

From: *Claudia Comte. How to Grow and Still Stay the Same Shape*, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 31 October 2019 – 23 July 2021), Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino 2022, pp. 12-16.

## ***Becoming the World: A Conversation on Patterns, Biodiversity, and Fluid Belonging***

**Marianna Vecellio**

Claudia Comte was born in 1983 in Grancy, a small village near Lausanne, at the foot of Mont Tendre, one of the highest peaks of the Jura Mountains. The forest and all its natural elements, together with a passion for fiction, comics, and cartoons, sciencefiction films and video games, all contribute to the formation of her rich language, which references both the real and the imaginary.

Although installations form the main body of her work, she also creates sculpture, painting, video, performance and, of course, wall painting. All the projects by this Swiss artist share a set of rules deriving from a methodical and dynamic approach, and express interest in the materials and techniques of realization. Full of humor and irony, they make clear autobiographical references, tackling issues that are extremely urgent today, such as climate change and global pollution.

Specifically designed by the artist for Castello di Rivoli, the exhibition *How to Grow and Still Stay the Same Shape* consists of twelve wall paintings depicting organic, plant, and animal forms combined with optical and geometric patterns. Alluding to the continuous metamorphosis of life, the exhibition transforms the rooms into vibrant environments that immerse the viewer in an experience of fluid belonging. “Plant life is life as an integral exposition, in absolute continuity and in total communion with the environment,” wrote Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia. Comte’s works seem to behave exactly like the vegetable world about which he wrote. The most intense and radical form of being-in-the-world, made up of fluidity and infinite transformation.

Comte’s mimetic and immersive work expresses a paradigmatic way of being in the world: it does not separate the subject from the contemplated object and creates a silent and profound relationship with space, as plants do. Her work merges with the surface, blending with space to become one with it, and merges with the world—becomes the world.

Marianna Vecellio:

Wall painting is an environmental practice dealing with the physical and architectural characteristics of the space. What does wall painting mean in your general practice and what do you express by taking such an immersive approach?

Claudia Comte:

I often think about the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a total artwork or environment. By working with the architecture of the exhibition space, the paintings act like a skin on the wall, in harmony with the total environment. Furthermore, they sit on the surface of something that has its own history and specific material conditions. In this way, the paintings also become part of the palimpsest of the building. In other exhibitions I’ve done, the wall paintings were often treated as a way of framing an environment for a series of sculptures, all individual works in their own right. In these cases the wall paintings function like backdrops, or a landscape upon which a series of often anthropomorphic forms

are placed. But here, in this exhibition, the wall paintings take the leading role, so to speak, and within this space they relate to and play with each other through their proximity within the architecture of the space.

Another consideration I make in relation to a wall painting is how to create a connection with the audience. I try to take an empathic approach. I want to provoke a visceral reaction in the viewer through the illusion and visual vibrations that the patterns create. The patterns I use reference various sources, mainly what's already present in the natural environment, within the geometries of flora and fauna. I think this is partly why one might experience a physical or emotive reaction to these works.

MV

Where does the title of the show, *How to Grow and Still Stay the Same Shape*, come from?

CC

The title comes from a book by the anthropologist and psychologist, Gregory Bateson, who takes a trans-disciplinary approach to anthropology. The phrase makes me think about the intelligence of a seed: how a seed of an oak tree, for example, or an egg, or sperm possess all the information within themselves to create life. It's incredible to me that such complex information is inside a tiny seed. So here we return to questions of micro and macro perception.

MV

What are the elements that inspired you the most in the preparation for this exhibition at Castello di Rivoli?

CC

I considered the architecture of the Castello first, including its eighteenth-century frescoes and wall decorations. I wanted to respond to it in the process of making wall paintings many centuries later. What struck me about the main galleries of the Castello was the special way geometric patterns meld with arabesque forms and floral motifs along the walls, ceilings, and floors. I love this period so much. And here too, not one millimeter is left unadorned. Like the wall paintings, every detail in the space is important. I also like to think that I'm producing something that everyone can enjoy and feel curious about.

MV

You've said that, in front of your work, we're all the same. There are no hierarchies.

CC

My job requires me to consider every thing in the space, and every living being who visits the show. That's to say, no single part is more important than another. It's a democratic approach, I suppose.

