dioramics





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dioramics



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Colophon

Dioramics

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Contents

Before we begin **7**

What is all this? **9**

Something smells fishy **12**

And now, seriously **16**

And the rest is history **19**

Science! 19

Rebellion 20

Seeing things 22

Consciousness in layers 23

The Big Picture 26

Postmodernism 27

The mystics 27

Sannyas 28

The satsang show 30

Living without a head 32

The end of “spirituality” 33

The reckoning 34

Dioramics **35**

Before we begin

I want to explore something. Something so self-evident that we hardly ever stop to consider it: that we are constantly living in a world. Or rather, in all kinds of worlds that appear, change, flow into one another and disappear again.

I call them lifeworlds.

And I call this way of looking Dioramics.

What exactly that means is something I am trying to discover as I write. I tend to wander off along the way. From a memory to a philosophical thought, from a conviction to a doubt, from something very serious to something utterly trivial.

That is part of it, including any confusion.

I do not always know where I will end up either.

Welcome.

Questions you might ask yourself while reading this work:

What world am I actually living in? What self-evident assumptions shape my reality? And how self-evident are they really?

What is all this?

Imagine this: you are in a natural history museum, looking into a space where prehistoric animals stand in their natural surroundings. A diorama. Lifelike. You feel as though you are in an age millions of years ago. Mountains in the background. In a valley in the foreground, a herd of strange, enormous herbivores is grazing. It is quiet, but you can hear running water, and a wind blows through the undergrowth. There is an unfamiliar smell.

And then you are out on the street. In the rain. It is night. There is a sense of menace in the air. You want to go home and have been trying to get there for hours. You turn down yet another street and think you recognise something. But it is not right. Another street, and another. You just cannot manage it. You cannot find your home.

Waking anxiously in your bed. You look around. Yes, this is simply your bedroom. Quite normal. The poster on the wall, the wardrobe, the half-open window. The harsh calls of birds outside. It is getting light, and time to get up.

Three worlds. Three completely different realities. In each, you were somewhere, saw something, heard sounds and more or less knew what was going on.

But what actually changed when you found yourself moving from one world into another?

And perhaps more importantly: what stayed the same?

Questions.

Normally you do not ask yourself what it all amounts to. What do you know? You just get on with things...

I step out into the night and look up: it is exceptionally clear and I can see all those f*cking stars! JESUS!

A little ant walks across my hand. It has six legs, a body, eyes. It moves and goes on its way. And I think: this little ant is made up of countless cells that together keep this creature alive, just like me.

I could easily make it stop moving.

...

Being here, being conscious.

Something smells fishy.

Yes, okay, enough of that. I am hungry and am going to make a sandwich.

Something smells fishy

Fishy, then. And very wet. Water cannons and tear gas. Put lemon juice on a cloth and hold it over your face, I read somewhere. The mounted police officer lashes out wildly on the torn-up Waterlooplein.

The noise, all the violence. Terrifying, but exciting too!

A war zone. Is this what I wanted?

No Housing, No Coronation!

This-is-the-beginning, we will carry on the fight!

And I actually had somewhere to live. But I must stand in solidarity!

That sense of belonging, that sense of being right, the comradeship.

Embodying the correct and most avant-garde ideology. That matters.

The badges, smoking dope.

I am an arrogant armchair anarchist.

Secretly looking down on the plebs, the stupid masses.
Secretly, I have more sympathy for the capitalists.

Friend and enemy. So close together.

I could now chatter on about that Indian guru who showed me the light.

I could also talk about that group of postmodern men discussing the work of Klaus Theweleit. Something about masculinity and fascism. I do not understand a word my fellow students are saying. I feel stupid. I do remember that.

There are so many things I could talk about.

Fatherhood. Living in a commune. Falling in love.

All of them lived experiences.

Beleving. A beautiful Dutch word for which I have yet to find an English equivalent.

No, this is not going to be an autobiography.

I want to show how a particular view of existence grew out of all that living through things. The questions, the interpretations, the convictions, the doubts about being right, about others being right.

What remains? How do these sentences come into being?

Writing as a journey of discovery through my own lived experience, which is itself another lived experience. There is only this: (this) experiencing. So I say.

