

Lothar Baumgarten

November 2, 2021 – February 19, 2022

Via Mottalciata 10/b

Galleria Franco Noero is pleased to present the second solo exhibition of works by Lothar Baumgarten (1944–2018).

The artist himself conceived this project before his untimely passing, with a selection of works that span his entire career. It covers all his various periods, illustrating the continuity of his ideas with regard to the visual and conceptual issues that interested him throughout his life. The notions and intuitions of the initial period of his artistic career came about and acquired concrete form as they mixed in with his personal experiences, and with his desire to enter into a world far removed from us in both time and space. This became reality in the second half of the 1970s, when he lived with the Yanomami people in the remotest part of the high Orinoco, on the border between Brazil and Venezuela.

Three important sculptures dominate the interconnected spaces of the Gallery: *Caimán, Nariz Blanca* (1989-2010), *[Arché]_(Ark)* (1969-2016) and *Ascheregen* (2017), and a careful selection of photographic works and mural paintings appear on the walls, entering into an empathic and timeless relationship with the sculptural works.

Baumgarten's entire opus acts at different levels and is expressed with the most diverse means. It self-generated from the time when he initially began to observe and approach the world around him, looking at nature and space and the changes that that were gradually being brought about in them by the lens both of the camera, and of the cinecamera. The images he created were a recording of the real world around him and of the colours it acquired – including black and white, and the range of greys of the real world as rendered by the photo – but they were also the images that he himself imagined with allusions that contained a touch of exoticism, making reference to an elsewhere. The world around us, which Baumgarten observes, is also one of human beings and animals, through the evocation of a wild and primitive universe, at the dawn of myth, bringing together the spirit of the explorer and that of the anthropologist and of the ethnologist. And this is combined with the language and the letters of the alphabet that express this world and that represent our knowledge, superimposing themselves upon and conflicting with a primordial spirit that is its very opposite, for it is in a language it does not know. A process similar to that of etymological research often comes about, starting with the word and delving into its origin.

The mural *River Pieces* illustrate this overlapping of levels: the words painted on the wall conjure up distant lands, bringing to mind faraway places, even if only for the impasto of sound that the words make when pronounced: they are the names of rivers that are hard to find on normal maps, as are the populations that inhabit them and whose name sometimes coincides with them – letters of our alphabet with the shapes of our typeface but with the colours of the plumage of birds that fly in those places, whose scientific name in Latin gives the work its title.

The roof of the archetypal structure of a large house – or, symbolically, an ark – is covered with the long red and blue feathers of the tail of the Ara Macao parrot. The wooden frame rests on branches that allude to the waves of a river whose opaque liquid mass condenses into two vaguely iridescent black ceramic slabs resting on the ground. The work is *[Arché]_(Ark)*, initially conceived in the late 1960s, when Baumgarten was already dreaming of a voyage across the ocean to the natives of the Amazon, but finished only in 2016, years after the time he spent with the Yanomami.

The sounds recorded in the forest, together with the voices of the Yanomami, come surprisingly close and resonate inside the SAAB 900 that the artist used for a long period of his life. The work dominates the central space of the Gallery, interacting with a River Piece, whose shades of green and black echo those of a banana leaf placed inside a Volkswagen car. This appears in a photograph on the adjacent wall entitled VW do Brasil. Here the spirit of an exuberant, luxuriant nature coexists once again with the meticulous, diametrically opposed elegance of the car's mechanicals and materials.

An essay written by the artist accompanies *Caimán, Nariz Blanca* (Caiman, White Nostril), from which this extract is taken:

“Caimán, Nariz Blanca, or Caimán, White Nose, A white SAAB, model 900, 1989, has been transformed into an audio piece, with the title, Caimán, Nariz Blanca, which refers to its morphological appearance. It functions as a place, a location, as a time capsule and as an exceptional 35-hour audio experience. It provides an intimate space for contemplation on time and distance, it confronts under the car's acoustic dome with the native tongue, spoken by the Yānomāmi people. It is a piece about space and time, about the awareness of dying and extinct languages, a reflection on linguistic diversity and a cultural critique of agony and resignation. It is a statement by the Yānomāmi society for their poetics of ‘non-writing literature’.

Carefully restored and only altered with a newly installed surround sound system, it provides a hermetically sealed audio space to receive ethnographic field recordings, which were recorded in various settlements for a period of eighteen months during the years 1978, 1979 and 1980 while I lived among the Yānomāmi people in the deep rain forests of the Upper Orinoco region and the Parima mountains between Venezuela and Brazil. The content of the work is not only embedded in the formal grammar and its physical appearance, it is rather present through the human dialogue and exchange which the piece provides. The gravity of the experience, shared for eighteen months without any contact to the outside world is present in these recordings.

