

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané

j'étais air, space vide, temps

Mendes Wood DM

16/10 — 20/11 2021

A story of ghosts living within forests and marble stones

This is a story of ghosts, but also a story of animal creatures, organic formations and natural matter: a reverse pareidolia that deceives visual accuracy; a sci-fi infused, abstract trickster's tale weaving the threads of art and nature. One may well see this exhibition as an invitation to delve into a cabinet of curiosities displaced in time, or perhaps as time-travelling in search of the elemental force, that hidden entity operating its own magic within so-called reality, far beyond the horizon of visibility and below the surface of recognition, reaching wide, going back and forth in history, before and after human existence.

Here, nature is recreated in thought processes derived from its own constructs and abstractions, which in time immemorial have forged a world made of living and inanimate things, biotic and abiotic, moving in tandem to conjure some sort of universal design. And yet, a plethora of questions never cease to arise: What is natural, imaginary, emulated or simply artificial? What are the boundaries between the intertwined agents that concur to produce reality?

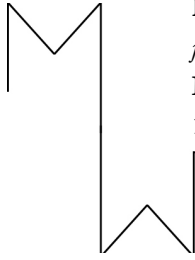
In this early 20th century townhouse in the Sablon, Daniel Steegmann Mangrané showcases some of his findings, inventions and interventions; structures that he has been devising as an artist who ventures into digressions towards inner and outer worlds, as well as into field trips across rainy forests and urban jungles, ultimately reaching the woods of human imagination. Various notions of scale and organisation, either spontaneous or deliberate, inform Mangrané's quest for ubiquitous patterns, the cue for a morphogenesis that repeatedly congeals the strata of time and life into a myriad of sculptural bodies. And as the visitor wanders around the house, twisted senses are unravelled, as the assembled artworks come to amass an *unequal accumulation of time**, promoting an encounter with diverse species, the ancestry of geological eras, the artificiality of human intelligence and its ingenious derivatives —or, to put it simply, with the spectrum of language as technological tool. This pattern of history in the *longue durée*, to use Fernand Braudel's words, translates into a palimpsest of inorganic memories, organic vocabularies and human demiurgic impulses.

Mutatis mutandis, where one seeks for natural matter, here one finds language altogether; and far beyond the nameability of things, this microcosm unfolds into a shape-shifting economy of materials, thus engendering new kinds of sampling and data collection. Hence, both human-made and nature-made patterns of behaviour stand for a colossal desire of unity in a path of historical discontinuity, a long-standing entanglement between humankind and nature.

Nature does not yet exist, says Theodor W. Adorno. Perhaps. Nature may be our very own construct, as a species. Human ingenuity faces the non-human power of life, while attempting to dominate it. Therefore, creating a second nature, where convention and rule function as escape routes towards the safely guarded realm of epistemological control.

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In the practice of Mangrané—an intellectual *a priori*—rather than mere human projection, nature emerges as an ecology of knowledge endowed with wild and relentless agency: a living subject one interacts with; or a dimension of its own amalgamating different life forms, human included, as well as expanded layers of time. By ‘rewriting’ organic drawings in various mediums—as if nature would slide sideways towards a new ontology of its own accord—the artist re-signifies visual tropes, as well as the mysterious purposes of the natural world. The calligraphy of branches is thus translated into quasi-fractal arabesques of redundant shapes, whose rhythm and repetition entails some sort of horizontal form of organisation, one that enables language to exponentially prosper to the point of being reabsorbed by nature and becoming something else, a form of hybrid intelligence.

With transformation being the secret of nature—one and the same in many ways, as in a metonymic process—the diminutive becomes a giant, and, conversely, the universe is subsumed into the smallest of fractals, as much as in every other existing geometrical pattern, such as symmetries, spirals, meanders, waves, tessellations, crystals, foams and nebula. In this dynamic process of reinvention, one thing acquires the shape of another in a virtual chameleonic dance between species; thus, disappearing as a strategy of survival, a *Bicho-Pau* (Phasmids) disguises itself as a branch on the skin of an insect, trapped into its very own virtual life—the hologram as an unreachable sphere of protection, designed to preclude the destruction of life.

