

## Organic perceptions

“Gemme la Natura perfin nella tomba, e il suo gemito vince il silenzio e l’oscurità della morte.”<sup>1</sup>, thus laments Ugo Foscolo at the thought of the transience of life and its fatalities, which bring the extinction of the body, that perishes and tends to be annihilated by the sheer force of nature. Nature watches with an impassible eye the misfortunes and wanderings of the ontological mind enclosed in a material body that asserts his fulness of life in a short span of time, encapsulated in a clepsydra, that counts irrevocably, inexpugnably the temporal passage. Erstwhile the body, content in its living mechanical device, governed by an organism that transmits and develops a regulated and calculated state of well-being. Henceforth, the fatality of death masks with a gloomy veil, that perfect mechanism, now turned to obsolescence. That’s the inevitability of the living organism that is born, grows and dies in a concentration of time. That is the tragedy that Ugo Foscolo tries to describe, through the poetic power of language, embedded in the civilizational progress of humanity. The body is nature, and nature dominates the body.

In the meantime, when we think about death and the physical disappearance of bodies, we tend to think about something living that ceases to issue signs of life. However, María Zambrano writes that even dust and ashes that are generated by the entropic forces of time, save the imprint of their past materiality. In the end, something has been maintained, something that gives testimony to the temporal action. The dust and ashes are the temples of time, that cease to mediate between living beings, but nevertheless, permit to make present their sensible forms (more than visible). Something that enables to look from the inside, something imperishable, that doesn’t come to be death, but reaches a time exempt of the deadly interruption. The matter united with its form intact, safe from the corrosiveness of time<sup>2</sup>. Although we sense a clear indication of an anthropocentric methodology of thought, which brings a divine nature into the metaphysical world of humans, the sheer possibility that matter can outdate its living formation, gives us the notion that organic beings which envelop the entire sentient world, can outstay their existence thanks to a kind of sensible formation that elicits a clear poetic manifestation of matter.

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<sup>1</sup> In our own translation: “Nature groans at last in the tomb, and its groan conquers the silence and the darkness of death” in FOSCOLO, Ugo. *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*. Einaudi Editore, Torino. 2015, p.89.

<sup>2</sup> ZAMBRANO, María. *El hombre y lo divino*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid. 2020, p.381.

For Jane Bennett there are two concepts that extend the natural materiality of things: *thing-power* and *out-side*. The gesture of thing-power has a strange ability in everyday life and in the production of objects produced by man, to exceed them as a purely objectual status, manifesting traits of independence or vivacity, constituents of the out-side of human experience. Produced objects can become vibrant things, endowed with a certain effectiveness and even a certain degree of irreducibility, concerning the independence of words, images and sensations provoked in the subject. This situation is presented as a kind of vivacity intrinsic to the materiality of the thing in itself. The conceptualization of thing-power can offer an alternative to the object as a way of encountering a non-human world, not only due to the vitality of fixed or stable entities, but also due to its supra-individualistic characterization<sup>3</sup>. In a first sense, the author particularizes, within thing-power, a heterogeneous association of dead animal bodies, once endowed with organic vitality, and debris caused by human industrial agency. This association, apparently heteroclitic of different states of matter, represents on the one hand a vital existence, evidenced by the current carcass, and on the other, the polluting waste left in nature or in its civilizational extension, the city. In this assembly, one can experience a thing-culture that is irreducible to the object-culture. Influenced by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the author defines that this eccentric window to the out-side was made possible by the fortuitous position of the set of debris and dead animals, but also, thanks to a perceptual style of opening that allowed us to glimpse the power of the thing, due to the expressive miracle evidenced by the objects. Hence the possibility of stating that items spread across the floor may appear as if vibrating, in a transmutation from inert, dead immutability to a vibrating presence of vivacity<sup>4</sup>.

That is precisely the manner in which Bennett thinks, in a clear removal of the anthropocentric way of thinking, to promote an agency that encapsulates humans and non-humans in a sustainable ecology encompassing the biological, vegetal, and mineral totality of nature, excluding man's hierarchical relationship with it. There's vibrant matter everywhere in the world, therefore the so-called definition of nature by man, is just a kind of second nature mediated by cultural assumptions<sup>5</sup>. To describe the equal relationship between humans and animals, and by extension all living organisms, the poet Luís

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<sup>3</sup> BENNETT, Jane. *Vibrant matter. A Political Ecology of things*. Duke University Press, Durham. 2010, p.XVI-XVII.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p.5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p.115.

