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Nicolas Floc'h : *el gran trueque = a grande troca = le grand troc*, Rennes : Frac Bretagne, 2018

Nicolas Floc'h : *glaz*, Amsterdam : Roma Publications ; Rennes : Frac Bretagne, 2018

Uriel Orlow: *Theatrum Botanicum*, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2018. Sous la dir. d'Uriel Orlow, Shela Sheikh

Manifesta 12 - Palermo Atlas, Palerme : Foundation Manifesta 12 Palermo ; Amsterdam : International Foundation Manifesta ; Milan : Humboldt Books, 2018. Sous la dir. d'Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli

Proregress: 12th Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai : Power Station of Art, 2018. Sous la dir. de Cuauhtémoc Medina

- 1 What do a scuba-diving artist (Nicolas Floc'h); one of Asia's most important contemporary art biennials (Shanghai) claiming the concept of *proregress*; a nomadic biennial (Manifesta) slipping between the cracks of Palermo; and an artist (Uriel Orlow) working on the vernacular knowledge of plants, have in common? At first glance, not much, although in one way or another, the issues raised by these practices all partake in a form of ecology. However, it is difficult to apprehend and circumscribe ecology, given the variety of aspects and issues it assumes.¹ However, current events are an incentive to document this complex science which pervades the imagination of artists as well as researchers and cultural agents. I believe they all develop and multiply practices whose point of convergence seems to be interest and care for living things, in all their intrinsic heterogeneity.
- 2 The connection with the research of the German zoologist and biologist Ernst Haeckel, who founded the science of ecology in 1866, is most obvious in *Glaz*, the catalogue of the

French artist Nicolas Floc'h. Separated by over a hundred years, the artist and the scientist both share a similar curiosity for the sea as living environment, the former building on the latter's work with new tools. This is the case with the artistic device *Peinture productive* [productive painting]. A phytoplankton is grown in an aquarium and lends its colour to the exhibition space. As for Haeckel, he skilfully drew, studied and made visible various types of zooplanktons, that up until then had been hidden from the view of most humans. "Around 50% of the world's population lives in coastal areas [...]. But we are still living along the shores of seas and oceans which are mostly unknown – only 5% of seafloors are charted."² The sea, which for a very long time was seen as a mere surface, which in turn was rendered this way by cartography, has been reconnected to its depth through the development of natural science and the expansion of increasingly advanced research on ocean ecosystems. Scientists are now alerting the general public to the radical changes at hand due to global warming and an economical model which preys on natural resources. No, the sea isn't flat. It is an extremely dense environment full of life forms, chemical and physical interactions, great flows of organic matter. Many of Nicolas Floc'h's works interact with these phenomena, as demonstrated by Yves Henocque, a marine biologist and marine environment governance specialist for the IFREMER. It is worth noting, in the wake of Jean-Marc Huitorel's meticulous introduction to the artist's work³, that the pieces presented in *Glaz* are the result of the long-term dialogue between the artist and scientists contributing to the in-depth knowledge of ocean life. By combining a "transformational"⁴ approach of art and his will to understand, and care for, an environment which moves him, Nicolas Floc'h has succeeded in creating units which are at once autonomous as works of art, and efficient in their capacity for making visible and tangible the consequences of human activity on these watery territories; as well as suggesting various possibilities for remediation to be developed.

- 3 The 12th Shanghai Biennial questions human activity, its past and its future in an increasingly faltering world, in a completely different way. The term *proregress* is borrowed from the North-American poet E.E. Cummings, in order to grasp the ambivalence between emancipatory projects worthy of a form of progress, and political and social regressions currently at work. Ecology is discussed here in the form of political ecology, a type of critical theory which programmatically connects the separate fields of economy, technology, environment, and social and political theory. Cuauhtémoc Medina, the chief curator, and Wang Weiwei, the associate curator of the biennial, observe some sort of artistic political ecology⁵ is devised through a selection of works from around the world. Beyond the notable cultural and aesthetic differences in the pieces brought together between East and West, North and South, it is striking to notice the common emergence of a criticism of the concept of development⁶, the latest exemplification of the modernist concept of progress. Several works encourage us to slow down and stop, in order to observe the nuances in individuals (Yang Fudong), to contemplate the colours of the sky (Macarena Ruiz-Tagle), to walk backwards (Ilya Noé), or to perpetually repaint a wall in white (Reynier Leyva Novo).
- 4 The most interesting phenomenon for the Western observer is probably the effort made to translate Cumming's coinage into the Chinese cultural system. The Chinese curators suggested the concept of *yubu* as an equivalent to this contradictory state. In the Daoist tradition, *yubu* is a series of dance steps that go from front to back and from left to right. These movements have a great symbolical significance, which, according to Medina "suggests the necessary preparation for a collective endeavour: the need to

