Phenomena in Tuula Närhinen's artistic practice

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Introduction

Tuula Närhinen's artistic activity can be roughly divided into two. Firstly, she has been interested in the relationships between cultural and natural environments forged through history, as evidenced by such works as *Senne* (2001–2003) and *Kluuvinlahti Fossils* (2003). Another, perhaps a larger, part of her production examines temporal natural phenomena. It deals with elemental nature, such as water, wind, sun or frost, or, alternatively, plants and animals. When we talk about Närhinen, we can almost talk about the art of natural phenomena, which deals with how natural phenomena turn into images or their pictorial realization. She has, for instance, thought about how to depict frost or how we can observe frost besides sensing it on our skin, checking the thermometer or a seeing frozen road surface. Or how to observe UV radiation, how to depict wind or what colours constitute plants.

Phenomenon: The first approach attempt

"These are the tracks of the animal", they said. "These are the tracks we should follow."

Johnston Pygmy guides

In the past few years, Närhinen has "tracked animals" by following their gaze, and by observing their movement and the typical characteristics of particular species. The series *Animalcams* from the early 2000s comprises photographs taken with pinhole cameras made by Närhinen. Their lenses imitate the eye structure of various Finnish animals. Furthermore, the choice of locations supports the visual perception of the animals' habitat. *Wunderkammer*, made in 2006 for the Kuusiluoto school in Oulu, consists of dozens of miniature sculptures resembling different bird species or their parts. The *Tracking Animals* installation, made in 2003–2004, studies the movements of animals and their nocturnal foraging. The work is displayed in the Phenomena exhibition in the Pori Art Museum.

It is interesting to stop to consider the links between the *Tracking Animals* installation and the exhibition's theme, a phenomenon or phenomena. What does depicting a phenomenon or the art of phenomena refer to in Närhinen's installation? It is a work that strives to make perceptible and therefore comprehensible the behaviour of wild animals: their nocturnal movements and activities. The work, its photographs and paintings, illustrate animal movements and take them to the level of phenomena. In addition to animal tracks and pictures of them on the walls, the work comprises different traps that Närhinen had placed in natural settings, and a brief text in which she explains the starting points for her work. She set traps – harmless to the animals – containing food and placed sooty glass sheets and ink-pads under them. The smell of food attracted animals to these traps and they left tracks and other traces on these "drawing and painting surfaces". The works are drawings and paintings made by the animals with their bodies, which we are now

given the opportunity to view by the artist.[1] In her description of the work, she writes, “allusions to other works of art add a flavour to the work but I want to use these images made by animals most of all to open a new perspective on landscapes. These records make visible small animals that are usually hidden in the landscape. Their movements, habitats and scale have taken a concrete form for humans to see.”

Of her work *Animalcams*, Närhinen writes that “Photographing with the animal cameras was a journey of exploration for me, a way to take an eye and set it down in places where humans cannot normally go and see what kind of images emerge.”[2] The texts reveal that the works function as phenomena: they make the imperceptible perceptible but not as such but rather via a phenomenon, in this case the traces and tracks in soot and on paper.

In everyday speech, we use the word phenomenon to denote some natural or cultural event that can be observed. When talking about natural phenomena, we often mean an exceptional occurrence, such as a volcanic eruption, thunderstorm, landslide and the like. The cultural use of the word may refer to quite routine and mundane things, such as everyday life and its objects and functions.

The everyday sense of the word ‘phenomenon’ mainly corresponds to its modern meaning in theoretical philosophy. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant defined the modern meaning of ‘phenomenon’ in the late 18th century. It is the observable and conscious form of a thing in itself (*noumenon*). For him, a phenomenon is the meeting place of the thing in itself, which is necessarily unattainable, and the classifications produced by the human intellect. According to the same principle, physics understands phenomena as those things observable by the senses. In the 19th century, a school of philosophy inspired by Kant’s ideas concentrated on studying what can be perceived by the senses or understood by the consciousness, in short, the phenomenon. Phenomenology, as this school is called, is interested in how the world appears to human experience and observation. Phenomenology, particularly an early version of it developed by Edmund Husserl, includes a method through which, it is assumed, the consciousness can attain the immediate essence of the object, the thing in itself. According to Husserl, this is possible through phenomenological reduction, in which we set aside, “bracket”, the so-called natural attitude, or everyday customs and self-evident ideas that we have learned. [3] Since then, disputes inherent in phenomenology, as well as its criticisms have concerned the possibility of phenomenological reduction and its viability. The early works of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, for instance, are a close analysis of Husserl’s eidetic reduction and the immediate presence of meanings. Through his analysis, Derrida arrived at denying the phenomenological reduction, the possibility of temporal presence or attaining the essence of things in general. [4]

