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Metamorphoses: Let Everything Happen to You

Chus Martínez

My mind is bent to tell
of bodies changed into new forms.
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 1, 1–2

The recent philosophical and artistic interest in nature does not reflect a new trend but the necessity to expand our public space within it. This expansion is taking place not through the institutionalized presence of art and culture in public spaces, but rather through a transformation of what we imagine is possible and the development of proposals for the invention of a new ground for the future. The word “nature” embodies today a complete revolution in the way we relate to the organic and non-organic, in the way we understand gender, generative power, and life.

It would be wrong to think of nature as a “subject.” One could be as radical as to say that in these days, to talk about “nature” is to talk about “art”: art without the burden of institutional life, without the ideological twists of cultural politics; art as a practice that belongs—as it should be—to artists, but that needs to socialize with all those who care about life. In other words, to talk about “nature” is to replace the historical notion of the avant-garde with a mission for art that is not determined by form or by the invention of new gestures, but by a thorough investigation of the codes of life.

This exhibition is for all those directly interested in the processes of life, nature, and new forms of sensing from a non-human-centered perspective. But it is also for those who are not. And it is for all those who are interested in the limits and possibilities of the art exhibition and in the structure of our current public life and citizenship. Think about all the structures that currently constitute the art world, about the impoverishment of a language inherited from past left and liberal social visions and the impossibility of reinventing these dreams under the premise of a late-capitalistic economic system. There is a need for a new sensorium to invent new notions, to build new sentences, to embrace a new idea of equality and social justice. If we believe this, we can see that to talk about nature is to talk about the expansion of museums, of the public space. Nature is a source that reprograms our senses and entails a potential for transformation that may affect the future of architecture, of communications, of gender entanglement, of economy. And of art.

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis stands for our fascination with transformation. No other era has witnessed our current need to address the desire to change gender, our refusal to be confined in one body; and yet we refer to this as a “trans,” as a passage and not a metamorphosis. My idea in this exhibition, and in this text, is not to discuss historical references to metamorphosis, from Ovid to Franz Kafka (1883–1924), but to position the notion as the possibility of a radical transformation of life. There is a reason why the notion of metamorphosis has not enjoyed a revival in Western culture: it is associated with negativity, with a sense of loss, of a transformation that initiates a journey of no

return from the “I” that constitutes identity. This is, of course, a simplification, but our culture is skeptical of becoming, of losing the distance that guarantees judgment. We lack sufficient references and opportunities to imagine the positive implications of a continuous flow of change, of shifting bodily and geographical margins. If there is a philosophical question that has troubled thinkers for centuries, it is that of transcendence and immanence: the possibility of a permanent entity outside of our bodies and minds, an eternal presence capable of responding to our prayers. Change, in the form of a fluid flow of possibilities, poses an enormous challenge to that very possibility. It would only be acceptable if the force that moved it, that initiated it, had its origins in that eternal presence. Otherwise—if change and transformation were self-originated, if they possessed the intelligence in themselves to know what this change was for—no transcendent powers would be needed to justify them. But we fear the monstrosity of being alone and—as humans—embedded in the same matter and logic as nature. Western philosophy is marked by the attempt to find a realm for humans and their logic that is different from the many other logics with which we coexist. We create culture for us, and nature for us, making nature exist outside of our selves. Our administrative mind is not quantic but rudimentary, counting each and every one as we are, as we were, as we will be, and thus remaining identical in memory to the representations in the records, in the archives.

There would be nothing more disturbing for our culture than to discover that the many artworks and treasures of the past are mutating while waiting to be exhibited. Imagine the long and tedious days spent by great artworks in storage, reduced to inactivity, not even being challenged by the climate (since climate-control also reduces any chance of change) or by our moody eyes upon them. Imagine the bodies and the faces of the people in your family photographs changing in their albums. You might think it surreal or fantastic that I imagine the million changes of state that may have undergone. It looks like the hypothesis of a science-fiction film. But the possibility is there. It is only that we defy it—it is simply not rational to follow this path. But in the meantime, we are looking forward to the invention of new forms of wearable technology, of mobile phones that will be able to bend and take the form of our hands. Is such a touch screen rational? You could say, “Oh, but this is a consequence of ergonomics, of the introduction of a better relation between us—as workers—and the devices that work with us, not only in the office, but in our everyday lives.” And certainly, we have developed a togetherness with our devices that leads to the idea that technology could be a second skin, that we could integrate it into our body. This idea, however, is less a response to technology than to our need to expand our “substance,” to use Baruch Spinoza’s (1632–1667) term, in order to express the possibility of enhancing the human through attributes that bring the species closer to eternity. There is something amazingly comforting about the fact that our devices respond to us. This trait of the new mobile phone that will be flexible, that will bend and adapt to the shape of our hand, does not respond to its function, since the palm is not an ear that demands flexibility to improve hearing. But it does respond to our concern with what our palms touch. Donna Haraway (1944) starts her text “When Species Meet” with the meaningful question: “Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?”¹ This inquiry should be extended to all matter, organic and inorganic, not to enter a mystified world but to learn how to leave behind the great divides that mark our relationship with nature, and to enhance our possibilities of animating culture with a new experience of itself. It is not that we need to “redefine” culture—the task is far more complex than the necessary and continuous exercise of critique—but that we need to introduce new experiences inside the experience of culture.

¹ Working with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev at dOCUMENTA (13) gave me an opportunity of sensing the crucial relevance of multi-species co-evolution as the source of new ideas and concepts to open up the perception and the role of artistic intelligence.