create through dance and movement a space of possibilities. [Yubu] invites us to rescue the oscillation of time as a preparation for a renewed social and cultural impulse.”⁷ As symbols of intercultural dialogue, *yubu* and *proregress* act as thresholds which make it possible to access a shared acknowledgement of the global uneasiness in the present world. However, only the works’ purely symbolic value is called upon here, whereas it would have been interesting to activate useful responses whenever possible. The collected works question, criticise and analyse various painful moments of human history from recent angles. But it is difficult to find among them artistic approaches that are more pragmatist, more engaged with changing the world, like some of Nicolas Floc’h’s pieces are. Despite the fulfilment of its dialogic ambitions – between geographies, cultures, and economic and political regimes – the catalogue is something of a demonstrative inventory.

- 5 The catalogue of Manifesta 12, the nomadic European biennial that chose the city of Palermo for its 2018 edition, takes on a completely different approach. Manifesta 12 is entitled *The Planetary Garden*, in reference to the landscape designer Gilles Clément, and its catalogue is called *Palermo Atlas*. The approach displayed by the curators is to transform the biennial into a period of productive research for the future of the city, for the use of Palermo’s government, institutions, and denizens. It must be admitted that the experiment is very convincing. A research team from the architecture and urbanism agency OMA led a meticulous, creative and scientific field study before the beginning of the Biennial, to be offered, in the form of a catalogue, as a legacy for the various regional agents. The *Palermo Atlas* is the result of the consultation of the population. It raises social and political issues, which are met with analyses and answers in the texts and interviews of various experts, and which dialog with works of art whose small number is compensated by their relevance and appropriateness. To produce less in order to produce better: an ecological saying if ever there was one, in these times of resource and energy plundering. The chapter entitled “Abandoned, Unfinished, Unbuilt” (p. 272-329) is a good example of the “Manifesta Methodology”. Because of real estate speculation and years of mafia rule, Palermo is scattered with unfinished architectural projects that have been abandoned for decades. This phenomenon is connected to a general tendency throughout Italy, and systematically documented by the group Alterazioni Video. The group, which recognises the existence of a unitary architectural style called *Incompiuto*, or unfinished, raises the issue of unfinished heritage, which is left to decay and is now too expensive to be restored. One option for the cultural inclusion of these constructions would be to make it possible to visit them, from a touristic and everyday perspective. It would be necessary to observe the uses that are created there in order to offer slight adjustments to “cultivate” life there. The fact of working with things as they are, of choosing observation over a long duration, of not erasing mistakes from the past but on the contrary of inviting them into new narrative frames, deserting architectural action for minimal intervention – all this is the result of a contextual and well-equipped ecological conscience, whereas the first attempts at artistic remediation in the 1980s often remained misunderstood or were very difficult to carry out.⁸
- 6 The team behind Manifesta, unlike most international biennials, chose to work with the lively, shape-shifting matter of the city-as-organism, in order to evolve with it. The result is a will to approach the issues of energy – political and symbolic as well as material – through artistic thought, whereas for a long time sustainable development

has offered engineering and technical answers which have disconnected everyday life from these issues.