[1] Bringing in non-human circumstances as creative agents is central in late 20th century art. It is, however, not about the absence of the artist but about withdrawing to the background. See e.g. Johansson, Hanna 2006. In *Tarkemmin katsoen*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
[2] The work has an interesting connection with Jakob von Uexküll, a notable early 20th century zoologist and pioneer of ecology, and his the research on animal habitats, which led him to embrace a radically non-human view of nature. He complemented his books with pictures, which suggest what the human environment might look like from the perspective of animals.
[3] Husserl, Edmund 1995. *Fenomenologian idea. Viisi luentoa*. Helsinki: Loki-kirjat. See also Husserl, Edmund 2006. *Uudistuminen ja ihmisyys. Luentoja ja esseistä*. Ed. Sara Heinämaa. Tutkijaliitto: Helsinki.

Närhinen's art contains a trait that suggests phenomenological reduction. For instance, her work *Frostiana*, which deals with frost, shows a clear tendency to discover the essence of frost. Similarly, the work *Chromatograms* leached out the pigments hidden in Finnish meadow plants. *Anemographs* and *Surf*, on the other hand, penetrate the visual essence of wind. *Anemographs* record the movement caused by wind in the branches of familiar Finnish trees and plants and on the waves of the sea while *Surf* traces the movement of the waves. The research and its results, however, make use of light and the mechanics of a photographic camera, that is, exposure time. The second part of *Anemographs* consists of images drawn by trees with the help of the wind's energy. Närhinen attached marker pens to the branches and provided white drawing paper on which the branches could trace their own movement powered by the wind. All these works are traces of the natural phenomenon in question, such as water freezing over, the colour components of plants or the movement of wind, naturally not the essence (*eidos*) of things. However, this focus on observable phenomena is also the starting point for Husserl's phenomenology. Its aim is to move away from abstract assumptions to what is concrete and real: the world of phenomena, in which humans can obtain knowledge based on their experience and observation. Attaining *eidos*, the essence of things, however, requires direct consciousness or seeing, without mediating or disrupting layers.

In my view, many of Närhinen's works address the issue of phenomenological reduction and its link with scientific thought. However, it must be remembered that her works are always about approaching the thing in itself through different mediating techniques, which, correspondingly, manifest themselves as traces of the event that they seek to imitate. Because of this, the works will also demonstrate the limits of the phenomenological method.

I will only briefly examine the question of limits here, through the work *Tracking Animals*. When a phenomenon is understood as a trace or a track, it becomes a separating factor. At the same time, the track – even in the everyday sense – confirms that whatever caused it is unattainable. Tracking animals is an example *par excellence*.

The title of the work, *Tracking Animals*, is familiar to us from textbooks as well as philosophical thought. Because it is difficult to encounter or even see wild animals from afar, identifying Finnish animals by their tracks is one of the basics of natural history in Finland. As a philosophical question, tracking animals plunges us directly into the core of phenomenology.

An article by the Finnish philosopher Susanna Lindberg, *Derrida eläinten jäljillä*, ('Derrida tracking animals'), leads us to this question. Lindberg begins by suggesting that the idea of animals can actually "serve as a thread running through all Derrida's work and partly lend it structure."[5] I do not intend to repeat the philosophical, literary or even actual animal relationships of Derrida, who is often said to be difficult to understand. Instead, I want to highlight one strand, which links his ideas on animals not only to the

[4] Derrida, Jacques 1984. *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. (French original 1967.)
[5] Lindberg, Susanna 2005. Derrida eläinten jäljillä. *Tiede & Edistys*, no 2, 2005. p. 87.

phenomenological problem but also to Närhinen's works. In short, Lindberg, Derrida and Närhinen all lead us to ask: "is it true that animals can be tracked but never caught or understood?"

Animals have fascinated Derrida and the deconstructionist philosophy associated with him, but also other thinkers inspired by late 20th century phenomenology.[6] This is due to the fact that one of the central motives in deconstructive and post-phenomenological thought has been to stretch the boundaries of knowing and understanding, and animals clearly constitute one such boundary. They resemble us humans and are simultaneously incomprehensible to us. Animality in humans (animal rationale) is associated with traits that evade rational possession, such as instincts, the subconscious and corporality. Due to their nature as something that evades reason, animals have some time ago been associated with mechanics and have thus direct links with machines and, as Derrida suggests in his writings on Freud and psychoanalysis, with the subconscious.[7]

Our relationship to animals has long been characterised by the mechanical assumption, according to which animals are categorically excluded from humanity through naming them. This exclusion, in turn, is linked with knowing, possession and representation. This gesture of exclusion is also a gesture of deprivation, and if and when it is applied to animals, it also means the destruction of the animality of animals and their mystery. For Derrida, the idea of animals as being categorically non-human corresponds to other oppositions at the core of our culture, the deconstruction of which is the focus of his philosophy.

