

Ein Kooperationsprojekt des Kunstvereins Hildesheim und  
des Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museums Hildesheim

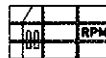
# observing beast, time, evolution

Kunst und Naturwissenschaft

Mark Dion, Ursula Hansbauer & Wolfgang Konrad,  
Frank Hesse, Katie Holten, Sanna Kannisto,  
Künstlerkollektiv finger, Jochen Lempert, Ariane Michel,  
Helen Mirra, Jürgen Stollhans & Federico Geller,  
Susan Turcot, Lois & Franziska Weinberger



Kunstverein Hildesheim



ROEMER- UND  
PELIZAEUS-MUSEUM  
HILDESHEIM

Mit minimalistischer Geste kombiniert die Künstlerin einfache Materialien zu formal strengen Objekten. Dabei interessiert sie nicht der Gegensatz zwischen Natur und Kultur. Ihre Arbeiten sind nicht wertend und machen aufmerksam auf Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede in zeitlicher, materieller und räumlicher Dimension. In Hildesheim zeigt Mirra alpine Pflanzen mit ihren Wurzeln, die sie während eines dreimonatigen Aufenthalts in Norwegen bei Wanderungen nördlich des Polarkreises gesammelt hat. Gerahmt und hinter Glas werden sie paarweise an ihren Stengeln und Wurzeln miteinander verbunden. In Anlehnung an wissenschaftliche wie amateurhafte Verfahren hat sie die Pflanzen gepresst, korrekt identifiziert und anschließend mit ihren lateinischen Namen gekennzeichnet. In ihrer Genauigkeit und Akribie wirken sie wie maßstabsgetreue Zeichnungen. Diese Vorgehensweise schließt die Nachbarschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Archivierung ebenso mit ein wie die persönliche Hingabe an die Sache.

The artist combines simple materials to shape formally strict objects with minimalist gestures. But in doing so, she is not only interested in the contrast between nature and culture. Her works are not judgmental and call attention to similarities and differences in a temporal, material, and spatial dimension. In Hildesheim Mirra shows alpine plants with their roots that she collected on hikes north of the Polar Circle during a three-month stay in Norway. Framed and behind glass, they join stalks and roots together by pairs. In the style of scientific as well as amateur-like procedures, she pressed the correctly identified plants that were afterwards designated with their Latin names. In their exactness and meticulousness, they seem like to-scale drawings. This method includes the proximity to scientific archiving as well as the personal devotion to the matter.

## Art and Natural Science Failed Couple-Relationship or Complicity?

1 Cf. Wolfgang Iser: *Kunst und Wissenschaft, Gegengedanken zur Biennale in: Kunstforum International, vol. 85, 1986, p. 124, and Erna Fiorentini: Naturwissenschaft und Kunst in: Ulrich Pfisterer (ed.), Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaften. Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart/Weimar, pp. 244–248*

2 Cf. Horst Bredekamp: *Darwins Korallen. Frühe Evolutionsmodelle und die Tradition der Naturgeschichte, Wagenbach, Berlin 2005, as well as Julia Voss: Augenflecken und Argusaugen: Zur Bildlichkeit der Evolutionstheorie in: Horst Bredekamp and Gabriele Werner (eds.), Bilderwelten des Wissens. Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik. Oberflächen und Theorien, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2003, p. 75ff*

If one characterizes science and art in general, they seem at a first glance to have little in common. As a rule, science is subject to criteria which are objective, verifiable, unambiguous and logical. Art, on the other hand, is based on subjectivity, follows its own laws, which may even be irrational, and is characterized by openness, polysemy, and heterogeneous possibilities of access. A retrospective view makes it clear, however, that art and science were in no way always separate, but that their relationship is marked by a mutual proximity and differentiation. If in antiquity art and science were originally assigned to a common domain of knowledge, Aristotle already distinguished between “art” as the producing *téchne* and “science” as the thinking-contemplating *theoría*, and he thereby established a distinction which remained valid in the Western cultural canon into early modern times.<sup>1</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, simultaneously a universal genius, artist and scientist, stands symptomatically for the softening and convergence of the dichotomy between art and science which had been cultivated for so long. The unity of science, art and technology was also a postulate of the Enlightenment for a long time. This is evidenced by the chambers of wonders which presented objects from the natural sciences alongside works of art. But during the course of the growing differentiation among various scientific disciplines which had a strong visual orientation – for example botany, anatomy or zoology – interest also grew in pictorial representation as a cognitive instrument. The art historian and visual theoretician Horst Bredekamp cites as a prominent example in this regard Charles Darwin and his book *The Origin of the Species*, published in 1859 and containing what was for that era a veritable superabundance of illustrations.<sup>2</sup> It is also clear for Bredekamp, however, that on the other hand it was of great significance for the status of the image in modern times that