Another example of our negative take on morphing is the requirement, when we log on to certain sites with special security, to retype letters and cyphers that are in the process of becoming something else. The ability to recognize them even in this disguise, or before they become altogether other, is regarded as “human.” If we fail, as I always seem to do, then we must be robots. There is nothing negative about being a robot, but in this context it is regarded as a fraud: a machine that wants to be me. This is a vivid example of how to many people metamorphosis cannot be integrated joyfully and unproblematically into our epistemological cosmos. It defies the old virtues of truth-to-nature and objectivity, both premises of modern scientific thinking.

This truth-to-nature thinking emerged in the early eighteenth century (one of its most prominent exponents being the Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus, 1707–1778) and was a reaction to the overemphasis by earlier naturalists on the variability and therefore monstrosity of nature. It would be very difficult to encounter a defense of variability in Western philosophy. We can trace the interest in immanence from Spinoza to Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), but it seems too complex a concept to render itself truly productive or absorbable. And yet immanence emerged as a response to a notion that is at the core of both our political organization—democracy—and our idea of the social: participation. Plato saw three possible kinds of participation: a material participation, an imitative participation, and a demonic participation. If participation consists of being part of something, then it is difficult to see how what is participated in suffers no division or separation from the participant. If to participate is to imitate, then the artist (or the demon) might force all the senses to reproduce the model. This means the introduction, for example, of a foreign force, something external to our nature to make us participate. This problem has shaped philosophical discussions for centuries, leading to many speculative theories that attempt to come to terms with a principle that would allow one to think of participation without implying “breaking into parts,” ceasing to be oneself to fully become another. Philosophers have sought to define a cause, a force that gives rise to change, transformation, whose effect would be immanent, emanating not from an outside, but from itself. As Spinoza expressed it, “the effect remains in its cause no less than the cause remains in itself.”² But what does this actually mean? Immanence involves an ontology, a theory of being whereby beings are not defined by their rank in the hierarchy, and are no more or less remote from the One. This notion—immanence— would make participation a true merging exercise that would imply a flow of beings into beings.

If participation, the breaking into parts, and separation is what defines our modern political organization, it also governs our understanding of mechanical and technological developments as mere “components” that participate in the enhancement of our powers, skills, and intelligence, and reinforce our nature as a mere source from which we can take as we please. Such a symbiosis of humans and technology has been termed “Posthumanism.” In answering the question “How Did We Become Posthuman?” scholar N. Katherine Hayles (1943) writes:

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the

² Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (Paris, 1968), transl. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 172.

body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born.³

Hayles argues that our relationship to information technology is mediated by what we can call possessive individualism. “Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them ... The human essence is freedom from the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession.”⁴ “Owing nothing to society” comes from arguments that Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) constructed about humans in a “state of nature” before market relations arose. Because ownership of oneself is thought to pre-date market relations and owe nothing to them, it forms a foundation upon which those relations can be built, as when one sells one’s labor for wages. Her point is very interesting as a different reading of information or intelligence, seen as an external trait that can be possessed by both the human body and the machine without implying a radical change in either. In her texts, Hayles has advocated for a reversal of the “bodiless information” abstraction that is an undeniably essential component in all theorizing and yet can account for the infinite multiplicity of our interactions with the real, erasing the world’s multiplicity and risking a much more complex understanding of life.

In the face of such a powerful dream, it can be a shock to remember that for information to exist, it must always be instantiated in a medium. And this is probably the reason why so many artists today are interested in exploring the relationship with form, with change, with intelligence, with nature, without indulging in transcendent modernist dreams of coming closer to a goal, to an End or to the One. This exercise of thinking of life without hierarchies, of giving way to an idea of morphing, of truly trying to become nature in order to understand the limits of mere participation, has been undertaken by artists in an eloquent and courageous way. An impulse is appearing in many different practices and contexts that invites us to see this not as an arcane encounter with the powers of nature, but as a radical process of liberation and demystification, one which, nevertheless, stresses the importance of expression—an expression not of the “I” or of the “self,” but actually a method that finds its source in experience and moves us toward invention. After all, metamorphosis could be another word for invention.

But if it might be easier to say that to explore metamorphosis is to inquire into invention, why did I not say this from the outset? The problem lies in something very simple: we have severe difficulty in thinking of invention without thinking about results. The invention I am thinking about involves an interplay of metaphysical, socio-political, scientific, and aesthetic dimensions that give invention an “eventual” nature, the creative capacity of repetition, and the claim that “invention has no cause (and no effect).” In this sense, art is a true inventive force.

I believe that the interest of art and artists in nature has a quantic character—a desire for simultaneity between art and nature. Enfolded in all the practices that have nature at their core lies a will to relate to those who know best, who developed the methods of study, the language and, almost more importantly, the images to pursue the desire for an experience of nature that is constantly evolving. Yet perhaps more than building a relationship with other disciplines, I sense that these artists have an ambition to impact these disciplines, with the imperative to transform art’s own substance as well. The interest in nature cannot be perceived as a revision, as an adjustment of a “subject” inside artistic production or its exhibition history. There is an instrumental use of those

³ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 2–3.

⁴ Crawford Brough Macpherson, *The Political Theory Of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes To Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 3.

practices as well, since they are being integrated into institution programs, conferences, publications, etc. But the instrumental use should be seen as an exercise that entails the slow comprehension of how this quantic relation to nature, this new simultaneity between art and nature, and therefore a transformation of the time-and-space language and structure that supports it, can be achieved. Returning to basic forms of producing connectivity and relations, therefore, can be far more productive in achieving this ambition than the orchestration of a vast range of technological tools to fill the *horror vacui* of not knowing exactly how far we are from our goals.

