

The Riddles of the Universe (Floating Mountains, Breathing Glaciers)

Invited by SCOTTY for the first exhibition of a series entitled “Der Schein der Dinge” (How Things Appear), Line S. Hvoslef, Maja Nilsen and Randi Nygård are showing several works exploring rhizomatically the human and non-human representations of Nature. If the three artists draw shapes and patterns from the life of Nature, they enrich their perspective with considerations involving history, memory, imagination, autobiography and speculation. Their works combine natural philosophy (from Antiquity until romantic idealism by way of medieval knowledge tradition), baroque aesthetics, mysticism, natural science, abstract painting, surrealism or conceptual art. In spite of differences in their methodological approach, Nature for Hvoslef, Nilsen and Nygård is a subject of study but also a medium and a source of philosophical if not political inspiration – three parts of their artistic research which seem to be inseparable from each other.

The riddles of the universe

The exhibition title is quoting the book of the German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), *Die Welträthsel. Gemeinverständliche Studien über monistische Philosophie*, first published in 1899. In this opus, Haeckel aimed to popularize for non-academic readers Darwin's theory of evolution by exposing his monistic view of the universe, namely a non-dualistic understanding of the relation between material and spiritual, body and mind; all existing things are derived from one single substance and composed of elementary particles or “monads”. According to the mathematician and philosopher Leibniz, in his *Monadology*, Chapter 3, “monads are the true atoms of nature, and, in brief, the elements of things”. Haeckel saw in the concept of evolution developed by Darwin an elementary principle able to answer the riddles of the universe. In other words, able to solve what Kant called the “metaphysical questions”, the ones nobody would ever resolve. In Haeckel's eyes, science has no boundaries and never stops progressing, but one riddle persists: the origin of the universe's substance.

Reading the Book of Nature

Often-cited by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the metaphor of *Welträtsel* – world-riddle – originates in a long story. At least since Lucretius' scientific poem *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things), written in Latin during the first-century BC, Nature is seen as an area full of signs requiring an interpretation, while atoms are compared to letters. Spread by Augustine since the 5th century, the allegory of the “Book of Nature” (*liber naturae*) still has influence today. Inspired by Thomas of Cantimpré's *Liber de natura rerum*, Conrad of Meigenberg published his encyclopedia *Book of Nature* (1475) describing the life of plants and animals. It is the first natural history published in German collecting all the knowledge about Nature available at that time and mixing scientific with mythological considerations. Cantimpré wrote his most famous opus *Bonum universale de apibus* between 1257 and 1263, an allegory of human society built on a description of the life in a community of bees. Deciphering the riddles of Nature, all these “books of Nature” contained many illustrations precious for understanding the cosmos not only by means of text but also with images.

The Mirror of Nature

Another philosophical allegory from the 13th century used to describe the organization of the cosmos was the mirror of Nature – *speculum naturale*. The Dominican Vincent of Beauvais is widely known for his encyclopedia *Great Mirror (Speculum maius)* probably written between 1235 and 1264. 80 books and 9885 chapters had gathered the knowledge capable to explain the material and spiritual order of the creation. According to the medieval tradition, mirroring, imitating and reflecting are etymologically as well as conceptually related to the action of thinking, contemplating, or speculating. Quoting again Leibniz's *Monadology*, each monad – that is each micro or macro unity – is a “living mirror of the universe”. This allegorical understanding of the cosmos turned Nature into a theater whispering half-encrypted stories and whose stage setting is playing with mirrors.

A book, a mirror, a theater

In the works of Hvoslef, Nilsen and Nygård, we see mirrors, landscapes, real or imaginary. We see plants and animals; seas, mountains and other natural or fantastic figures occupy the space. These pictorial elements move in a Nature which appears like an open book containing a collection of rebus. Some methods and motives used by the artists might even migrate from one work to another creating a common space of circulation for all kind of interpretations. These interpretations have a special responsibility regarding the possible future of the cosmos, for instance endangered animals and plants. Does the gallery space show itself more like a book, a mirror or a theater? Probably a collage of the three. Beyond all differences set between abstraction and figuration, Hvoslef's landscapes – comparable to soundscapes – consist of forms, movements and forces. Melting nature and technology, Hvoslef comes within the scope of the pictorial tradition influenced by Goethe's morphology and its concept of metamorphose. Nature and history cannot be simply separated. They work together and produce some strange mixed creatures, just like it is impossible to draw clear lines between the past, the present and the future. Similar to a monad, Nygård's "mirror-collage" stages a small theatrical space dedicated to the African Violet's contradictory destiny, while her series "Black Carbon Creates Clouds, Drifts in The Wind and Falls to The Ground (Iceberg, Ny-Ålesund, Spitsbergen)" records natural reliefs by rubbing. Regarding Nilsen's series of five collages, the theatrical and ornamental dimensions are clearly stressed. Delicately combining photographic elements taken from popular scientific books, Nilsen's collages open up a mysterious cosmic dimension where natural objects are turned into costume or jewelries, whereas no limits remain between artistic and natural forms, human and non-human worlds. Nilsen takes the etymological family relationship between cosmos and cosmetics very seriously and pays homage to Haeckel's book of lithographic and halftone prints based on sketches and watercolors of organisms: the *Kunstformen der Natur* (1899-1904).

Ecology of art

Here in the shared exhibition space, the presented idea of nature is pluralistic and dynamic, polyphonic. It is a place for questioning, meditating on the human relationship to our environment and its different meanings. That is, not only Nature and the cosmos, but an environment including spatial, geographical, geological as well as historical and mythological aspects: the "Umfeld", "Umwelt" or "Umgebung". Since the research of the biologist and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944), biosemiotics has become a field where scientific analysis of behavior, theory of language and decryption of signs produced by nature – plants, animals, humans – coexist. Considered the father of ecology, Uexküll gained an influence on the theory of art with his concept of "parallel worlds". There are as many worlds as species, as many perceptions of time and space as possible worlds. All animals, including humans, are shaping their perception through patterns, thus creating structures and diverse signs whose signification is available only to those who are a part of this world. They are also available to those who are observing attentively – like Uexküll himself – all these marks, lines, gaps and paths, all these drawings or architectures. It seems that Hvoslef, Nilsen and Nygård share with the biologist a similar ambition through art.

Clara Pacquet, Berlin, March 2018