Darwin developed his system of evolution, not through an analysis of natural processes in themselves, but through the descriptive explanation of a pictorial diagram.<sup>3</sup> The painting of classical modernism, in turn, was inspired by many innovations in the natural sciences, predominantly in physics. Cubism takes its leave of three-dimensional Euclidian space; Wassily Kandinsky was fascinated by atomic physics and formed analogies between the disintegration of the atom and his own emotional experience of the disintegration of the entire world. The importation of scientific methods into art was also seen as a promising means of overcoming academic traditions. Science was thereby considered to be the guarantor of progress, in whose efficacy great hope was placed.

And what is the situation today with the relationship between art and science in the twenty-first century? A series of recent exhibitions<sup>4</sup> bears witness to the interest in and relevance of the interdependence between these two different fields. It becomes clear that, in the current encounter between art and natural science, it is a matter neither of establishing universally valid lines of demarcation between the two areas nor of discovering common denominators. Instead art commentates, counteracts, simulates, adapts and deconstructs the perception of natural science which is of such fundamental importance for our contemporary understanding of the world and which, at the same time, has become more and more incomprehensible. For the art historian Susanne Witzgall, all artists are no longer primarily concerned with discovering spiritual realities and higher truths, but instead with investigating the epistemological basis, the procedures and conventions of the natural sciences.<sup>5</sup>

The exhibition *observing beast, time, evolution. Kunst und Naturwissenschaft* (observing beast, time, evolution. Art and Science) is embedded in the context of the palaeontological collections which are presented in the two permanent exhibitions *Erde im Wandel der Zeit* (The Earth over the Course of Time) and *Frühe Menschen* (Early Humans). With fossils, minerals and finds of bones, the exhibitions describe the creation of all life and the development of the human species. They accordingly touch upon questions currently receiving much attention in various societies and dealing with such issues as climate change, species extinction or the increasing questioning of Darwin's theory of evolution in favor of Christian creation doctrine.<sup>6</sup> The goal of *observing beast, time, evolution* is not to establish analogies to the objects and themes of the collections, but instead to take up the threads of those issues and phenomena which are raised and thematized in the collections and, from an artistic perspective, to spin them further in an associative manner. It is thereby possible to attain another viewpoint concerning certain facts and circumstances, one which would perhaps not be possible within the borders of one's own discipline. The invited artists also make use of scientific approaches. Thus for her photographic series

3 Cf. Horst Bredekamp: *Drehmomente. Merkmale und Ansprüche des Iconic Turn*, in: Christa Maar and Hubert Burda (eds.), *Iconic Turn: Die neue Macht der Bilder*, Köln 2004, p. 17

4 E.g. *Say it isn't so*, Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen

5 Cf. Susanne Witzgall, in: *Kunst nach der Wissenschaft. Zeitgenössische Kunst im Diskurs mit den Naturwissenschaften*, Verlag für moderne Kunst, Nürnberg 2003, p. 432

6 According to an investigation by the research group *Weltanschauung in Deutschland from 2005*, around 13 percent of those interviewed believe in the Christian-Biblical doctrine of the creation of the world and of life. One quarter (25 percent) agree with the concept that a Higher Being or God created life, and that under His control it slowly developed. Three fifths (61 percent) are in accord with the scientific theory of evolution. [http://fowid.de/fileadmin/daten-archiv/Evolution\\_Kreationismus\\_Deutschland\\_2005.pdf](http://fowid.de/fileadmin/daten-archiv/Evolution_Kreationismus_Deutschland_2005.pdf)

