

Aesthetics of Planetary Crisis: Hanne Nielsen & Birgit Johnsen's *Particles*

Particles (2023) opens in the interstellar darkness of outer space. In one swift zoom, we are thrown onto the surface of the earth to the swarming sound of drones on what appears to be a scientific probing expedition of sorts. Two strange characters, accompanied by hovering drones, set out to explore the deserted planet. The gaze of the drone searches, registers, and objectifies. The hissing of the machines triggers an unnerving sense of alarm and unease. No longer fit for human habitation, planet Earth has turned toxic.

Particles presents the earth as a site of ecological crisis. The two-channel video installation (49:41 min) consists of two large projections, each displaying a visual narrative which weaves into the other, intimately connected yet physically separated. The installation invites spectators to shift their attention between the screens, adding a sense of disorientation and an element of instability to the experience. The artists themselves perform the two figures that have fallen from outer space in the form of something looking like a plague doctor and a scientist, wandering through sceneries of terrestrial wastelands, fully equipped with tools for collecting and measuring the soil, water, and remnants of the earthly life they encounter.

The Swarming Gaze

With very few exceptions, all the scenes in the videos are filmed by drones. The automated gaze and vertical angles so characteristic of drones contribute to an affective experience of detachment and alienation. The sensation is intensified by the whirling sound of machines. Throughout the work, the humming and buzzing of the drones forms a backdrop, a framing phenomenon, sometimes loud and insistent, sometimes subtle, almost subsensory, yet always there, omnipresent and ominous. The shifting camera positions are dominated by the hovering perspective of the machines, and the haunting shadows of the drones remind us of their persistent presence.

Probes and Props

Despite the sense of gloom conveyed in *Particles*, the artwork also has humorous touches. The two wanderers display an impressive list of props, including the beak-shaped mask of the Plague Doctor, a space helmet, a crystal ball, a butterfly net and a white bird's wing. Indeed, the various headgear and masks that appear in the videos play a prominent role in the work, each of which carries its own conceptual meaning. They provide the characters with cultural tropes of identity, while simultaneously opening up new lines of interpretation in accordance with the multi-layered message of climate crisis and pandemic disease that appear throughout the video installation. The protection gear functions as a shield against particles of all kinds: viruses, dirt, dust, soot, smoke, and smog.

Inserted media footage creates an insistent news stream of unfolding ecocide, broadcasting flash floods, tsunamis, wildfires, emissions, and images of a dense, yellow haze. Intermittently, a mechanical female voice lists historical and contemporary events of extreme air pollution and ‘airpocalypse’ in the form of unbreathable sulfurous and photochemical smog in cities such as London, Los Angeles, New York, and Delhi, as well as factual details of past and present pandemics. The ambient sense of alarm of the droning soundscape is amplified by the interspersed media footage and listing of events of airborne crises. Perhaps the most poignant point of the expedition gear is that it serves as a constant reminder of the need for and lack of breathable air, the elemental, yet invisible atmospheric conditioner of life and habitation.

Trouble at Home

The artwork takes the form of a visual articulation of the planetary crisis caused by humans - yet there are no humans to be seen, only remnants and traces of destruction. Unlike Nielsen & Johnsen’s previous large-scale filmic installations, such as *Camp Kitchen* (2014) and *Modern Escape* (2018), which were set within the realm of the Western middle-class home, *Particles* takes place outdoors in the desolate landscapes of an abandoned, overgrown amusement park, empty industrial sites, a junkyard and a gravel pit, castle ruins, and burning fields. Even so, the notion of home remains central. Expanded from the interior of a suburban household to the global scale of the biosphere, the home of humanity faces an existential threat. Once a familiar place, the Earth has become an uncanny site of crisis. Where are the humans who used to inhabit these landscapes?

Embracing ambiguity, *Particles* offers an artistic perspective on our current perilous state and highlights the interdependence of all life forms, the climate, air, water, and soil. To the droning sound of hovering machines, we are reminded of the affinity between eco and oikos: the word *eco* etymologically derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning house or dwelling place. The environment and the home were always already intertwined.

A Silver Lining for the Post-Anthropocene?

In the final scenes of *Particles*, the two protagonists fall to the ground and into the same soil that opened the video narrative to the study of caterpillars in a seemingly circular movement. Now, on the brink of ecocide, the butterfly is reborn - or, like the moth, airborne - in a moment of transformation. Echoing Icarus, it reaches for the sky, dripping with hope and hubris. Every threshold holds a closure and an opening. The artwork suggests both. *Particles* offer an open ending and a possible silver lining as the crystal ball is left unguarded in the furrows of the soil. The future is up in the air. Like particles: unfolding, uncontained, underway.

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