That is something I learned from the nondualists.

Right, what nondualism is and is not will probably come up later. If not, there is always the Internet and Artificial Intelligence to explain it to you in minute detail - or just confuse you. That is possible too. For now, this: nondualism is nonsense. So is dualism. All -isms are nonsense. Or rather: all -isms, including this piece of writing, consist entirely of their own claim to being right. But you knew that already, did you not? Of course.

Words. Concepts. Do they grasp anything? They point to one another. Just look in the dictionary. No, that is too easy: words do not acquire meaning solely by referring to other words. They also function through use, bodily experience, social context and shared practices.

Words (again), spoken by an AI. It knows so much.

Words are part of lived experience. But not a necessary part.

Something is conveyed, at any rate. Words are wonders. They are incomprehensible. Do you understand that? And who is doing the understanding? Do you understand THAT?

Something smells fishy again. I do not trust myself an inch.

You know, I can tell wonderful stories, build convincing arguments and even persuade myself that I have discovered something fundamental. But why should I believe myself?

And now, seriously

I do not want to keep going with anecdotes and clever little phrases. Perhaps that is not why you chose this book. Suppose you found the title interesting: Dioramics. Wtf.

Still, I have already shown quite a lot of what I mean by dioramics: we all live, constantly, in all kinds of lifeworlds that often alternate, overlap, flow into one another and shift.

The philosopher Edmund Husserl introduced the concept of the Lebenswelt (lifeworld), particularly in his late work The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (1936).

Husserl regards the lifeworld as the world we already experience and inhabit before we try to explain it scientifically or theoretically.

So he does not simply mean someone’s personal world of thoughts, but the self-evident, shared world of our everyday experience.

A quotation from Erfahrung und Urteil, §10, p. 38. Rendered here in English:

> “Returning to the world of experience means returning to the lifeworld: the world in which we always already live.”

For Husserl, then, the lifeworld is above all the self-evident, pregiven world that forms the basis of all our knowing and acting.

In dioramics, the emphasis is different: on the plurality and changeability of concrete lifeworlds, such as the dream world, the bedroom, the political demonstration and the world of my philosophical thoughts. Worlds are legion.

Husserl called his philosophy “phenomenology”, which seemed a complete break with what philosophy had pursued until then: developing a metaphysics, a framework of thought intended to explain what exists, what the world and thought actually are, in an absolute sense. In fact, by his phenomenological reduction Husserl means suspending certain assumptions about the independent existence of the world in order to investigate how that world appears to us and acquires meaning.

We cannot know what ultimately exists; we cannot step outside our own experiencing, outside our own lived experience. We can, however, and constantly do, move from one lived experience into another.

“Dioramics”: a way of looking at how worlds appear, disappear and change.

There is no “viewpoint from nowhere”. But we can talk about what appears and how something appears.

Edmund Husserl put metaphysics - well, “our self-evident assumptions about the existence of the world” - in brackets. As far as I am concerned, it can go in the bin. But why should I believe myself? Because this, too, is a position, and in fact a metaphysical statement…

Well.

And the rest is history

How do you arrive at something like this? How did this way of seeing come about? Which lifeworlds do you pass through?

Let us take a look and put some of those dioramas on display. I have arranged them, more or less, in historical order, but at this moment all those worlds are mingling.

They have not disappeared.

Science!

My first love. Man! How could you not be enthusiastic about the discoveries of science: DNA, quarks, the Big Bang, evolution! How does the world, the universe, work? How did it come into being? It fascinates me endlessly. On my way to school, I look admiringly at the people in white coats among the glassware in their laboratory. I could see myself doing that.

I get a chemistry set, a microscope, and later those thick books on inorganic and organic chemistry for my birthday or Sinterklaas.

Standing in front of the class (but shyly, with my back to the children) and talking about particles and atoms. I fill the whole blackboard. I am incredibly nervous and incredibly enthusiastic, and I get to do it all again in the other sixth-grade class. Wonderful.

Rebellion

Puberty, long hair, pop music and Provo! Luud Schimmelpennink's white battle dress. Joyful, free-spirited rebellion. Even my parents have some sympathy for the movement. I delve into the world of ideas behind it: a cheerful, playful version of anarchism. No one holds power; no one tells you what to do. What we do, we do together. Or alone, for yourself. Up to you. As long as you do not hurt other people. That is a worldview I like. That is how it should be!

