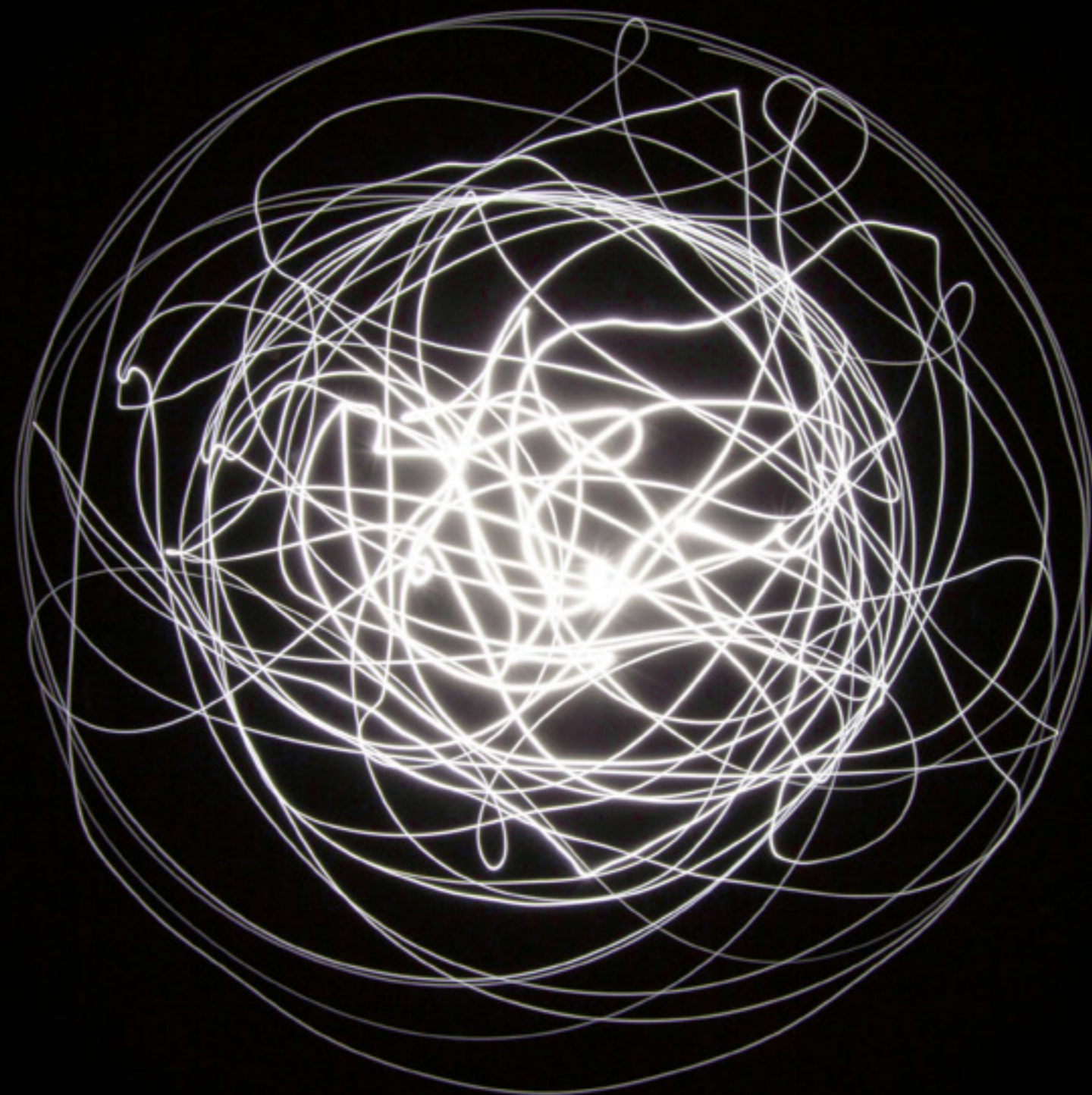


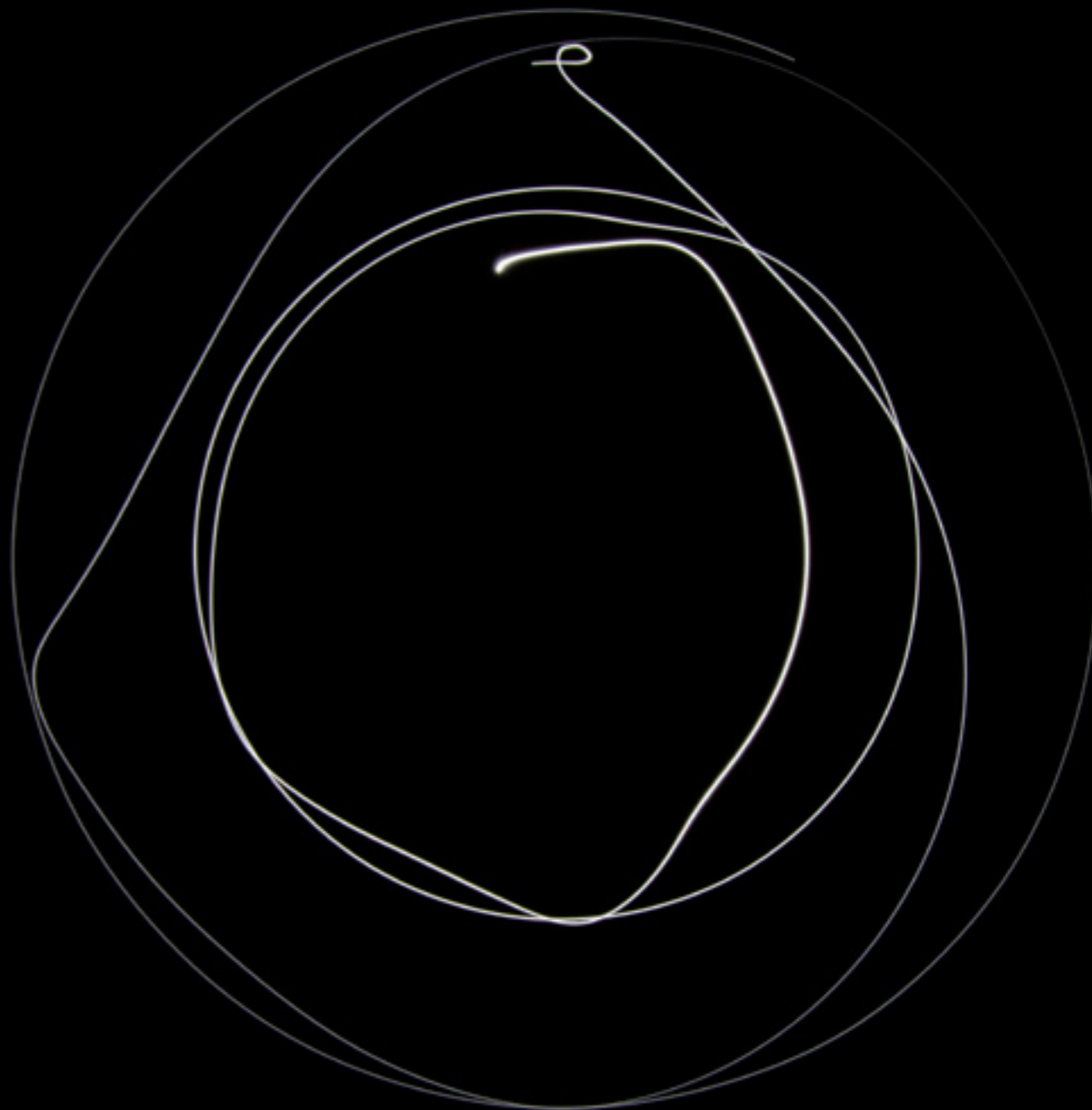
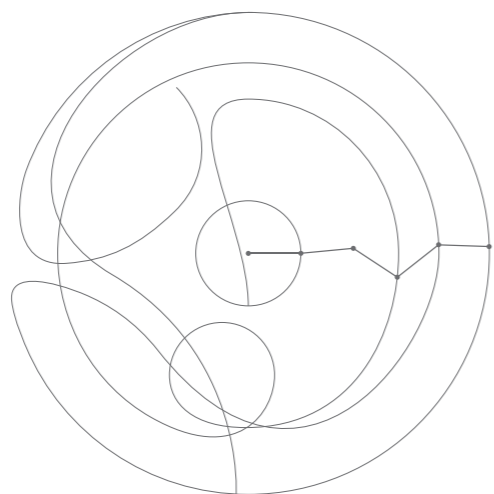
DAS NUMEN

DISTANZ

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Elective Affinities

Melanie Franke

Julian Charrière, Andreas Greiner, Markus Hoffmann and Felix Kiessling create objects that can be perceived as both natural and culturally manufactured. By regarding “phenomena originating from nature” as “co-authors”¹, they construct a hybrid area of knowledge within which they effortlessly transcend disciplinary boundaries.