Twentieth century phenomenologists have, however, directed their thoughts on mechanistic ideas that objectify animals to issues concerned with ethics and justice and, with it, the categorical differentiation of animals and humans has diminished. Instead of a general, almost universal category, animals have begun to be thought of as particular, diverse creatures that also resemble humans. Derrida, for instance, sees the boundary between humans and animals as a kind of an *abyssal* rupture, which occurs when we meet an animal's gaze and let it speak to us. When an animal's gaze touches us, an ethical relationship between the two gazes is created. In spite of the gaze speaking to us, the relationship remains a mystery because we do not know what the animal is saying, what is the animal's language and so forth. The animal necessarily remains incomprehensible to us. This happens despite the fact that we carry an animal within our bodies. Animals, as Derrida says, *touch* us but in the end remain a mystery, which is why he associates animals with fiction or ghosts (which perhaps explains the significance and power of fables).

In other words, an ethical relationship to animals is only possible when we allow them to remain outside calculation, possession and representation. This is exactly why it shows the limits of phenomenological reduction. The mysterious animals, or the *animal world*, haunt us within and without but as a phenomenon that we can only track, never represent, which we can approach but which nevertheless withdraws from us.

[6] Here I refer to an idea which began with Martin Heidegger, which, in addition to Derrida's work, has continued in the thought of such philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Giorgio Agamben.

[7] Derrida, Jacques 2004. Freud ja kirjoituksen näyttämö. In *Platonin apteekki ja muita kirjoituksia*. Eds. Teemu Ikonen and Janne Porttikivi. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Phenomenon: The second approach attempt

We are not jumping from soil to the idea of soil, but from continuous and multiple clumps of earth to a discrete colour in a geometric cube coded in x and y coordinates.

In 2001–2003, Närhinen created a work of art on the River Senne, which flows through Brussels. She followed the river from its source in Naast to Brussels and on to Zennegat in the north. An important part of the work consists of solid matter removed from Senne water samples with a sieve, such as plankton and waste, and watercolours based on details of microscope images of them. The material, for instance, reveals that the water becomes more turbid as we approach Brussels. Närhinen's works, particularly the meticulous watercolours, allude to Dutch Golden Age art of the 17th century, originating in the same region. It was characteristic of Northern European art of the time to depict everything that the eye could observe in great detail. The human eye was aided by different lenses, mirrors and, as it happens, a new scientific instrument, the microscope. These tools helped to gain new, more accurate information about the world.[8] Art and science became intertwined in a natural way, and it was quite common to view painting as a science, the task of which was, as the Dutch Samuel van Hoogstraten says, "to represent all ideas and concepts that the visible nature as a whole is capable of producing".[9]

Today it is natural to regard art and science as being two separate spheres of human activity, one of which, science, seeks to study reality while the other, art, seeks to express singular things, emotions and such. Art and science have, however, throughout history both given to and taken from each other.

Both of these forms of cultural activity are interested in how the world appears and what lurks behind that appearance. On the other hand, there is a crucial difference in the relationships that art and science have to images. While science uses images to grasp reality as accurately as possible, art starts with the image itself. The relationship science has with images is instrumental, the aim is to better and more enduringly gauge the real world or parts of it, while the purpose of art is to study the nature of visuality, or the way images are constituted, and to discover themes in the conflict between images and reality.[10]

When talking about Närhinen, it is easy to see her artistic work as an activity that approaches science in its methods. Her works truly delve into natural phenomena, such as frost, the colour components of plants or animal vision and movement. The process is, however, different from the scientific attitude in that the main purpose is to produce visually interesting images, not to prove or argue scientific hypotheses.

