

## Time & Waste

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The series of works by French artist Antoine Renard, *New Earth-like Sample* is comprised of tall see-through tubes that are filled with various consumerist goods recovered or found by the artist. They appear in amongst soil samples from various locations in Berlin where he works and lives and to this soil and detritus he added worms and other micro-organisms, some invisible to the naked eye and some very much alive and wriggling around. Renard is trying to compost the readymade products of today and in so doing points at how we might find a future Eldorado. This might seem like a big jump to make, but that is the journey that Renard's work conjures in the mind when looked at with a longer timespan than the duration of an exhibition.







It starts with compost. And in particular Renard's stated intention to replicate *Terra preta*, a highly nutrient rich, anthropogenic soil that is found in and around the Amazonian basin. Also called 'Amazonian dark earth', it formed as a soil from an admixture of manure and bones, getting its dark hue from charcoal which points in the direction of its origin, mainly human settlements and kitchen areas where fires cooked food and middens accrued. What is interesting about *terra preta* is that not only does it remain in the soil for thousands of years, it regenerates itself over time and yet it still remains unclear exactly how to recreate it artificially, something Renard has done with the brio and playfulness of an artist himself adept at exploring new ways of looking at the intersection of the natural world, consumerism and new cognitive patterns borne out of both these things, indifferent to the potential scientific and temporal shortfall of his experiment

When I first came across this work it was part of an exhibition called *New Atlantis* in the project space KM Temporaer in Berlin. The title of the show was telling: the material trace of a civilisation broken down, disappearing and creating its own mythology. The plastic, very durable products in these composting tubes could become in time the keystones of an archaeology of our present times, any future civilisation

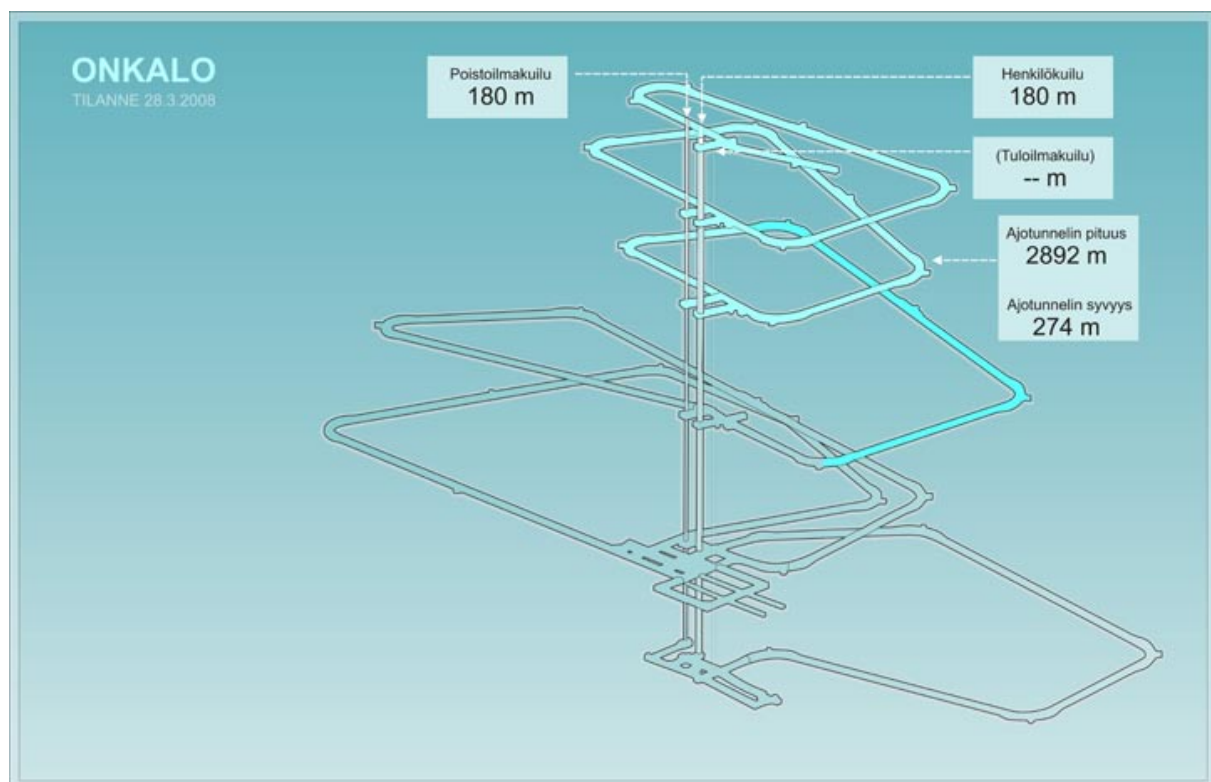
trying to understand us will be interpreting these plastic bags, medicine boxes, energy drink cans and finding in them clues to a composite portrait of who we are.