As we understand the world, we also want to change it. In short, Das Numen transport a knowledge of ecological relations in landscapes into the microcosm of an urban gallery. Mounds of earth with an integrated irrigation system bring the ecological exterior into the interior of a gallery (*Das Numen Transformation*, Haus am Lützowplatz, Berlin 2011/12), where water circulates between a landscape of wooden pallets, earth and grass. Groundwater that has been extracted and filtered using a pump system flows into the gallery to feed the plant life. In another work (*Das Numen Momentum*, DAZ, Berlin 2013), the physical pulses recorded from the surveillance of the sun at an observatory are interpreted by the movement of an incandescent pendulum with multiple arms. The laboratory production area is transposed into space, along with data generated in consultation with the laboratory’s scientists. These works can be interpreted as an attempt to reveal unknown truths through a perceptive, inquisitive approach. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger describes them as an exploration of the space between knowledge and ignorance, processes where art and science exist in close proximity. Even in the sciences, regularity and accuracy are subject to chance. The absolute is unattainable: despite exact systems and geometry, inexplicable surpluses and malfunctions have been known to arise. Therein lies the potential for change—and perhaps even the works’ poetic qualities.

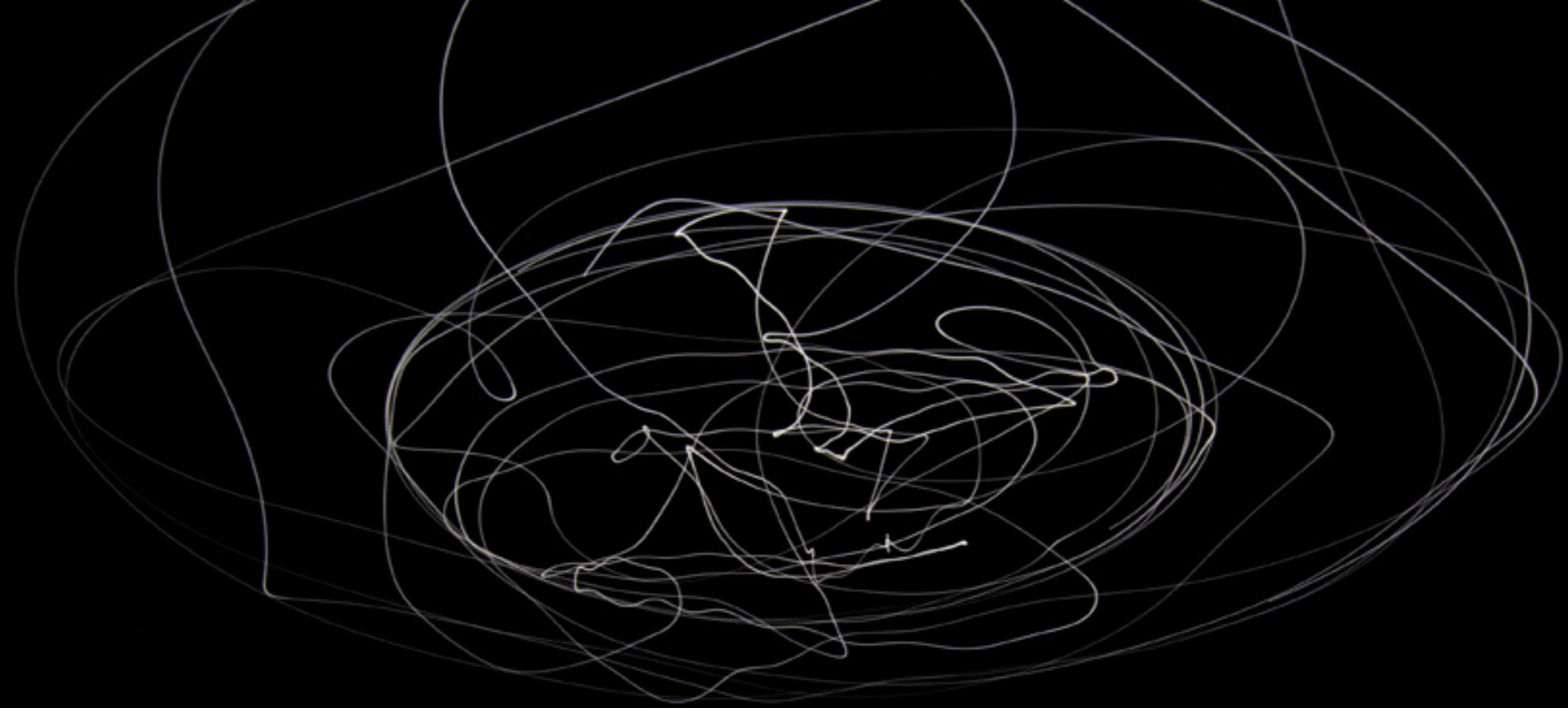
As new knowledge, orders and concepts develop, standard forms of cognition, comprehension and representation are dismantled. Research is deemed as significant in its own right as the knowledge that stems from it. Even the sciences yield a heuristic understanding of the “production processes with an uncertain conclusion”², whereby “poetic methods” are also employed “as essential strategies”³. If knowledge and its poetological qualities are deemed interdependent, then it follows that the representation of knowledge is not a subsidiary act. On the contrary, the presentation of knowledge exposes the objects of material and nonmaterial knowledge through a creative process, rendering them visible. The origin of knowledge is “contingent on a positively artistic creation of characters, symbols and narratives”⁴. Das Numen’s work also operates in this way, transporting

