

Line, Cornerstone, Molecule

(On Caution and Mimicry)

For Birgit Knoechl

And what if it doesn't want anything from you? And certainly doesn't need anything from you? Rather waits somewhere out there? For the day. For some rain. Or sun. Or for stimuli and vibrations your senses anyway wouldn't perceive. It: the thing, the animal, the growth, the weather, organic and inorganic life. Your feelings, thoughts, and words won't touch it. Water molecules don't care if the rain soaks through to your skin. And the overcast sky will not part just because you are craving light. At least there is no clear evidence that it would be otherwise. That's how we see nature: as a world full of things, forces, and phenomena, which are what they are completely on their own, and they remain true to themselves in a certain way. In contrast to us humans, who constantly run ahead of the present and believe we can permeate, understand, and control things with the power of our consciousness. A pretense. What better indication of the borders of consciousness when not the fact that no knowledge in the world can ever take the wetness out of water? Perhaps the decisive step to be consummated in art and thought is therefore to recognize and clarify these borders: My consciousness ends here. At this line. And I do not cross this line. I draw it. And I touch it on my side. What touches this line on the other side I cannot say for sure. Only this much: As a border the line forms an interface, an axis on which dimensions meet, a kink in the world around which dimensions of reality can fold and unfold.

And what if you do know it? Know it far better than you think? It: the thing, the animal, the growth, the weather, organic and inorganic life. Why should the nature out there go silently about its business? After all, you are a part of it. And it permeates you constantly. Already when your feet get cold and the cold ground slowly creeps up into your body. Roger Caillois writes: "While light is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is 'filled'; it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him".¹ Like how you are permeated by radio waves. When you do not encounter the world as a foreign body but are in it, why then do we act as if it is an outside, as if a shroud lay over it behind which things live in hiding? As if we constantly called out "hide and seek!" while strolling through nature. But what if it doesn't hide rather is within and outside us all of the time?

¹ Roger Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, trans. John Shepley, 1984 [1935], accessed June 6, 2015, <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~stou0046/caillois.pdf>, p. 30.

Then we would have to learn to understand speculative physics.² Or make more art. For what is art when not – since primeval times, when it was still expressly understood as totem and fetish-making – the attempt to make contact with the forces of the material world? Making contact doesn't mean translation between human and non-human languages (playing a color organ in front of aliens, deciphering ice crystal forms, or language training for cacti³). It doesn't happen like negotiations between two parties. For the connection already exists as long as certain processes take place *synchronously* in different organisms and things. For instance, plants seem to *respond* to events in their environment. The pain of an organism in the proximity of a plant is reflected in its quantifiable excitations. In a comparable way electromagnetic frequency patterns can be measured in mustard seeds, which correspond exactly with those of the movement of planets.⁴ Thus, if forces, impulses, affects, and oscillations have an effect *parallel in the medium* of different bodies then there is a type of *multimedia mimicry* in nature. What chills me to the bone might flow through the leaf veins of a plant in the same moment. And what makes the weather and puts clouds in the sky simultaneously magnetizes the electrons in my cerebral cortex. The music of the spheres sounds *multitimbral* with one superimposed voice.

There are equally as good reasons on hand for a cautious approach that delineates borderlines as for a speculatively empathetic approach to the nature of the world that retraces mimetic processes. And it is neither a question of choice nor of faith – both forms of knowledge exist today, one way or the other. The real challenge is to find ways of dealing with the fact that the cautious and the mimetic perspectives could be *equally true*.

The exceptional aspect in the work of Birgit Knoechl is that she opens herself as an artist to exactly this challenge! She enters into a sphere of activity – cautiously drawing lines while designing multimedia mimetic forms – where artifact and nature appear clearly disparate in one moment, whereas in the next they seem to be permeated by mimetic shape similarities, form and frequency resonances. Her approach to the claim of art to presentify the world is, on the one hand, tangible without any pretense. Her work doesn't say: I am nature. Instead it openly says: I am ink on paper, cardboard, latex coating, silhouette and pattern, work in a

² For example, in its philosophical interpretation by Karen Barad in: *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Thanks to Federica Bueti for reading it to me.

³ Many para-scientific investigations relapse to the point behind their intuitions, where they once again approach the world of phenomena in a conventional way as an opposite that we could convey something to or elicit something from if we only possessed the *code for the information transfer*. Iconic examples are the welcoming address to aliens with a cybernetic color organ in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), the interpretation of water crystal forms as a standardized symbolic language by Masaru Emoto, or scientist Ken Hashimoto's attempts to teach Japanese to cacti as documented in the film *The Secret Life of Plants* (1979).

⁴ Many convincing examples of such phenomena can be found in the book *The Secret Life of Plants* by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) and the film adaptation by Walon Green (1979) as well as L. George Lawrence's experiments with mustard seeds. Thanks to Birgit Knoechl for the tip about the book and film!

medium, not a representation, not a rendering of the real. However, along this clearly drawn dividing line Knoechl allows parallel flows. A geometric object of folded paper or cardboard coated with latex then becomes an object of mathematical fetish magic. In this way it conveys an idea of what might be happening in this moment *simultaneously and synchronously* to Knoechl's drawings and objects in other media of nature: in the geometry of things, in the fractal pattern of a plant's growth, in the mutual overlaps of leaves, or in the rhythm of a membrane movement of an organism in the sea. There are no claims of a higher knowledge to be derived. Quite the opposite. What knowledge means in relation to the things of nature, the forms they can even take on, is a question that Knoechl's work irrefutably poses when her skeptic agnostic trait comes to the fore, when the artifact closes in upon its meaning and gives you the feeling that you're not going to know what this thing knows. A feeling that already in the next moment can turn into a risky inkling that your body knows certain forms, resonances, and rhythms better than your consciousness would admit. Risky? Because it probably couldn't be proven with common means. And because Knoechl rejects the misguided choice between skepticism and mimicry and instead enters the space between them. It is her risk to make an art that clearly exposes the border to nature and at the same time suspends it in the multitimbral harmony of lines and materials with bodies, shapes, volumes, and forces. Without evidence and justification. But with the courage, instinct, and humor of an openness to ontological uncertainty – in other words, truly with the means of art.

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