

Text from: Birgitta Weimer. *Daseinsformen – Osthaus Museum Hagen, Ausst. Kat.: Birgitta Weimer im Osthaus Museum Hagen, 06. Oktober 2017 bis 07. Januar 2018, Hagen 2017, P. 6 – 16.*

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sat reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

William Wordsworth (1798)

Iterations of Other Worlds – The Art of Birgitta Weimer

Of course it is permissible and appropriate that we understand the way Birgitta Weimer practices art as a confrontation with -- or even research on -- the worldview and models of the (natural) sciences. But this would assumedly not be saying very much, for such a characterization would overlook the modes of her works existence. They are “visual analogues” (Weimer) and thus always mixed-breeds that bear hybrid ratios beyond clear-cut domains of knowledge called ‘science’, ‘nature’, ‘technology’ or the like. Therefore let’s no longer try to speak of ‘nature or ‘science’, no longer of ‘nature *and* science’ or of ‘art *versus* science’.

Perhaps, before we actually start, it would help to think about “the beings of fiction”, with whom we have so long co-existed and that inhabit and animate the sheer infinite galaxies of fictionality. Artworks *are* “fictional beings”; they exist as such in our midst. And we live among them in a quite special relationship that, as we will see, has a strange network-like quality, described by Bruno Latour as follows: “To say that beings of fiction populate the world means that they come to and impose on us but also with the peculiarity that they nevertheless [...] need our support. [...] [I]f we do not revive them, if we do not minister to them, if we do not value them, they are in serious danger of vanishing. Accordingly they have this particularity, that the objectivity of their renewal is dependent on subjectivities that would not even exist if they had not given them to us.” (Latour)

To understand the specifics of this in the case of Birgitta Weimer, we will begin with a couple of (harmless) directions and questions: Regard the jellyfish in the sea (*Medusæ*) and how they are carried along by the waves and the current. Why are there suddenly so many of them here in the warm water? A look into a microscope and you’ll discover red blood cells in plasma (*Globules*). Do you think that a cell actually exists in isolation? Take a photograph or simply look out the window (or into a mirror). Can the world exist in a standstilled moment? Do we live in a stable continuum? (*Reality Bubbles? Probability Clouds?*) Go to an observatory and peer through a telescope at unreachably distant star clusters (*Messier Objects, Stella Nova*). Who sets up this cohesion of the galaxies? Think about what happened in

Hiroshima, Chernobyl or Fukushima: have forms of life mutated since then? (*Survivors?*) Where are they to be found? Under the cloudy sky, in a room, in your body as thought and feeling, on a digital photo, stored in your computer, in a dream? (*Spheres*) Listen to a parliamentary debate on reducing exhaust fumes or read a text by Barack Obama on the indispensable measures for protecting the climate (*Transmitters*). What are you thinking: Is it about nature? The raindrops on the window, the cereal in the breakfast bowl, the good blood levels ... (*Convolution, Fluidum, Aggregatrot, Morphogenesis*) ... Do you really imagine that your living environment exists in states of a stable continuum? Would it instead not be possible to think of it as a totality (what for us is 'totality') a coupling of ever new networks of constant changes and transitions (*Reconstructing Nature*) and at the same time perceive it as a totality (what for us is 'totality') manifest in distinct ways of existence? That's how it should be, shouldn't it?

And so we only perceive several stabilizing associations of those living environments that—micro- and macroscopically—surround, bear, locate and enclose us and also let go of us again. We, who are as persons never spread out or disbanded globally but are always situated exactly—or at least concretely and physically—located. We had long thought that this locus had the qualities of a pure, clear and distinct environment: subject here, object there; culture here, nature there; body here, technology there; art here, science there. But locus is already a mixture, a conglomerate, is already contaminated and infested by heterogeneous relations and entanglements of partly obscure agents. About which the philosopher, Jane Bennett, comes straight to the point: "The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group." Which is why the inquiry into such diverse things such as jellyfish, blood cells, perception of time, galaxies, radioactivity, self-perception, climate change, stability. They are never only natural, only technological, only cultural, only scientific, but always bear the different qualities and dynamisms of other ways of existence. Locus is a result of relations that have become linked into complex paths.

Let us take two examples from the field of Weimer's works (*Globules, Messier Objects*). Blood for us is in us and, mostly quite unnoticed, a pulsating fluidity of life, but can also even be a quantifiable and differentiable substance under the microscope. Such a metamorphosis is complex and proceeds by way of technical, economical, scientific and other relational operations (lab measurements, the focal lengths of optical lenses, the financial accounts of health insurance and software for statistics, the transportation of the substance through the city including test tubes and cooling units, the sting of a wound in the crook of an arm, blood pressure, the potential mixture of liquids, etc.). Such shared operations of human and nonhuman agents create cohesions, relations that, for instance, enable the isolation and evaluation of red blood cells (*Globules*). Yet regardless: neither as pulsating 'life's elixir' nor in our bodies nor as a laboratory substance is our blood 'only' nature, but is also always a social entity, technological artifact, economically valuable material. Similarly the telescopic, cartographical galaxy and star cluster objects (*Messier Objects*) that Messier discovered and measured are not physically in reach owing to their inconceivable distance in time and space. Are these points of light in the telescope for us not always also material things, sublime-romantic puzzles and particles of a system in a scientific taxonomy? And Weimer's Messier galaxies even

potentiate such irritations. We stand in their midst and look at their illuminations as well as at the walls. Where do they come from and what and where is the place in which we find ourselves?