scientific processes (biological, physical and technological) into the arts. In *Das Numen H2O* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin 2011), water from the Spree River is converted into drinking water through a multi-layered filtering system on the roof of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. In another work (*Das Numen Sonor*, Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin 2013), abstract pictorial worlds are translated into audio tracks. Seismographs visualize acoustic material—the vibrations of the surrounding city. Modern technology interprets the impulses as bass sequences and transmits them into an octagonal room, and the machines begin to sound out their own poetic devices in this technicistic world view—induced by the moment of vibration that, by means of the seismic notation, is again registered as sound.

This interplay between elements, materials and processes yields complex configurations and “brings something to the foreground (...) of which we as yet have no precise notion”⁵. As such, the process is just as significant as the result that emerges. This realization entails an understanding that the *modus operandi* can be found in the setting of a scene, placing the scientist, like the artist, in the middle of the unknown. It can be understood as an empirical structure in the form of “instruments, mechanisms and apparatuses”⁶, as Hans-Jörg Rheinberger notes, “experimental systems” are “places, where (...) new things transpire”, or poetic “spider webs”, in which things become trapped. Chance also plays a significant role in the sciences, even in laboratory conditions, and the difficulty lies in repeatedly setting the scene anew, focussing and defining the place of emergence. We can always claim in retrospect to have been searching the whole time, yet the realization is always *a posteriori*. Das Numen’s enormous scope is revealed in these many ways of handling the undefined—perhaps even the numinous—that materialize, wonderfully, under the guise of the truth. By generating structures that “make it possible to productively process coincidences”⁷, Das Numen expands scientific cognitive processes through the contingency of the inestimable.

Das Numen’s works are experiments that test what happens when forms of knowledge are combined with preexisting and newly developed poetological possibilities—when “the formation of knowledge and the performing arts intertwine”⁸. They poetically answer the question of what would happen if “scientists and artists were to observe one another, not listening, but watching what they do with their hands as they practice their crafts”⁹. In laboratories and ateliers, efficacies become apparent in the diverse elements and technologies, be they of a social, cultural or naturally epistemic nature.

In ateliers, there always have been techniques that, free from aesthetic rules or scientific principles, yield a transboundary process with an uncertain outcome—techniques that have been evaluated and interpreted differently across cultures and eras. If we assume that we are in a time of epistemo-



logical upheaval, one that questions origins and seeks new forms of knowledge, then “changes that relate in a complex manner to the required and encouraged exchange between knowledge, science and art”¹⁰ lie at the heart of this transformation. Literary scholar Gabriele Brandstetter emphasizes that, in the transgression of boundaries, the “transfer takes place in the form of narration”¹¹, with regards to the transgression of boundaries. This argument is made in the context of the overthrow of barriers around the year 1800, linked to the forms of representation of the first French encyclopaedias, which—in continuation of the Enlightenment project—strove for a “poeticization of knowledge”. In Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities*, the protagonists become the test subjects of the author’s experiment, and conversely, experimentalists who devise and execute experiments themselves.

