

TECHNICS OF NATURE

Daniel Silva's works reconcile technology and biology, the geometric and the organic, the machine and the human, but they also go beyond this duality and disturb modern representations. He is indeed blurring borders between the western category of nature and an overwhelming techno-scientific narrative that has somehow structure-fixed the world. Reversing the position of the subject and the object (in the cartesian vision of nature, the western subject is looking at nature as an object it aims to dominate), he tends to create installations where the material is the target itself, as the core of the experience, whereas the aesthetic experience becomes diffuse as the spectator gets lost, not recognizing any harmonious object of significance.

Mildly Anxious Beasts is the second chapter of a narrative that started in Onomichi¹ and in which disorientation is essential : a project of fragmentation, but with fantastic or monstrous creatures, partly animalistic, partly artistic, partly industrial. A process of degradation through time and climate (in the garden at LOG, Onomichi Japan), of disassembling and recreating bodies : the installation at Baert Gallery shows three disjointed "beasts" that are hung with Japanese sailcloth from a mobile, drifting, occupying the space. While the heads are fixed on walls, a fan moves the bodies, creating shadows and multiplicities in the process. As the visitor discovers the show, the most striking, bewildering experience is facing the idea of decapitation after seeing the heads are still and the bodies are hanging without their heads. The ambiguity of the oxymoron, "mildly anxious", and the mix of psychology and animality in the title,

show that beasts can live in people's heads as much as they can be anthropomorphized in our culture.

So the spectator drifts in the space of the gallery, without direction, in front of an object which is not possible to identify, having claws and mane but no head, like a monster questioning the idea of representation. In other words, the object of contemplation, the classical fixed space of nature has become an agency whose threatening movement appeals to the eye². In the prequel installation in Onomichi, the sculptured heads of the "beasts" moved according to robots. The heads were controlled by the algorithms inside the robots, as much as the bodies could also potentially be moved by the wind, rain, or snow in a natural site : they were aging in a Japanese winter garden. Natural power and electricity show that what remains in this cosmic vision created by Silva is energy, impetus, and movement. It means that nature, as Neri Oxman underlines in a recent podcast³, becomes a system of connection and that we could interpret it as a multi-center of working forces, so that the environment defines the shapes it creates. The artist will try to work with the forces of nature, based on growth and interdependence more than industrial production, enhancing it is a source of design and creation. Technology, instead of replacing it, could be used as a tool to go beyond this creation and add complexity to it. These various gestures create a hybrid world that is alive.

Daniel Silva also makes sculptures that are grown rather than produced. In *Mycelium Holons*, because the interlocking shapes are made by roots and are being pulled by latex belts, they form a fragmented rhizome. The piece, a holonic system – composed of parts that are simultaneously a whole in and of themselves, as well as a

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¹ The first exhibition originally shown in LOG in Onomichi, from December 22nd 2022 to February 28th 2023 was the origin story of the beasts where they were aged in Japanese winter.

² Bruno Latour, Facing Gaïa, Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime, 2017, p.56 : "From now on, there are no more spectators, because there is no longer a shore that has not been mobilised in the drama of geohistory. As there are no more tourists, the feeling of the sublime has disappeared along with the security of the viewer. It's a shipwreck, certainly, but there are no more spectators."

³ Lex Fridman Podcast, #394, Neri Oxman : Biology, Art, and Science of Design and Engineering.

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part of a larger whole - forms a territory which can evolve in space, suspended by different kinds of metal fixtures and having different shapes, either pending flat against the wall, or perpendicular. Therefore, Daniel Silva's work is an exploration of the possibilities of nature as a source of variation, growth, and synergy. It's reinventing a new kind of industry. That's why the works are not homogenous : they are made of flux that move between assembling and disjointing, agglomeration and separation. No wonder he uses mycelium, a root-like structure of fungi that acts as the Internet of the plant kingdom, allowing plants and trees to communicate ; a material that is currently studied for its sustainable qualities, possible replacement for styrofoam, leather, and other building materials.

In another work from the show, *Tomb Womb Cocoon*, the joints are made of resin, forming a graft whose shape and texture is indistinguishable from the shape of branches because they were modeled by AI and machine learning to resemble those of branches. It is unclear whether the vessel is meant for the end or the beginning of a life cycle - tomb or womb ? This duality is echoed by the materials and construction, which juxtapose technology and biology, geometric and organic, machine and human, created in collaboration with Hironori Yoshida as a cohesive structure. Grafting is thus a form of horticultural technique that can be combined with technology to add creativity, in a syncretic shape.

Love or madness ?

Moving territories : an archipelago of intentionalities

Just like J. von Uexküll tried to understand how living beings exchange and interpret signals⁴ with biosemiotics,, Daniel Silva's works help us understand how the world of living beings is like a system that builds itself through exchange and interpretation. Animals are neither reactive machines nor computational machines, but living beings that are capable of feeling and interpreting the world.

