

NON PLUS ULTRA

By Malou Solfeld, 2017

With his *Non Plus Ultra* series Claus Rottenbacher presents the peninsula of Gibraltar in a way that goes across borders of time and space by taking his starting point in a place that has throughout the whole of European history played an essential role. From the Greek mythology we have the Pillars of Heracles as well as the phrase *Non Plus Ultra* (meaning „nothing further beyond“), from the Italian literature we have Dante's meeting with Ulysses and from the English philosophy and science we have Francis Bacon's illustration of his *Instauratio Magna*. All referring to Gibraltar, that fabled tiny spot located at the very southern end of continental Spain, being British since the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. But Rottenbacher's intention is not just to quote or alone pay an homage to these ancient masters but to make us reconsider where we are today and perhaps even more importantly, where we want to be tomorrow. With his *Non Plus Ultra* series of 2016 - what has on a global scale been called the worst year since second world war - the geopolitical situation in Gibraltar seems more relevant than ever and to a certain extent might even function as a reflection of how the rest of the world is changing these days or at least as a historical reminder of how the future may turn out to be tomorrow.

A closer look

Within the *Non Plus Ultra* series, plate „1713 - XXI“ stands out specifically in tying together all essential elements of the *Non Plus Ultra* issue in one single picture. The plate manages to reflect the series in a way that it can serve both as great introduction and crowning glory at the very end. The beholder is placed in an almost God-like perspective from the top of the Rock of Gibraltar, the mountain representing one of the two Pillars of Heracles. Heracles, the human-God/demi-God who, according to the myth, split the mountain thus creating the strait of Gibraltar. Thereby, he simultaneously separated the continent of Europe from Africa while connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. A supernatural gesture like this seems to be exclusively for Gods and only existing in mythologies. Yet, opening and closing of borders by human beings with extraordinary power seems not too far from reality – and perhaps of even greater relevance just now, being continuously confronted with beliefs of renewed national state belongings and non-belongings, whether it be "America First" or Brexit. Gibraltar focuses all these issues like a burning glass.

In Rottenbacher's plate "1713 - XXI", the Flag of Great Britain - one of the world's biggest colony powers – has been cut out of the frame, yet being very much present in the lower left corner. Above we see a technological device that at first glance could be a surveillance camera, but is in fact a tourist telescope for the visitors of Gibraltar to take a look at *The Other*; may it be the other *side* – Morocco/Africa on a clear day, or may it be the other *species* - The Barbary Macaques, living in Gibraltar, being the only wild monkey population in Europe. Or may it be *The Other* in terms of technology: the many tankers drifting around the coast of Gibraltar queuing up for the cheapest gasoline station in the Mediterranean Sea. They are also to be found in plate „1713 – IV“, here creating a composition referring to the illustration of the Pillars of Heracles in the engraved title page of Francis Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* from 1620, with the boat in the middle of the two pillars, combining science and philosophy.

Both *the gazing* and the idea of *The Other* is central to Rottenbacher's *Non Plus Ultra* series. Looking carefully at 1713 - XIX and 1713 - XX, the gaze becomes almost uncanny, when - after watching them for a while - there is something or somebody seemingly staring back at us from within the mountain, and that might actually very well be true. 1713 - XIX depicts a mountain

full of holes reminiscing of a time not so long ago when human beings were using the mountain as a camouflage to hide from the enemy - in order to be able to attack before being attacked themselves. Inside the mountain, the Rock, or the Pillar of Heracles, one finds a 55 km long tunnel system which is almost twice the length of the entire Gibraltarian road network. The tunnel system has been developed and used for more than 200 years - most recently during the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the Cold War.

Meanwhile 1713 - XX shows us a physical extension of the gazing mountain in a way that the building in the foreground articulates the movement of cannons firing out of the holes, causing explosions and materializing the intention of the tunnels as it was in the first place. A similar concept is the case in the pairing of 1713 - XI and 1713 - XII, where the natural water source coming out of the mountain has been narrowed down into a pure resource for human beings by isolating the water in pipes.

This nature/culture dichotomy is present in all of the plates, and one easily gets the feeling that despite the film-still-like aestheticized transformation of the often unappealing places of the British Colony of Gibraltar, the importance for Rottenbacher lies behind the image itself: "Gibraltar was the exact opposite of that Mediterranean place I was expecting, and I immediately sensed something peculiar related to the ambivalence of this geopolitically exposed place. I had a very strong impression of hopelessness, but when trying to capture it, there was always the element of hope emerging, as if salvation was just waiting around the corner." These ideas can be seen most explicitly in 1713 - V and perhaps less in 1713 -VI, but still there is something alluring behind the rock, bothering oneself as beholder not to be able to access.

This inaccessibility brings us back to how Heracles created the Strait of Gibraltar by dividing the mountain in two pieces. Heidegger once said that we can measure stone and weigh it, we can name it and describe its colour and shape - but we can never really access it in order to fully understand it. Even if we physically try to open it - as Heracles did with the mountain, leaving his pillars behind as gate to the new world - we just end up the same place we started. We can then start all over again measuring the stone, with the only difference being that we then have two stones. To Heidegger, another thing/object like the stone is the bridge. The bridge, more a place than an object, is a thing that we *can* actually physically access. By doing so, according to Heidegger, we enter the fourfold of the Sky, the Earth, Divinity and Mortals.

When going through Rottenbacher's *Non Plus Ultra* series (especially 1713- VII & 1713 - VIII) the question arises if it is time to finally realize that we as human beings are not Heracles. That we are not meant to put up and break down borders, but in order to not repeat our parents and grandparents mistakes we might rather start building, dwelling and *being*. In the sense of Heidegger, who suggests, that it is not only about building bridges but about inhabiting the earth in awareness of the fourfold. This includes a deeper understanding of how we are as human beings. And how we treat not just each other or the earth but also the sky and things and places, that we are not (yet) able to access. Because we are not Gods, and thank God for that, one thing we learned from Heracles is the enormous responsibility that comes along with it. Meanwhile we can enjoy the divinity captured in especially those of Rottenbacher's *Non Plus Ultra* plates showcasing less traces of humans and more signs of The Inaccessible.