And after all it is our distinguishing feature in relation to the products that we create and consume: we do not stop to think about their trace and where and for how long they will end up once we are done with them. In our homes we fill rubbish bins with what we don't want any longer and we banish it outside, to be collected and spirited away. Out of sight, out of mind. Collectively what is more, we have always found it hard to value a people who do not leave a strong trace, tangible goods or sought-after treasures, behind them. Even today the debate as to how big and how advanced the population of the Americas was before Europeans arrived in the 1490s is something that continues to this day, namely because of the lack of empirical traces. *Terra preta* is one such trace however: it is a self generating compost that results in a rich bog where the soil should in fact be quite infertile. It was made by humans as part of a sophisticated society and the unique mix of charcoal with bones, manure and biochar all worked to produce what could be interpreted as a positive and natural end-product for human waste.

The decision to use tall, cylindrical tubes for these *New Earth-Like Samples* is telling (and how I feel he has placed us in the future with this title alone, a kind of sci-fi situation of exo-planets re-enacting a distant planet earth). These totem poles reference the scientific core drills used to study glaciers, soil, carbon deposits – in short the past. And yet these tubes are filled with the recognisable products of our über-contemporary, the neon trash aesthetic of energy drinks already tarnished with what seems like a bruised, future perspective. The scientific method to rate the past is something for which curiosity is the driving force: what we don't know about forces us to bore down, break into or peer at through giant lenses. We consistently want to enter places, even if those places aren't places we should ever rightly enter. This makes me think of what was often a strong belief in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the curses placed on those entering the burial sites such as the tombs of the Pharaohs. Or indeed the perils of the unknown and those willing to travel to the edge of the world at the risk of falling of its straight edge, of flying into space, or indeed the over 200000 people who applied to the Mars One mission, a one way trip to our nearest neighbouring planet.

But in fact there were no curses written on the tombs of the pharaoh and certainly not Tutankhamun's. In general it is very rare for tombs to carry curses: the

idea of desecration would have often been unthinkable, and indeed dangerous to put down in writing, symbolic or explicit. This is the line of thought that led me to the pleasant sounding anapaest that is the site of a contemporary final resting place of epic proportions: Onkalo is the Finnish spent nuclear fuel repository. It is the subject of *Into Eternity*, a fascinating documentary by Michael Madsen, which looks at the planning of the huge facility that will stretch 5 kilometres through granite bedrock and reaching to a depth of 500 metres below the earth. Over the course of eighty years highly radioactive spent fuel rods would be placed inside copper canisters would be placed inside holes at the bottom of each of the many shafts spreading out from the bottom of the main tunnel. These canisters would nestle in bentonite clay, the tunnels filled in turn with more clay and rock. Slowly the network of tunnels would be closed until the mouth is sealed and closed for good, never to be opened again. It is something that would be science fiction if it was not already fully designed and underway. The translation from the Finnish of Onkalo is 'cave', a hiding place for nuclear waste that should remain hidden from any organic lifeform for a minimum of 100000 years. The problem quickly becomes a question of how do you communicate to people over such a timespan? It is a period of time longer than modern humans have existed on the planet. No doubt such an intricate and engineered complex will suggest something worth hiding.



In a fascinating sequence from *Into Eternity*, scientists and engineers at Onkalo and the company Posiva admit in frank terms when being interviewed that they hadn't thought everything through fully, indeed they seemed to be a bit overawed by the idea of human society breaking down at some point in the future to a point where any knowledge of not only the facility, but of nuclear waste and radiation in general, was lost and unknown. How would these future people know to stay away from this elaborate, hidden complex? There are artist renditions of a 'field of thorns', imaginings of how to show a hostile place that one shouldn't enter. They could of course just seal up the entrance, landscape the surface, and try and forget about it, but that just seems brazenly irresponsible. Even then, if it were discovered, say due to geologic shifts in the bedrock from the inevitable ice age weight of glaciers that will move over the area, the lack of any fore-knowledge would make finding it all the more enticing.

When we base our knowledge, understanding and perhaps even respect for past civilisations on what they have left behind, particularly in ornate, elaborate tombs, how can we not expect others to do the same? Entering Onkalo will mean death for those who go there, but how to communicate this in language, even one that speaks beyond the use words or symbols, if such a language can be properly imagined?

That is why compost is a sort of utopia in a way, our own possible Eldorado a bit like Thomas Moore's own no-place located somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. Antoine Renard takes a cross section of the daily products we leave behind and renders them into a state of becoming. Waste added to time equals a future ideal of a resourceful Atlantis lost beneath the riverbed of history. The household waste we banish from our house may be what we like least in our daily lives, it may smell, rot or be useless and worthless, but more likely than not it may play a part in the collective legacy each one of us leaves behind.