

prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines
{each part welcomes the other without saying}

1.

A membrane trembles where the everyday and the immanent touch, separating and at once connecting them. It permits the senseless routine of everyday life and the imperceptible stillness of immanent life to give way to one another, to communicate. The porous membrane is an active conduit between acknowledged (everyday) and unacknowledged (immanent) forces in human lives. Passing through it is indeterminate and like so many anomalous sensations little attention is devoted to it. We avoid lingering in or near this membrane because it cannot be readily processed to conclusion through language and reasoning, growing and receding as it does at the limits of sensation. It is this membrane Elke Marhöfer allows us to inhabit for 25 minutes in her film *prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines* {each part welcomes the other without saying}.

The everyday, the day-to-day, the ho-hum routine of everyday life. This is what lies on one side of the membrane Marhöfer explores. It is the bound-to tedium of going about the day, the live-long day, which interests her in this film. Thus the domestic shots – of domestic plants, domestic animals, a domestic man, and a domestic state. The latter is visible only in her shots aboard a train that runs from Havana to the neighboring province of Matanzas, and in the yellow plastic collar of a horse's wagon harness. The everyday Marhöfer presents us with is one of domestic stillness, where life is so mundane it literally goes without saying. No one speaks in this film, and given that Cuban households can be intense places, this is notable. The cart driver quietly harnesses his horse, then softly bathes its steaming back at the end of a shift. The horse is noiseless. The shots of home are as quiet as the eggs that

somehow hold a central place in this film. Marhöfer's is a quiet, everyday, domestic stillness.

The everyday routine is not without its costs. The most pernicious of these is the alienation that is attendant to it. So many connections and possibilities have been foreclosed. This is the price of having rationalized and structured the day according to schedule, according to plan. All of it worked-out and made sense of in the realm of language, in thought, and logic. How many possible gestures, possible effects, go un-realized when the "repetition of the same" becomes what we call "the day?" The everyday: a making-sense, through reason and language, of forces gathered-to, so that no further sense need be made. If the everyday is exceptional it is only because despite being ho-hum it is the result of a barbarity of objectification, which places countless possibilities at a distance and welcomes in the disaffection we call "boredom." Alienation, as we well know from our human relationships, brings with it silence, too.

The other side of the membrane Marhöfer presents us with is "the immanent." This is the nature that makes life possible, which undergirds the life we notice as such. The immanent is what life, including human life, is saturated by, it is that matter without which we could not live. Counterintuitively, it is also that matter which we experience the least, and rarely affirm. Because it is ubiquitous and our entanglements with it are so intricate and intimate, immanent matter is rarely acknowledged. The immanent stands out even less than the everyday, though not for being domestic. It is rather untamed and intensive, but infinitesimally, and in most of human life it is experienced at the limits of sensation and usually escapes notice. The silent hum in our ears, the feel of our pulse, the warmth of the sun on our skin, the temperature of our bodies.

Marhöfer's film plants us in this intimate matter as relentlessly as it does in the domesticity of everydayness. Her presentation of immanent life begins with the shots of

vegetation, mostly trees. The repetitive shots of trees. The initial images are an homage to Mikhail Kalatozov's *Soy Cuba*, where palm trees also stand-in for the island. Trees that at first glance captivate us with their delightful shapes – the shaggy top of a Royal Palm, the ropey, knotted, arms of a *Jaguey*, clumps of giant bamboo, and the slick sheets of a banana plant. But minutes into *prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines* {each part welcomes the other without saying} the vegetation slips away, despite being in many of her shots. The green recedes, in its expectedness, to the background of existence we notice not at all – immanence. Marhöfer intends for us to linger alert near the immanent though. So, hand-in-hand with letting the trees recede, she brings them forward. Thus, the wind shakes them and the rain soaks them, to mark a difference in the canvas, to recall to our attention the immanent field she has only just introduced.

In and out of focus comes this immanent world, and this is her intention. This is the first hint that she is placing us in the membrane that separates the everyday and the immanent. It is appropriate that she would give us wind and water, two extensions of nature so close to us that rarely do we acknowledge them. The water contained in our cells, which comprises the greatest part of our blood and tissues. The wind, a dramatization of the air we breathe, the oxygen and carbon we share with the vast part of life on earth.