I would like to mention here an important project that I undertook in 2016 thanks to the Argentinian artist Eduardo Navarro (1979): the exercise of displaying the documentary footage that TBA21–Academy had gathered during several ecological ocean expeditions.⁵ The footage showed the coming together of individuals of different backgrounds, the experience of being in the many different biodiverse environments, as well as the technological spectrum that has been used to record this experience. It became clear that one of the most interesting aspects of these 600-plus hours of recording was behavior. The will to transcend passivity, to be active in nature, to record, to produce something out of it, even though these expeditions had a highly speculative character, is actually palpable. These beautiful images framed not just nature but us: us not only as humans, but as cultured humans. Moreover, I would argue that the images revealed a gendered world oscillating between the desire to control, generally associated with the male element, and a very important perception of culture as sentient, which may spark a new sense of co-existence with the nonhuman, traditionally associated with the feminine world.

It was therefore of great importance to consider several ways of activating these images in a public context for the event *Fishing for Islands*, held at the Hamburger Bahnhof in October 2017: giving them to an artist to be rearranged according to a logic that was quite different from that of those behind and in front of the camera; making the underwater imagery coexist with moving bodies and gestures on land; and embracing a singing voice. Every piece of research is marked by individual intentions and desires, so it seemed compelling to explore a different way of becoming one with the oceans by inviting two mimes, who over the years have focused on moving like fish and animals, to perform in front of Tiphane Kim Mall's (1987) filmic installation, presented on a very large articulated screen-wall, and accompanied by the singing of Kabir (1440–1518) poetry by filmmaker Shabnam Virmani (1965). The movements of the mimes near this sea of images strengthened the sense that the footage was not merely there to be seen, nor to acknowledge the expeditions, but to show that new organs and a new complexity of movement will be required if we are to transform our human behavior.

This simple idea posed a massive complexity for me that I could not have solved without the involvement of Navarro. He developed a mechanical set of hands that doubled those of the mimes, covered in mirrors. He dressed the mimes in black and mirror masks, and each held a hand and a mirror. The simultaneity of the projected images, the mimes, and the voice of the singer presented the audience with a complex set of variables that emphatically addressed the epistemological dimension of this non-division of realms. The environment declared: take the sea as that “one thing,” a source for a new imagination of the world. Think about the sea as an organ, not as a place or a medium, but as a fantastic addition to sensation, and therefore to affection, and therefore to the future of science and technology and art; but also to the future of love. Think of the sea as you

⁵ TBA21–Academy is the exploratory soul of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary and an itinerant site of cultural production and trans-disciplinary research. Conceived in 2011 as a moving platform on the oceans, it brings together artists, researchers, and thinkers from various fields concerned with today's most urgent ecological, social, and economic issues. Through its expeditions on sea and land, the academy seeks to reinvent the culture of exploration in the twenty-first century, while inciting knowledge creation, new modes of collaboration, and the coproduction of solutions for the pressing environmental challenges of today. <https://www.tba21.org/#item-foundation-1047>

might think about philosophy: as an infinite substance that can provide us with an experience so radically different from the commonsensical that it will insulate new life. The project and archive presentation of *Fishing for Islands* aimed to show that the sea is not a “thing” we possess, nor a place or a part we protect, but a whole new plane, an infinite image where unknown intuitions and ideas coexist without belonging to any particular mind, whether human or other animal. It proposed the sea as an infinite perceptual image capable of saturating our verbal narratives, so that we may emerge with another language to tell and sing about a new world, to approximate ourselves to a new form of becoming that will affect life, that is affecting art— and therefore politics, since the polis was never in the seas. It was an exercise to identify artists, scientists, poets, singers, and dancers as those able to trace the moving away of learning and thinking solely from the realm of the social sciences. Art and artists in all the realms of knowledge will challenge the dry, the Earth, the social, the real: the world.

Toward a Holographic Understanding of the Oceans

Objectivity has a history. The idea only emerged around the mid-nineteenth century, and its function was related to the notion that in order to represent a scientific object faithfully, one had to eliminate all subjective interferences. Although the emergence of the self as a cultural idea can be traced much further back, it is contingent on the peculiar vicissitudes of the new circumstances of urban life. Individuals in cities are both made by and subjected to the constant influence of the mental processes of others, which stimulate and enlarge our minds but also make them less our own. The self has always been vulnerable to this form of contagion, a flow that perpetuates a collective production of the self, making us no longer know what it means to be sincere. But, again and again, we try to simulate sincerity, to approximate the noble ethos, by becoming a reiterated impersonation. Yet the world of objectivity and the different kingdoms of the self rely heavily on but a few organs, mainly the brain and the eyes.

When Navarro mentioned to me that he had been developing for some time a series of edible drawings, I immediately started to think again about the subject that opens this text: the idea of a different metabolic relation with nature. For Navarro, metamorphosis has been the main principle of his work for more than a decade. This proposition can only be understood taking into account our relation to destruction, since becoming formless is the first step in re-emergence. Navarro cites the ideas expressed in the holographic principle⁶. When artists make such references, scientists smile, since what we—the art community—understand of such complex theories is always highly particular and simplified. The holographic principle can be radically simplified as follows: destruction is no option in the Cosmos, since the Cosmos does not destroy its own information.

I love the first lines of Gustav Metzger’s (1926–2017) *Manifesto of Auto-Destructive Art* from 1960:

Man in Regent Street is auto-destructive.
Rockets, nuclear weapons, are auto-destructive.
Auto-destructive art.
The drop drop dropping of HH bombs.
Not interested in ruins (the picturesque)
Auto-destructive art re-enacts the obsession with destruction,
the pummeling to which individuals and masses are subjected.