- 7 In a way, Gilles Clément's idea of a planetary garden accompanies the thorough investigation by the Swiss artist Uriel Orlow, published under the title *Theatrum Botanicum*. Although most recent major exhibitions devoted to gardens and landscape still all too often present plants solely under their decorative aspect, an increasing number of artists, in the wake of a community of landscape designers, gardeners and researchers⁹, are contributing to the requalification – in the eyes of humans – of the status and role of plants in history. *Theatrum Botanicum* does this from the very specific viewpoint of decolonial studies, where the deconstruction of knowledges, languages and powers focuses on South Africa's national botanical garden. The originality here is that part of the archives under consideration is alive, rooted in the soil of Cape Town and still playing a role in History. The other archives used by Orlow are the official records of the trial of an indigenous herbalist in the 1940s, who was judged for having made and sold remedies without a pharmacology diploma. Inspired by all of these archives, the artist produced a play, which shows the conflictual boundaries between knowledge, their cultural and legal legitimacy, as well as the interweaving of plants with our thought and life systems.
- 8 The book published by Orlow is a collection of the most important moments of the play, as well as a list of plant names, as they were known in different local languages before they were renamed by European taxonomy; and a series of essays criticising our scientific, artistic and curatorial colonial history. I believe it is crucial to emphasise this implication in the weaving together of voices, analyses and practices, which make this an exemplary book of research *through* art. It goes well beyond the field of art and questions anthropology, epistemology and linguistics. Nicolas Floc'h and Uriel Orlow both contribute to an editorial form that has been growing for some time, for which the issue is less making an inventory of works than summarising an existing artistic practice by absorbing and reinterpreting tools and issues borrowed from hard as well as social science.
- 9 When questioned about the mechanisms of ecosophy, Félix Guattari explained that it was necessary to “establish a polyphonic relationship between the various pragmatic objectives.”¹⁰ It is therefore interesting to see art, a thought form and the ultimate polyphonic practice, engage with ecological issues requiring a certain amount of questioning and “pragmatic objectives”. Through a freedom that is typical of art, the books discussed in this article contribute to a revision of moral anthropocentrism in favour of an ethics extended to all biological, artistic, scientific and cultural life forms.¹¹ Although this cognitive shift is at work in the art field, it is still far from generalised in our societies, at a time when humanity is exercising an unbearable pressure on all ecosystems. This is why it is all the more important to emphasise the interest displayed by artistic and curatorial practices for grasping the diversity and complexity of the living realm – from forms of social and political life between humans to those developed between humans and non-humans – and to care for it. Such a project requires the development and coexistence of a multiplicity of epistemologies, knowledges and value systems, be they vernacular, scientific or artistic. Through the legacy of postcolonial studies, it is necessary to reread the past differently, and to relearn how to live with the realm of the living, through a widened and critical understanding of our common world.

NOTES

1. Ecology, or the “science of the house”, studies the relationships between living creatures and the environments in which they live. Most of the time, these relationships induce co-evolution and strong interdependence between life forms and environments, offering ecology an extremely labile and processual observation field.
 2. Henocque, Yves. “Des Dynamiques transformationnelles du quotidien”, *Nicolas Floc’h : glaz*, Amsterdam: Roma Publications; Rennes: Frac Bretagne, 2018, p. 147
 3. Huitorel, Jean-Marc. “Une esthétique de l’immersion”, *Nicolas Floc’h : glaz*, op. cit., p. 7-29
 4. A term used by Jean-Marc Huitorel to connect the performative, participative, narrative and symbolic dimensions at work in Nicolas Floc’h’s pieces.
 5. The reference to political ecology is this author’s personal interpretation. The curators of the Shanghai Biennial do not explicitly refer to it in their writings.
 6. In the discussion at the end of the catalogue between Cuauhtémoc Medina, Fei Dawei and Gong Yan, the critical position of several of the biennial’s artists regarding concepts of development and progress is questioned.
 7. Medina, Cuauhtémoc, Wang Weiwei, “From Yubu to Swing Theory: The Staging of Historical Ambivalence”, *Progress: 12th Shanghai Biennale*, Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2018, p. 21
 8. I am referring here to the work of Helen and Newton Harrison for example, which often remained at the stage of mere projects, or to Joseph Beuys’s 7 000 oaks, for which the artist lacked the support of Kassel’s local authorities and inhabitants. He was forced to advertise Japanese whisky in order to self-fund this project aiming to reconnect urban space to the earth and vegetable life forms.
 9. Gilles Clément and Liliana Motta are two landscape designers who have hugely contributed to the evolution of the place of the vegetable reign in urbanism projects. Moreover, Jean-Marie Pelt, Francis Hallé, and, more recently, the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn have contributed to transmitting a better knowledge of the singularities of the life of plants and their importance in the biosphere to a wider audience.
 10. Interview with Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écologie ?*, Fécamp : Lignes, 2018, (Lignes Poche), p. 76
 11. I am referring to the works on the ethics of care, of which Sandra Laugier is a prominent figure in France. See for example: *Tous vulnérables ? Le care, les animaux et l’environnement*, Sandra Laugier (ed.), Paris: Payot, 2012, (Petite bibliothèque)
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Emeline Eudes holds a PhD in Art Aesthetics, Science and Technology from the University Paris 8, and is a researcher in environmental aesthetics. Her work focuses on the study of the connections between art, environment, and politics. She has studied the creativity of urban inhabitants (CNRS post-doctoral fellowship), environmental art and activism and the cultural and political role of artists in school environments (AIMS post-diploma supervisor at the ENSBA-

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