

Performing Things

Over the past few years, arguably starting with permeable super real in 2010, Elke Marhöfer's films have taken the course of a continuing research journey. What in the beginning seemed to be more of an intuitive refusal to comply with ideological constraints of the cinema apparatus, by now has grown into a deliberate experiment with and within Elke Marhöfer's artistic practice and her academic investigations. At the core of this project lies the desire to abandon or transcend the anthropocentric predilections that are not only institutionalized by anthropology but also dominate the theoretical and practical terminology of film.

It is still generally assumed that the fundamental constituents of a cinematic act depend on the human perspective and perception: the viewpoint, the center of attention, the protagonists and the addressees are usually all human, and in case their humanness is uncertain, the nonhuman element typically serves to set the stage for the creepy, bleak, estranged, absurd or haunting, depending on the genre and narrative at hand. The attempt to challenge and overcome this anthropocentric framing has aesthetic and technical, as well as political and ethical aspects. While it is a shared concern of a number of contemporary filmmakers and artists, the nonhuman and even antihuman traits of the cinema apparatus have informed filmmaking from its beginnings: automation of the reception, manipulation of the body, the alliance "man-machine", comical, frightening and awe-inspiring, were very much the focus of early cinema. And again in experimental and expanded cinema where the disposing of narrative structures and the deconstruction of exclusively human authorship by the creative involvement of hazard, coincidence and unintended effects of the material and technical processes created a critical aesthetics, a critical perception, or a perception in crisis. It can be argued that while these forms of dissident aesthetics were essentially meant to shatter the spectator's / recipient's belief that film was an object (commodity) *made for him / her, with him / her in mind*, the aesthetics of more recent forms of "disloyalty towards anthropocentrism"¹ in film (as Elke Marhöfer puts it) are less concerned with destroying (the ideology around the commodified object). Instead, they aim to provide new pleasures – or seek to please something new, hitherto unrecognized, a not necessarily human desire from which unrecognized affiliations, confluences, and creations might grow. Recently, some of the work of Thai filmmaker Apitchatpong Weerasethakul and the cinematic output of Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab co-directed by filmmaker Lucien Castaing-Taylor have often been cited as examples for this kind of latent development. While probably informed by it, Elke Marhöfer's work bears ample evidence of entirely idiosyncratic choices made by an artist researcher / researching artist who has provided herself with a double chance to be disloyal towards anthropocentrism by opting to work in both fields simultaneously: anthropology and visual arts.

There is no need to actively favor the human species over other forms of existence, in order to nevertheless be deeply entangled in anthropocentrism – through modes of production and perception, aesthetics, narratives, the shape of objects and landscapes, and even through the very tools used to express critique, be it language, a camera, or a keyboard. Renouncing anthropocentrism is not equivalent to giving up the human perspective or even ridding oneself of one's humanness (if that was possible). It first and foremost means to reorganize the field of perception, discourse and practice in such a way that the human perspective is not favored over that of other beings or bodies; that all "actants" involved in a given setting are given

¹ All quotes in italics are taken from an unpublished paper by Elke Marhöfer in which she reflects on the conceptual background of her artistic practice. This text was originally written as a response to the paper.

equal consideration. Bruno Latour introduced the term “actants” that allows us to speak of an active, interested and creative involvement in the world independently of the typically anthropomorphic terminology around “intentionality” (“subject,” resp. “subject –object,” “consciousness,” “will,” etc.).

The fact that the very language we use to describe the dilemma is a heavily loaded vehicle of anthropocentric predilections has been one of the major tasks for posthuman theory, and it is relevant for Elke Marhöfer’s practice, too: “*The question is no longer, if animals generate images, have language or gesture to communicate, use their hands to make tools, but what terminology, which words are appropriate to describe their expression and perceptions?*” She goes on to explicitly describe her own approach as aiming in the direction of an artistic practice with an entirely different self-assertion. She suggests that in the light of “*the bold correspondence of human and nonhuman expressions and perceptions*” the dominant concepts of “*meaning, culture, representation, which includes thinking and knowing*” must inevitably appear “*outmoded and anachronistic*”. “*Why not do without them?*”, Elke Marhöfer asks, as it seems with the joy of relief rather than the fear of uncertainty.

It is fascinating and rewarding to see how in Elke Marhöfer’s artistic work getting rid of the old vocabulary becomes audiovisual practice. I would argue that a particular characteristic of her recent work is due to the performative awareness (or aware performances) in using her tools, making films that can be seen as a composition of traces of a complex, both intellectual and technical engagement with the world.

While, in a general way this could be said of all audiovisual productions, the essential questions now evolve around the role and importance given to the human in these interactions and how one interprets one’s own humanness as an actant. “*Enfranchised from the human,*” Elke Marhöfer suggests, “*the production of meaning or knowledge is not only a cognitive process, but also a dynamic, practical interaction with the world, that takes place in relationship to a territory or the earth.*” Such “performative awareness” in filmmaking must not fear the charge of “performative self-contradiction” presumably implied by the objection that, after all, it is a human subject that expresses this enfranchised critique. “Yes and no,” replies Jane Bennett, who in the introduction to her book *Vibrant Matter* asks these rhetorical questions herself. For her, attempting “to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common is to bracket the question of the human [...]”² On the one hand, the fact that such bracketing is an intentional, willful operation appears less like a contradiction once “revisions in operative notions of matter, life, self, self-interest, will, and agency” have had their effects on how self-reflection is perceived and performed. On the other hand, however, self-contradiction made visible and expressive in an audiovisual act can even be part of the dynamic (or serve as an epiphany) that helps to decenter the typically anthropocentric perception of moving images and the accompanying sounds.

Elke Marhöfer, recognizing that, “*when working under the premise of a nonanthropocentric point of view, filming becomes not only a matter of content, but also entails a technology like a camera*”, goes on to suggest that “*a camera is not purely a human cultural and technical device, but must be seen as an extension of already existing forces within the surrounding environment. With this in mind the camera becomes a ‘tool’ that is in principle not different from nonhuman animal tools.*” In her case, the camera is a 16 mm Bolex. Actively “bracketing the question of the human” regarding this camera and its interrelations with “existing forces” does not deny the importance of the filmmaker’s physical and more or less skilled way of operating it. On the contrary: the actual handling of the camera, the physical efforts to hold, control, move and balance the technical device become parts of an uninterrupted and non-hierarchical network of relations including the effects of

² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010). All subsequent quotes from Bennett are from page IX of this volume unless otherwise noted.

light and heat, the shadows of clouds, the movement of animals' bodies, the flexibility of a tree moved by a gust of wind, the noise of petrol combustion in a car engine, and innumerable other processes and events.

Contextualizing the human aspect on a "less vertical plane," as Jane Bennett aspires, allows for a more dynamic and permeable understanding of the involvement of the human in these complex arrangements.

The "animate in plants" and the "vegetable in animals," as Gilles Deleuze puts it, comes to the fore on such a reorganized plane and the anthropomorphous aspects of objects and creatures denote something more autopoietic than merely a metaphor ascribed from the human point of view.