Is toxicity, madness, or anxiety something human? In the end, the visitor of *Mildly Anxious Beasts* is the one connecting the works together, but also acknowledging the fragmentation of a postmodern world where soul and body, the normal and the abnormal, are disjointed. In that sense, these works can appear like post-human grotesque masks that could show a resurgence of the wildness and intensity of the body that was erased by industrial modernity. Indeed, the beasts show the impulsive violence of a remnant body which would be controlled by digital intelligence : the idea that we live in primitive bodies with technological tools that unsettle our existence. It shows, with powerful effect, the explosion of the organs, the emotional disruption of the technics inside bodies while returning energy to those bodies that eventually remain as sensual memories of a disturbing aesthetic experience.

This ambiguity in affects is part of life, and Daniel Silva's work is giving material to complex psychological reactions, affects, and desires, but in relationship to nature. In other words, any living being can be represented by his works of art as a place of reformulation or "remorphization" : Daniel makes sculptures that grow from a single piece, compartmentalized as different forms that can be separated

or assembled like a puzzle. Indeed, in this exhibition, the way ceramics are exhibited look like an island. The black wooden sculptures are forming little expanding territories. As for the ceramics informed by insects, especially termites, they are perched up on cement blocks used in construction. The composition with mirrors below the sculptures can refer to the process of creating a nest for insects. It's a process of colonization, territorialization and deterritorialization. A biologist, Eugene Marais, explains in his book *The Soul of the White Ant* how a termite queen is bred in the colony to go and establish a different colony. She's born with wings, but when she's ready, she uses her wings just once. She flies and finds a spot, then settles there. Suddenly, the king hastily flies to find her, she loses her wings as well as the king and they hunt for a house, to build a termite society. In a way, Marais points out that a termite's behavior "is psychology", that any animal is forming like an organ in a body, i.e. an individual into a social system.

The ceramic insect installation also includes an audio piece of an interview of a Japanese monk from Onomichi, mediated by google translate and intermixed with insect sounds. This work questions the animist possibility of taking animals as individuals that can feel. For instance, the monk is asked if insects have souls, and if there is a difference between love and madness. The artist Rafael Gross Brown sampled the audio with insect sounds but also ramen noises and local music that emerged from the background at a ramen restaurant called *Matatabi*. The translation by Google, which includes errors and glitches, is displayed in a small screen in English to develop different ways of expressing the intentionality of the insects through a mix of chance and destiny. Beside sound impressions, the flight of the termite before creating a nest can be visualized on the floor by a pair of rubber wings, close to the block installation which could be considered a shrine of sorts.

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⁴ "However, effect space is not just a space of movement constructed of a thousand crisscrossing directional steps. Rather, it possesses a system by which it is controlled, the well-known coordinate system, consisting of levels that are vertically arranged, one on top of the other. This serves as the basis of all spatial determinations" (J. von Uexküll, *A foray into the worlds of animals and humans*, University of Minnesota Press, p.55).

TOWARDS A COSMOPOLITICS OF AFFECTS : CONNECTING THE BIOLOGICAL, THE SOCIAL AND THE SOMATIC

In Daniel Silva's works, nature becomes a scene or scenography for performativity. As Butler explains, "within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (Bodies 13). Silva's works are giving life to disruption and depossession. Disjoined bodies become fragments in a series of connected elements. They also exhale spiritual possibilities, raising a kind of biological psyche. The embodiment and individuation appear within an immaterial spirit created by movement and shadows, like a *genius loci*, an atmosphere of the place. No wonder mythology is so present in Silva's works : reminding us of Bruno Latour claiming for a new economy, politics and religion of nature, Silva's works often relate to rituals that are linked to liminal states and metamorphosis between the human and the natural. The work "Styx" references the boundary between Earth and the underworld. The wax cocoons, made of beeswax hung from the ceiling, play on the liminal state between the caterpillar and the butterfly. Other myths can be linked to either Europe or Asia. Among animist narratives that exist in Japan, there's the Buddhist idea that bees are considered as sensitive beings and that they should not be hurt or killed. That's why Silva was so interested in exchanging with a monk in Onomichi about the question of the soul of insects : as Eugene Marais points out, "the functioning of the community or group psyche of the termitary is just as wonderful and mysterious as that of people. It has however, a very different kind of psyche, similar to telepathy or other functions of the human mind which border on the supernatural" ⁵. Animals, living beings are linked to various mystical beliefs. For instance, we know that the bee "Apis Mellifera" was revered by the Celts. *Mildly Anxious Beasts* is also inspired by the Sardinian myth of Mamuthones. During

that festival, people wear beasts' masks : the Mamuthones perform in all their catalytic force, hypnotizing the public by dancing rhythmically in groups of twelve. They can be seen as oxen men, shepherds who identify themselves in the ox and cover their face with a mask that reproduces its features in a gesture of nearly mystical veneration of an animal so precious to humans.

