

Transmutations:

As someone who generally works on dead people, I'm deeply honored to have been given what Luc Steels described as an invitation to rejoin the living. Inevitably we to the viewing of any work our own concerns and preoccupations, our own 'issues' as my undergraduate students might say, but it is not, I think, an exaggeration to say that so many facets of this exhibition explore precisely these boundaries between life and death, between the born and the made, the animate and the inanimate, form and medium, all issues that I happily confess to having an unhealthy interest in.

The reference in AnneMarie Maes title *The Raw and the Cooked* to Claude Levi-Strauss' groundbreaking 1964 book *Le cru et le cuit* foregrounds what for me are some of the key themes of the works by the 3 different colleagues shown here. The invocation of the title of Levi-Strauss's book is not quite an homage so much as an appropriation that calls into question, **undermines even**, the well-known binaries between categories such as wet/dry, cooked/raw, that underlay Levi-Strauss's structuralist project.

Despite their diverse aesthetic thrusts, media and sensibilities, a number of themes are common to several or all of the works. The most obvious theme in play is the age-old tension between physis and techne, nature and facture, between the biological, the ecological and the technological. This tension includes not only the artificial agents of Luc's installation, activated by the digitized transformation of the human eye into a Cyclopean hieroglyph whose chromatic qualities disembodied artificial agents then proceed to name in a process unfolding through time. The play between nature and culture also presents itself in tensions between **form** and **medium** that underlie many of the works displayed here, tensions that underwrite the transformations and transmutations of the exhibition title, which are both seen and unseen. Transformations, for example, of coffee and fungus into cloth- or skin-like membranes, of malleable wax into rigid polyhedral forms, of the viewing eye into a technological spectacle transmuted into the sounds of emergent words produced by invisible agents sheltering in the metal frame of a laptop. The play with traditionally oppositional categories is also apparent in AnneMarie Maes's use of organic media such as gelatin and wax to produce forms found in nature but not necessarily found in **these** particular media, or the use of technological means to capture the spectacular geometry of the organic, geometries rarely visible to the human eye.

Many of the objects and works displayed here can be seen as synecdoches, shorthand, for forms and systemic structures that range from the micro to the macro, from the geometric perfection of the invisible pollen grain, to the structures of communities and populations (bees, humans, or artificial agents) or to the notational structures that make the forms of unheard music visible as trace. In many cases, these forms and structures become fully visible, and therefore fully present,

only with the aid of prosthetic devices such as electron microscopes, much as the agents living in Luc's computer are only offered a partial vision of us and only with the aid of the technologies on which they depend for a process of viewing on which the very possibility of language depends in its turn. The conceit plays, of course, with the traditional role of the camera obscura as both an aid for vision and a model or metaphor for perception itself. Luc's artificial agents define the linguistic terms within which chromatic perception will be articulated, and colors themselves even named, an inverse kind of transmutation of color into word and sound that interweaves the conceptual and the perceptual.

This play between the acoustic and the graphic, between the aural and the visual, is no less palpable in Pia Jarrell's works, into which musical notations (often invested with deep personal resonances through their relation to the work of Michael) are transformed into inky forms, marks and shapes that punctuate chromatic fields. In this way, we witness a shift a transmutation from the aural, from the inky trace that contains the possibility and potential of sound, into the visual rigor of lines. No longer awaiting activation at the hands of a performer, musical notations are now liberated as form, activated in new ways to perform in new aesthetic registers. In this triumph of form over semantic content, line is both enabling and constraining, holding the **memory** and **potential** of sounds whose **limits** it also defines, even as the shift to an emphasis on formal values alone is perpetually constrained by the very fact of working with the conventional lines and signs of musical notation.

Acoustic, chromatic and graphic energy are all present in the works, whose transformations of vision into sound and back again, are linked through questions of memory that are ultimately related to the operation of time. The dry musical notations on a page that appear as blots and scrawls to those unable to read them, are, at the right time and in the right hands, capable of coming to life, and enlivening in their turn vast audiences. In Pia's hands, the role of these musical scores as residue of aural memory is subverted and transformed. Cut, layered, gridded, superimposed, colored, and gilded, these paper scores are transformed into palimpsests, stone like forms and surfaces that record the texture of time or its residues and traces in new and unexpected ways, ways that draw upon while extending the passage of time implied by the progression of a performance.

In the major installation of Pia's shown here, this temporal dimension is given an added poignancy by the invocation of the ill-fated Cassandra awaiting her fate in silence, disturbed only by the sound of Luc Steel's chattering agents imprisoned in the laptop in the room next door. Poised between a life fast ebbing and a gruesome death yet to come, the figure of Cassandra is especially appropriate to the theme of Transmutation, but also to the larger extremely topical questions that are raised by many of the works. These questions regarding the distinctions between nature and facture, organic and inorganic, resonate with those currently being posed across a range of fields and practices marked by a rethinking or even rejection of the legacy of the Enlightenment, including the rigidity of inherited distinctions between animate and inanimate, or artificial and organic life, that are increasingly being challenged by phenomena like

emergence, to name but one. The artificial of that phrase ‘artificial agent’ invoked in Luc Steel and Olafur Eliasson’s installation is of course especially slippery and deceptive – if agency means what it traditionally means in its most basic formulation - the ability to make choices – then in what sense can it be artificial? And this is of course the point.

Where exactly do the boundaries between nature and culture, the found and the made, between form and color, sound and vision, science and art, the organic and inorganic, or even the animate and inanimate lie? The works on display here, and the transmutations evoked by the title of the exhibition as a whole suggests a refreshing fluidity between what are generally seen as oppositional categories. In this sense, the **transmutations** invoked by the exhibition title has much in common with what Bruno Latour would call ‘translation’, a practice that, in his terms, produces hybrids of nature and culture, and which Latour contrasts with and relates to practices of purification, practices that in his terms seek to distinguish humans from nonhumans, the animate from the inanimate. However, given the larger questions raised by the works on display, the very strong formal values of many of the works and the emphasis on form that permeates the exhibition as a whole it seems to me that a much more appropriate text to invoke might be Henri Focillon’s 1948 masterpiece, *La vie des formes* (The Life of Forms), from which 2 distinct quotes kept coming to mind during my sneak preview of the exhibition yesterday: the first is "Life is form, and form is the modality of life." The second is “Forms never cease to live.”