*act of flying, amazilia tzacatl*, Sanna Kannisto accompanied biological research teams into the Brazilian rainforest, and Ariane Michel followed an expedition to Greenland. Kannisto and Michel observed not only nature, but also the researchers and the manner in which they collect data concerning flora and fauna and thereby have a decisive impact on what image of nature and wilderness is conveyed. Thus on the level of contents, they are close to the work of Mark Dion, who concerns himself with the phenomenology of natural science and the history of knowledge, and thereby, such as in the work *Tar Museum*, makes reference to representational forms in museums such as window display cases, pedestals and stuffed animals. Katie Holten also plays upon presentations in museums with her work *Die Entwicklung der*, in which she displays her stones made out of papier mâché in vitrines – only that it is matter, not of replicas of age-old minerals, but of so-called “carbon-capture” rocks from a promising technology of CO<sub>2</sub> precipitation and storage, from which many people expect a considerable contribution to climate protection in the future.

The dimension of time, which is also indicated in the title of the exhibition, comes to the fore especially in the works of Helen Mirra, Frank Hesse and Jochen Lempert. In her sculptural work *Metamorphosed*, Mirra combines painted stones, lichen and worn-out pieces of clothing. What arises in the composite view is a conglomerate of various temporalities: that of the person who once wore the clothing; that of the lichen, which can become centuries-old and, depending on climatic conditions, grow up to a maximum of one millimeter annually; and that of the rocks. Similarly, in his video work *Die Schildkröten der Galerie Tschudi* (The Turtles of the Tschudi Gallery), Frank Hesse filmed over the course of a day turtles living in a sculpture park, against the background of the Glarner Alps from three different camera perspectives in real time, thereby bringing the various measurements of time into a dialogue with each other. The large-format, black-and-white photographs *Vèzère-Hafte* by Jochen Lempert show in the beam of a spotlight mayflies which, through the long exposure time of the shots, dissolve into delicate traces of light.

Susan Turcot's drawings frequently have political or ecological focuses such as, for example, the overexploitation of the last large and untouched forest areas in Brazil or Canada. On the one hand, she presents this process in a detailed and documentary manner, like a reportage. But on the other hand, inasmuch as she frequently complements the depiction with fantastical elements or – as in the case of the work *Faultline* – situates it at a fictitious location, Turcot avoids an assertion concerning reality and, furthermore, thematizes the process of drawing as a subjective procedure for translating perception.

Extensive investigative work preceded the installation *Niemandsland* (No-Man's Land) by Ursula Hansbauer and Wolfgang Konrad, in which they analyze the role of genetic databanks in relation to the patentings of seed varieties and also reveal their effects. In addition to depicting these socially explosive developments, they build a bridge to the year 1936, to an expedition of the German Research Society to the Hindu Kush. Thus – just like Jürgen Stollhans and Federico Geller – they pursue the revision of a stretch of scientific and social history. Stollhans and Geller (who is also a biologist) have occupied themselves for a long time with the theory of evolution. In their work *Sorry Ham!* they tell the story of the famous experimental monkey Ham who, during 1961 in the framework of a NASA research program, was the first primate in space. Through the combination of fictitious elements and well-grounded scientific material, the two artists are able in a humorous manner to deconstruct the serious demeanor of science as the guarantor of objectivity and certified truth.

The artists' collective "finger" is interested equally in social and ecological processes. With the project *Stadtinkerei* (Urban Apiary), they set up boxes containing beehives in municipal spaces, where the biological diversity and yield of honey in the meantime is often higher than in rural areas. On the basis of analyses of pollen, they bring to light ecological transformations and shifts of species-diversity from rural to urban spaces. Municipal wasteland and successive acreage also frequently constitute the point of departure for the works of Lois and Franziska Weinberger. Thus they placed carrying bags filled with soil as *Mobile Gärten* at various city sites so that, over the course of a summer, seeds could flourish after being blown there by chance.

Altogether, the combination of natural science and art provides a chance to intertwine two investigative threads and thereby to develop new perspectives. Art takes up themes that in the meantime have come to fall through that Cartesian or disciplinary grid which can arise in the context of official systems of academic knowledge. It reveals contradictions and generates interconnections which are frequently inconceivable within the borders of scientific disciplines. Art does not deliver any simple answers or solutions, but instead raises questions which serve as the points of departure for further thought – just as science in fact does as well.

Elke Falat