My constant physical presence in all the recordings is obvious, but this presence does not exist phonetically in any of the takes from the beginning to the end. The Saab is a substitute for my silent physical presence at the time of the recording process and at the same time it stands for my absence during its presentation”. (LB)

Ascheregen (Shower of Ash) is a work created by Lothar Baumgarten for his last participation in an institutional exhibition: entitled Prometheus Unbound and curated by Luigi Fassi, it was held in 2017 at the Neue Galerie in Graz. The essay written by Fassi for the exhibition catalogue looks at Baumgarten's interpretation of the myth of Prometheus, in a series of operations across several levels. The work shown in the exhibition – a large table showcase like those used in museums but with its legs apparently resting precariously on piles of white terracotta plates – was the object with the most deeply ingrained and least ephemeral features.

A confrontation with mythical thinking and the interrogative dimension of the Prometheus myth is highlighted by Lothar Baumgarten, who also investigates the meaning of prometheism and its enduring enigmatic potential throughout time.

Baumgarten, whose work has always been engaged in an intense reflection on nature and its problematic categorisation through the anthropic forms of culture and science, in a series of new works, has focussed a reflection on some essential aspects of myth. Who is Prometheus? As we have seen, the ancient Titan is an ancestral cosmological entity that precedes the Olympic gods; is a primordial power (temporarily) forced to having his liver torn apart by an eagle, with it then destined to regenerate each night in an endless cycle. Baumgarten represents these bare elements of the mythological events in their rough and burning materiality. In his body of work presented in the exhibition, entitled Ascheregen, scattered elements are gathered together: the names of the Titans appear painted over eagles' feathers; and ashes and charcoal stones are placed close to

each other in an enigmatic evocation of Prometheus through biological elements and natural forms. Charcoal as a mineral element reappears in other sculptures, indirectly signalling the latency of fire as a primary element; a signal of intelligence and strength, but also one of fear and destruction.

The laconicism of Kafka's text is a key reference running through Baumgarten's and Stockhausen's dialogue with the Prometheus myth. The myth cannot be hermeneutically forced into any single interpretation, and, by its very structure calls for continuous re-reading, a process bringing to the fore its dialectic of progress and standstill; of development and failure. If the myth teaches both the permanence of the human possession of culture and the irreversibility of its development despite the opposition of the will of Zeus, Baumgarten explores such a statement, stressing the possibility –transmitted by the myth—of resistance through self-cultivation.

In this way, elements from the culture of labour and civil engagement emphasise the manifestations of a possible Bildung that Baumgarten allows to emerge in his works on Prometheus. Stones, ashes, pigments, feathers, but also literary references, all converge to compose a body of research aimed at grasping mythical thinking by means of the hidden nature of things. This is done by exploring their enigmatic appearance, the history contained within their ephemeral materiality, as well as their organic consistency and seductive ambiguity.

Luigi Fassi, *Prometheus Unbound*, 2017, Mousse Publishing, edited by Luigi Fassi and steirischer herbst – pp. 181-182

Shapono is a mural charcoal drawing that schematically represents the distribution of family units under a circular roof covered with palm leaves and open in the middle, where the Yanomami lived around individual hearths. The artist originally drew the work in pencil on a white ceramic plate, the surface of which he had partially coated with white lead, placed inside a showcase where there were others that formed a river map of the areas around the shapono. Together with its shape, the primary function of eating and the conviviality that the plate immediately brings to mind surprisingly coincides with that of the place where the Yanomami base their social structure and organisation and where they live their lives.

