

A Fusion of Mountain and Man,  
By Hans den Hartog Jager

The mountain is God, but like all gods the mountain seldom reveals its intentions. The mountain does not speak, the mountain simply *is* – and in this ‘being’ it is so overwhelming, so fascinating and inescapable that man cannot but relate to it. The mountain has been declared sacred. Monks have lived on its flanks. Artists have drawn and painted it. While in the meantime, a large majority of people circle around the mountain as if it were a sleeping giant; scratching its surface, climbing it and, when the summit is reached, triumphantly planting a flag on top of it. As if they have conquered it – but every mountaineer knows, deep in their heart, that this act is futile.

Because the mountain cannot be conquered. Never. Ever. A human on a mountain, is like a flea wandering through dog’s fur - which reminds me that the worshipper, the artist and the climber, like the flea, are rarely interested in the mountain’s innerside. The mountain’s attraction lies in its dominance, its magnitude, and they are so far removed from human proportions that we can never grasp the mountain’s true size. Thus, the mountain directs us to circumambulate it, each time seeing only small portions while mentally connecting all those parts into a mountain - the whole, entire mountain exists in thought only, in the human mind. And in the vision of that other God. The mind becomes God. The mountain is God. But do they ever unite?

Five years ago, Antoinette Nausikaä decided she wanted to observe mountains. Important mountains, sacred mountains, mountains that for centuries have become charged with stories, culture and meaning. Of course, her idea reflects a great longing: a Dutch person that wants to travel to the mountains, also yearns for other views, a different world, a different horizon. Antoinette was, in her own words, searching mainly for silence - undoubtedly an alibi for the quest for her own inner silence. *Breathing Mountains*, this book, is the culmination of that investigation. Antoinette visited Olympus in Greece, Mount Fuji in Japan, Ararat which resides on the border of Turkey, Armenia and Iran and the WuYué, the five great sacred mountains in China – there exist no mountains more sacred, no more culturally charged than these. So, from the start there was a graceful tension in her project: Antoinette visited mountains on which, from a physical point of view, it could be very serene, but from a historical, cultural and philosophical perspective, they transmit a cacophony of impressions. How would she deal with the fact that the physical mountain would constantly elude her; that each mountain would demand her to wander, to circle, to walk, to think, to remember - without the mountain itself ending it?

Her mission failed, of course. It was inevitable. Whoever hopes to find silence and solitude on a sacred mountain, ends up in the same paradox as people trying to find contemplation in the San Marco in Venice, Saint Peter’s in Rome or from Mumtaz’ spirit in the Taj Mahal. Longing for isolation and to intensify life, one looks for the spirit of a sacred place – only to discover that, in every possible way, these places are impregnated with human presence. Other people. Construction works. Laundry. Waste. Circles. The buses that take us to the foot of the mountain. The path that leads one upwards. All these signs of human presence can easily be understood as the result of globalization, of vulgarization and touristization. But after her first disappointment, Antoinette realized it would not be that easy – and perhaps her starting point had been too romantic. Isn’t the essence, the true spirit of the mountain, precisely this fusion of nature and culture, of history and purposelessness, of mountain and man - the unexpected blending of two great qualities that

in romantic perception almost seem to exclude each other? Almost casually, this led her project to become a perfect presentation about one of the most pressing philosophical themes of this moment: the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene, as interpreted by philosophers like Timothy Morton, deals with the idea that man and nature are fundamentally separated - or *should* be. This idea of separation is a typical product of nineteenth-century Romanticism. In the preceding decades, during the Enlightenment, man briefly thought that his mind could control everything with technology and culture, including nature and higher powers. The great insight of Romanticism was that this control had its limitations - and that nature in particular is too grand and too all-powerful to bend to the whims of man. The power of nature, according to Romanticism, lay in its autonomy and integrity. And, as a human being you had to respect this. Romanticism made nature almost unapproachable - and inhuman.

During the last decades this conceptualization has evolved a lot, although it took a while before we, as people, realized this. Of course, there are still natural *forces* that we cannot control (droughts, floods, tsunamis). But it also sounds naïve to claim that nature functions autonomously, separate from human beings. In the past two hundred years, all life on earth has become completely permeated by human presence - climate change, oceans, landscapes: they have all been influenced and altered by man - as if the Enlightenment is posthumously proving itself correct. One can be romantically melancholic about this situation, according to Anthropocene theorists, but it is also possible to accept it, and then assess how to transform this human impact for the Greater Good. This is the core of thinking about the Anthropocene: humankind does not have to resign itself to all the consequences of its presence but can acknowledge the symbiosis of man and nature and then direct it for the better. As human beings, we can achieve more if we realize that nature and people are one.

This was exactly what Antoinette did. Rather than continuing her quest for 'pure' silence, semi-disillusioned, she climbed and went around the mountain to find her own place, her own role in this half-human, half-natural world. As a viewer, it is difficult to distinguish the individual mountains in this book, but that is not the point: *Breathing Mountains* does not deal with specific, geographically located mountains; collectively the mountains develop into the symbol of the abstract, platonic mountain. That is also the strength and beauty of this book: we witness Antoinette circling the mountain, looking, searching, and constantly balancing on the delicate high-wire between nature and culture. Where is she herself? What does her gaze mean? While observing and photographing, can she ever escape her 'own' nature – and all human traces? She searches for circles, finds patterns in trees, digs in the mountain's crust, collects clay from which she produces figurine sculptures. She finds human traces that are so elementary, so powerful and so ancient, that they almost turn into nature again.

Gradually, she becomes part of the environment - and *Breathing Mountains* develops into a beautiful, serene portrait of what happens when people and nature meet and coalesce without losing their distinctive qualities. This analogy also offers plenty of new possibilities, anyone who follows Antoinette's eye realizes how much our perspective, our understanding can be enriched by eliminating the boundaries between nature and culture. For man, it is certainly no harm for us to be occasionally confronted with the most fundamental and most natural forces in our souls. At the same time we come to realize that, in some ways, mountains are much more human than we often think. Just take the fact that some of the mountains that Antoinette visited, like Mount Fuji, are volcanoes which have

sometimes been silent for centuries - but still contain the possibility, the promise, the threat that they will erupt again to spit out tons of boiling, sizzling, burning lava over the earth. Unapproachable perhaps?

And so it is with people. However well we believe we understand our fellow human beings, we never know what is going on inside them - there may always be hidden feelings, emotions, and ideas that we do not see, we do not recognize and that seldom come to the surface. For this there is art. To show what lies beneath the outside, to draw attention to the burning mass remains hidden. In it, man is God, God is the mountain, and the mountain is man. By the way, do you know whether God is man or nature?