Quintais writes: “Há uma verdade no olhar do animal que me desenha no espaço interior que é a nossa mútua escuridão.”<sup>6</sup> From now on, there’s no hierarchical evaluation of the place of humans and the natural extension that gets dominated by the possession materiality of humanity. Jacques Monod asserts that scientific objectivity must exceed the anthropocentric illusions, to design a conceptual notion of absolute integration of reality, comprised between man and the biosphere. Its structural functioning doesn’t contain a predictable group of objects nor phenomena but constitutes particular events that aren’t deductible from a homogeneous sample because of their unpredictable nature<sup>7</sup>.

Anne Marie Maes’ work is a continuation of this dematerialization of the anthropocentric assumptions, that tended to dominate the theoretical relationship between man and nature. Maes brings to art practices, a hyperaesthetic viewpoint of nature, by immersing herself in a political ecology that encompasses traditional poetic devices stemming from the traditional artforms and the innovative and groundbreaking shattering of the conservative assumptions of the integration and representation of nature. Maes’ look at nature, is not a passive and distant empirical approach, but rather a phenomenological deepening, or a way of becoming nature herself, in a political and poetic way. The way the artist operates permits the transgression of the traditional medias, into a realm of an understanding between all living organisms. No more an exclusive *I* that predetermines and inducts the action from a creationist standpoint, but an *I* that integrates with an *other*, with the intention to operate actively with the elements placed in the art framework. Nathalie Sarraute on her work *Enfance*, describes the states of her profound immersion with nature, in a way that the regarding and conscious self ceases to be dominant, as to be fully inlaid in the vestigial treads that nature capacitates, losing her own ontological notion of identity, to be inserted in a limitless experience of continuous fruition<sup>8</sup>. If we consider this integral unity between self and nature, Maes’ work translates in a direct way the feeling of potentiality and performativity that nature brings into her artistic practice, like a living organism that transforms itself, folds and unfolds in a manifold capacity to spread in an open space. It is the artist who expresses that we are in

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<sup>6</sup> In a direct translation: “there’s a veracity in the animal’s eye that draws me in the interior space which is our mutual darkness.” QUINTAIS, Luís. *Arrancar penas a um canto de cisne*. Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa. 2015, p.121.

<sup>7</sup> MONOD, Jacques. *Le hasard et la nécessité*. Éditions du Seuil, Paris. 1970, p.53-55.

<sup>8</sup> “je regarde le ciel comme je ne l’ai jamais regardé... je me fonds en lui, je n’ai pas de limites, pas de fin.” In SARRAUTE, Nathalie. *Enfance*. Éditions Gallimard, Paris. 1983, p.275.

a world of entangled life, where time passes at its own rhythm and where things can react in unpredictable ways<sup>9</sup>.

Unpredictability is the substantial teleological approach of Maes, precisely because she tends to work in an environment of chance-controlled mappings, and controlled chaotic events, that shape and redesign continually from a starting point. Chance, opportunity, accident, event are words that operate on a fundamental level with which, the integration of nature starts to envelop and develop its own growth and tendency to transmute at a cyclical level, marked by periods imposed by natural forces. Sometimes is the exploration of invisible forces that appear visibly, like a hidden form that takes its shape, thanks to a structural manifestation. Menander writes that we cannot search for the invisible by turning our vision away from the visible<sup>10</sup>. Through aleatory movements, the living organisms that enter Maes' work, tend by themselves to shape, and form circulatory movements in a never-ending kaleidoscopic frame, which alters continually not only the chromaticism of the superficial screen of the work, but also the endogenous wanderings of the micro-structures that persist, insist, and resist in an aleatory environment which is the living work of art. In this sense, Gilles Deleuze recovers Leibniz's concept of monadology, by integrating it in a living body that performs and acts in an extended space. A flexible and elastic body composition owns coherent parts that form a fold, which divide *ad infinitum* in smaller folds, keeping nevertheless, a certain level of cohesion. This action of folding constitutes a fabric which divides itself by way of changes of mass, or aggregates and correlatives of the compressive elastic force. In infinitesimal bodies exist worlds that are regulated by constant progressions of acquisition and loss of movement, attempting to preserve its life force. The unfolding that derives from this action has a performativity that by way of dialectical forces such as, extend-distend, contract-dilate, compress-explode, keep the mechanism and the natural machinery running at its own organic time. The endogenous processes that derive from this action maintain an individuation of life affirming movements<sup>11</sup>.

