

## Invasions

### Flo Maak's *Collected Stories*

The “Anthropocene” – the geological era in which humans are said to have become the decisive geological force, and in which our existence can be traced not only by way of gigantic patches of garbage in the oceans but also in rock samples – has long since ceased to be a merely academic, much less an analytical category. As a political marker it is associated with alarmism. The time has come, or so this diagnosis of our time appears to suggest, when ‘Nature is striking back’, as through their excessive production and extraction humans have triggered a process that threatens to become irreversible or has already become so. The fact that the unbridled exploitation of soils, the settlement of land, and the clearing of woodlands has been tied to the specific capitalist economic system and (neo)colonialist practices rather than to “humans” per se, is all too often forgotten in this narrative. And instead of a genuine discussion of the devastating effects of global warming, the thawing of permafrost, and the massively accelerated extinction of species, this homogenizing and agitated mode of narration is all too prone to revisit racist discussions of “population increase”, proto-fascist fantasies of homeland security, or promises of salvation through technological innovation.

Flo Maak's *Collected Stories* express an entirely different approach to the Anthropocene: An alarmism cognizant of ambivalence, which instead of shocking its viewers has a sensitizing effect and raises questions rather than providing answers. The works facilitate the realization that nature and culture cannot be neatly separated from one another. Nature is not romanticized, but in contrast sought in places where its heterogeneity and impurity subtly come to the fore. This approach is adverse both to an ultimate promise of redemption and to levelling diagnosis of all-encompassing crisis – and it is this which constitutes its political and aesthetic appeal.

The work group “Red Green” tells the story of a plant, a traveling one, namely *Chromolaena odorata*. The grouping of different photographs of the unassuming shrub with its many names makes it clear that natural and cultural history are profoundly intertwined. For example, the Red Green or “Communist pacha” – as the plant is known in Kerala (India) – has spread across the region since the 1940s. Its name is doubtlessly linked to the Communist movement, which was gaining traction at the time. Such instances of natural and cultural history may tell stories of invasions, forced colonialization and appropriation, but they can also be stories of acceptance and embrace – *invadere* means to penetrate, and as such points to the twofold character of invasions as something sensory *and* threatening, acquisitional *and* accepting. While some might see the Communist weed as a scourge, others might perceive it as a welcome symbol of political change. The special ambivalence of the invasive element becomes clear as we imagine it in contrast to the native. Yet the latter is likewise a prismatic concept that may be both called upon in order to defend such a thing as the “indigenous” element, as well as in other contexts consider this local aspect to be a-cultural and a-historical – the colonial invasion then justified by a denigration of the native. The woven flag titled “Most Wanted” invokes this highly

ambivalent interplay between invasive and native. Red and green merge: threat and healing, life and destruction are quite literally and in a very material sense entangled. The flag thus reminds us of the specific “impurity” and negativity that (also) makes up life and opposes a naïve vitalism.

Flo Maak’s work makes it clear that we should not imagine life and nature as a Garden of Eden that has been destroyed and to which we could return. The boundaries of organisms are precarious. Bodies are dependent on and permeated by heterogenous others, such as organisms, artefacts and bacteria. They are inconsistent “multitudes”: congregations, movements, constellations that describe what is primarily co-existence beyond all political frameworks, statehood or social contracts. In political philosophy, the multitude is considered the opposite of a tribe or nation. It exists beyond sovereignty and for this reason has also been considered threatening – uncontrollable, emotional structures that undermine the state order. *Multitude II* focusses on a multi-species assemblage: The encounter with the side of a horse’s face, covered in flies, in front of it a rusty lattice, its shadow, the sunlight. The horse appears infested with flies, but the powerful batting of lashes that will bring a new order seems to be in the air. The possibility of the continuous reconfiguration of natural/cultural structures is implied here, while the hinted-at possibility also emphasizes the latter’s relative elusiveness. The fact that this “web of life” does not form a harmonious coherence is expressed not only in the parasitic-symbiotic relationship between the organisms, but also in the rusty fence. However, it is also here that a special strength of the representation relates to perspective: Our encounter with the horse is less of a sentimentalized meeting “on an equal footing”, than a reminder of the involvement of the numerous multitudes that make up (a) life.

We can thus describe Flo Maak’s perspective itself in all of the works presented here as itself being invasive: It doesn’t stand on the outside but rather involves itself: This is a perspective described by Donna Haraway as one of a “creature of the mud, not the sky”. This in turn complicates the phenomena shown rather than making them less ambiguous: Which is the “companion species”? Which is the “alien species” or the “invasive species”? The tension between assimilating and being alien is not solved, but the works instead remind us that these decisions cannot be made offhand, as natural-cultural contexts are characterized and constituted by a reciprocal penetration and permeation, by impurity and potential destructiveness. This becomes clear when the viewer gazes into the blurred face of a gorilla in the piece *Sad*, which invokes simultaneously the animal’s disappearance and proximity. All of this gives expression to an aesthetic strategy that neither follows a purity requirement nor proclaims a return to the roots, but instead continues to trace ways of still possible multi-species coexistence.

The work group “Ground Truthing – Mount Etna” also draws on this strategy. Volcanos – as a phenomenon of movement, tectonics, folding – are fascinating precisely because they signify something archaic, yet at the same time they are a spectacle frequented by tourists, which makes rubbish an elementary part of their context. In this regard, they much resemble cable cars in mountains promising a ski experience that now hardly ever takes place any more for lack of snow fall. The

precariousness of the distinction between civilization and wilderness is expressed for example in the piece titled *Contact*. It shows an arrangement of concrete, volcanic rock and street markings. It becomes clear how nature and culture are co-evolving here: Sedimentations of ever new concrete, layers upon layers of lava rock, reconstruction in transformation. Meanwhile the illuminated lava rock, glowing red and with blood oranges placed on it, conjures up the life force of the volcano: *Juice* conveys an idea of fertility and documents the mineral-rich volcano soils – blood oranges grow on the slopes of Mount Etna. At the same time, the viewer is confronted with the openings and folds of the volcano, which call to mind the craters and folds of human bodies, the complexity of a vulva, the craters of human anuses. Yet the human being in some ways appears more archaic even than the volcano itself. The perspective of a creature from the mud decenters the human: for all of its resolve, *Dude* is a skeleton.

Dr. Katharina Hoppe

Translation: Dr. Jeremy Gaines