

THE IT AS ACTANT

In this talk I will ponder about the question if and when objects are autonomous. I want to begin with a visual introduction. So, I will show three short video extracts with three very heterogenous autonomous objects:

First video/Autonomous object Nr. 1: The column

David Weber-Krebs (performance. Robert Morris revisited)

<http://davidweberkrebs.org/work/performance-robert-morris-revisited>

(6:18 – end)

Second video/Autonomous object Nr. 2: The robot

Commercial video – robot sentinella

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xg078_robot-sentinella

(1:50 – end)

Third video/Autonomous object Nr. 3: Balloons

Nikolaus Gansterer (Tracing the traces. Traces of spaces)

<https://vimeo.com/23400343>

(2:58 – end)

In the first video we saw an excerpt of the performance with the title *performance (robert morris revisited)* by the Belgian choreographer David Weber-Krebs. This performance is actually a re-enactment of *Column*, a performance that Robert Morris showed in 1962 in the Living Theater in New York (in the frame of a concert organised by La Monte Young). Like in the performance of Robert Morris it displays a white well-lit column for 3,5 minutes – motionless. Then, the column topples – seemingly by itself. And we see the recumbant column for another 3,5 minutes before the performance is over.

In the second video we watched the robot sentinella. South Korea has positioned stationary robots like robot sentinella at the border of South- and North Korea since 2007. The "security guard robot 1" that we saw in the video is armed with a machine gun and is

remote-controlled, but it is claimed to be capable to recognize enemies automatically and to fight against them – even without human command. This is – as far as I could find out – not practiced yet. So far the robot is remote controlled but it is claimed to be capable to operate without human commands. The robot tracks its target during day and night and is able to shoot at targets that do not respond to an initial verbal warning. That's what the Korean subtitles in the commercial of robot sentinella say. Robot sentinella is a robotic sentry equipped with two cameras. It has a sophisticated pattern recognition and a 5,5mm machine-gun. The robot also has a speaker to warn the intruder to surrender or get a perfect headshot. Robot sentinella is potentially an autonomous weapons system (AWS) – developed by Samsung in partnership with Korean University and went on sale in 2007 for 200,000 dollars. Since then it has been deployed at the border between North and South Korea where it is used as a remote controlled robotic sentry so far.

In the third video we saw a very analog object: the movements of balloons – induced by the unpredictable force of the wind or the air set in motion by the movements of the people walking through a gallery. The movements of wind and air make the balloons dance and via an attached string the movements are transferred to a pencil, so the balloons draw by themselves. The resulting drawn patterns could be read as visualizations of the autonomous movements of these objects.

In the first video (with the white column) we saw the autonomy of the object as an illusion or imaginary horizon. The column is remote-controlled or pulled with an invisible string in order to evoke the impression of moving autonomously. (When Robert Morris developed this performance he actually planned to stand inside of the column and to make it fall at a certain moment. But during a rehearsal he sustained a severe head injury when falling to the floor while being inside of the column. That's why he finally changed his plan and decided to attach a transparent string on the column that he would pull from offstage.) The column is framed by a theatrical stage and the theatre apparatus, it performs for our contemplation but disturbs the habitual perception in such place because usually it is humans who are the protagonists on a stage – or even more precisely, it is the movements and words performed and uttered by human beings that are conventionally in the foreground in the theatre. Here there is not only no human being on stage but also no word is uttered and no movement takes place – except the sudden and unexpected fall of the column which seems autonomous but is in fact totally controlled by human actors (via a string or a remote-controlled motor). The column seems to resist any demand to perform a spectacle. With its mute and motionless presence it seems to reiterate Bartleby's famous words: I prefer not to. And yet, in this total refusal of motion/action, in its

absolute minimalism it is ultimately spectacular again.

The column slightly reminds one on Duchamp's ready-mades because it is so banal and not especially beautiful. But it is also significantly different from the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp – not only because it is not really an everyday object and probably not mass-produced – but because it is all about the one movement that it performs. If we think about a different status of an object, we might think first about Duchamp's ready-mades and the way how the titling and recontextualisation of everyday objects in an exhibition (for example of the bottle rack or the shovel) and the fact that they were signed by Duchamp provided the objects with additional aesthetic value.