Deleuze's folds integrate in an intrinsic manner in Maes' work because the living forces applied to several works, produce, and conduct an ever-changing plastic solution, that keeps renewing the representational devices and transforming by mutation the

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<sup>9</sup> "We are all lichens" in MAES, Anne Marie. *Matter of kinship*. Casa de Mateus, Vila Real. 2024, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Menander's fragment in MARTINS, Albano. *Antologia da Poesia Grega Clássica*. Edições Afrontamento. 2011, p.341.

<sup>11</sup> DELEUZE, Gilles. *La piega. Leibniz e il Barocco*. Einaudi Editore, Torino. 2004, p.10-15.

aesthetics principle, eliminating finished, crystalized, and immutable forms. The endogenous character in the organism keeps altering not only the functionalities and preservation of existence, but also demonstrating the process of formal renovation. For Rosi Braidotti, the notion of anthropocentric nature is outdated, in the manner that it reveals an illusory perception of dominance that humanity has over nature. Biological life, therefore, is an extended concept that surpasses the codifications made by inalienable laws of humans, and their sacred rituals and institutions. Living matter is a vitalist formation that develops in a twofold way, on one hand we have the *Anthropos*, which highlights the existence of human organisms or the *bios*, and the contextualization of all animal life and non-human forms or *zoe*. The author postulates a *zoe-centred* equality to characterize nature, because it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic transspecies commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism, because animals, insects, plants, and the environment, in fact the planet and the cosmos, are called into play<sup>12</sup>.

In 1973, still in an incipient conceptual thought, the Portuguese artist Alberto Carneiro wrote a manifesto for an ecological art. The manifesto expresses the need that man must become one with nature, and the need for the artist to mutate himself in an unconscious way with a natural processing of existence. Ecology of art will be, says Carneiro, a return to the origins of our own matrix possessions, eliminating the all-encompassing cultural creations, in favor of a transitory relation with the material world. Nature recreated in us and through ourselves, in a mirroring of the unconscious memory, the simplicity of this relation enables the artist to experience the qualities and sensations of nature, from a cultural unimpeded standpoint<sup>13</sup>. Carneiro experiences nature from his own ontological self, thus reducing the wildness and randomness of nature, in order to master the artistic process. Maes' utilizes the very essence of nature to promote an artwork that is shaped by the intrinsic events that happen in an existential environment. The artist delves deeper into the understanding of the processual undertakings of nature, in such a way that enables the artist to express that her research is not a romantic enterprise but a pragmatic pursuit of knowledge, because there is an investigation that arises from a special kind of connection that comes directly from things. Kinship is a pact of necessity<sup>14</sup>. Unlike

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<sup>12</sup> BRAIDOTTI, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, Cambridge. 2013, p.60-66.

<sup>13</sup> "Notas para um manifesto de uma arte ecológica" in CARNEIRO, Alberto. *Das notas para um diário e outros textos*. Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa. 2007, p.25-26.

<sup>14</sup> "We are all lichens" in MAES, Anne Marie. *Matter of kinship*. Casa de Mateus, Vila Real. 2024, p.8-9.

Carneiro, the poetic form of art is not an aim or a direct pursuit, but is the natural outcome of the proliferation and integration of natural elements that constitute a possibility of transform themselves in forms of art. From lichens, natural pigments, insect eggs, fossils, extracts of soil, wool, moss, petals, biotextiles, bacteria, algae, branches, microbial grown fabrics, honeybees, pollen grains, Maes' deepens the relationship with organic formations, so that the *zoe-centred* manifestations can occur. There is a symbiotic relationship between art and science, that in their intertwining result in a simultaneity of artistic intuition and epistemological knowledge. There seems to be an inversion of the art paradigm in which material are extracted from their local sources, therefore extirped of their essence, and returned in a formalization removed from their natural principles. This inversion relocates the importance on the materials and their natural growth processes, alluding to a sustainable biological activism, demonstrating new possibilities to integrate forms in art. There seems to be some poetic kinship with artists like Walter de Maria, Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long, Robert Smithson, or even with the *Arte Povera* movement with Jannis Kounellis, Giovanni Anselmo, Giuseppe Penone, in a way that they include aspects of examples of natural materials.

