

Unfolded Phenomenality

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Nature as a form of observation in the work of Andrea Wolfensberger
Perspectivisation of a field

»Which nature is it that we are trying to protect from ourselves?« was one of the key questions asked in the series »Back to Nature« in a recent issue of the weekly newspaper Die Zeit.¹ This question seems telling in view of the new direction taken by the debate on nature: Beyond the accounts of post-human catastrophe and the debates on genetic engineering, the greenhouse effect and global warming that are – not unjustifiably – being conducted with a disturbing rhetoric, we need to clarify today which concept of nature we actually espouse. After nature began to be viewed at the end of the 20th century as an increasingly political and social affair, considered primarily from the perspective of its possible end,² during the past few years the need has once again arisen to redefine our theory of nature,³ an undertaking which of necessity also involves redefining our own position in the world.

Many theories have been proposed. They range from an attempt to gloss over the differences between nature, man, culture and technology – as in Ray Kurzweil's post-humanistic fantasies of the nanotechnologically tuned human being⁴ – to the simple reduction of all technical phenomena to their origins in natural processes,⁵ and ultimately to an understanding of nature as a social construct in the scholarly cultural debate.⁶ Common to all of these perspectivisations is that they no longer presuppose a firm distinction between nature and culture. In their publication on cultural theory, Hartmut Böhme, Peter Matussek and Lothar Müller describe nature as being »in principle not accessible ›in itself‹; we can only deal with forms of our own cognition in which we objectify nature and manipulate it practically and technically ... Nature is the history of what humans have devised as nature based on cognitive, technical, aesthetic, religious or other models. In short: Nature is what we think it is and what we know about it. And usually what we have ›thought‹ and ›known‹ about it was what we could and wished to ›make of it‹ in practical terms.«⁷ According to this point of view, there is »no other access to nature than in the historical forms of our knowledge of and dealings with it.«⁸ And therefore »Nature ... is always a function of human practice and culture.«⁹

In the following I would like to interpret the work of Andrea Wolfensberger as a position within this field and then ask how nature is determined therein. I will try to show that in her work as well, what one might call nature can never be divorced from what our own observation creates: an »ontology of observing«, to borrow a term coined by Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana, is characteristic of Wolfensberger's works.¹⁰ She develops a perspectivisation in which observing (but not the observer, mind you!) takes primacy over the object.¹¹ What is vital here is that the artist dissociates herself from the anthropocentrism that currently dominates the ecological debate (which one might call an inverted anthropocentrism because humans are accused of causing all the problems in nature, which would supposedly be better off left to its own devices). Based on a few examples of her work and comparisons with other artists, I will argue that in Wolfensberger's works the human subject is not ultimately the main focus. In contrast to Romanticism and Idealism, where man with all his unfathomable sensations in the face of nature repeatedly encounters his own being, Wolfensberger's ontology of observing does not revolve around the human self. Her works can be read instead

as a clear renunciation of anthropocentrism in favour of a focus on the phenomenality of natural processes and organisational patterns. It is this phenomenality that needs to be recognised and understood; it is stretched, exposed and subjected to a media-conditioned scrutiny in an effort to understand what organises life.

The path of the sun and gauging sensation

In one of her first large-scale installations, executed for the exhibition *Artefact* in 1988, Wolfensberger inscribed an approximately 10-cm wide line of beeswax across the walls and floor of an old foundry building. This line traced the trajectory of a ray of sunlight that shone through a chimney hole in the ceiling on June 24, as it wandered along the walls and ceiling in the course of the day. During the exhibition, however, the sun described a wholly different arc, so that the light cone shining down from the ceiling on sunny days could not at first glance be associated with the wax line. An important effect of the glowing yellow stripe of beeswax running across the room was therefore initially to divide the hall, dyed a mottled brown from the oxidised casting sand, into two zones in such a way that crossing the wax line on the floor always revealed a completely new quality about the other side. This appeal to physical sensation and orientation consistently challenged viewers to change their standpoint and reconsider their own placement within the space. Like an intarsia of stored, congealed light, the wax line brought energy, life and temporality into play, drafting against the backdrop of the foundry furnace and the dark, deserted industrial architecture a multifaceted, symbolically and sensually charged space for interpretation. This was a space that shaped the relatedness of life, energy, death, ephemerality and recurrence as an open context, in which the meaning of artistic intervention seemed to consist of defying transience through the presence of the sensual.