⁶ The holographic principle suggests that the contents of the universe originate as mathematics encoded on a boundary surrounding the entire cosmos.

I think Metzger knew even then about the holographic principle. Stephen Hawking (1942) has observed that as far as quantum mechanics is concerned, information about the quantum state of a particle that enters a black hole goes with it, but is never destroyed. According to Leonard Susskind (1940), all we know about physics would fall apart if this information is lost. Thus no destruction is possible. This can be read in so many non-quantum ways, but we could claim it as very good news, since it is an invitation to stop trying to destroy—an invitation coming not from a well-intending soul but from the Universe itself! However, we all know that in the precarious minds of humans, things are far more complex.

Navarro's very simple gesture of drawing on a matter that is compatible with our guts radically challenges the cry for an immaterial art. Taking into consideration the power of the market and the aggressive opposition to complex thinking, as well as to art and artists, the idea of a non-destroying but metabolizing art seems an important proposal. It heralds the end of the sweet years of bourgeois culture and the beginning of a radical post-capital stage—where, however, it is difficult to know what can challenge the current situation. Is a difference from capital even possible? Digestion is a flow that includes both natural and cultural phenomena. So perhaps eating art, making it part of our digestive system, is a way of addressing the importance of radically transforming ourselves, as well as imagining a space for a different connectivity among humans and non-humans. Once in our stomach, art may do its part.

Bruno Latour wrote: “The very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off.”⁷ The aim of all these art-and-nature-related practices is to investigate what it would be to “bracket culture off” as a transitional way of transcending both states.

The Artists

Lin May Saeed, Mathilde Rosier, Ingela Ihrman, Eduardo Navarro, Reto Pulfer, Ingo Niermann, Alexa Karolinski, “I Have Left You the Mountain,” Nicanor Aráoz, and Ania Soliman

The claim that humans are animals different from all the others was first expressed by Aristotle. He formulated his definition of humans as “living beings possessing language” (ζῷον λογὸν ἔχον), which later, in the passage from Greek to Latin, acquired the classic form *animal rationale*. But Aristotle's definition was clearly in contrast with, or in reaction to, his predecessors', from Homer to Empedocles, Parmenides, or Democritus, none of whom could care less about discussing the differences between the various faculties of animals. Humans included.

Ascribing an intellectual power to animals and plants introduces interesting new twists to the relation between thinking and perceiving. For many, all the ideas, all the experiments conducted by thinkers, or by artists proposing to be an animal or a plant, are still too extravagant, while others are too much concerned with leaving behind the old political truths as the left understands them, which have taught us to be aware. For centuries, language and labor have been defining the human condition. All the works in this exhibition, however, investigate a simple question: Why shouldn't I become a flower, or a seed, or a turtle? Why wouldn't it be a good idea to go inside the other, the different, not only observe or direct it but actually try to reverse the analytic logic and therefore, the order of life? True, we cannot perform this operation with every single animal and plant, with every single living creature, including humans; but it is an inspiring proposal to introduce into our imaginations, to persuade us that we could and should do such a thing.

⁷ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Paris, 1991), transl. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 104.

Lin May Saeed

Through bas-relief, sculpture, and large paper cut-out drawings Lin May Saeed's work develops an intense study of the myths of ancient civilizations and their power in today's political and societal thinking. She has been recreating figures and scenes that invoke an idea of Mesopotamia, a region that encompasses Iraq, the mountains of Armenia, and extends toward the Persian Gulf. This exercise, which is only partly explicit, refers to the very different ways in which we treat the dreams of the past, this geographical area as the source of wisdom, and the present condition of the region. Saeed reminds us that such dreams were always colonialist in nature. Babylon, an important kingdom in Mesopotamia from the eighteenth to the sixth century BCE, is imagined as a transforming "civilization," but a black one.

To express such notions, Saeed often uses an inexpensive synthetic material: expanded Polystyrene (styropor), normally white and used for packaging. Its structural qualities—easy to carve, extremely light—contrast with our historical image of bas-relief. This technique is defined by the fact that the sculpted elements remain attached to a "solid" background of the same material, which is painstakingly chiseled away. The forms and the figures emerge from the matter, which becomes a background for the subject, a scene that Saeed normally paints with soft colors, evoking illustrations in fables, but also loosely referring to the rich animal relief of the Ishtar Gate, now in Berlin (Pergamon Museum), like the studio of the artist herself. Ishtar was the goddess to whom the eighth gate to the inner city of Babylon was dedicated. But it is not from ceramic or clay or stone that these creatures emerge, but from polystyrene, bearing the mark of the many small spheres that live inside the material.

Polystyrene also has its roots in Berlin. It was discovered by Eduard Simon (1789–1856), an apothecary. And this material has also undergone a process of metamorphosis, since its origin is the resin of the Turkish sweetgum tree *Liquidambar orientalis*. One could summarize the history of the resin's transformation by saying that one very important aspect of it is the lack of oxygen. No oxygen, no life; thus this synthetic material has even less life than other inorganic materials. Here, it provides a basis that gives the works a fragile appearance, and yet it embodies eternity: chemically inert, resistant to acids and alkalis, Polystyrene is non-biodegradable.