Like we can see in Maes' textile works *Visible, Invisible*, organic and floor sculptures or tables with skins, or even her remarkable sensorial skins, Giovanni Anselmo writes that energy in itself is never visible and it can never be, but manifests itself through the dynamics and scope of action. The insertion of energy in the artwork doesn't manifest its existence but explores the permanence of its activity. There is a sensorial primitivism found in the natural material that shows itself in the hidden material forces<sup>15</sup>. The sensorial skins are grown by bacteria during an acid fermentation process, and they undergo a visible metamorphosis of the invisible conditions and endogenous movements that tend to heterodoxy of form and heterogeneity of visual formations. Temperature and humidity are decisive factors that trigger the manifestations of the circulations and movements of organic formations. Giuseppe Penone explains that only the material matters because the artwork is not a simple representation of a mimetic objectuality, it is its own reality, that changes or tends to transmute in organizational patterns triggered by events of light, space, weather conditions, even their overwhelming poetic configurations buried in the superficial matter<sup>16</sup>. Kounellis affirms that even in the unutterability of the

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<sup>15</sup> ANSELMO, Giovanni. "l'energia in sé non è mai visibile" in *Arte Povera Interviste curate e raccolte da Giovanni Lista*. Abscondita, Milano. 2011, p.100.

<sup>16</sup> PENONE, Giuseppe. "la natura non è separata dall'uomo" in *Ibidem*, p.111.

living matter, there is something lurking that escapes rationalism, something that supersedes the causality of referentiality for a poetic invisibility of form that manifests itself, by an extreme act of subtlety<sup>17</sup>. These artistic and theoretical references are fundamental into our understanding of Maes' work, precisely for the micro-structures that form the material macro-structures of the visible conditions. Works such as *Rituals with Microbial Ancestors* (performance) and *Microbial Life* (installation) show the transformative process of ever developing substances, that are induced and fostered by internal conditions of survival and necessity. Biology takes its compositional strategy so that living organisms can procure their interdependence with each other.

Baruch Spinoza in his *Ethics* describes a formation of being that tends to persevere in innate conditions given by his existence on the world. He calls this *conatus*, i.e., something that tends to assimilate life in order to manifest itself in an existential duration. This thing can never be destroyed because nothing can extirpate its existence, but on the contrary, opposes to everything that can deprive of its existence. Things can never be more than what is ascribed by nature, and so its potency affirms that the effort to persevere is the effort to maintain its life in an indefinite time span<sup>18</sup>. António Damásio integrates the *conatus* in his own neurological postulates and his descriptions of the biology of organisms. All living organisms are born with devices designed to solve automatically the basic problems of existence, such as finding sources of energy; incorporating and transforming energy; maintaining a chemical balance on the interior compatible with the life process; fending off external agents of disease and physical injury. This so-called *homeostasis machine* is convenient for the regulations and responses such as approaching or withdrawing of an entire organism relative to some object and in increasing (arousal) or decreasing its activity (quiescence)<sup>19</sup>.

Maes' work offers the possibility the experience the *conatus essendi* of unicellular or multicellular organisms that proliferate and develop integral relationships with the environment and controlled induced external contributions. The artist's work is a laboratory of segmented lines that approach, intertwine, that represent a labyrinthic manifold of a biologic semantic versatility. It is precisely with this versatility that we approach the conceptual notion of *still life (nature-morte)* and its applicability to Maes's

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<sup>17</sup> KOUNELLIS, Jannis. "Pensamientos y observaciones" in MOURE, Gloria (ed.). *Kounellis*. Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona. 1990, p.214.

<sup>18</sup> SPINOZA, Baruch. *Ética*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid. 2016, p.220-221.

<sup>19</sup> DAMÁSIO, António. *Looking for Spinoza*. William Heinemann, London. 2003, p.30.

work. If we think it in terms of a traditional representation of a standstill of time, the *still life* demonstrates the living matter that was crystalized in an immutable formation of its essence. That is the case of the pictorial representations in paintings, sculptures, photography, that showcase the immovable organism lifeless on a plane of suspension. *Still life* embeds all objects into a portrait of lifeless movement. Maes continues in a certain way the tradition of *still life*, but by inverting or operating a caesura in the traditional *continuum*, by extricating the immutability of existence and by utilizing cellular organisms that move, fold and unfold in an endogenous *perpetuum mobile*. The immovable objects of erstwhile transform themselves into a turbulent agility that energizes the field of operation. If Rosalind Krauss, to describe the modern sculpture invokes the notion of the sculptural object in an expanded field<sup>20</sup>, we can too, describe Maes' *nature-morte* as *still life* in an expanded field. There seems to be a notion of evolution and overtaking of still objects, with the intent of promoting and developing internal relationships of mutual regulations and operational devices to maintain their *homeostasis machine*. Nothing is still, nothing remains calm and collected under the screen of a representational portrait, rather, the forces of performativity and activity increase and disrupt the stillness of impassibility. Nothing yields to a superior creational force because every cellular disposition performs through the lenses of a *conatus essendi*. There is an enlargement or even a hypertrophy of the stillness of life, with the direct injection of muscular and energetic forces that extend and distend, that dilate and contract by way of integral activities of organic manifestations.