In this early work, three themes are already in evidence that will remain central in the ensuing years: First, the viewer's standpoint, which always must be gauged in sensory terms; second, the rendering of the phenomenality of energy processes, orders and states, and their meaning for the organisational patterns of natural life; and third, artistic practice as resistance against the temporality of all existence, or as the gateway to an unfolded present, similar to the spirit of Far Eastern practices.

Autopoiesis and the precarious organisation of life

In the works of the following years, Andrea Wolfensberger develops her own brand of brittle poetry. Additional wax objects, recalling at times the strange indeterminacy of Eva Hesse's sculptures,¹² as well as the videos she begins to make, show an increasingly distinctive aesthetic that combines the imperfection and unruliness of natural phenomena with a presentiment of ordering principles – and hints, without any transfiguration, at organisational patterns of »being itself« (Martin Heidegger).

Along these lines, the artist now executes a series of photographs, films and videos dealing with the phenomenon of the »dancing« flocks of birds that can be seen every evening in the winter skies over Rome.¹³ In her publication *La danza degli storni*, documenting one of these works, Wolfensberger paraphrases the physicist and system theorist Fritjof Capra: »For Newton, material consisted of basic building blocks, all of them made of the same material substance. In Einstein, mass is a form of energy and material is made of energy patterns that constantly change into each other. Although physicists agree that all energy is a measure of activity, they have no answer to the question: what is actually active here?«¹⁴

The phenomenon of the flocks of starlings that gather by the thousands over the roofs of Rome in flowing organic formations raises precisely that question. To enable observations that go beyond the beauty and sensationalism of this natural spectacle, the artist prepared a black-and-white negative print of her film stock. The birds can thus no longer be identified directly and the question of the meaning and origin of the natural phenomenon comes even more radically to the fore. What the

artist seems to find interesting initially about the swarming starlings is not the sublime, beautiful and spectacular aspects (at least the plainness of her images would tend to underplay these as much as possible), but the abstract confirmation of the infinite richness of nature's forms. The question remains: Why is something moving here in the first place? How do the birds communicate in such masses? Which role is played therein by the individual living thing? Do these occurrences display self-organising processes?

Performativity and risky perspectivalisations

A similar theme to that in the series *La danza degli storni* is explored in the video *Wassergang*, also from 1993. Here, the artist uses an underwater camera towed behind her to photograph her own path wading through a river. The swirling bubbles that rise up from her rubber boots are captured by the camera and then slowed down 50 per cent, yielding images that are strongly reminiscent of the bird formations. But the performative aspect is new, as Annette Schindler writes: »While she drags the video camera behind her, or wears it on her body, the artist struggles with the force of the onrushing river.«¹⁵ At the end of the almost 19-minute video sequence, the camera floats away because the artist, fighting the increasingly powerful current in mid-stream, has fallen into the water. The images are accompanied acoustically by both the noise of the bubbling underwater world and a dissonant sequence of electronic howls. These only hint at possible harmonies. The slightly disturbing, offbeat rhythm of the electronic sounds, which were composed by Ernst Thoma, and the changing images of the whirling bubbles generate the impression of a fragile, constantly endangered continuum, which in the end does in fact rupture. The performative aspect of fording the stream, where the artist puts herself at risk literally as well as in the narrative, in turn, signifies the menace to her own artistic position.

This moment of self-risk is rendered even more emphatically in a videowork created some ten years later: *Naus*. In a sequence reduced to nine per cent of its original speed, the artist, camera in hand, swims towards a tanker off the Aegean coast. It is not only the horizon that shakes here in the face of towering waves and the strong pull of the tide; witnessing the artist's unsteady swimming movements, we have the feeling that the act of filming itself must have been an extremely dangerous undertaking.

»of collapsing edges«

Andrea Wolfensberger never treats the theme of nature without symbolic connotations and its relation to cultural practices. This is evident not only from titles like *blauer Mohn* and *who is afraid of yellow*,¹⁶ but also from her choice of subject matter. The river, for example, is a symbol of the borderline between life and death, or an emblem of constant change; the videos shot in mountain landscapes display marked echoes of landscape painting; and her photorealistic pictures, painted after close-ups of an autumn garden, can be regarded as allegories of transience. There are recurring allusions to mythology or, as in the case of the blue poppy (*blauer Mohn*), to romantic topoi. But the point here is to break with the heroic and sublime, i. e. with all that might generate a romantic view of nature. The romanticism of the blue poppy gently waving in the wind before a mountainscape in the video *blauer Mohn* is undercut by a fat, ugly fly that alights upon it, and by the way the blossom itself, battered by the wind, keeps disappearing out of the frame. Nature here is not the »non plus ultra« of beauty, nor is it an enhanced counterworld or the incarnation of authenticity. It is not presented as wild and unspoiled in the sense of a misinterpreted eco-romanticism that not even Rousseau would espouse.¹⁷ Instead, this oeuvre is about the ways in which technology, nature and media can be artistically transformed.

