

Things that look

Let me begin with a rather hackneyed statement: art allows us to look at things differently. I will then take that cliché a step further: art allows things to look. Things look at us. They feel us. Our touch is their touching us. Let's stretch the cliché even further: art can think for another, invent another, bring things about. Art visualizes things differently. As an artist, Maddy Arkesteyn is a philosopher. She breaks with the whole tradition of Western thinking that has dominated our culture for centuries, including attitudes to art. So she breaks with clichés, and not least with the cliché that we look at things.

The whole tradition of Western thinking might well be characterized as 'distance thinking', from Plato's allegory of the cave, through Descartes' dichotomy of subject and object, to modern political utopias. Western man has always thought of himself as detached from the world. The world was a whole entity of objects. - there outside us, at a distance.

Distance has to do with the spatial metaphor which was also used in classical physics, where space is an abstract and impersonal medium in which objects are placed that could be totally separate from the observer. This presupposes not only a distance between observer and object, but also a clear division of the two. The observer adopts a contemplative position with regard to an isolated

object. We go and look at the artwork in a museum, but then with the distant expression of a Sunday tourist. Distant, because it doesn't actually affect us, at least, not in the sense of rousing us, disorienting us.

The subject who took up his post there, in nature, society or museum, believed he possessed the necessary technical and scientific tools to be able to mould everything around him to his own model. Control, calculability and manipulability were his catchwords. And there was always something dualistic and hierarchical about the attendant and long-fostered system of thought: mind over body, culture (science, technology) over nature, man dominates woman.

In her work Maddy Arkesteyn gives short shrift to this established picture. You cannot distance yourself from her work. Her installations make you feel uncomfortable. You don't look at them. The artist wants the things to show themselves. She believes objects cannot be extricated from a world, from their context. It is important to Arkesteyn what happens in, next to and between the objects. That way objects extract themselves from our desire to control and calculate. They elude us and become indescribable.

Maddy Arkesteyn wants to capture that moment when things evade us. She wants to let those moments crystallize. Hence the atmosphere of abandonment, also in her photographic work. The things are thrown back upon themselves. They have wrested

themselves from our rational and peremptory gaze. Our fundamental attitude takes on a different colour, a different temperature even. Cold. Alone. Arkesteyn addresses us more physically than rationally.

In that way she rethinks common clichés. The combination of dualism, controllability, calculability and technical relationship referred to above, could have subjected both our surroundings and our own corporality to an exploitative regime. Classical aesthetics was as much an expression of this as the classical natural sciences were. However, Arkesteyn no longer allows the observation, the *aisthesis*, to be guided by reason. In her work aesthetics has to do with being in an environment in a sensorial way, so we no longer observe from an external position, as if the world was separate from us. We feel more affected by the state of that environment. In other words, it is through our corporality, our being, that we feel what is around us. We become affective, instinctive and so immediately touched by things in our world. Not a hundred miles away from this is Heidegger's thinking on affectedness: how we are emotionally 'conditioned' by our world. So here 'world' is not a synonym for 'outside'; rather it is what we are inextricably bound up with, what we do not have a distant relationship with. Distance and the idea of man as a purely rational, controlling being enabled us to explain away the world and the body for ourselves. We were not body or nature, we *had* them. With Maddy Arkesteyn we don't

seem to have anything anymore. Man is no longer the possessor of things. They possess us.

To return to the opening cliché: an appeal goes out from Arkesteyn's work. She visualizes the request that we no longer look at things, no longer approach them as on-lookers, but rather that we should be aware of the action emanating from them. She asks us to see that things are always close, that they approach us and do not desert us. They condition us.

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