But I cannot join in the "happenings" yet. Too young. And a denim jacket? Not allowed either. Common. I have to conform to my family's respectable middle-class morality: finish school, get a good job. Just act normal; that is crazy enough. I understand the logic behind it; I understand where my parents are coming from. The war is still very fresh in their memories:

soldiers in the streets, round-ups, hunger, violence. And so: finish your food, do your homework, do your best. And so I more or less go along with it, but sometimes break out too. Skipping school, not getting my hair cut.

My family, those circumstances and those sensitive situations all play a part too. I am actually quite well-behaved. Even if, a little later, I look like a “freak”. I smoke dope because it is part of the scene, but I am afraid of the hard stuff: speed, acid, heroin. The “shit” sometimes feels liberating, though I also often get anxious and wound up.

The world of Underground, Hitweek and Provadya: I feel at home there, and yet I do not. It is quite a hard, macho world, with enormous contempt for bourgeois society, for the “straights”.

I never really belong.

Seeing things

Alongside the purely scientific, I have also been interested in what apparently lies beyond it: parapsychology, UFOs, that sort of thing. I am convinced there must be sound explanations for these phenomena, even if they have not yet been found.

I even studied parapsychology! At Utrecht University, with Professor Tenhaeff, by then a stooped man in his eighties who was still lecturing. An impressive, but also somewhat tragic figure.

Parapsychology itself died a slow death for me. It no longer matters, and perhaps, in social terms, it no longer matters either. I do not actually know, but I think so.

And it will not be the first time that certain subjects hold my interest for a while and then disappear. Because I have seen through the subject, or at least feel that I have, or because my interest has gone, or because it has dissolved into something else...

Consciousness in layers

An image that (still) lives in many people's minds: "consciousness" as a kind of space in which all sorts of things happen: thoughts, feelings, dreams. That space is divided into layers. Ordinary waking consciousness, the subconscious beneath it, and sometimes there is talk of a superconscious as well.

I encounter this world through the work of Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli. The psyche, the inner world. An entire world in its own right, with hidden forces, symbolic representations and archetypes that influence our thinking and actions. To discover them, you have to go into the "depths". Or upwards, towards higher levels of consciousness. Apparently there is a great deal to discover in that head of ours.

Well.

Lived experience, experience, is conscious by definition. If you think about it, that really says everything. There can be no unconscious lived experience. At least, not if by lived experience we mean what is actually experienced.

That does not mean, of course, that we are aware of everything that happens. Our attention is always directed somewhere.

There is constant selecting, filtering, ignoring. Fortunately. Without those filters, we probably could not even function properly.

And of course there are all kinds of processes of which we are unaware that influence our thinking, feeling and actions. I do not doubt that.

But why should they be located in a hidden psychic space? Why should we imagine an inner world with floors, depths and heights, where all sorts of things take place without our knowing?

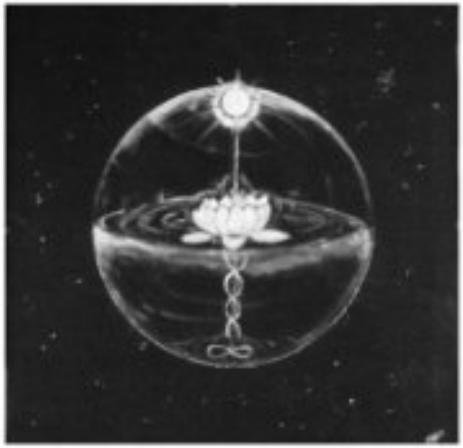
This representation of “consciousness” is only an image. A way of looking at ourselves.

And that image can be extraordinarily convincing. You can live in that world for years, trying to fathom yourself, seeking hidden meanings in dreams, symbols and coincidences. You can even derive an entire philosophy of life from it.

And I did. I even wrote a paper about it at the University of Amsterdam, analysing my own dreams...

Unfortunately, I no longer have any idea which dreams they were.