Indeed, a relationship evolves between the characters, but it does not exactly comply with the chemical order to which the emblematic title of the novel alludes. Here, it is once again evident that the orders are not proven to be stable, but subject to societal, cultural and other influences. Even so, by producing systems of representation, they differentiate knowledge from the bounds of ignorance, speculation or opinion. These systems do not only structure the knowledge of an era. Conversely, they make it possible to apprehend what we acknowledge as “true” and what evades us—echoing the voice of Michel Foucault. In *The Order of Things* he bemoaned the loss of a knowledge that can no longer be acquired due to the specialization of the individual disciplines and their sophisticated taxonomies. Over time, this knowledge enters the realm of the unverifiable, becomes mythology or vanishes into oblivion. In the works of Das Numen, knowledge from different disciplines is taken out of its conventional—ecological, technological or physical—context and reorganized as artwork. In this process of abstraction, the artists work explicitly with the sociotechnical and sociocultural relativity of knowledge, with an accentuation that emanates a marked transgressive power.

¹ Das Numen, “Manifest”, Berlin 2010.

² Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, “Experimentalordnungen in Wissenschaft und Kunst”, in: *ArteFakte: Wissen ist Kunst – Kunst ist Wissen. Reflexionen und Praktiken wissenschaftlich-künstlerischer Begegnungen*, pub. by Hermann Parzinger, Stefan Aue et al. Bielefeld 2014, pp. 307–321, p. 315.

³ Jeannie Moser, “Poetologien. Rhetoriken des Wissens”, in: *Wissen. Erzählen. Narrative der Humanwissenschaften*, pub. by Arne Höcker, Jeannie Moser et al. Bielefeld 2006, pp. 11–16, p. 12.

⁴ Moser, 2006, p. 12.

⁵ Rheinberger, 2014, p. 311.

⁶ Rheinberger, 2014, p. 310.

⁷ Rheinberger, 2014, p. 314.

⁸ Gabriele Brandstetter (pub.), *Erzählen und Wissen. Paradigmen und Aporien ihrer Inszenierung in Goethes “Wahlverwandtschaften”*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2003, p. 45.

⁹ Rheinberger, 2014, p. 317.

¹⁰ Brandstetter, 2003, p. 8.

¹¹ Brandstetter, 2003. p. 9.





Das Numen: Pragmagic Post-Terminologies

Paul Feigelfeld

These signs are real. They are also symptoms of a process. The process follows the same form, the same structure. To apprehend it you will follow the signs. All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic. Useful to you, gentlemen, but no longer so to us here. If you want the truth—I know I presume—you must look into the technology of these matters. Even into the hearts of certain molecules—it is they after all which dictate temperatures, pressures, rates of flow, costs, profits, the shapes of towers. . . . “You must ask two questions. First, what is the real nature of synthesis? And then: what is the real nature of control?” You think you know, you cling to your beliefs. But sooner or later you will have to let them go. . . .

– Thomas Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow

It is hard to describe what Das Numen do, because one can only describe it, but at the same time, one cannot. There is the slim yet plausible chance that their work may not even be defined as art, but as a process beyond the abstractions and mechanisms of it, as a statement of ontological difference operating out of the gap between *nature* and *culture*, and between *phenomenon* and *noumenon*. While phenomenon defines anything that appears to, or is an object of, the senses, the noumenon is a posited object or event that is known, if at all, without the use of the senses. The eponymous term *numen*, in turn, etymologically derives from a god’s nod of the head to make her or his presence known. It gives rise to formless facticity and ephemeral empiricism.

If we escalate Isaac Asimov’s famous statement, according to which “every sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” (or god, if you will) towards the less transcendental statement that this technology becomes “...indistinguishable from nature”, we might eventually grasp these hybrid *phen(o)umena* the artist collective presents us with, which in their simplicity nonchalantly brush away an “age-old” hubris lingering between man and nature. One is tempted, of course, to say *creates* instead of *presents*, but Das Numen do not create in the strict sense of the word. What they do is act as media, in both a spiritist and technological way: they treat processes of nature as data, and data as natural phenomena, which, as in the words of Samuel Beckett, “swarm and jostle like ants, hasty, indifferent, bringing nothing, taking nothing away, too light to leave a mark.” They process, transmit and store.



