

Unfinished Past:

Marijke Lukowicz in conversation with Ben Greber and Bram Kuypers

**ML** What is the “Processions” trilogy about? What was your starting point?

**BK** For me, it started when I accidentally discovered this huge circle on Google Maps and, when I zoomed in, saw that I’d been there once as a little boy: the Transrapid test track. I’d almost forgotten about it; it had been sometime in the 1990s. When I then looked at photos of the track, I was fascinated right away - because of its vast dimensions and strange appearance, which is similar to an aqueduct - something from the past but at the same time something modern.

I asked Ben if he wanted to go there together, and he was very interested. But I’m sure he had his own reasons for that.

So we drove to Lathen and took a look at the track. We were excited about the architecture and especially about how it seems to point both to the future and to the past at the same time. The track is falling apart but still looks very futuristic. I think that was the initial point: not only to explore the track more closely but also to look for other examples of ruins of innovative experimental systems. And we soon discovered that there are several such sites - in Japan, for example. There were also other projects in Germany, like the Alweg monorail in Cologne. But most of the tracks have been destroyed and are no longer visible. The Transrapid track and that of the Aérotrain in France are the most intact. They’re very similar, at least in terms of their architectonic quality. And, I think [*laughs*] because of the Holy Trinity, we needed a third situation. And the Hyperloop was a very logical choice.

**BG** We ourselves hadn’t expected to discover a religious formal language while standing in front of the Transrapid track.

**BK** Of course, the motives are technological and economic, but you can only create them if you believe in something that doesn’t exist yet at that moment. And this faith seems to be visible in the architecture. You can also see that the idea of the future looks different in the 60s than in the 80s.

**ML** This picks up on an important idea of the modern age: that it’s possible to create a better, perhaps utopian world through innovation and technological progress. Which has a lot to do with a faith that isn’t necessarily religious in origin. With the Transrapid test track, there’s this

moment when you realize that the future has overtaken itself - to come back to the aspect of temporality that's inherent in the work.

**BG** I do think that a change happened at some point in history. While the idea and representation of utopia was connected with religious ideas for a long time, from some point on - maybe in the late 20th century - it suddenly became associated with technological progress.

**ML** And this association is especially evident in the first film, for which you chose the title "Procession 1." To what extent does the second part continue to deal with this idea?

**BG** In the second part, we film Bram running along the abandoned Aérotrain test track in France. Which was actually the initial idea for the whole project. From the outset, we'd seen this running along the track as a procession, procession as a ritual, and ritual as a connection between the past and future. Because it's something that always recurs and that you do over and over again in the same way. In the sense that: a train used to run here, and there's this idea that this technology might be used again in the future. So this act of proceeding along the track is a bridging act of hope and faith.

**BK** I'm just thinking about the fact that, ultimately, in "Procession 1," the utopian object - the expected high-speed train - is represented by a structure as primitive as a maintenance vehicle. Reality and this stupid maintenance vehicle completely destroy the whole idea of future. And it strikes me that maybe that's how it always is. In the end, the future is always a compromise between utopia and reality. It was the same with the Aérotrain. After all, the idea was all well and good. But, in the end, they had a jet flying across the landscape at 400 km/h at a height of 10 meters. Obviously, that didn't work. With a jet turbine! It was so idiotic that of course, ultimately, they built the TGV. The compromise is what can ultimately be implemented. And that's what I also find so interesting about the Hyperloop. The grand idea of putting a tube around the whole world ... but, in the end, what's the point of that and how's it supposed to be feasible - also politically?

**ML** How did you hit on the Hyperloop? After all, it has a completely different aesthetic. And, formally, moving through a tube is also a completely different story. The work in "Procession 3" has also changed accordingly. This time you didn't run along the track but observed it from the outside instead.

**BG** While filming the Aérotrain test track from the '60s and the Transrapid test track from the '80s, we'd noticed what different ideas of the future were inscribed in them. We absolutely wanted to continue to explore this difference, so in the final part of the trilogy we also wanted to document the most recent technology, which is currently only just in development.

All three parts of "Processions" are also always about the relationship between the structure and the landscape. In other words, what does being intersected by this line representing the future do to the current environment?

**BK** We have a really nice brochure from the Transrapid. It includes an illustration that shows how easily the track can negotiate the landscape since it's on piers. I think there was also a Hyperloop promotional video. It shows how the track just cuts through the landscape wherever it wants. It's always at the same height. Then there's a tunnel, then a lake, then another lake ...

**BG** So, basically, it completely ignores the landscape around it?

**BK** Yes, exactly. I think every high-speed line is built that way.

**ML** Did you have a chance to take a look inside the Hyperloop?

**BG** No. We were in touch with Virgin, but in the end they didn't let us in. So we took a chance and just went, because it basically fit into our concept. From the start, we'd talked a lot about the fact that, unlike the Transrapid and Aérotrain, here everything happens in secret, inside the tube. When you're standing outside in the landscape, you don't notice that people are gliding past you at supersonic speed. It was already dawning on us that this exclusion of the surrounding environment could become an important theme in the third part. Which it did. When we started filming, it became increasingly clear that what happens off the track is actually much more exciting to us. But that had already started in France, where we began collecting empty shotgun shells and liquor bottles lying next to the track.

But the landscape in Nevada is much more archaic because it operates much more slowly. Both geological change and the flora evolve much more slowly there. You can discern many processes that point far into the past. The remains of human influence also hardly weather. We found so many artifacts of human use, which then played a major role in "Procession 3."

It's about the tension between the past and a utopia that hasn't been realized yet.

**BK** I also find it interesting that, this time, the drone doing the filming is itself the one on procession, approaching the future. Through the broken landscape, it proceeds towards the future (in the form of the Hyperloop tube). Yet what's shown is mainly the landscape.

**ML** What I find exciting about the Hyperloop is that it is - as you say - part of the landscape but at the same time totally excludes it, so maybe it's also a kind of dystopia, a kind of separation between humans and nature. While the other technologies still allow you to perceive the landscape, here it's actually completely disconnected. The earth around it could fall prey to complete desertification. No one would notice.

**BG** Totally. Bram and I both took multi-day road trips to Nevada. Bram was coming from Arizona and I was coming from LA. And the shoot was very influenced by our trips through this apparent wasteland. Where people sit in their fenced-in properties and shoot at tin cans because there's nothing else to do. They struck us as so completely excluded from society.

**BK** The windows of the carriages of European kings were covered with carpets to spare them the sight of misery. Which is also a kind of exclusion.