

A few years ago, I landed a curious job at the Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore. I had to climb volcanoes in the name of research. 17 to be exact. In the process, I discovered that volcanoes have very different characters. If I could choose one volcano (1) as a spouse, it would be Merapi, the fiery one. 11,512 km as the crow flies from where I am now. So volatile, tremendous, dangerous! One can easily get burned by its pyroclastic flows!

Fire walk with me. (2)

I took off from Changi Airport to Yogyakarta. On the way to the volcano I was stuck for hours in a huge traffic jam at 3 am. «SPEED» was written in giant red letters on the windscreen of the bus I was sitting in. Breakfast contained sandwich toast sprinkled with hagelslag, a leftover of the Dutch colonialism, Oreo cookies, ice cream flavor and my special volcano hiking drink You-C1000 vitamin C lemon, costs 0.3 SGD at Indomaret on Java, and 3.50 SGD at Mustafa Center in Singapore. Hundreds of lorries passing by, crammed with finest Merapi sand shipped to Singapore and other destinations. It took 40 years to build Changi Airport on reclaimed land. How many years does it take to turn a whole volcano into the next Future City? On the last 700 altimeter my knees got soft. It made me sweat. I buried my fingers in the gravel, pushed myself to the limit, to the summit.

Sunrise.

Did you ever gaze into the abyss of a crater? Creator of myriad variations of surfaces, gate to the fluid self-seeking pathways through vulnerability. Toxic fumes, furrowed moonscapes, petrified liquids, lakes of acid. Fiery heartbeat of a wayward current. «Every man is an abyss – you get dizzy looking in.» (3) «Go on with every vision or quest you require, stand on the rim of the volcano, stand alone and do your dance, just find this beast before it gets another bite.» (4)

A



A Future Cities Laboratory, Singapore-ETH Centre, 2015. Image: by the authors



B Merapi, Indonesia, 2015. Image: Hannes Hermanek
C Merbabu, Indonesia, 2015. Image: by the authors

D Singapore, 2015. Image: by the authors
E «The Human Crater», 2017. Image: by the authors

Descent.

On the next day I got to know Merapi's fraternal twin Merbabu. Merbabu is known for its sleepy and calm nature. High fertile farming land in between the two. Merbabu is keeping an eye on Merapi, to calm it down when it throws a tantrum. I drove up Merbabu on a motorbike, as far as I could, along narrow slopes. Vegetable plantations, followed by dense jungle evolving into gentle hills. Tents were spread along the pathways and plateaus. A place of leisure for the Indonesian youth to escape their parental homes, seeking freedom on the Volcano, a refugium from the restrictions of a religious society which practices public caning as a legal punishment for gay sex. I am not allowed to say that publicly, it will be censored. The Future City is conservative. It appears that sleeping Merbabu is a talented deceiver, disguising itself as a mountain, to the extent of growing its own sort of Edelweiss. One could interpret this as an act of autonomy, a process of individualization from its dominant twin Merapi, the volcano par excellence. Merapi's activity, his waywardness, his ability to talk, to destroy, to change himself, to generate occurrences that effect to the extent of a global impact, infuses spiritedness. Is it possible, that the twins bear traces of a conscious rejection of urbanization and progress?

«No resource of power seemed more inexhaustible than that of fire. Cultural history has been decisively shaped by energy technologies. Water and wind energy, which have been a guiding technologies for half a millennium, are marginal compared to the «heroic» line that deals with the deep layers of fire: from Prometheus to the atomic bomb, this is the narrative of a grandiose acceleration of history under the sign of fire, ambivalent between horror and the desire for redemption».(5) Behind the duality of the twins lies an entwined unity. A reciprocal effect of creation: Action and contemplation. If action is taken it changes everything. An eruption is a violent change. Isn't it a generalisation to say no creation without destruction? An eruption brings change, but silent omission can be more powerful. Sometimes the greatest creation is to refuse to do anything. When I returned to Singapore, I stayed in bed with Merapi in my head. Waves of indifference submerge my comfort zone. So what? This comfort zone was designed for me not to succeed. I shut down all possible kinds of productivity as my personal choice of subversion. It takes some time to realize that I get my salary to consume, and not to produce. Production happens elsewhere. When I look out of the window of Richwood Condominium the sun glows red all day. Greetings from Indonesia. This is what it smells like when forests give way to palm oil plantations. Eternal Flames transform into Haze.

Turn around. This is the crater. You are the crater.