Both in the reliefs and in her sculptures, Saeed's language is dense. She addresses humbleness through the fragility of the material and at the same time references the possibility of a deep and radical transformation of the character of our current society. She plays with the idea that this hope for transformation may remain unfulfilled, may not be the cause of an effect, stressing this possibility by using an artistic language that may appear archaic. Indeed, her work refers to a certain condition that art possesses: it is a place of privileged banishment from immediacy. Through her forms, materials, and colors, which represent the past, Saeed pays special attention to the kind of relationships we establish with history. But she also studies how our way of remembering a past that we cannot remember, since it is only part of a cultural narrative, affects our judgment, our behavior in the present. In that great discourse with the living dead that art is experiencing, our role is not a passive one. Seeing and perceiving is a mode of action. We engage the presence, the voice of the forms and objects we see. We allow them entry, though not unguarded, into our innermost selves; they occupy strong places in our consciousness. They exercise upon our imagination and desires, upon our ambitions and most covert dreams, a strange, bruising mastery. In other words: men who burn books or destroy art and culture know what they are doing.

Mathilde Rosier

*Listen to me and you shall hear
News hath not been this thousand year:
Since Herod, Caesar, and many more,
You never heard the like before.
Holy-dayes are despis'd,
New fashions are devis'd.
Old Christmas is kickt out of Town.
Yet let's be content,
And the times lament,
You see the world turn'd upside down.*

These verses from an old English ballad serve to introduce the wonder that is performed in the work of Mathilde Rosier, a celebration of the “turn’d upside down.” This simple inversion, which transforms and challenges everything, belongs to the oldest of urges: the need for change. This is a real revolution that Rosier brings about due to the magnificent power of an imagination responding to a chaotic world of a monstrous fusion of values and of incongruous social forms and languages. It is not an allegory; it is real. Rosier’s painted figures celebrate this overturning of all the orders we know with a grace that seems demonic, supernatural. They “stand” upside down with a new naturalness that replaces the oddity of our former lives on the ground. They invoke, from above us, the very importance of the top. We see the world from the point of view of these upside-down protagonists and feel their state of absurdity and joy.

Unlike Pieter Bruegel’s (1525–1569) *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559), there is nothing monster-like in these images, however. Nothing of the antithetic violence of those trying to eat from their anus, for example. No, this divergent species is possessed by a true love-force—a non-instrumental encounter with the orders of human and nonhuman. These beings standing in reverse, posing in silence, taste joy. Like Karl Marx (1818-1883), they seem to argue that in the absence of money, we can get money only in return for love. Hanging up there on the ceiling, these figures are closer to animals, since they are not colonized by our cultural and social systems. And we feel invited in, we feel the warm force that makes us raise our eyes slowly toward them. Can we do this too? Are they too far or too close?

This simple inversion represents Rosier’s long research into the possibility of introducing simple rituals into the core of her work. She is interested in exploring a force, a pulse, a vibration, a movement, a *tempo*, the production of a duration that is inside all the works of painting, performance, or film that are able to challenge the melody of history. We are only part of something larger, she suggests, the scope of which is indeterminate.

These new series of paintings are a strange and great take on the portrait. What can a portrait be today? It definitely cannot be a person standing in front of a camera, or to be more accurate, in front of the reverse of a phone attached to a stick. We take for granted that the millions of pictures people take of themselves and others constitute a new species of portraits. But they are not. In the continuous repetition of the same gestures an incredible redundancy is produced. These images have lost the sense of risk that characterizes a true portrait. To present oneself is to take great risks, it’s to make our identity and our self-possession vulnerable. Rosier’s upside-down figures remind me of Fëdor Dostoevsky’s (1821-1881) description of a characteristic dream that occurs in the early stages of epilepsy: one is somehow lifted free of one’s own body; looking back, one sees oneself and feels a sudden, maddening fear, another presence is entering into one’s own person and there is no avenue of return. Experiencing this fear, the mind gropes to a sharp awakening. So it is when we are in the presence of these works. They contain a great performative power and a reminder of how

transformation is still possible. And they may come to possess us so completely that we go, for a spell, in fear and in imperfect recognition of ourselves. Those who have read Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) and can still look into the mirror unflinchingly may technically be able to read, but are still illiterate in the only sense that matters.

Ingela Ihrman

In her sculptures of flowers, animal costumes, and performances Ingela Ihrman focuses on the temporal order of organic development. The work pays special attention to field research, to actual studies of plants and flowers that carry a special meaning, through their name or their form, such as the passion flower, for example. In calling this plant "la flor de las cinco llagas" (The flower with the five wounds) in reference to Christ's suffering, the seventeenth-century Spanish priests who named it in South America during the colonial war introduced it into the logical model of transcendence, of the dialectical suffusion of earthly senses by a suffering that transforms pain into glory. Ihrman has not only studied such meaningfully loaded plants and flowers, but also recreated them, producing complex costumes in which she performs. To go inside flowers or animals instead of observing them from outside embodies her intention to reverse the controlling logic of science, giving these organisms new life and returning them to the plane of immanence, to the order of life. Ihrman's interest in the organic life of plants and animals bears no resemblance to theater or the impersonation of the role of a plant. Her study focuses, in a very personal and complex way, on how the rhythms of life affect and influence biology, embryology, and physiology as well as language theory and philosophy, and therefore also political science. The observation of how life generates, evolves, and develops and of the repetitive forms and variations it creates produces an episteme. Every organic and inorganic element comprises its own time, and all these different times relate rhythmically: in other words, those rhythms emerged and penetrated our entire culture. For example, how many times have you heard the phrase "Listen to your body"? And yet what exactly do we listen to? How do we discover that our own body moves and makes sounds? And what is it that the many movements and sounds reveal about the condition of the body? How can this experience have any epistemological value if we cannot go inside other bodies to listen, to sense, to experience? It is only being inside another body with its other, different sense of life and time and rhythm that allows one to open up to a hitherto unknown dimension of attentiveness. Ihrman's artworks and performances constitute the production of a sensing environment inside the exhibition space, a place where we can learn to sense these lives, hear these sounds, and describe, represent, and register them in terms of feelings and movement.