Precisely 100 years ago Duchamp exhibited his first ready-mades. But the questions that were at stake when Duchamp displayed ordinary objects in the gallery were radically different from the ones that are in the foreground of artistic projects which renegotiate the status of objects today. The questions that the ready-mades posed were not concerned with the autonomy of objects or whether they have the capacity to act. The ready-made embodied the impossible wish to exhibit an object of aesthetical indifference (that is neither crafted nor otherwise aesthetically especially interesting.) In this way the ready-made object actually served to question what we find beautiful or interesting and thereby what art or an artist is. Moreover it was a kind of super-elevation of the artistic persona of Duchamp without whose signature the objects would not have gained comparable aesthetic surplus value. Because it is exactly 100 years ago that the first ready-mades were shown, I would like to play a short statement of Duchamp commenting on the ready-made in which the focus on aesthetic questions is emphasized.

Statement Duchamp:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYqDpNmnu8I> (00:49 - end)

In the second video that I showed in the beginning we were confronted with the autonomy of the object in its dystopian form. Automated weapons systems embody the terrifying vision of object autonomy as the possibility to kill human beings without human involvement in the act of execution. It stands for the fear that we could be controlled and governed by technologies with a high degree of autonomy, that the technical prostheses that we have invented to improve ourselves could in the end be beyond our control and cause destruction and extreme ethical dilemmas. However, there is a broad consensus among professors and scientists all over the world that authority to initiate the use of lethal force should never be delegated to a machine or automated process. A vast number of scholars, lawyers, military officers and engineers agree that there should be an

international prohibition on autonomous weapon systems in order to prevent the delegation of lethal authority to unsupervised non-human systems. In 2015 many philosophers, scientists and technology investors have signed an open letter proposing a ban on weapons that use artificial intelligence technology (among others Stephen Hawking, Noam Chomsky, Steve Wozniac, Daniel C. Dennett and more than thousand of the most reknown researchers in the field of artificial intelligence.)

I don't really want to go into the discussion of the ethical dilemmas connected with such weapon systems today, I just wanted to also point at the dystopian forms of object-autonomy. Neither is my intention in this talk to induce a discussion along the lines of argument of strict determinism that we all know very well – the question if we control them or if they (gadgets, things, technologies) control us...? Who determines whom...? The aim of my talk is precisely to go beyond these superficial questions that are anchored in a conception of the world consisting of two independent sides – we and them, humans and objects (both natural and technological). The aim of my talk is to radically criticize such a binary categorization of the world and its entities.

If we come to the third video and to a more artistic context again – the work with the balloons – we are neither confronted with the fascination of an apparent or illusionary object-autonomy, nor with the dystopia of object-autonomy. In the third video we see the capacity of an object to act and to move – due to its very material conditions and the material conditions of the space it inhabits.

When considering the three examples – the white column, the robotic security guard and the dancing balloons – the question is whether these examples that I declared to be examples of a certain autonomy of objects are not in fact examples of their very heteronomy, of their interdependence and interrelation with other entities. In regard to the column it's movement is totally dependent on a human being – operating the remote control or pulling the string. Regarding the automated weapons system the question is more complex. The existence of the robot definitely depends entirely on human beings but it is designed in such a way as to be able to operate without human intervention. This capacity is dependent on programs or algorithms that are developed by human beings. Its functioning is dependent on certain material components that have to work together in certain ways. The movements of the balloons are dependent on the wind, on the air and hence on the people in the gallery that make the air move in different ways. If we start to ask now who is really independent – the balloons, the wind, the persons walking in the gallery – we are back at the question of strict determinism. The philosopher Bruno Latour was one of the first theorists who really challenged the tradition of dichotomous world

models – of objects and nature misunderstood as inert matter on the one hand and subjects misunderstood as agile and creative agents – being the lords and masters of the inanimate on the other. Whereas in fact "the locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group". (I am borrowing the words of Jane Bennett here who coined the term of the human-nonhuman working group.) Latour put it the following way: „There is no object, no subject....But there are events. I never act; I am always slightly surprised by what I do.“ Bruno Latour has suggested to consider or to think in assemblages or collectives of humans and things in order to counter the idea that things (both natural and technological) are passive matter devoid of agency. In several books (especially in *The parliament of things*) he tried to explain that agency is not a human privilege. Latour proposed to conceive of things as actants if they make a difference, if they have an effect on others or if they alter a situation. Rather than trying to disentangle the human from the nonhuman, the subject from the object, we can gain from perceiving their intricate entanglement, their constant interwovenness, their embeddedness in a network of relations (and with material entanglement I do not just mean a relation between me and the door for example because I am on the right side of it and I perceive the door, so it's in my consciousness). Entanglement is meant in a material sense: My actions constantly involve some material entities and the use of these things alters my body, influences and alters the way how I think, how I do things but more than that these entities that I am constantly in touch with also have an effect on my body. (Where my body starts or ends and a nonhuman body starts is not so clear....is the computer a part of me or did my thoughts become part of it as they are resting on its desktop now? Is my finger part of this machine when it is touching the mouse? How is it with an artificial heart? Is it an object and after entering the body it is a subject? Or is it an object-part of a subject? How is it in regard to food? We constantly eat stuff and partly transform it into bodily substance. So where does the object of an apple for example end? When we swallow it or when we touch it? These are rather unresolvable questions....) According to Latour "it's never clear who and what is acting [...] since an actor is never alone in acting. Play-acting puts us immediately into a thick imbroglio where the question of who is carrying out the action has become unfathomable." In specific networks with other things and/or humans things enable certain actions and disable others. Latour clarified that this does not mean that objects and subjects merge and that we consider them as a harmonious union, but that we substitute the rigid conventional distribution of roles with a spectrum of indistinction. If we focus on the entanglement of humans and things (and other nonhuman entities), on the interdependence of so-called subjects and objects we might develop a heightened