MV

While conceiving this exhibition, you collected a mixture of scientific and historical data, such as a geological study of the hill on which the Castello is located, investigating the stratification derived from the movements of the glaciers in the Neozoic era, and some historical aspects related to the decoration of the royal residency. How do these relate to the show?

CC

I like to imagine the entire museum stripped of its external walls, revealing the castle's interior and the stratification of layers upon layers of eras, one on top of the other. Obviously, I'm speaking from my time, but I love to imagine the history underneath each floor, and that the weight and knowledge of the past is readily available to absorb. On the third floor, where my show is displayed, you're at the top of the very top—meaning on the top of this hill at the center of Rivoli. We overlook Rivoli, and it's such a privilege to be up there. There are no eighteenth-century frescoes here, but there are incredible views of the forests and mountains in the distance, as well as all the infrastructure required to make a town: the buildings, the boulevards, the parks, etc. The windows allow the contemporary landscape to enter the historical palace, so there's a stunning clash here. I topped the wall paintings with a black stripe (technically speaking, it's the twelfth wall painting in the exhibition) that's one-directional and connects the other eleven—meaning it makes one continuous horizontal movement across the entire five gallery rooms. And what occurs underneath the line, which I imagine is the subterranean field, or something akin to the underwater world, is multi-directional patterns that move on both x and y axes. Yet paradoxically, we're high above Rivoli, far from the basement of the Castello. The massive ceiling, made out of wood, reminds me of the organic materials I use for my sculptures, wood and marble, which are both strong and reliable.

MV

You grew up in the mountains, and define yourself as a country girl. What's your relationship with nature?

CC

I grew up in a small country village, with the freedom to explore the surrounding forests, and left to my own devices to uncover its insects and animals. We lived in a wooden chalet, so wood as a basic material was a very common and present substance in my early life. As a child, I was fixated on the patterns made by the wood in the chalet. I was totally hypnotized by the inside of things, particularly by what the natural world could reveal. But this curiosity also extended to video games and comics. I've never grown tired of these particular interests.

MV

Your installations combine forms that recall the natural world such as plants, animals, algae, fish, waves, with patterns that appear to come out of the digital world. It seems you're dealing with a posthuman representation of both: turning nature into data and codes, and the digital forms into proliferating living patterns. How do you marry these two aspects in your work?

CC

I work with computer programs to create these paintings that are very simple shapes gradually morphing into new forms and inevitably resolving themselves into something we call a pattern. But these patterns always originate from something preexisting in nature, and are then extrapolated via a digital experience comprised of numbers and equations conveniently formulated by a computer program like Illustrator. So instead of representing a fish as nature has made it, I work backwards through digital drawings and creative devices like geometry, abstraction, and embodied metaphor, to get to something that feels like a fish. They're first and foremost visual vibrations; there's movement, with contingency. We experience the pattern vibrating and at the same time nothing is happening. In the viewing experience, either possibility is always there. I like to play with abstract shapes that stimulate the imagination. In the first room, we have a wall painting called *Dancing Algae*

*(black on white)*, 2019. In the end, it's this beautiful landscape made up of animals. And it's obviously static, but if you give visitors possibilities to imagine, you'll see that everything begins to move through the room, like cartoons. Everything is flat, but from the landscape of the scene you understand that something is happening.

For this reason, I consider these wall paintings alive somehow. I think that when the team and I work for so long on a wall project, we end up imbuing the paintings with surplus energy. I believe all the people working on the walls give the work a different register, or another life, apart from myself.

As Frank Stella said so well, "What you see is what you see." But at the same time, not all is seen, or understood, or registers visually within the imagination. You take what you want from this exhibition. Like going for a walk in the forest, each time is always different.

MV

You've described your wall paintings not just as living beings, but as representations of biodiversity. Some of your patterns remind me of the concentric circles of trees. They expand silently and incessantly in the heart of the trunk in spite of us. They're invisible, like sound waves. You want to show what's invisible. Can you explain this concept to me?

CC

Throughout my practice I've been developing a style of language that's invisible in its obtuseness, as communication often can be. A particular combination of patterns, for example, means something to me but something different to others. When I treat an entire show in this way, I'm speaking metaphorically and showing biodiversity through networked patterns in a space, for example. I want to create all types of forms and angles, which allows me to talk about multiple rhythms and vibrations. In the show there's a wall painting that covers four walls in one large room. It starts as a single stiff straight line then slowly morphs into a series of curves, which gradually become acute zigzags. In this wall painting, there's a group of lines, each one subtly different, its difference informed by the line that came before it. Each line is unique yet it morphs into the next line along the wall, which creates a new pattern. For me, these subtle transitions form a community, like in an anthill: the ants you see don't look different from each other, but of course they are.