Eduardo Navarro

When Eduardo Navarro proposed an edible abacus, a humorous scenario of the pleasurable destruction of the information world crossed my mind—a fête of counting with bread that would merge orders of production (art, ideas) with perception and the organs that are unaccounted for when we conceive our ideas of the self; that is, the stomach, the guts, the pancreas, the liver. According to Wikipedia, the word "abacus" comes from *ἄβαξ*, which means "something without base, and improperly, any piece of rectangular board or plank" and the first can be traced back to Mesopotamia in the third century BCE. The "home" position for the beads—now breads—is on the right-hand side. Carefully produced abacuses have metal rods with a slight curvature to prevent the counted beads from accidentally sliding back to the home position. The beads move from right to left: 1 to 10, and then carry on upwards to the next row. The bottom row represents 1s, the next row up represents 10s, then 100s, and so on.

A funny question occurred to me: if the word “calculate” comes from the Latin *calculus*, which means “small stone” (they were used as numerical devices), what would we call a history of mathematics made of bread? The combination of bread and mathematics makes a lot of sense. It is a common understanding that mathematics underpins all the sciences, both as a language and a way of thinking. Without mathematics, it is impossible to adequately address science-related problems and the answers to many of the key questions affecting our planet, for example the prediction and control of the climate, have very important mathematical components. This is one of the reasons why less wealthy countries historically have a statistically superior capability in mathematics, and often boast a bright mathematical past as a guarantee of transcending their current situation. So this merging of bread and calculus is oriented not only toward information, but also toward an almost astrological idea of prediction, of figures that foretell and transform our lives.

This is not the first time that Navarro has used bread as a material, or made edible art. Edible art, in his hands, is not a thing we “can do,” but a true individual apotheosis that questions the relationships we have historically established through our ideas and sentiments. In other words: if nationalism is based on an ideal of separation, and if colonial expansionism is based on the possibility of absorbing, it is far from crazy to devise an art practice, a movement even, that fundamentally presents cultural cannibalism as a way to reveal the burden of post-Enlightenment forms of power, our relationship to the organs we use to produce ideas, and the future of more radiant and inspiring ideas about gender and identity.

To face this task, in the unassuming and gentle manner that defines his artistic production, Navarro has been baking and drawing. This type of work rejects, or better, does not acknowledge the limits between the works and ourselves. He invites all of us to just eat what we see. One could see his large cabinet of drawings as awakening the fear we have of art, historically speaking, being eaten or destroyed. However, digestion is a comprehensive function aimed, ironically enough, at the dissemination of what we eat. By eating one of culture’s most extreme forms of authority, that is, art, we also move away from any adversarial gesture, since to come to the exhibition and eat it can only be a form of pleasure. It is a pleasure based on simple energies that conjures the need to institute a different grand narrative for gender, nature, race, and, of course, art—through nothing but its steady digestion in all stomachs, including those of the parliaments that bear the future of democracy.

Reto Pulfer

Cloth and fabric have millions of cultural and anthropological connotations. The history of cloth is an essay on the history of the line, and one that lives in perpetual entanglement with other lines: lines that are made of fibers that we need to tame, to color. Cloth is also the perfect host for metaphors about skin, flexibility, about the gesture of covering and uncovering, veiling and unveiling, about touch and the importance of softness. And yet, although he works with fabric in his installations, none of these issues seem central to Reto Pulfer’s art, since it is not really the material that occupies his thinking but the way in which simple elements can modify our environment.

Throughout our lives we interact with our surroundings in ways that continuously affect how we operate, and in turn, these structural and functional modifications affect our subsequent interactions with environments, both in terms of what we perceive and how we behave. Aligning with this pragmatic observation, Pulfer concentrates all his efforts on processes of embodiment and materialization, proposing a promising alternative to approaches that psychologize or politicize space and the environment. Space has been seen by philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), among others, as a phenomenon that can provide an insightful exploration into forms of organization. It serves as a medium for the interpretation of the way in which the social, physical,

and mental interact. However, we have seen the tensions between the powerful organizational forces interested in maximizing function and productivity and the return of an interest in New Age practices of mindfulness that liberate us from the transparency of function and preserve the order of the private.

Pulfer's work studies both the original function of the space in which it is shown and the many ways by which we can return space to the realm of the magical through clothes, textures, and materials. Here, the word "magical" is not synonymous with supernatural or unknown energies; the "magic" in this work is closer to what the Japanese call *engimono*, or omnipresent good luck charms, which are at once spiritual devices and commercial products. In other words, his way of transforming places makes the importance and the fascination we have with luck and spirituality very explicit, and it does so not through the invocation of invisible powers but through an insistence on the importance of materialization. It is for this reason that the texture, the colors, and the quality of all the materials he uses are so important. He creates interiors, not of tents or buildings or precarious architectures, but situations that resemble the living inside of a flower. Cloth, light, skin, humans, buildings, rope, and color are all experienced as intermingled agencies. Once inside the work, these entities exhibit no clear separation between the material and the symbolic, for all these dimensions are inextricably entwined. Western culture, and particularly the structural anthropology theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), believes that social structures are based on binary oppositions, or pairs of opposites like male/female, old/young, strong/weak. Pulfer's works, to the contrary, stress that meaningful relations do not depend on the opposition between the created and the made, since spiritual agency—or an agency that is not only based in pragmatism and function—is effective even when we know that it is fabricated.