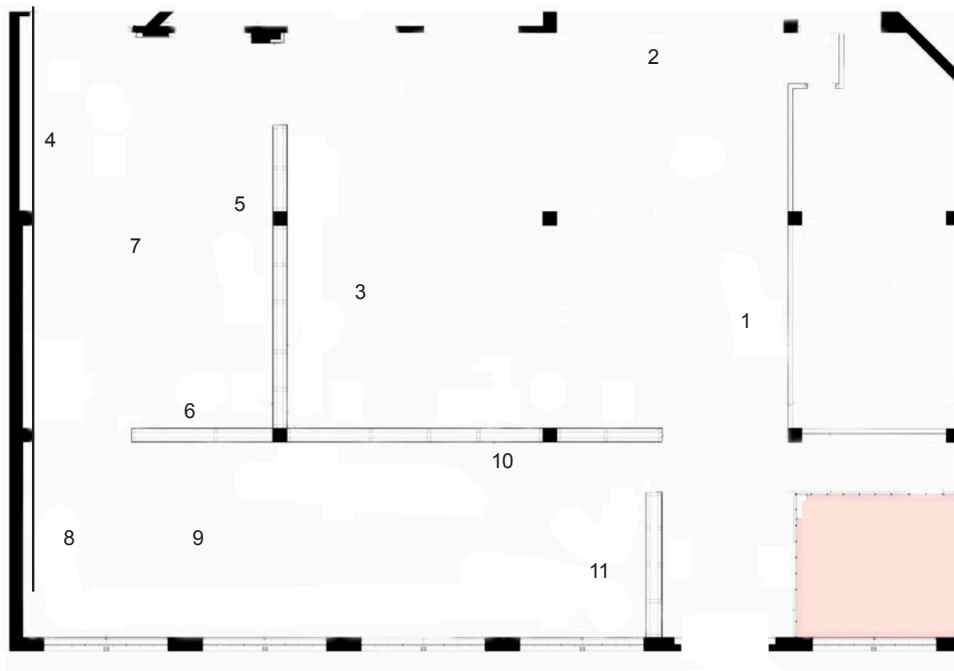
The six films that Baumgarten shot in black and white and in colour during the time he spent with the Yanomami are shown one after the other in the space reserved for special projects downstairs in the Gallery. They constitute an exceptional ethnographic record, with a precious and exciting view of the construction of the palm-leaf roof of the shapono, as well as of other rites and customs.

Lothar Baumgarten (1944 Rheinsberg, Germany – 2018 Berlin, Germany) is known for his sculptures with ecological themes. His anthropological investigations and reflections on the historical issues associated with colonialism find expression in photography, films and books, as well as in sculptural works and larger installations.

His work has been shown in solo exhibition in international public and private institutions, including: Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2021); Neue Galerie, Graz, Austria; Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea & GAM – Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin, Italy (2017); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Palacio de Cristal, Madrid, Spain (2016); Fundación Botín, Cantabria, Spain (2012); Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany (2011); Kunsthaus Bregenz, Bregenz, Austria (2009); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain (2008); Museum Kurhausmuseum, Kleve, Germany (2006; 1998); Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, USA (2004); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA (2003); De Pont, Tilburg, The Netherlands (2002); Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany (2001); Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice, Italy (2001); Museu Serralves, Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, Portugal (2001); unsthau Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland (1998); Fondation Cartier, Paris, France (1995); Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, UK (1994); The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, Chicago, USA (1993); The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA (1993); Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland (1991); Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, Los Angeles, USA (1990); The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, USA (1987); MoMA - The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA (1986); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (1985); ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, Boston, USA (1985). His work has been shown in biennials and international group exhibitions such as: 34th Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (2020); XIV Cuenca Biennial, Cuenca, Ecuador (2018); Skulptur Projekte Münster, Münster, Germany (1987); 41st Biennale di Venezia, German Pavilion Venice, Italy (1984); Documenta, Kassel, Germany (1997; 1992; 1982; 1972); 38th Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy (1978).

During his career Lothar Baumgarten was the recipient of the mfi Award, Kunst und Bau, Essen, Germany (2003); the Lichtwerk Prize, City of Hamburg (1997); The Golden Lion, First Prize of the Venice Biennale, Italy (1984); the prize of the State of Nordrhein-Westfalen (1976); and the prize of the City of Düsseldorf, Germany (1974).

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| 1 | <i>VW do Brazil</i> , 1973 | 7 | <i>Ascheregen</i> , 2017 |
| 2 | <i>Chlorophanes spiza</i> , Venezuela, 1985 | 8 | <i>Shapono</i> , 1985 |
| 3 | <i>Caimàn, Nariz blanca</i> , 1989 – 2010 | 9 | <i>[Arché]_(Ark)</i> , 1969 – 2016 |
| 4 | <i>Firmament</i> , 2014 | 10 | <i>Ramphastos cuvieri</i> , Venezuela, 1977 |
| 5 | <i>Eucometis penicillata</i> , Venezuela, 1977 | 11 | <i>Salto Xingu</i> , Brasil, 1985 |
| 6 | <i>Iodopleaura isabellae</i> , Venezuela/Brasil, 1977 | 12 | <i>Señores Naturales - Yãnomãmi</i> , 1978 – 1980 |