

Judith Hopf

GROW

kaufmann repetto is glad to announce *GROW*, Judith Hopf's fourth solo show with the gallery, where the artist presents new works (sculpture and silkscreen prints) that reflect critically on the privileged place of the human species in the hierarchical structures of being.

With *Phone Users 1, 2, 3* humans appear on the scene under the form of life-sized sculptures made of clay, a figurative representation unparalleled in the artist's practice. Shaped by hand-formed chunks, the crumbly outlines of their bodies and facial features are roughly sketched. Captured in the silent and motionless isolation of their raw and brittle materiality, each of the three figures represents a person who is grasping a phone. Their gestures evoke a familiar experience that we all know well from our everyday lives: they are portrayed in the attempt of receiving, recording or transmitting the signals of telecommunication. But whether holding up the phone in search of reception or clumsily bending over the screen while sending a message, these *Phone Users* seem to be struggling, as if it was not even clear to themselves what exactly they are supposed to receive. Their facial expressions convey a sense of bewilderment, incredulous that their connection to the world doesn't work as they imagined.

The concern for the interrelation between humans and technology is a recurring theme in Hopf's oeuvre, like for instance in *Laptop Men*, an earlier series consisting in abstract figures made of geometrically shaped metal sheets bearing cartoon-like faces. Also in *Phone Users* a total amalgamation between body and device has taken place, yet in this case a sense of resistance is conveyed through the rough materiality of clay, literally and symbolically close to earth. The plasticity and malleability of the raw material preserves the memory of the hand-shaped modelling, reproducing every handgrip and finger pressure with extreme precision - an *ante litteram* scanning process which acts as an antagonist to the contemporary digital dependence.

The critical scrutiny of dominant ideologies is also addressed in the other group of works presented in the exhibition. Two oversized grass blades are rising high in the spaces of the gallery. Monumental in scale - 3,50 meters tall one and 2,50 meters the other - they are realized in pressed steel and finished with a may-green powder coating. The industrial production process and the extreme enlargement confers a sense of abstraction on these two sculptural objects. With their towering height, the grass blades draw our attention to an omnipresent, but vastly overlooked botanical specimen. Grasses, sprouting abundantly on our planet for the past 55 million years, are arguably one of the most successful plant families, occurring in almost all ecosystems, with an extraordinary capacity to colonize, persist and transform environments. Due to its relevance for mammalian herbivory, grass assumed a fundamental role in the agricultural revolution during the Neolithic period. Forest clearance, one of the earliest man-made modifications of the natural environment, provided pastures for cattles, shortly followed by the introduction of fencing systems, leading to the appearance of property ownership, domestication of animals, collection of natural resources and the arising of 'cultural landscapes'. In more recent centuries, cultivated grass became a constant presence on the pleasure grounds of the modern man: in the gardens of Renaissance villas and Baroque castles, in the 18th century *Jardin à l'anglais* and in the carefully trimmed lawns adorning suburban middle-class houses of the 20th century.

But the artist's *Blades of Grass* are clearly not available for human use. By sheer size, they are placed out of our control, and being forced to look up at them we are obliged to revise our scale of values of what we normally consider to be great and important. This theme is also taken up in the two *Endless Tree* screen prints: each one 2,50 meter high, they depict tree stems whose growth is apparently perpetual and incessant, carelessly ignoring the limits of the picture frame. Unaffected by human categories, Hopf's rebellious grasses and trees prompt us to investigate the place of plants in human systems of meaning, recently challenged by the discussion of vegetal intelligence and vegetal dignity, which culminated in the proclamation of a 'plants' rights carta' by neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso. This radical ontological shift is also taken up by political theorist Jane Bennett's thesis of "vital materiality". Overcoming the dichotomy between human/non human animals opposed to inorganic matter, she theorizes that all entities have in common a lively and energetic play of forces: "Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because (...) the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, telling, feeling) a fuller range of nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies."¹

Within this broader context, Hopf's new works invite us to experiment a drastically different attitude, putting in doubt the human exceptionalism and the categories on which it rests. Her *Blades of Grass and Endless Trees* - not only placeholders for nature but also for 'matter' in a wider sense - are far from being inert, passive or humble objects. Their prodigious growth suggests the presence of an unruly, headstrong vitality - a vitality that certainly outclasses the helpless techno-addiction of the lethargic, clumsy *Phone Users* who have clearly lost the coordinates of a bygone, anthropocentric world. To conclude with Bennett, only by overcoming the figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter we will be able to advance "the emergence of more ecological and more sustainable modes of production and consumption".²

Judith Hopf (b. 1969, Karlsruhe) lives and works in Berlin. Her work has been exhibited internationally at SMK - National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen (2018); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2018); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2017); Museion, Bozen (2016); Neue Galerie, Kassel (2015); PRAXES, Berlin (2014); Kunsthalle Lingen, Lingen (2013); Studio Voltaire, London (2013); Fondazione Morra Greco, Naples (2013); Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Frankfurt (2013); Malmö Konsthall, Malmö (2012); Grazer Kunstverein, Graz (2012); Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe (2008); Portikus, Frankfurt (2007); Secession, Vienna (2006); Caso Institute for Art and Design, Utrecht (2006). She has participated in biennials and group exhibitions in international institutions, such as Lenbachhaus, Munich (2018); Mudam, Luxembourg (2017); La Biennale de Montreal (2016); 8th Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool (2014); Sculpture Center, New York (2014); Triennale for Video Art, Mechelen (2012); DOCUMENTA13, Kassel (2012); Kunsthalle Basel (2011); Kunsthall Oslo, Oslo (2010). Judith Hopf is professor of Fine Arts at the Städelschule in Frankfurt.

1 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham e Londra 2010.

2 Ibid.