Ingo Niermann

Ingo Niermann is a writer. He believes that a material emphasis on literature in the political and social processes that affect our ability to imagine the present and the future enhances the traditional ambition of writing to keep fictional worlds in sight. He belongs to no movement and yet the way he writes demands one: a movement of readers capable of seeing fiction as a useful material to develop not only plots, but arguments, and able to help us to imagine scenarios through which to observe and discuss the complex contradictions of the late capitalist world.

His first novel, *Der Effect* (2001), was inscribed in the new wave of Pop literature in Germany. However, since then his speculative style has generated a certain amount of controversy in literary circles. In 2008, he began editing and authoring an extensive book series called "Solutions," a careful reflection on social processes that are "authentic" in the eyes of the average reader, and yet the texts are committed to reimagine all facts in uncommon ways. *Umbauland* (2006), ten solutions for boosting Germany, was the first of the series of fourteen books. *Complete Love* (2016), his second novel, was also conceived as one of the "solutions" of the series.

Niermann's style could be described as realist in its observation of actual facts, but he is a romanticist in his passion for inventiveness, for ideas and relations, which are the true plots of his texts. This dualism accounts for a complexity that rarely satisfies those looking for traditional literature, since he opens up writing to what we can call a new life for philosophy, one that truly counts on its readers. However, we can sense the dimensions of his ambition for the genres he uses through the reactions it provokes. His literature is simultaneously distrusted by the moralists, who accuse him of outrageous licentiousness, and by the middle classes, whose tolerance is transgressed by his ideas of freedom that make clear the miseries of the old intellectuals and the new slavery of auto-fiction at the core of European writing.

In their preface to *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865), Jules de Goncourt (1830–1870) and Edmond de Goncourt (1822–1896) wrote a few lines that could be applied perfectly to the logic of *Complete Love*:

The public like novels that are untrue. This is a true novel.

They like books which seem to take them into society: this work comes from the streets. This is a clinical study of love. The public like harmless and comforting stories, adventures that end happily, ideas which disturb neither their digestion nor their peace of mind. Nowadays, when the novel has assumed the studies and the duties of science, it may claim the liberty and frankness of science.

Science, in the case of *Complete Love*, would be another name for a method to address the past, the extreme barbarism of the Holocaust, but, very importantly, the author's acute consciousness of the dangers in our present time. The novel presents as a solution to inequality and social injustice the notion that every being should enjoy an equal chance of finding sex and love, no matter how old, disabled, or ugly. *Complete Love* is a reform that radically questions the moral, metaphysical, and religious dimensions of a humanism that leads to the abandonment of life by totalitarian utopias.

Alexa Karolinski

Alexa Karolinski's first film was a portrait of Regina Karolinski (85) and Bella Katz (89), two best friends living together in Berlin. The film, focusing on the immense vitality of these two women, is not a straightforward celebration of two Holocaust survivors, but a document aimed to challenge, through a mundane report, the traditional image of the Jew as perpetual stranger. This image of the stranger became an ideal, extolled by intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), Edmond Jabès (1912–1991), Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) or Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017). However, for them the "otherness" of the Jew was nothing less than a badge of honor.

It is not by chance that Karolinski and Niermann were interested in working together to produce a film, or a visual essay, on the basis of *Complete Love*. Its title, *Army of Love*, responds to the idea that the exercise of loving needs to be a continuous one: building an army of lovers, well trained and aware of the fundamental challenge that is posed by love, not only to care or to provide sexual contact but to actually create space for love to originate. The film, which is the result of extensive research and a long series of conversations with disabled and non-disabled people, is one long beautiful scene of people floating while different voices are heard talking about the question of love in relation to disability. This question overlaps with the ever-present issue of difference, and how laws are insufficient to assure an unflagging commitment to a common human consciousness that overcomes the barriers of the body, ethnicity, and territory.

The film's powerful use of light and color positions it within a privileged medium that, rather than documenting a situation, creates an aesthetic field in which to reflect on disability and exile. *Army of Love* is the first part of what we hope will be a series about how rejection by and separation from the community, and the sense of not belonging, offer an unexpected cultural dividend that will affect every aspect of our future coexistence. Such rejection serves, in Karolinski's view, as a catalyst for an inventive impulse for a new society.

I Have Left You the Mountain

Conceived by Simon Battisti and Leah Whitman-Salkin on the occasion of the Albanian Pavilion at the 15th International Venice Architecture Biennale (2016), this installation hosts the voices, texts, and songs of ten contemporary writers and thinkers on the notion of displacement. The texts have

been set to music and sung by some of the last remaining groups of Albanian iso-polyphonic singers, an art form now protected as “intangible cultural heritage” by UNESCO. These singing voices provide an environment in which to grasp how displacement is a condition that nourishes—by force—a talent for abstraction oriented toward the exploration of the universal aspects of humanity. These voices urge us to feel and to reflect on how millions of people, in the past and the present, are forced to transform the persecutions, the inhuman conditions, the loss and the death, the millions of forms of tension and tears, into a positive impulse that is so powerful that it can reshape politics, art, and the intellectual structures of future generations.

The analogy between the detachment of the exiled and the alienation that fuels the work of the modern artist has frequently been invoked, and this collective work is encouraged by this idea. The initiative takes a particular interest in the skills of writing, but also in the way text transfers into singing and interpreting. It is the complex morphing of reflection and voice, sound, feeling, a trust in a space made collectively that constitutes the true homeland; a homeland that perhaps has no territory, but whose mission could be learnt by heart, by rote, expounded without end. The piece proposes a total and ongoing immersion in the idea that texts and words and thoughts and voices can be turned into the quintessential home. Therefore every form of participation, each commentary, is a return.