The work *Microbial Ancestors (Topography of a Second Skin)* is a textile tapestry that interrelates the *sensorial skins* theme with a woven framework. In it we see various layers of cellulose woven by the *Acetobacter xylinum* bacteria and *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* yeast cells that compose the skin tissue like a symbiotic organism. It is the performativity and energetic function of bacteria that in a dialectical way, both appeases and increases the organic functionality of the visual metamorphosis. There seems to be a direct correlation between the artifice (biologist-artist) that enables the framework with which the included organisms change in their own rhythms and forms, and a certain aleatory and *ad libitum* position that permits the innovation and formal renewal of the substances integrated in the living process. We can see this correlation between process-based media,

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<sup>20</sup> KRAUSS, Rosalind. *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths*. The MIT Press, Massachusetts. 1986, p.276-290.



namely between Maes' work and certain musical interventions by composers who use aleatory passages within the framework of sound. Aleatory music is the antithetical notion to a controlled environment that determines the absolute parameters of composition. Chance enters the musical equation, like Mallarmé's *un coup de dés*, in which the composer substitutes a predetermined planification in search of an arbitrary notion of material manipulation, like *Music of Changes* by John Cage. According to Ottó Károlyi, the composer can give a general introduction within the gist of the composition to its players, leaving the minute details, the precision, intonation, intervals, and even specific extended techniques to them<sup>21</sup>. *Last Pieces* by Morton Feldman exemplifies this methodology of approach. Iannis Xenakis utilizes in his compositional devices a stochastic method, which implies a random probability distribution or the mapping of patterns that can be analyzed statistically but cannot be predicted in a precise manner. *Achorripsis* and *Mists* are two compositions that form stochastic distributions of durations and intervals hand calculated. At a different level, Alfred Schnittke uses in his first symphony, a first movement which its first minutes were registered as *senza tempo*. This negation of time markers permits Schnittke to demonstrate on a large ensemble orchestra the possibilities of *ad libitum* insertions made by several musical sections, including an entropic and cacophonous whirlpool of sound that showcases the composer's *controlled chaos* approach. *Senza tempo* enables chance to be the supposed metronome that inverts and negates the development of chronological time. Even in literature there are several cases of aleatory possibilities, that like Maes', permit the catalysis of induced programs of unfolding interconnections. The *cut-up* technique of William Burroughs, Tristan Tzara's poetry, the novel *La vie mode d'emploi* by Georges Perec, and the novel *Rayuela* by Julio Cortázar can be examples that link in a conceptual way with Maes' work, in a sense that nature reveals itself in the most ineffable way, which excludes the rationality of the *logos*, subsiding the operational control of meaning.

Ingeborg Bachmann writes that once again we will be able to enter the wilderness and witness revelations of the savanna and the deserts and the steppes, or the deep forests, and the primeval nature will take us out of the nighttime of our thoughts, in a redemption that will promote free movement and will<sup>22</sup>. This can be a fitting description of Anne Marie Maes thought process, which gives nature a direct part in the integration of its materiality

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<sup>21</sup> KÁROLYI, Ottó. *Introducción a la música del siglo XX*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid. 2018, p.79.

<sup>22</sup> BACHMANN, Ingeborg. *Malina*. Penguin Books, United Kingdom. 2019, p.114.

and organic movements in an art framework. Within this framework we can sense the way time reveals itself, demonstrating with it its abstruse character, based on aleatory and occasions of chance, like living machinery that evolves and develops by its cadences, pulsations, and patterns. There's no meaning of chronological time in the sense that we can witness the proliferation of organisms, rather it's the surreptitious nature of endogenous performativity that endows the superficial materiality its own kaleidoscopic imagery. Democritus writes that nature and teaching are similar in essence, because teaching improves man, and by improving, acts like nature<sup>23</sup>. That is the reciprocity that Anne Marie Maes bring into art, by combining nature's core with the ability to learn from it, by changing perceptions and developing substantial alternatives that are ecologic-centered.

Rodrigo Magalhães

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<sup>23</sup> Democritus' Fragment 33 in BARNABÉ, Alberto. *Fragmentos presocráticos de Tales a Demócrito*. Alianza editorial, Madrid. 2019, p.343.