At the time, what I found particularly appealing about the whole concept of spatial consciousness was its beauty. It appealed to me aesthetically. So much so that I tried to paint it:



And at the same time, this vision gave me a sense of a Great Coherence. A synthesis, a theory of everything.

But that inner world, with all its layers, is ultimately also, for many people, a world that appears, a world that feels credible.

A lifeworld. Not necessarily the secret architecture of reality.

Perhaps our being conscious has no layers at all. Perhaps there is no inner “space”.

I am conscious of something. Lived experience is conscious.

Perhaps only what and how we experience changes.

The Big Picture

I find this beautiful, holistic picture of consciousness and the universe in thinkers such as Oliver Reiser, Teilhard de Chardin and Henri Bergson too. Everything is connected, everything comes together, everything lives. All is One. I believed in it for a long time. In the final Synthesis. With a capital S. A lovely idea, certainly.

Postmodernism

And then I read Foucault, Deleuze with his “rhizome”, and the beautiful house of cards, the diorama of the synthesis, comes crashing down. The end of the grand ideas, the dazzling, grandiose metaphysical systems. After this, the thinking stops; the activism stops too.

But what then? I am searching. I find myself out on the street. In Krommenie. And I no longer know…

The mystics

The vacuum does not arise quite so suddenly. The undermining of the synthesis and of my preoccupation with the outside world is not caused solely by the postmodern philosophers. I also read Gurdjieff, Castaneda, Krishnamurti, Tarthang Tulku. A new reality opens up, a new way of being: turning towards myself. Self-inquiry. Meditation and therapy.

Out of my head.

The mystics are beyond my reach. They are dead, live far away or are so radical that I cannot do anything with them. I long for something new to hold on to, someone who can fill the vacuum again.

Sannyas

Well, God, and who is everywhere in our little Dutch backwater? Not in the flesh, but as a movement? Bhagwan! Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh is the man's full name. At first, anyway. He is now better known as "Osho" (and that name always makes me itch).

It starts with reading. Swami Amrito (Jan Foudraine). And Rajneesh himself: The Way of the White Cloud. Mind-blowing! The house of cards collapses still further. Rajneesh's vision is colourful, positive, alive. The black flags of anarchy have disappeared completely. There is silence and there is "celebration" too. On the way to Enlightenment. A new goal.

Because if you resolve enough psychological obstacles through therapy and become centred in your body and in the here and

now, it is possible to merge with the All, or to notice that you are in fact already merged.

And this happens in stages. Some are “further along” than I am; others less so. And Rajneesh is, of course, the enlightened Master. I look up to the advanced disciples, the therapy and meditation leaders. Bhagwan himself is impossibly far away. The movement around him is very close.

And at the same time, I feel a distance too. I often find sannyas culture ridiculous. The songs, the adoration. But I join in, because I want to belong, to surrender, to switch off my mind. And sometimes I feel extremely lonely and anxious, especially during a week in America at a sannyas festival in Rajneeshpuram. I do not have much money and cannot afford to take part in everything. I know no one there, and everyone is so happy. I watch...

At the same time, I feel proud when I see what the movement has already achieved.

Looking back, this circus held me in its grip for ten years, sometimes through genuine warmth and involvement,

sometimes through abuses of power and manipulation. And of course through the promise of Enlightenment. Being One with the Universe, knowing the Great Secret. Content, calm (and superior!).

When Rajneesh dies, the circus stops. Find a new Master? My search for enlightenment is still very much alive!

The satsang show

After the Master's "passing", many sannyasins look for new guru figures. So do I. There have been dozens whom I have visited, read and watched on video. The big difference from Rajneesh was that these people are much more accessible. You can simply have a beer with them, or invite them to your birthday party (that really happened!).

Sitting together, with the guru at the front. Usually surrounded by flowers, a photograph of their master. A quiet, meditative atmosphere. It worked, in a way. Several times I really felt: now I have got it. The bliss, being in a "heart-space". Wonderful. Sometimes it lasted a few days and then disappeared again. Okay, next video, book, satsang.

A never-ending story.

Gradually, doubts arise too. Is all this really right? The gurus and satsang teachers turn out to be ordinary people too, with their tricks of the trade, their ego trips, jealousy and possible misconduct. Enlightenment... I do not know... I have a particular image of it. Something rather exalted and absolute. Something ethically “better” than the “ordinary” human condition too...