Marhöfer introduces another play of immanence in her film, and this is the ubiquity of light. From the first shot she rarely yields in this. She insists on the light of the sun, specifically, and on reminding the viewer that everything she shows us exists by virtue of sunlight, in one form or another. In the early takes sunlight streaks across her smudged lens. Twice she adjusts her aperture mid-take, so that you can't help but see the light. She doesn't just want us to acknowledge the sunlight. She has us look right at it. Like any look at the sun it can only be a peek, as when she glances directly at it behind corn stalks (sunlight

avatar second only to the sunflower). Sunlight, the energy of this planet, suffuses *prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines {each part welcomes the other without saying}*, and when we are not looking directly at the sun, it directs us to other shapes of sunlight, transformed and made concrete in the forms of plants and animals. Plants and animals as accumulations of vast amounts of sunlight, plants and animals sunken in sunlight, made by sunlight, and fed by it. This is immanence.¹

A good film will perform an active encounter with light – grappling and pondering with it. Marhöfer does this most obviously in her POV shots of sunlight, making us realize that we are included among the creatures bathed and fueled by its energy. Her play with light does not end with these shots and continues in her post-production. Her film processing self-consciously plays with light in that she has introduced a significant amount of “noise” to the film: streaks, smudges, sprites and lights of all sorts playing on the film and at its margins. As a viewer you are never allowed to forget that you are watching a spool of film stream past. You are interfacing with a technology. In her postproduction Marhöfer turns away from the bad habit of imagining film as a transparent medium. The light-glitches on the film are image stutters (explicitly so in the shot of the two calves), to ensure you never forget that you are, in fact, viewing. There is an homage to Rouch- (and Brecht-) inspired cinema in this. But Marhöfer’s intentions are beyond these sources in that she appears to reject the very idea of mediation (or representation) that drives most of cinema studies, dialectically inflected as these are. Her effort is rather to produce an extension of the very boundary that her film is made to explore: the one between the everyday and the immanent.

The everyday and the immanent share a quiet that passes for the obvious or the insignificant, these two twisted in a Mobius strip. They share a quiet that eludes detection. This is what

¹ For an economy of sunlight paired to a philosophy of immanence see Georges Bataille, *The Accured Share*, Volume I: Consumption (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

Marhöfer means by “*{each part welcomes the other without saying}*.”

Marhöfer’s achievement is to have us experience the play of everyday life and immanent life – the way rote life vanishes before our eyes only to slip against the radically proximate and vanishing reality of immanent sunlight and sunlight-avatars (plants, horses, chickens, cows). She involves us in this play by sinking us in the strange and silent boundary between them. A gelatinous boundary, unknowable in language in that it is radically experiential, resistant to translation and explanation in its dense silence. Her accomplishment is to have sought and found this membrane, and in her craftswoman’s hands she thickens it so that the viewer can’t but be caught in it.

In this Marhöfer is a devotee of her art and its history. She pushes the very materiality of her equipment, of her lenses and film, and explores their limits. This is the task of the artist within her guild, and she shows herself to be a keen and curious filmmaker. In the case of this film, the limits she probes are emotional (affective), and only through this are they conceptual. She pushes the affective dimension of her equipment and her handiwork in editing and processing, so that the film becomes an extension of the very membrane she seeks to explore.

2.

prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines {each part welcomes the other without saying} could be run backward, beginning with the credit sequence and ending with the Kalatozov shot, with its rowing sounds and sight of palm trees. Starting from the end, the film would begin with the shot of the prenda-nganga-enquiso for which this film appears to be named. We assume it is *Zarabanda 7 Rayo* there in the background of the now-opening credit sequence, where the prenda is acknowledged by its proper name. This prenda, (I assume it is kept by the cart driver?) is the strange attractor through which

the life in this film takes its shape. Prendas lend shape to the lives of those who keep them as part of *Palo*, a Kongo-inspired practice of healing and harming unique to Cuba. Palo connects the living to the dead through intensively material craftwork. Every shot from the one of Zarabanda 7 Rayo onward could be experienced as having passed through this prenda-nganga-enquiso, having been bent and shaped by its gravity.

Marhöfer has us linger with Zarabanda 7 Rayo, and only by virtue of the flickering candle can we discern it is not a still shot. In this, Marhöfer is doing precisely what the prenda wants her to do, which is to honor it with her presence. A Cuban-Kongo prenda also wants to grow, and it does so through lavish gifts. We do not know what Marhöfer gave to this prenda-nganga-enquiso while in its presence: was it an animal offering, or perhaps it was something more prosaic but no less generous, like a bottle of cane liquor? Given her benign interest in living things, as seen in the attention given to the little chick, I assume she did not offer Zarabanda 7 Rayo one of the animals we see in her film. This is how a prenda is “fed,” but from the look of the Zarabanda 7 Rayo it has not been soaked in animal blood recently. It is in repose, a candle to light its way into the pressing sea of the dead into which it is sunk and by which it is suffused. What we do know is that she offered Zarabanda 7 Rayo the gift of her time and creativity, and all of the resources necessary to make this film. The film is praise for this prenda-nganga-enquiso, and in this it is apt.

prendas-ngangas-enquisos, like Zarabanda 7 Rayo, thicken reality. They lend to it gravity and density by pooling and connecting forces that would otherwise be dissociated or incommensurate. To these forces prendas-ngangas-enquisos lend new direction and shape, so that they may return to it increased. This is why Marhöfer has made the film, to present some of those forces, the everyday and the immanent ones, and the world of energy in which they are sunk and which make them possible. In this way, Zarabanda 7 Rayo, the prenda-

nganga-enquiso for which this film was made, grows through the film and finds its extension in the remote and powerful worlds in which the film acts.