MV

You've also said that these works are the result of information and transformations in the materials a building is made of, for instance the wall bricks, which react differently to specific conditions such as humidity.

CC

What's amazing is that when you spend so much time with a wall, you begin to understand that it is actually alive. On the same wall, you might have several different qualities: some parts are more humid, or perhaps there's a disturbance inside. So when you're painting and you add tape and then remove it, it always triggers curiosity and anxiety because one part of the wall might behave differently from another. There are many contingent variables: humidity, how the walls were built, etc.—which is something you can't control. In this way, you're dealing with real life.

MV

Your practice also refers to fragility. All the wall paintings will be erased at the end of the exhibition.

CC

Because the wall paintings are usually impermanent, I have a sense that I cannot protect them. How long will my sculptures last? A few hundred years maybe? But they'll erode eventually. I show that everything is impermanent. I can reproduce these wall paintings in another museum, but they'll never be the same. Every wall painting is alive. Especially here on the walls of the Castello. We treat the walls the same way, we proceed with the same method, but each part of the wall reacts differently. Here we're dealing with stone, bricks, history.

MV

In the conception of your works, you follow rigid rules of composition and harmony that lead me to think about music. You've been a musician for many years (you studied the transverse flute). Is music important in the creation of your works?

CC

Oh yes, like other ideas related to music, such as mathematics, harmony, balance, and cybernetics. Even in jazz improvisation you have a set of rules. Paradoxically, working creatively within a set of constraints can be incredibly generative and enriching. Playing the transverse flute when I was young had a huge influence on the way I came to understand the world. When I look at the wall paintings, I feel as though they could be sung, starting from left to right. Each symbol or line has its own resonance embodied in form. A triangle shape, for example, to me makes an acute sound; a large circle makes a deep alto sound. Anyone can do this with a hint of imagination. *Electric Burst (Lines and Zigzags)*, 2018, a wall painting I made for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, should be sung by going up and down. When I work on a rendering, for example, it's like writing a score.

MV

I was struck by the community aspect of the pictorial process. When you make an installation such as the one at Castello di Rivoli, you usually have a lot of collaborators painting with you for weeks. You often talk about your collaborators as a team that shapes the project—a sort of morphing practice through a process of participation.

CC

The main point is that I can't do all this work alone. Creating the renderings for an exhibition is like writing a score. But then, when we're on site producing the paintings, I see myself as the conductor. Everyone has their different instruments to play this symphony. And it's important to understand who's best to play each role. There are many steps, many people doing their specific thing. By orchestrating the work through paint, we do activate the space.

MV

It's interesting to create a parallel between prehistoric cave paintings, for example those at the Chauvet Cave dating back to 36,000 years ago, and the wall paintings you produced at Castello di Rivoli. Those were the first paintings made by human beings, depicting animals (bears, lions and rhinos, mammoths) and human hand prints. For a moment, we could imagine that what was the cave for these prehistoric artists is what we acknowledge today as the museum. On the walls of these galleries at the Castello, you're depicting our current world, made up of wild animals, shoals of fish, smoke signals, and digital information. Do you see any connection between those ancient cave paintings and yours?

## CC

Even if I carve wood sculptures with a chainsaw, or make sculptures from marble, or paint on canvas (all very traditional materials), the process of producing a wall painting is a really a special one because I feel I'm engaging with the earliest form of human visual expression. It's a return to the past—actually, back to the very beginning. When I think about the Chauvet Cave, I think about fingers tracing the rough surface of the rock shelter with earthy pigments, still so lively after all this time. There's a beautiful representation of a rhinoceros that nods its head up and down as a first attempt to represent movement. It reminds me of the way movement is layered in cartoons as single frames. We still use these structures of representation. The first wall painting I present in the exhibition is called *The Tasmanian Devil (black on white)*, 2019. I thought of it as a succession of black and white, sharply pointed triangles, or fangs. The show starts here, with the mouth of an endangered animal. Warner Brothers designed a character called Taz for Looney Tunes, a devious fellow with an enormous appetite, who spins like a tornado and is soothed only by music. Taz and his real counterpart from Tasmania are both present in my reading of this wall painting.