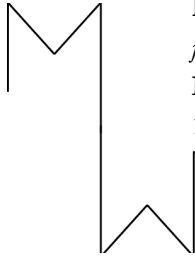
In a similar fashion, though far from the domain of first nature, poet and life-long psychiatric patient Stella do Patrocínio also operates her own strategy of survival by disappearing, though this time under the spell of language:

*I was pure gas, air, void, time
I was air, space, void, time
And pure gas, just like that, see, void, see
I had no formation
No formation
I had nowhere to make head
Make arms, make body
Make ears, make nose
Make the roof of a mouth, make conversation
Make muscle, make teeth*

*I had nowhere to make none of those things
Make head, think about anything
Be useful, intelligent, be reasoning
I had nowhere to draw any of those things
I was pure void*

Once again, the ethereal space of thinking produces the abstraction that dissolves organic substance into poetry. A cascade of pouring metaphors and horizontal metonymies allows it to

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exist as an autonomous entity, freed from the constraints of material life —that painful state of being which exposes nature to pain, or even to death. Subject and object, therefore, are fused into one and the same, annihilating altogether the notion of space and time, as if memory was no longer trapped under the dome of a singular existence.

The biographical span of life —a historical narrative that accounts for a singular body— vanishes through a gap that diffracts its contents so that it becomes something new, no longer an integral being, but rather a profusion of possible forms. Like in *Nu descendant un escalier*, by Marcel Duchamp, a stained glass effect transfigures the moving body by diffracting its parts, and in doing so, the unique shape becomes universal in a constant process of regeneration. Through a hole in the wall, inner and outer worlds interact in an economy of mutual contamination.

According to Gore Vidal, memory works like a palimpsest, being constantly rewritten —quite different from a computer archive, which unless reviewed, remains intact, and therefore the same. Human memory is subject to transformation; every time it surfaces, it takes on a different shape, becoming a new narrative, contaminated by fresh daylight. In much the same fashion, on geological grounds, the memory of a stone accumulates millennial layers of time, dating back to an era devoid of human narrative, or language itself. Nonetheless, whenever a scientist excavates the earth, the past is ungrounded, exposing time to the realm of knowledge, and to a larger extent, to the agency of time present.

In his swirling artistic dance, Steegmann Mangrané sets in motion an analogous operation, which brings the marble stone onto a stage that sets time versus history versus life, revealing that such geological formations differ from many other resilient stones, as it merges organic elements in a constant metamorphic process. Over two hundred million years ago or so, this supposedly lifeless marble was alive in the skin of animals and forests, and equally, once again, it might very well engender new forms of life in a rather distant future. In lieu of pure sedimentation, metamorphosis appears here in the course of a life-long history of evolution through transformation.

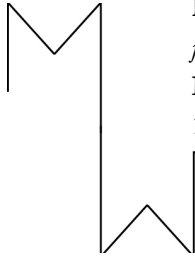
Without overlooking (or disregarding or ignoring) the ancestral synergy between the deep-veined mineral body and living organisms in an extended arch of time, the artist adds yet another layer of memory to the tomb-silent stone, one imprinted by human action onto the ground-laying marble whose surface gains new cartographies and shapes —a puzzled territory affected both by the agency of transforming elements and the ineffable duration of time itself. One may call it the Anthropocene, or, perhaps, the time-lapse of speculative endeavour, which gives nature a voice through the very artificiality of art.

Bernardo José de Souza

*According to geographer Milton Santos, the space is a result of the unequal accumulation of time, layers of geological, natural, human and technological agents that when combined engender history and its intrinsic relationship with political, social and economic forces. See *Pensando o Espaço do Homem*. SANTOS, Milton. São Paulo: Edusp, 2012.

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Daniel Steegmann Mangrané (Barcelona, 1977) lives and works in Rio de Janeiro.

Recent solo shows include *Dog Eye*, Kunsthalle Münster, Münster, Germany (2020); *A Leaf-Shaped Animal Draws The Hand*, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan (2019); *Ne voulais prendre ni forme, ni chair, ni matière*, Institut d'Art Contemporain de Villeurbanne, Villeurbanne (2019); *A Transparent Leaf Instead Of The Mouth*, CCS Bard College, New York (2018); --' --', Fundació Tàpies (2018); *A Transparent Leaf Instead Of The Mouth*, Museu Serralves, Porto (2017); *(Paisaje de posibilidades)*, MAMM, Medellín (2016); *Lafayette Anticipation*, Lafayette Foundation, Paris (2015); *Animal que no existeix*, CRAC Alsace, Altkirch (2014).

His work has been also featured at the group shows Liverpool Biennial (2021); Taipei Biennial (2020); *Concrete Contemporary*, Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich (2019); *I was raised on the internet*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2018); *Mixed Realities*, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, (2018); *Cosmic Spring*, Centre Pompidou, Metz (2017); *Biotopia*, Kunsthalle Mainz (2017); *Mondes Flotants*, 14th Biennale de Lyon (2017); *The present in drag*, Berlin Biennale, Berlin (2016); *Sorround Audience*, New Museum Triennial, New York (2015); *Beauty Codes*, Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon (2015); *Treasure of Lima*, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid (2014).

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