In doing so, Das Numen address questions of space and representation in themselves, rather than constructing a laborious experimental order of hierarchical and teleologic technical settings. Nature and technology are addressed as equals, leaving aside any *aprioris* usually governing the crystalline epitaxy and organic coalescence between epistemology, ontology, the epistemic and the ontic, thus letting ecologies of experience and non-human agency come into being between senses and sensors. As Carson Chan called it in his curator’s statement for the 2013 piece *Das Numen Momentum*: “a model of the boundaries between the world of knowledge, and that of awe.”

Through operations of augmentation, simple processes of nature—repetitive, like breathing, waking up; continuous, growing, transforming; differential, condensing, shifting—are transcoded and translocated. From outer space to the gallery space, from underground into sub-bass low frequencies inside ourselves, feelable, not hearable. A fungus becomes a software in its very own, non-Latourian actor-network constellation. Earth becomes architecture in the same way an Arduino microcontroller becomes an organism, effectively making Das Numen inhabitants of an convergent oceanic environment of nomadic monads made up of art and science, theory and practice, nature and technology.

Robert Smithson echoes massively in Das Numen’s minimalistic encyclopedias of experience. Artistically supple, and with scientific subtlety, their work reveals itself rather than revealing something else. What it reveals allows for a glimpse beyond the dualism of art and science. Compared to the age of the biological and geophysical realities that come into play, this dualism and its existence of approximately merely 400 years (taking the modern formalistic mathematical science of the 1500s and 1600s and Descartes’s invention of the subject as a starting point) seems insignificant. It stands to argue that Das Numen are already throwing first glances ahead into a future reality in which agency and discourse are equally distributed among nature, culture, art and science.

These future convergences chart a space in which art and science don’t so much merge as disappear. Discourses of writers like Reza Negarestani and Timothy Morton, with their material and resource agencies, object orientation or rather object orientalism and hyperobjectivism, or Levi Bryant and Brian Boyd, with speculative realism and contingency as their strange attractor, already attempt to fathom this meta-temporal and non-historical, non-textual realm. They know it’s there. But they

are still writers, they still operate according to what they themselves have declared unfeasible or even impossible: that the world is a text that can be read, and therefore—through fiction as much as through large-scale computer simulations—written. Today, we have long exstinguished the thresholds between realities and simulations. Take the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud of Eyjafjallajökull that grounded global air traffic in 2010 as an example: any actual physical evidence of it was collected only *after* its reality had been confirmed and reaction scenarios designed and decided by a large-scale computer simulation, in a global act that describes the idea of cloud computing and its climatic, meteorologic and economic impact and entanglements in vivid colour. Once we manage to shed the cultural technical metaphors of nature as a book or breakable code, of the pencil of nature, of acts of self-writing and ideogrammatic evidence, what will remain is the *numen*.

Actual entities involve each other by reason of their prehensions of each other. There are thus real individual facts of the togetherness of actual entities, which are real, individual, and particular, in the same sense in which actual entities and the prehensions are real, individual, and particular. Any such particular fact of togetherness among actual entities is called a ‘nexus’ (plural form is written ‘nexūs’). The ultimate facts of immediate actual experience are actual entities, prehensions, and nexūs. All else is, for our experience, derivative abstraction.

– Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality

Das Numen may be called an organization rather than an artist group or collective. While all of them—deliberately not named here—work as artists individually, the way they work as an organization is organizationless, non-hierarchical, yet structured, intuitive. The layerings and networkings in their practice are transparent and opaque at the same time. They bring together *organon* (*tool*) and *organism* in a delicate process of individuation rather than abstraction.