(ecological) awareness connected with the responsibility that is entailed with this entangled condition.

Karen Barad, an American feminist philosopher and physicist dedicated her philosophical writings lately to the challenge of explaining this material entanglement of all material entities (in a physical and philosophical way). She developed a concept called agential realism and the model of intra-action. We constantly involve other entities in our actions (human beings, things, machines, animals) but Barad does not think that there is an object and a subject and then they meet and interact. She thinks that the intra-action is the primary thing – before there is something like subjects and objects. The intra-action transforms the involved entities and the entities transform each other during the intra-action. So, subjects and objects are the results of certain intra-actions and do not pre-exist as such. Karen Barad's intra-action describes an encounter that engenders certain entities and makes phenomena emerge that did not pre-exist as such before the encounter. According to her, matter and meaning, the material and the discursive constantly intra-act as well. We could say that once we move, it is the material entities around us and their entanglement with us that dispossess us of our narrative continuity.

But if everything is entangled, what is autonomy then?

We have all experienced situations in which things and machines do not really do what we want them to do or what we try to make them do. And this means that they must have some autonomy from us. Martin Heidegger was describing this shift in regard to the status of the broken tool in his famous tool-analysis. (I want to write on the computer but the screen freezes. I want to build a tower with ice-cubes but they melt. I want to cook in my flat but suddenly there is an electricity cut and no one cut the cable. Suddenly the engine of the car does not start. I want to see what the time is but the clock in my kitchen stopped.....) That all entities intra-act and are therefore interconnected and dependent on each other, does not mean that things do not have a certain degree of independence from human intentions and perceptions. If we perceive things as actants, as Latour suggested, then it follows that actants are capable to resist after all. But more than that, if we abandon an anthropocentric world view, then a broken thing does not just obstruct human actions from time to time, but has an inherent liveliness that allows it to intra-act and act in the world at large, not just on or with us. (This is the most evident when we throw things away – they transform, they keep being active – even in our absence – they emit methane and greenhouse gases that enter the air and eventually our lungs – no matter if we want that or not, if we watch that or not, if we know that or not). If we abandon the idea of the human

being being the sole mover and center of every process and action, if we distance ourselves from metaphysic individualism, a non-functional thing is not merely an obstacle in the way, a certain limitation of absolute mobility, smoothness and efficiency of the subject, the thing is not only here *for us* and it does not necessarily yield readily to our cultural, linguistic and scientific constructions. (What is a thing if it is not commodity, a useful instrument, a property or passive matter?) Things have a certain agential capacity which is scientifically proven as a capability for self-organisation.

The affirmation of a certain degree of independence of things destroys fantasies of human omnipotence, the imagination of a self-sufficient subject in possession of absolute control being independent of other material entities and its material surrounding. It destroys anthropocentric views of the world in which humans a priori occupy the center and are in charge of all those „its“. That´s the critical and political potential of all the artistic and philosophical attempts that try to expose a certain disobedience of things, that create situations that would allow for their „emancipation“ to a certain extent. The objects explored in these projects are things that resist stasis of any sort. They are non-static entities that do not only exist *for us*. And in this sense, I think, they are anarchist objects. Recently the philosopher Timothy Morton wrote: „I shall try to liberate autonomy for the sake of nonhumans.“ How will he do that? I will end this lecture by referring to the words of Christoph Schlingensiefel by saying: Art/philosophy is only what we do not understand completely immediately.