Daniel Silva's work harness a hypnotic power by recreating the forces of bodies that are interconnected. *Mildly Anxious Beasts* is a techno-digital dance between different arts and materials, a beautiful drama produced through a cosmic theatre reuniting animals, humans and machine bodies and/or organs. As for the insect installation, one is reminded of Eugene Marais's explanation on the functioning of an animal system in which each member plays the role of a specific organ in a body : "a termitary must be seen as a single animal, whose organs have not yet been fused together as in a human being. Some of the termites form the mouth and digestive system, while others take the place of weapons of defence, like claws or horns" ⁶. Silva's creations, then, look like an organic and materialistic play showing cosmic energy where the spirituality of nature can go beyond, until the use of AI, as added intelligence. Therefore, combining the forces of *techne* and *episteme*, technological knowledge and spiritual beliefs, this mystics of nature resurges in a post-human anthropology as a power of agency : transmutation and performativity. Nature is not about control but a possibility of creation through disorder, a balance between forces. The spectator's freedom is linked to the randomness with which he encounters the work, such as when the robots drift in the middle of the floor. We don't know where they are going, but it's a piece of evidence of the remnant freedom of contemporary subjectivities. It's like a game where they appear as bumper cars. Friction, colliding forces raise a kind of bio-sensitivity.

The works can also form a biomorphology : in

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⁵ Eugène Marais, *The Soul of the White Ant*, "The Beginning of a Termitary", Dminoz, 2018, p.17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.18.

Perfect predators, he uses Japanese sailcloth and indigo dye, informed by patterns in the exoskeleton of dragonfly wings. The design of Mycelium is close to molecular or cell shapes :

“The animal environment, which we want to investigate now, is only a piece cut out of its surroundings, which we see stretching out on all sides around the animal - and these surroundings are nothing else but our own, human environment. The first task of research on such environments consists in seeking out the animal’s perception signs, and with them, to construct the animal’s environment. (...) every subject spins out, like the spider’s threads, its relations to certain qualities of things and weaves them into a solid web, which carries its existence”⁷.

This idea of weaving an environment is embodied in Silva’s work. Before the pandemic and its isolation context, *A Fragmented Garden* developed an archipelago of fifty *Nendo Dango* seed units⁸ dispersed around Tokyo in November 2019. The work was aimed at creating a green archipelago based on the participation of Kyojima residents and especially their plants, which were borrowed and displaced to an art studio to form *A Garden Within a Garden*: a deconstruction or redefinition of the garden - not defined by its physical proximity but by its connections. During a couple of months, Daniel Silva collected data points including warmth, time, and geolocation on the plants. The residents were actors of the process of growing, as much as technology and algorithms, to create a body of work including sound sculpture with water flowing according to data in the *Babbling Boxes* installation. The whole green network eventually formed a map across Tokyo, a map that could possibly

evolve since the *Nendo Dango* might sprout as edible plants. To embody this material territory, Daniel created beeswax cocoons hanging from the ceiling and structural forms resembling magatamas on the floor (*Wax Spaces in Between*). Finally, the film *Down a Fragmented Garden* shows parallels between mycelium networks and the internet connection and features tardigrades and moss-dwelling microscopic animals. In this project, we see how Daniel Silva blurs the lines between the audience and the creative process, mixing human, natural, and technical agencies.

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⁷ Jakov von Uexküll, Op.cit., p.53.

⁸ The “Nendo Dango” is a revegetation device reinvented by Masanobu Fukuoka, a Japanese farmer-philosopher pioneer in natural farming, based on the concept of “do nothing farming”.

This interview was mediated and translated by Google Translate - with glitches and errors.

Daniel Silva: *Do insects have souls?*

Otagaki: Insects, of course, have souls. In Buddhism, there is a phrase that says, "Everything is alive, and everything can go". In Buddhism, humans, of course, and even cockroaches have lives that cannot be seen. Life is invisible, and there is nothing more than a vessel called a human being or a cockroach. All lives are equal, I'm a bit emotional right now, and I value things like that.

Of course, humans are also wearing the same space as insects. Insects have the same life as insects. There is no replacement for humans and humans. We live the same life. Buddhism says that even though the forms are different, the lives are the same. Thank you for your question.

DS: *Is there a difference between love and madness?*

O: Thank you for your question. There doesn't seem to be a difference between love and madness, because both love and madness depend on the situation you're in. It's very true, no matter how you live your life as a principal, no matter what kind of relationship you have. If there is a circle,

people will do bad things. In other words, depending on the circle, humans will act. Buddhism places great importance on connections. Thank you for your question.

DS: *Insects and the temple*

O: Thank you for your question. Generally speaking, insects that live in temples are not harmful. However, if there are any that threaten the pillars of the Shiroariko Hotel, we ask the ward's abled persons to exterminate them. For other insects, please contact the temple. No one will be killed or killed if you enter. Thank you for your questions.

Interview with Otagaki, monk at Fukuzenji temple by Daniel Silva
Matatavi Ramen shop Onomichi, Japan

DANIEL SILVA

Biographies of Collaborating Artists

RAFAEL GROSS-BROWN

HIRONORI YOSHIDA

Hironori Yoshida has a PHD in Creative Informatics from the University of Tokyo. He's worked on interior and architectural designs with non-standard elements such as tree branches , stones, and sometimes waste. They have rich features that can define design styles, therefore, the most important process is capturing of those real objects. His works were also published as multiple technical papers in top conferences such as SIGGRAPH, UIST, and ICRA.