

## Whose perspective is this? A few thoughts on Eija-Liisa Ahtila's Studies on the Ecology of Drama

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Since the early 1990s, Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila has been considered a master of the split-screen installation form. Her large-scale, multi-channel cinematic works create specific perceptual situations, while investigating the construction of audiovisual discourses and testing potentialities and limits of cinematic narration. In her works, Ahtila challenges cinema's conventions of single-channel storytelling, using multiple screens to build an experience of various concurrent times and spaces. Her latest work *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* – which was installed at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York City from the 1 March to 22 April 2017 – is no exception.

Like her other recent work for galleries such as *The Annunciation* (2010) and *Horizontal* (2011), this four-screen installation asks how technology, stylistic choices, and storytelling devices can generate an image of non-human worlds. Beginning with a few images of nature that occupy all four screens located in the same gallery room – a surprise for some – the installation begins by revolving around a figure played by the well-known Finnish actor Kati Outinen. The actor guides the visitor of the gallery by delivering a lecture in movement. She poses the installation's core question: 'How would it be possible to understand a different kind of existence [on this] planet?' While literally journeying from one screen to another, Outinen walks and talks the spectator through issues of human-centered storytelling in order to highlight the limits of meanings and connotations produced by the application of classical film dramaturgy and conventional film codes. By focusing on patterns of perception varying across species, *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* attempts to show the possibilities of opening up an audiovisual space for various kinds

of human and nonhuman actors, including a bush, a juniper tree, a common swift, a horse, a brimstone butterfly, and a group of human acrobats.

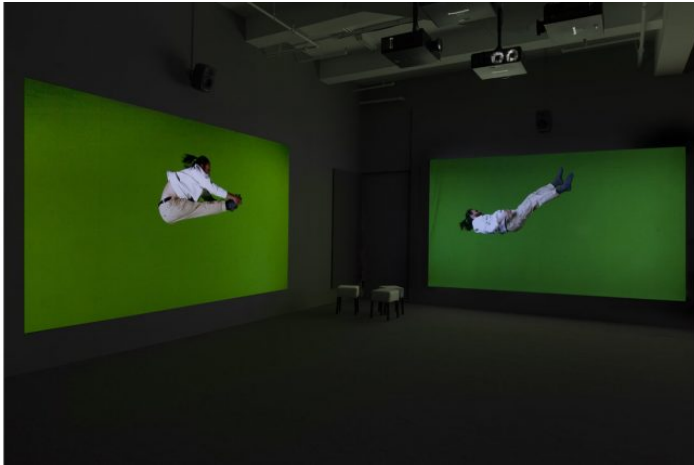


Fig. 1: Studies on the Ecology of Drama, 2014, four-channel projection installation, HD, 16:9, audio 5.0, 25:40, 30 second loop. Edition of 5 + 2AP. Image courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.



Fig. 2: Studies on the Ecology of Drama, 2014, four-channel projection installation, HD, 16:9, audio 5.0, 25:40, 30 second loop. Edition of 5 + 2AP. Image courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.

Ahtila's creative commentary on filmic perspective with regard to non-human worlds recalls Anat Pick's ideas on zoomorphic cinema. Drawing on Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll's thoughts, Pick's essay 'Animal Life in the

Cinematic Umwelt' proposes that decentering the anthropomorphising representations of some films can manifest non-human life-worlds before they are turned into subjects for our dramas. Drawing upon Uexküll's concept of *Umwelt* (an ecological environment), Pick argues that cinema can establish 'new relational trajectories' of animal and human worlds, positing different manifestations of both the human and the non-human.[1] In his book *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, Uexküll famously describes the perceptual world of a tick. The tick itself may seem completely different to a man, a dog, or any other animal, but, Uexküll suggests, that does not change the fact that the tick exists as a unique subject with its own distinctive perceptual world. An attempt to understand the way the tick perceives does not necessarily require the anthropomorphisation of the tick by ascribing human qualities to it. The translation of signs of a life-world of a living organism is based on (the tick, for instance, only reacts to three stimuli: temperature, light, and smell) does not expunge the organism that embodies those signs. Even though such renditions may never be precise, following Uexküll's (and Pick's) ideas, one could think about creative translations by artists and filmmakers that attend to the signs of perceptual worlds of non-humans with an aim to establish a different perspective towards them.