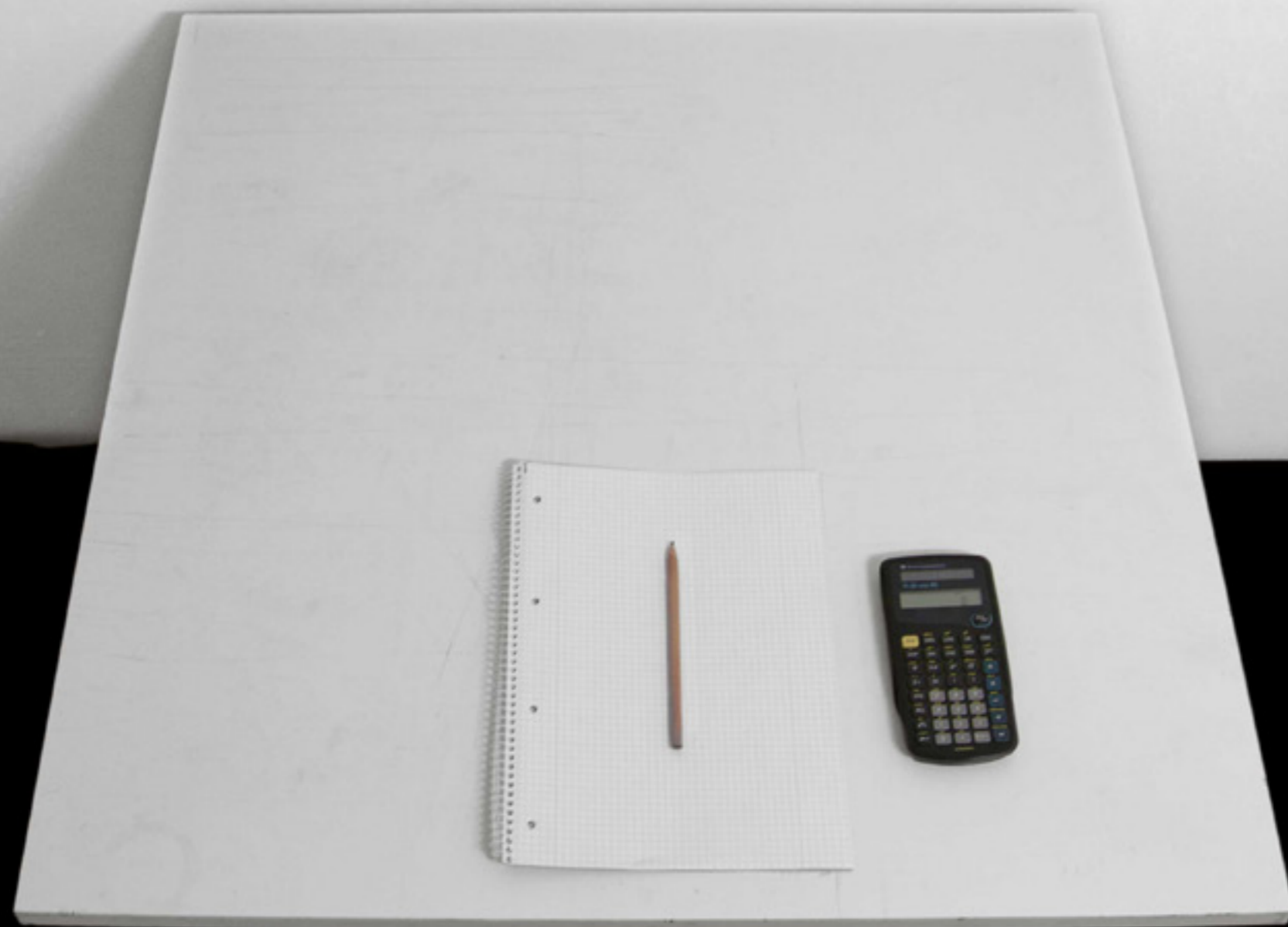
We may have to invent a new definition for what it is exactly that Das Numen is doing. In an oxymoronic way, their interaction with each other as an *organization*, their *organoi* and *organisms*, is both pragmatic and magic. As an even more oxymoronic, maybe moronic definition of a practice in a post-terminologic realm, let me suggest that is is *pragmagic*.



The scientific model is founded on the predictability of results; a model that does not reliably anticipate the reaction to an action is not a model at all. That the sun will rise each day and set each night—varying the length of each day and night every six months—has been a rhythmic constant that has prevailed since before human history. Our perception of time, our transcendental beliefs, and the basic structure of our civilization had all depended on the certainty of the sun’s rise and fall. But look closer, deeper and with the aid of enhanced eyes and the sun is a thing of chaos and chance, if not possessing of logic far beyond our limited comprehension. *Das Numen Momentum* is a representation of solar and cosmic scales within a gallery space, and a model of the boundaries between the world of knowledge, and that of awe.

Carson Chan, 2013

$$P_1 = \frac{p(\sigma_\Lambda) p(\sigma_\omega)}{\Lambda \omega} \pi r_\oplus^2$$



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Colophon

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