In addition to these visual works, Närhinen's *Tracking Animals*, like her other installations, also display other material related to the creation of the work. The work includes devices and materials used in creating the actual work of art. In *Tracking Animals* they include the actual traps, the drawing and painting surfaces and a text explaining the origins and starting points of the work. Presenting the other material alongside the

[8] Alpers, Svetlana 1982. *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
[9] Alpers, Svetlana 1982. p. 77
[10] Groys, Boris 2002.

pictorial “end product” inevitably raises the issue of the practical side of creating the work and piques the viewer’s interest in the conditions of constructing the images. Displaying the traps and other materials is not a coincidence but a conscious choice on the part of the artist. Behind it, one can even see a desire to reduce the autonomous value of the images and a desire to direct observation of the work towards the temporal and even spatial context in which it was created. On the other hand, the creator of many of the works is not so much the artist but the subject of the work, the natural phenomenon or, as is with *Tracking Animals*, the animals. The way Närhinen works gives room to creators that lack subjectivity or personality, which can in this context be described as weak or non-human actors.[11]

Displaying the creative process and the tools used not only opens a new perspective on artistic work but also on phenomena. This once again links Närhinen’s work processes to issues of scientific practice in a fascinating way. This time, phenomena do not take up the Kantian static position between the thing in itself and human consciousness. Instead, their position and status become more complex and start to move. The French sociologist of science Bruno Latour, who is also known for his science studies, talks about circulating phenomena. He writes: “Phenomena, however, are not found at the *meeting point* between things and the forms of human mind; phenomena are what *circulates* all along the reversible chain of transformations, at each step losing some properties to gain others that render them compatible with already-established centres of calculation. Instead of growing from two fixed extremities toward a stable meeting point in the middle, the unstable reference grows from the middle toward the ends, which are continually pushed further away.”[12] Latour arrived at the concept of the circulating phenomenon when he thought about the reality of science studies through the practical experiences of a field trip to the Amazon forest. In his *Circulating Reference. Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest*, he attempts to show that there is no direct resemblance between the results of science and the world, that is, the subject of science. Scientific representations do not correspond to the world but their relationship should not be seen as an unbridgeable gap either. Rather, Latour’s model challenges us to recognise that scientific representations, such as images, texts and diagrams, as it were, give us some information and refer to nature but not in the sense of correspondence.

In other words, we should not talk about resemblance or correspondence between the work and its subject when we are talking about science or art that employs scientific methods. Rather, we should talk about changing references that progress from the local, the material and the particular towards standardisation, text, calculability, relative universality and so forth. The circle of references is in the end always endless and a scientific model as such does not correspond to its subject: the world and nature.

Latour’s ideas are related to Närhinen’s art in that Närhinen displays various stages of her work. In other words, she does not want to make viewers believe that the image and the reality behind it – wind, waves, frost – corresponded to each other. On the contrary, Närhinen stresses the “constructed” nature of her art, the stages and intermediaries through which images of wind, animals, etc., are created. It is exactly this mediation and chain of constructing meanings that Latour also wishes to emphasise in focusing not on

[11] I am indebted to the Finnish director Tuija Kokkonen for the concepts of weak and non-human actors.
[12] Latour, Bruno 1999. Circulating Reference. Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest. In *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies.* Cambridge, MA; London, UK: Harvard University Press, s. 71–72.

"research results" but on the practice of scientific work, precisely the chains of events through which scientific results are created.[13]

Although Närhinen works in a systematic way, her work differs from the methods of scientists. She strives for an approach that opens up the phenomenon and simultaneously produces a result that is visually fascinating. In this sense, her work – though it approaches the scientific method – is first and foremost visual. Despite the differences, it is crucial to see aspects of Närhinen's work that reach out to the process of making art and thus reveal it. As is the case with scientific work, it is clear where the boundary between the result and the presentation of the stages of the process is in Närhinen's work. She does not try to blur the distinction or place the image and the process that led to it side by side. Instead, she makes the hierarchical relationship between the two recognisable. On the other hand, she wants to show that her images are created through a mediating activity, that a phenomenon does not turn into an image on its own or out of the pure consciousness of the artist.

In my article, I have approached Närhinen's art not only from the perspective of the subject matter but also from the perspective of the way the works are created. At first glance, these two approaches might seem remote from each other. If I, however, return to the theme of the exhibition, phenomena, a natural connection can be found. In phenomenological tradition, animals represent the domain of the unrepresented, the uncalculated, a certain kind of radical other, which enables us to make visible the boundaries of representation and that which can be represented. Latour's circulating phenomena, on the other hand, suggest that science has similarly limited means to represent nature and its phenomena in a way that would directly correspond. It seems that phenomena are, after all, the only real thing that we can access, as Husserl once suggested. We are not, however, dealing with phenomena that are plain to see and present. Instead we are dealing with the attitude and means of tracking those phenomena.

[13] Latour, Bruno 1999.