Echoing this zoomorphic approach, Outinen, the narrator of Ahtila's installation, asks, 'Can anyone or anything alter itself so much that the required change in perspective take place?' The framing, composition, camera angles as well as other cinematic techniques are thus used by Ahtila as instruments to explicate underexplored audiovisual representations of non-human perceptual worlds. Consider an image of a bearded man jumping on a springboard in front of a green background. This slow-motion image, as we learn from the narrator, simulates the perception of a bird (simultaneously portrayed flying across the accompanying screens) whose tempo of visual registration, Outinen further explains, is faster than ours. The optical perception of a bird is thus translated for the human spectator specifically through the application of slow motion. Another example of cinematic translation of non-human perception is a set of sped-up images demonstrating how various species perceive movement and light. For example, a dog, the spectator learns, would need more images per second to perceive a continuous and smooth movement. Thus, the features of non-human perceptions are replicated by the characters' transitions across the screens and associative multi-screen editing.



Fig. 3: *Studies on the Ecology of Drama*, 2014, four-channel projection installation, HD, 16:9, audio 5.0, 25:40, 30 second loop. Edition of 5 + 2AP. Image courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.



Fig. 4: *Studies on the Ecology of Drama*, 2014, four-channel projection installation, HD, 16:9, audio 5.0, 25:40, 30 second loop. Edition of 5 + 2AP. Image courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.

Without directly relying on Uexküll's proposition that various types of human and nonhuman animals have different perceptual worlds, *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* comments on the limits of spectatorship in human-centric narrative cinema, inviting the gallery visitor to pay attention to specific perceptual worlds of non-human subjects, and to think about the possibility of

all living organisms equally sharing the frame of the film. At first glance *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* recalls a didactic lesson given by a (non-ignorant) schoolmaster. The work is filled with several illustrative examples that make the installation seem not only expository, but also slightly satirical. Moreover, given that the human actor leads the spectator through the argument of the installation, one could also criticise the work by saying that it proposes nothing more than an utterly human commentary on non-human worlds. And yet, at the same time, the apparent didacticism exemplified by Outinen's edifying intonation can be read as a satirical meta-criticism of other, more conventional, artistic approaches to non-human worlds. Rather than pretending to build a transparent window into worlds that lie beyond human perception, Ahtila's installation assures an egalitarian possibility for the human spectators to develop an eco-criticism through understanding cinema's variety of visions.

Towards the end of the installation, however, the explanatory mode of narration extends to an audiovisual effort to reach beyond the human through an attempt to represent and enact the imaginary world of butterflies. In an unexpectedly comical performance, a group of young human actors embody butterflies, first by climbing up into trees and wrapping themselves in white sleeping bags, and later by moving across the screens, jumping into a field and running around with cameras in their hands. At this particular point, Ahtila's narrational guidance disappears – the camera takes the perspective of the people-larvae and the subjective points of view of butterflies occupy all screens of the installation. Non-human life-worlds can thus finally be experienced through an effort to depict them beyond the restrictions of the human body and language, following a process of becoming-animal that is mediated cinematically.

'Can we see a world from another perspective than of a different species?', asks Outinen, a few seconds before the above-described performance. Today, when contemporary theory and philosophy stand against anthropocentrism and its destructive implications for the planet, Ahtila's installation provides a glimpse of hope for a creative and critical commentary through an ecology of film dramas. As Outinen states,

[w]ith our imagination, we can get a grasp on that foreignness and by imitation present its being, poses, gestures, make it visible, to impress it on our minds as part of our perception and understanding. It is through our fantasy that we are able to enter the world of other species.

Contradicting Bruno Latour, the speculative philosopher Timothy Morton argues that humans have been modern, but that this modernity has come to an end. Modernity has ceased, Morton suggests, because ‘humans have become irreversibly aware of the existence of non-human entities in a way that decisively explodes modernity’.[2] The next moment of history, Morton writes, is the moment at which humans catch up to the ecological knowledge that has been pressing on them for almost two hundred years. This new moment requires different forms of ecologically conscious artistic practices, since ‘art and some philosophy bear witness to this exit [from modernity]’.[3] In connection with Morton’s thoughts, *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* echoes the need for a new ecological art – and in this case it is cinema. And yet, fostering a fantasy of perceptual worlds that are not determined according to the needs of the human species, Ahtila’s installation does not pretend that it can save the planet. It rather playfully and self-reflexively confronts the spectator with some of the limits and asymmetries of commonly-applied cinematic codes to construct narratives of nonhuman perception. Recognising slippages in both the human-centric approach and non-critical object-oriented illusions, *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* encourages us to look for new emancipatory possibilities of making invisible non-human life worlds visible, or at least imaginable, and refocusing our attitude toward the world in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

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## Notes

- [1] Pick 2015, p. 227.
- [2] Morton 2012, p. 40.
- [3] Ibid., pp. 40-41.