A case in point: the monumental installation of a plant curtain in the Zürcher Kantonalbank. One might be tempted to think of Olafur Eliasson, for instance, who attracted attention in the late 1990s with his walls of moss, artificial rain spaces, waterfalls and eddies. His work emphasises the historicity of the classic distinction between »physis« and »techne«, between nature and the work of

man, there by tracing technology and nature back to the same energy processes. Wolfensberger's agenda is different; she is interested in how her choice of medium may influence her observation of so-called natural phenomena. By virtue of their size – as in the plant curtain and the matching wall painting at the Kantonalbank – her objects and images are exaggerated to display an enhanced present. The accent in Wolfensberger's work is on providing an arena for observing and dramatising the corresponding act of visualisation. This brings ordering patterns and symbolic meanings to light, while the manipulation of time and scale also makes what we see seem unfamiliar.

At the same time, Wolfensberger's pictures of nature eschew self-reflexive observation that discovers in nature only the unfathomable depths of the observing subject – i. e. that which is enigmatic and still indeterminate. Even the series of paintings *uns blüht* of 2003 and *von den hereinbrechenden Rändern* of 2006, which were based on video stills the artist took in her mother's garden, do not offer us spaces on which to project our own agendas. They hint at the tradition and aesthetic of nature images that are about the self mourning, its own transience. But the closer one gets to images like *Sternmagnolie*, the more wilful they become, rendered in brushstrokes that are anything but delicate. In her latest paintings, this technique is exaggerated to the extent that it creates an effect reminiscent of interference on a TV screen.

The beauty of nature is revealed only in potential mode, but even then it is still unsettling. Through the deceleration seen in almost all of Wolfensberger's video works or the device of bringing processes to a standstill and extending the present moment, ordinarily self-evident sequences of movement and physical processes suddenly seem deprived of meaning and causality.¹⁸ This is particularly obvious in the video *Bach (Brook)*, in which the artist seamlessly lines up several digital black-and-white photographs of a brook and then pans along them with her camera. We hear splashing and the picture moves, but the water remains a frozen mass. The media-conditioned gaze generates alienation effects, making the world seem unfamiliar to us and allowing us to see its phenomena in a new light.

In the video *YOYO* this effect is taken to its logical extremes. The tempo of the film, which shows the artist's son playing with a yoyo, is reduced to 10 per cent of its original speed. This lends the audio track an almost monstrous sound. And the up-and-down movements we associate with the yoyo suddenly appear in a new and totally familiar guise. The childish movements, the social aspect, the interaction with the camera – all that is part of the scene at normal speed – become blurred. Distorting the motion by stretching it out over time creates a completely different reality. The phenomenality of the action as it unfolds in time implies that the world has a substantiality that we do not perceive, one that is independent of our practices and »ways of worldmaking«.¹⁹ At the same time, however, the blurriness makes us realise that only a media-generated world can reveal this substantiality.

Wolfensberger thus reads nature neither as »what's out there«, as what exists physically, nor as a vision in which nature is, in Böhme's sense, »always a function of human practice«. In contrast, for example, with the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys, which undoubtedly resonates in Wolfensberger's early works, this oeuvre is not primarily about our responsibility toward, and intellectual interaction with, natural processes.²⁰ And unlike Dan Peterman, who in his artistic projects declares the cycle of consumption, decomposition and recycling to be a social issue of utopian dimensions, Andrea Wolfensberger instead exposes above all the phenomenality and temporality of physical, chemical and biological processes. She formulates a brittle and at times disturbing sensuality of delay, in which time acquires an almost Heideggerian transcendental quality in exploring the question of being. By stretching out the present moment and using the tool of deceleration, she repeatedly draws attention to the phenomenality of the world. In this respect, her works are always about the primacy of observing as an ongoing creative process, as an effort without which the object of observation does not make any sense.