The fact that the presence of these things both touch us and are something like *reality bubbles*, behind which an infinite potentiality of other forms of existence circulate, means that these covert relations pervade us at their ends or nodes and make us into what we ourselves can ever understand as an environment that is ours but which never completely belongs to us. Michael Foucault calls this game of presence and latency the ratio between subjectivity and “archive” and applies to it the wonderful metaphor of the “border of time”. The archive, “simultaneously near us but aloof from our actuality, is the border of time that surrounds our presence, goes beyond it and points to its otherness; it is our own exterior that keeps us within bounds.” (Foucault) This shows that we, as so-called subjects, are not the Cartesian starting point of the world, i.e., the environment, but the result of a long chain of events and operations that, on their route, realize material, semiotic, technologic-medial, political and scientific associations and first of all lead to subjectivity. To continue the thought together with the initial questions—what stability and continuity do clouds have? What do I see when I gaze through the telescope and see through the lightyears? What kind of beings survive atomic catastrophes? Which are the spheres that I inhabit? And so on—Weimer’s works, several of which have from the start slipped into this text (in brackets), reveal themselves bit by bit in their transformative and hybrid ways of existence. Accordingly the following question is vehemently raised: What kind of artworks are these, insofar as we do not see them simply as aesthetic ‘art-historical’ objects, but as autonomous *things* and agents? In which ontological mode are they present when they confront us?

To start with, a possible answer can be formulated art-historically: Birgitta Weimer’s *CŒuvre* has doubtless significantly contributed to the sculpture crisis (see, e.g., Vogel) that has lasted over several decades. A crisis that has deconstructed so-called sculpture and brought objects into being that, according to their various parts, can be considered close to a mural, a relief, a performance, a media installation, an environment, among others, but always also something different, something that goes beyond a taxonomic genre, as Birgitta Weimer’s works also do. Seen formally and materially, her works belong partly to an artistic field that has, in a critical and productive way, taken up the legacy of Minimalism, that art movement since the 1960s that with its *specific objects* (Donald Judd) has relied on industrial produced materials and parts, hence on an anonymization and dissimulation of the material as well as the production process. Artists like Richard Serra and, especially, Eva Hesse—who represents an important *point de départ* for Birgitta Weimer—sought an aesthetic solution that promised to bring the materiality of the works intensively together with the resonant corporeality of their reception.

Such interferences of pictorial body and bodily picture are formulated everywhere in her works and constitute aesthetically the above inquiry into the mode of her works as *things*. It is as things that they emerge from a more passive status, which befits them as objects, to achieve active power, thus unsettling us as to *what* they really are. A look at their continuing and disturbingly unclear status, these creatures in

Weimer's cosmos—the *Probability Clouds*, *Messier Objects*, *Globules*, *Medusæ*, *Transmitters*, *Survivors*, *Sad Tropics*, *Spheres*, *Reality Bubbles*, etc.—are characterized as “epistemic things”. For these are “not only objects in a narrower sense, but can also be structures, reactions, functions. These present themselves as epistemic in an irreducible fuzziness and vagueness characteristic for them. [...] Such preliminaryity is unavoidable, for epistemic things paradoxically embody what one does not yet know about.” (Rheinberger) Birgitta Weimer creates works as beings that carry out an “image act” (Bredekamp), which is able to ontologically change and suspend the composition of our world of diverse beings and undertake iterations.

And it seems almost as if they thus (also) wanted to take revenge on those who first of all measured, and then in a way produced, our historical place and whom we have learned to call Anthropocene (cf. Crutzen, among others), who in regard to science see it as a network of technological development, scientific-model rationality and biological-physical systemization: Charles Messier, Alexander von Humboldt, Carl Friedrich Gauß, Charles Darwin, Gregor Mendel, Werner Heisenberg ...

Those hybrid things of Birgitta Weimer's have already coexisted with us and inhabited our space for several years now. And at the same time, with their uncanny uncertainty as epistemic things, they are social beings, which initially Michel Serres and then also Bruno Latour called “quasi-objects”; they “circulate in networks and cross the boundaries of language, of the social and the real. [They are] hybrids, composite beings of nature and society, of the verbal and the real. They are the things which join together and stabilize the social band. The term [“quasi-object”] points to our entanglement with things in society; things circulate between us, around us, and if they are matter-of-factly on hand, we can hardly call them delimited objects.” (Roßler).

Consequently Weimer's works hybridize the mode of appearance of objects, measurements and orders, so that a clear attribution ‘to nature’, ‘to technology’, ‘to theory’, ‘to science’, etc. can hardly succeed. Then how and where should the *Probability Clouds*, the *Medusæ*, the *Transmitters*, the *Messier Objects* and the *Morphogenesis* be taxonomically located? As objects they may simply be beautiful artworks, but as things they shake up our habitual order and our measurement of the world (Kehlmann) and thus also, when face-to-face with them, deconstruct our own position as subject. That is their image act. This becomes possible at a seemingly preliminary end of a journey that they have concluded, if they emerge at our locus as Weimer's works and creatures. Of course: the artist Birgitta Weimer helps them to do so (quite in the sense of Latour's “*support*”). But we have no access to the spaces of the journey's route that these “fictional beings” have traveled. Somewhere between biological science laboratories, the system of physics' basic theories, deep astronomical times and spaces, oceanic currents, mathematical models and geological formations there were links, bifurcations, loops, rhizomes and notched spaces in which, gradually, they were transmitted, transformed, stabilized and finally materialized—as iterations of other worlds.

From the German by Jeanne Haunschild