

In Focus

Three positions in contemporary media art and photography

Introductory talk for the exhibition opening "In Focus" in Nottingham, 5 October 2019.

Three women, who joined forces in the Karlsruhe branch of the Women Artists' Forum GEDOK - a countrywide organisation that exists to promote border and genre-transgressing tendencies in contemporary art - come together in this exhibition, whose broad remit suits them well. Each works in the field of contemporary art and each seeks to find novel aesthetic forms and perspectives. We will encounter three very different artists, each with her own agenda and her own customised toolkit with which to construct a personal aesthetic language. In this respect, the exhibition also underscores the diversity supported by the GEDOK-sisterhood of arts.

Birgit Spahlinger explores the souls of plants¹ which, in her series of prints, she understands as *Shapes of Information*.

Astrid Hansen observes the world from above² in a series of photographic images.

And Sabine Schäfer³ is intrigued by the minutiae of nature, which she examines in her *Audio Biospheres* through image and sound, both taken at unusually close range.

At first glance, this ensemble of works may seem arbitrary – which would of course not be unusual, since many artists and curators today embrace the vagaries of chance. But if we look beyond the differences - in genre, form and content - and concentrate on concepts and intentions, greater commonalities become apparent:

In all of these works, that which is all too familiar - plants, insects and humans – appear remarkable and strange; even magical. What intentions lie behind such estrangements? How are these intriguing transformations brought about?

The title of the exhibition provides the clue: *IN FOCUS*.

¹ Birgit Spahlinger: "The Shape of Information" - Soul of Plants | photo graphics

² Astrid Hansen: "Seen from above" - series of photos

³ Sabine Schäfer: "Audio Biospheres" - Interactive Graphic Prints with Audio QR Code

All of these artists wish to sharpen our perception. After all, is this not what ART does best - direct the way in which we perceive the world?

Perhaps, at first, this doesn't seem like much - or even very remarkable but, in the context of an ever more invasive media culture, it has never been more essential.

In the midst of a perception shift of epochal proportions, we are daily exposed to a rapid and stealthy reformatting of our entire sensorial matrix through the action of digital media - media which compel us to browse, skim, skip and surf through the content of our devices at ever faster speeds. How can we withstand what we habitually practice? And how are we to resist this fleeting, superficial and fragmented state of mind, this lack of depth and connectivity - and the pressure of being driven increasingly to receive the world "in a state of distraction" (Walter Benjamin)?

Some philosophers and cultural analysts, even some neuro-scientists, are pinning their hopes on art as a cultural practice in which human sensibility is key. When artists' "understanding and skill enable us to bring the world into focus for perceptual consciousness" (Alva Noë), art encourages us to experience the world in an *attentive* way. In a culture driven by haste, distraction and constant entertainment, the three women in this exhibition are concerned rather, as Hansen puts it, with "*deceleration*... making space and radiating calm.

And the way they achieve this is through FOCUS.

The works in the exhibition command our attention by exploring different ways of focusing:

- Inspired by quantum physics and spagyric procedures, Birgit Spahlinger scrutinises the shapes of plants and their information content. Through the abstraction, multiplication, mirroring and contiguous arrangement of her images, her particular kind of focus reveals new and surprising figures at the points of intersection.

- Sabine Schäfer takes us into the secret strata of insects and plants - deep down and close up - expanding our visual and aural horizons and disclosing shapes, textures and sounds that normally elude the human sensorium.

- And Astrid Hansen finds yet another vantage point: moving up and away from earth-bound perspectives to adopt a bird's-eye view. From a distance she observes scenes far below, but up close and personal.

For all their fascination with the natural world these three artists are far from being technophobes. Indeed, their TECHNOLOGICAL MEANS afford them their respective foci and reify their desire to connect the natural with the analogue and digital worlds. Those means facilitate the apparatus viewing and listening we are invited to experience.

Without modern technology none of these works would exist:

- Spahlinger finds her phyto-images, then uses a computer to manipulate and multiply the abstracted shape, finally placing them closely together in a grid-like formation contained by a strong circular frame.

- Hansen empowers her camera with tele-objective vision in order to draw her subjects close while remaining at a distance.

- And Schäfer employs both high-resolution images of biological specimens - obtained through grid electron microscopy - and sound, laminated and transposed, to penetrate the deep visual and sonic structures of living organisms. Her Interactive Graphic Prints are furnished with an Audio QR code through which her intricate sound compositions can be accessed via phone or tablet. Yet when we hold our devices in front of her augmented photograph *Verschwinden AR, Dryas Julia* the image disappears.

All three artists use technology to unveil spaces of wonder and calm, and allow us to experience the familiar in surprising ways. At the same time, they leave us wondering about the limits of our perceptive ability: about what we *can't* see, or hear.

A remark by Marshall McLuhan springs to mind: "the serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because (s)he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception."

This perceptual awareness informs the specific techniques that each of these artists cultivate. For all the differences in their individual quests, they are in pursuit of a common

goal, namely to extract something *essential*, "to tease out", as Spahlinger says "the pattern of which life consists".

One of the specific procedures they employ to achieve this is the technique of REDUCTION:

- Spahlinger isolates her plants and simplifies their shapes, arranging her multiples into round fields of energy, which invoke the grids containing laboratory specimens.

- Hansen isolates her subjects by using the extended range of her telescopic lens to capture the empty space around them in order to "emphasize the scene that matters" (Hansen) – rather than setting out to capture the greater spread of activity usually offered by a higher vantage point. The frame of shadow she adds further enhances this isolation.

- And Schäfer enlarges extreme close-ups, extracted by means of high-tech image and sound capture, bringing tiny and imperceptible particulars into view, emphasizing in sound and image their textural detail and connections.

Finally, despite their focus on the 'essential', and the use of reductive techniques, none of these works is '*straightforward*'. Their creation requires sophistication, skills and experience drawn painstakingly from various different fields of artistic practice.

Their HYBRID nature becomes manifest:

- in Schäfer's work in the combination of sound, image and interactivity – and in her collaboration with scientists and technicians.

- It shows in the combination of research and digital image manipulation in Spahlinger's graphics.

- As it does in Hansen's treatment of her photographs with epoxy resin, by which means she achieves a patina that turns it into a precious object, somewhat reminiscent of an LED screen.

In spite of being immediately enjoyable, none of these works is lightweight, facile or easily digestible – all channel our attention toward our fragile natural world and, at a time of great environmental peril, sensitise and empower us to interact with it differently. In this lies the potent function of critical art today to which our three artists are all committed. Rather than

adding to a conformist and enslaving mindfulness, they argue a strong case for perceptual awareness.

And they demonstrate that FOCUS is a precondition for considered action.