- 1 Elisabeth von Thadden wrote the first article in the series, wherein she states: »Everyone is talking about ecological collapse. No one talks about nature anymore. This is a mistake.« Cf. Elisabeth von Thadden: »Im Augedes Orkans«, DIE ZEIT, February 15, 2007, No. 08, quoted after the online version at <http://www.zeit.de/2007/08/Klima>; retrieved May 1, 2007.
- 2 Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, New York: RandomHouse, 1989.
- 3 One of the major projects undertaken to this end was an interdisciplinary study group on the »Cultural History of Nature« led by K. M. Meyer-Abich at the Cultural Studies Institute in Essen. Cf. Hans Werner Ingensiep & Richard Hoppe-Sailer (eds.), *NaturStücke. Zur Kulturgeschichte der Natur, Ostfildern: edition tertium, 1996*, and Hans Werner Ingensiep & Anne Eusterschulte (eds.), *Philosophie der natürlichen Mitwelt. Grundlagen – Probleme – Perspektiven*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002.
- 4 See Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*, New York: Viking Press, 1999, and Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, esp. chapter 8, »A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century«, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp.149–181.
- 5 The art of Olafur Eliasson provides one example here, as referred to later in the text (see p.173). See Madeleine Grynsztejn, et al., *Olafur Eliasson*, London: Phaidon, 2002.
- 6 One of the protagonists in the German-speaking world is. See Hartmut Böhme, »Wer sagt, was Leben ist? Die Provokation der Biowissenschaften und die Aufgaben der Kulturwissenschaften«, DIE ZEIT, 49/2000, pp. 41–42, and Hartmut Böhme, *Natur und Subjekt*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988.
- 7 Hartmut Böhme, Peter Matussek and Lothar Müller, *Orientierung Kulturwissenschaft. Was sie kann, was sie will*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2000, pp.119–120.8 Ibid., p.120.9 Ibid., p.121.
- 10 See Humberto R. Maturana, *Ontology of Observing. The Biological Foundations of Self-Consciousness and the Physical Domain of Existence*, <http://www.inteco.cl/biology/ontology/>; retrieved April 1, 2007.
- 11 Ibid., section 12. EVA HESSE *Accretion*. 1968 Fibreglasseeach 147,3 cm, Ø 6,3 cm Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Hauser & Wirth Zürich London. From: Bill Barrette (ed.): *Eva Hesse Sculpture, Catalogue Raisonné*, New York: Timken Publishers 1989, p.182.
- 12 On Eva Hesse, see the extensive documentation by Lucy Lippard in *Eva Hesse*, New York: New York University Press, 1976.
- 13 See the essays by Irene Müller and Sarah Schmidt in this publication, pp.182 and 176.
- 14 Andrea Wolfensberger, *Ladanza degli storni*, Rome: Istituto Svizzero di Roma, 1991, s. p. For the original quotation see: Fritjof Capra, *Uncommon Wisdom: Conversations with Remarkable People*, New York: Bantam Books, 1988, p.140. Here in an interview Capra says: »I realized immediately that he had put his finger on a very difficult question. I responded by contrasting the Newtonian view of matter as consisting of basic building blocks, all of which in turn are made of the same material substance, with the Einsteinian view of mass being a form of energy and matter consisting of patterns of energy continually transforming themselves into one another. However, I also had to admit that, while it is understood that all energy is a measure of activity, physicists do not have an answer to the question: What is it that is active?«
- 15 Annette Schindler, »Andrea Wolfensberger«, *Sikart. Lexikon und Datenbank des Schweizer Institut für Kunstgeschichte*, <http://www.sikart.ch/artikel%5C4005833.pdf?PHPSESSID=44bc6f73fece00d1ac4a461e24f8bdf5>; retrieved April 1, 2007.
- 16 An allusion to Barnett Newman's series of paintings *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*.
- 17 Rousseau claimed, for example, that taming a pet was to its disadvantage and caused weakness and he regarded civilisation's accomplishments as unnecessary, considering »the human in the state of society« weak and stripped of his »inborn freedom«. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, 1754, quoted after the online version at <http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq.htm>; retrieved May 30, 2007. Even so, he deemed it out of the question for men to return to the »natural state« he envisioned. DAN PETERMAN *61th Street Bottlecap Pasta/Accessoires to an Event*. 2001 Pasta, reprocessed post consumer plastic, refrigerator, installation view 2. Berlin biennale, Berlin Photo: Jörg van den Berg
- 18 A procedure that recalls the early works of Bill Viola. See David A. Ross and Peter Sellars, *Bill Viola*, Ostfildern: Hatje/Cantz, 2003.
- 19 Independent therefore of a radically constructivist standpoint. See Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995.
- 20 See Fernando Groener & Rose-Maria Kandler (eds.), *7000 Eichen Joseph Beuys*. Cologne: Walther König, 1987.
- 21 See Dan Peterman: *exh. cat., Kunsthalle Basel/No.17*, Basel: Schwabe, 1998.