So what is actually being sold here, and at the same time: what am I actually looking for here?

Living without a head

There is one man who has remained a constant presence for me throughout all that following of gurus and satsang teachers, and that is Douglas Harding. With him, I do not have to believe anything or tune in to anything. Douglas offers a clear method: what do you actually see here, in the place where others see your head? I have caught a glimpse of it once or twice, simply standing in the garden, but normally the “inner” idea of a head in that place is many times stronger than the image of what may actually be happening there: namely, the world. And it has nothing to do with ethics or “higher” states of consciousness. The significance of this always remained somewhere in the background of my search.

Meanwhile, the searching itself kept me under its spell...

The end of “spirituality”

Robert Saltzman, Shiv Sengupta and, to a lesser extent, Joan Tollifson are the three writers who, for me, completely puncture the circus of what is usually called “spirituality”. They do not sell a “teaching”; they do not claim a monopoly on wisdom. Perhaps that is the heart of the whole spiritual business: there are people who think there must be something more, something better than everyday life. Myself included. And then those people go looking for someone who can tell them about it, and naturally someone is found. And the spiritual goods are passed on, often in exchange for a bit of money. There are books, gatherings, videos, an abundance of choice and something for everyone.

These three authors do, admittedly, write books and convey ideas too. The interesting distinction is perhaps not that they offer nothing, but that they promise no special state you could reach by following their instructions…

Disillusioning, liberating. I no longer have to.

The reckoning

Finally, Miranda Warren showed me that there is nothing “exalted” outside or above what appears (or that everything is equally exalted), and therefore no teaching is needed at all. Her condition and mine are simply different expressions of what it is to be human. How could it be otherwise? What appears simply appears, and it is different for you, for me, for everyone, at every moment. But of course there can and will be similarities too. Miranda experiences no “separation” between herself and the reality surrounding her. So it does not surround her either. For her there is no “her” and no “reality” either. Apparently there is only a flow of images, sounds, thoughts and feelings. Images, sounds, thoughts and feelings appear for me too. Along with them, I usually do experience a separation between myself and the world. That is how it (whatever this may be) appears for me.

The end of striving for another, supposedly better way of experiencing.

Dioramics

The whole idea of a “diorama” began with a story about making a peep-box. As a child. You took a shoebox, cut little windows in it and covered them with red cellophane, and inside the box you could arrange all kinds of objects. Then you went around asking people whether they wanted to look into your peep-box. The peep-box was a world. A world that appears as soon as you look into it and enter into the scene inside. In fact, also a world that appears because it has been made and arranged...

A more elaborate or refined form of the peep-box is the diorama you find in museums. A complete scene with everything in it.

A lifeworld is like such a diorama: a coherent world that appears, in which things acquire their place and meaning, and which, at that moment, is simply reality.

And this essay, too, is a peep-box, a diorama. I arrange it, and you, the reader, look inside.

That immediately raises a question: who or what actually arranges our lifeworlds? Our memory, our expectations, our body, our history?

And no, I do not have a ready-made answer to this either. But must I? Savouring the question is so much more satisfying...

John Astin in “This Is Always Enough”, 2013:

> Would you be willing to abandon, even for one instant, all teachers and teachings, all injunctions and practices, to simply meet what appears in each moment with no guidance or reference points to tell you what is true, or how you must live? What would it be like to no longer be identified with any conceptual framework or spiritual philosophy — not yours, not Buddha’s, not Jesus’, not anyone’s? How would it feel to live with no maps, no mental conclusions, no final destinations, to cease to refer to any notion in the mind about how life is supposed to be?

That is about it, as far as I am concerned.

Gradually, I came to understand that enlightenment cannot be forced. You can meditate, read books, visit teachers, but none

of that lets you order an awakening. What was I still doing with that striving?

I have no absolute answers, and I do not need them either. In fact, they no longer interest me.

The spiritual search has ended.

Only later did I begin to feel that, anyway, I am still searching. I want to be seen. To belong somewhere. Perhaps that longing had been travelling with me all along, and had even set my search for enlightenment in motion…

And now that is what appears - along with everything else, of course.