The singers of Fier: Petrit Canaj, Llazar Dumi, Kastriot Halihoxha, Nesim Meno, Muharrem Mezani, Guri Rrokaj, Fatmir Tahiraj, Shaban Zeneli; the singers of Vlorë: Adriatik Cenko, Viktor Gjoka, Sinan Gjoleka, Vendim Kapaj, Piro Latifaj, Dejrjm Mustafaraj, Trifon Malaj; the singers of Himarë: Luljeta Çipa, Valentina Gerdhuqi, Violeta Gerdhuqi, Zaharulla Koka, Polite Merkuri, Eglanda Prifti, Vojsava Zenelaj; the singers of Tirana: Dhurim Ballo, Sotir Ballo, Nazo Celaj, Trifon Golemi, Hyso Xhaferraj.

Nicanor Aráoz

Using many different media, Nicanor Aráoz focuses on how very different fields—ethnology, anthropology, social studies—find in art the perfect site to cooperate but also to address their distrust in the narrow-mindedness and elitism of the scholarly view of the Latin American avant-garde. His works value the organic, uncommon forms and materials, and the importance of the supernatural, understood as a function of qualitative and quantitative change in a people’s fund of knowledge and experience. It is precisely the recognition that the experience is different from individual to individual that makes him believe that there is no set standard for supernatural beings themselves. The study of the mutual relations between the mental and the material seems to be an aesthetic but also a political necessity in a context where art needs to open up to very many different ideas of “culture,” and to the way culture has been used to oppress indigenous life.

Aráoz’s large pen drawings can be seen as forms of kites. It is believed that the home of the first kite was Shandong, the easternmost province of China. One legend suggests that a Chinese farmer tied a string to his hat to keep it from blowing away in strong winds, and from this concept the first kite was born. The drawings show large faces that are only partly human, monstrous figures that emphasize the mutual relationship between the material object—a hand-made drawing—and the mind of the subject. They truly serve the conceptual, emotional, and volitional operations of the mind. Their powers of illusion can be attributed to the way we relate to their appearance: the illusion comes from our minds, not from an outer world. These faces possess something touching, friendly, resembling demi-gods that could put an end to our human troubles, based on the multiple binarisms that mark our existence—from class to gender, from culture to nature.

Aráoz conceives his many different works together, as a physical science oriented toward the discovery of natural solutions that will dissolve all conflicts based on distinctions. The work

presents itself as a new folk art, a taxonomy of all that is pathologically displaced in our societies, in a form that makes it possible to rediscover ways of dealing with the conflict, to rename the subjects, to reorder according to new rules so that new possibilities appear. The work is an epistemological field in which to absorb all the errant beliefs, like xenophobia or homophobia, which cause the worse disasters. It always proposes a correspondence that in a gentle and non-monumental way may benefit society.

Ania Soliman

The drawings of Ania Soliman constitute a complex body of research into how the switch from theory to practice, from world-views to worlds, or from epistemology to ontology, unveils many dilemmas. After all, do we not always harbor epistemological presuppositions, theories, and concepts, even unquestioned beliefs? Moreover, might our assumptions not be at odds with those of others, thus contradicting their worlds?

Soliman's work deals with much more than lines and forms and colors and composition. There is a reason why much of her work takes a large scale: it needs a battleground on which to address belief—the way it shapes the self, how the self relates to the “I,” and the “I” to all the others. Yes, we are worlds, but worlds in relation, and it is this question of how we bond with each other, of our affections for each other, that troubles and moves all her work.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) was one of the first to define identity against the identity of others. Where it is ontologically realized, consciousness of the full self will involve the subjection, perhaps the destruction, of another. All recognition is agonistic, he would say. It may be that the bond that makes us relatable is defined by this eternal defensiveness. Read Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). It was he who put forward libido as a narcissistic excess: love is fundamentally self love. “Endlich muss man beginnen zu lieben, nicht krank zu werden,” he wrote.⁸ These are hard words, which portray love merely as a remedy. Once the libido runs through all human relations oriented toward the pulverization of the rival persona, then love appears, as a balsam, as the last way out to avoid the disaster.

The structure of personality, the conflicts, the politics, the eternal questions one poses to the self, the limits of gender... all this is expressed in Soliman's work. In its dense visuality and in its ambition, it gets rid of the radical negativity that oppresses Western thinking, opening up experience to something different. What? Much has been said of man's solitude. The inner self and the mental occupy the space that Heaven and Hell were once accorded. Soliman's work proposes both: an inventory of the irreparable, but also a passage to a radical transformation of the way we relate the human to its culture; the need to expand, extend, open up to another realm; the will to renew all the energies of life with a positive force. Her drawings all relate to each other. Or better, her entire oeuvre supports this need to separate the future human from great disasters. True, at first sight it seems that certain vital futures have been eliminated forever from the spectrum of possibility. However, Soliman suggests that an effort should be made to go out of the Western canons, visions, and past in order to find a new strength. Through her textual references and titles, she makes clear, as very few other artists have, that although Far Eastern cultures have affected and affect the European sensibility, there has never been an acknowledgment of genuine parity. The way Western sensibility can coexist with a nostalgic admiration of Middle Eastern or Oceanic virtues seems unbreakable, precisely because its own primacy is never in serious question. And yet *it is* seriously affected and in question. There is no “natural” return to the center; there is no center, and the only

⁸ In the end, you have to start loving, not falling sick.

way is to internalize this knowledge, to express it, but more importantly, to make it ours, to make it us, to make it paper and ink and then drawing, and then something different will emerge. Art is it.