





INTERVIEW

Lauren Cornell in conversation with Daniel Steegmann Mangrané

Lauren Cornell In 2015, the Centre Pompidou-Metz asked you to create the scenography for their exhibition *Jardin Infini: De Giverny à l'Amazonie* (Infinite Garden: From Giverny to the Amazon) which explored how the garden has captivated artists throughout history. Your design activated the lighting, color, and architecture of the galleries, turning them into a lush environment that enwrapped the works, and blurred the distinctions between art and its surroundings. The dissolution of boundaries at play here recurs throughout your work. Could you speak about how you approached *Jardin Infini*? It must have been daunting to take on!

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané The invitation from the curator Emma Lavigne

totally came out of the blue. I was terribly excited and a bit scared of the scale, but it was nonetheless the ideal occasion to explore the exhibition as a medium and see how far you can stretch it in a show that definitely had an historiographical approach. Very early on I decided to treat each gallery very differently: In Gallery 3 everything was dark, somehow narrow, and made out of square angles, while Gallery 2 was bright, lively, rounded and opened up to the body of the viewer. Most of the works in Gallery 3 were very somber, dealing with notions of death, war, putrefaction, trauma, while most of the works at Gallery 2 related to feasts, psychedelia, tropicalism, germination. So you had these two entirely different spaces, which I treated with almost opposite phenomenological apprehensions of

the space. My dream was that somehow the visitors would get overwhelmed by Gallery 3 and then, when entering the luminous space of Gallery 2, they will somehow detach from the exhibition and just start to engage with each other, and with the pure experience of being in the space, maybe even lie down for a while.

There's very little freedom left for visitors of large museums, where everything is mediated by signs and labels that direct the experience and there's little room for real engagement, even in physical terms of space use. This dissolution of boundaries you are talking about was actually a key concept for the show. When a show is well put together the artworks tend to dissolve in the execution of their relations, and you dissolve with them. Most of the time when I make a show I'm looking for this moment of detachment, the moment when the visitor stops engaging with individual works and starts to engage with his own presence in space, to dissolve into it... I think it's from this moment onward that things start getting interesting.

LC How do you plan for a "moment of detachment"?

DSM There are many ways to do this: seduction, distraction, directing attention to details, disorientation. You can play with sizes and scales... or, as you were saying, with lighting, colour, space, and the choreography between those. For example, by creating a system of inner references or echoes, like a ritornello in a musical composition, you can focus the attention of the viewer to the other side of the room, so your body is in one side,

but your attention is back to something that you saw in the other extreme of the room. Suddenly your body is in one side and your head in another. There's a split. Something breaks and needs (or not) to be put together again. There's a difference between your physical and your psychological presence in space that the exhibition can enlighten and exploit. Those are notions that deeply interest me.

Phantom (2015), the virtual reality installation we worked on for the New Museum Triennial "Surround Audience," was a wonderful occasion to explore it. As soon as you put on the headset your body disappeared—you were dissolved in the virtual surroundings! *Phantom* had another aspect, which came as a surprise, and that was the fact that looking at the user was actually pretty fascinating: suddenly you were looking at someone that was clearly somewhere else. This dissociation was really strange. Of course the staging was carefully planned, and obviously I had a notion of how the user would look in the empty space, but I didn't think it would be so powerful!

LC It's true, their disconnection—in all its awe and awkwardness—from their physical surroundings was what was on view to those waiting in line. Both *Phantom* and *Jardin Infini* are similarly encompassing: they both literally surround and engulf the viewer. Why is this immersive aspect important to you?

DSM I want all the attention, all the commitment, all the body and all the thinking of the viewer. I want him or her to be totally taken by the work or by the exhibition. I think deeply on how I can

enhance the experience, and how I can steal the maximum amount of time and attention. I mean that not only in a Bruce Nauman way ("Pay attention motherfucker!"), but what I'm trying to say is that you also think with your senses, feelings, and emotions. You think with your body and with your movement, and the mind is a muscle. So by changing the conditions of the viewer's body, you can change his state of mind, the way one acts or interacts, your perception of space and scale. Being capable of such transformation is what makes the medium of the exhibition so deeply rich.

LC Changing the conditions of the viewer's body—I see this throughout your work. But people don't always want the conditions of their bodies changed. Have you ever encountered any resistance to particular works of yours?

DSM No, never... Some people had trouble using *Phantom*, but that discomfort was more related to physiological questions, like equilibrium or dizziness, than physical or psychological constraints. It made me wonder if that's something that should be explored: a work that can create a deep discomfort in the viewer. I never aimed for it, I actually always tried to go in the opposite direction, but it's something I wonder from time to time—how could one make a deeply disquieting, terrifying show. Cinema explored that thoroughly, why didn't art? Few artists have explored the physical uneasiness art can provoke. That said, I think the viewer who goes to see contemporary art already expects to be challenged and have his will, his thoughts and his ground somehow moved.

LC Your so-called "curtain" works, hanging sheets of chains that resemble panes of stained glass cutting through galleries, offer a subtle challenge—or perspective shift—for the viewer in that they reshape the space and pathway through it. They have so many conflicting valences: they are heavy but ethereal, present but set apart from the space, absent. As I understand, each of these works is site-specific. Could you talk about how you approach a new curtain in a particular space?

DSM When I first had the idea for the curtains, I was making drawings opposing a formless shape to very regular patterns, which I thought could be some metal sculptures. It was a very incipient idea but somehow the rigidity of the grid was frustrating. Then those curtains came to mind. They are very common in the Mediterranean, they are colorful and they make this nice noise when you cross them. It was obviously the right material for dealing with notions of corporeality and incorporeality, materiality and immateriality, tridimensional experience and flat surface... the work changes as you traverse the different layers, and you grow more and more aware of your body and your movement in a space which you need to constantly negotiate.

When doing a new curtain I normally try to enhance something of the given space and its experience. At the same time, I tried to elaborate a catalogue of forms that are somehow familiar but that you cannot clearly name: so somehow you feel compelled to identify, but you cannot really be sure, as in the titles of the series, / (- \ for example, which you can read, but cannot

pronounce. There are many things you know but you cannot say, and sometimes when you find yourself without words reality and truth emerge. I like when art brings you to a place of wordless understanding, but you have to reach that place in the limits of language.

LC *Lichtzwang* (1998–present), an ongoing, now two-decades-long series of watercolor grids on graph paper, captures this kind of wordlessness in its intuitive, diaristic mode.

DSM I devoted myself to *Lichtzwang* for almost 4 years exclusively before slowly starting other things. I remember once entering the studio, literally covered with these small watercolors and thinking how crazy that was, to be doing those small drawings so intensively... it felt almost perverted! But the fact is that almost everything I did afterwards came from there—all the work with variations, permutations, color, temporal and spatial loops, structures... all come from there.

Most of the works in the *Lichtzwang* series are composed of groups of 11 watercolors, and if you put them in the wall they make a line of 177 cm wide, which by chance is exactly my height. So you have the horizontal line of drawings and your vertical body, moving from one side to the other, “animating” the drawings in your mind. While you look closely at these small drawings you lose the notion of the space where you are. And if you follow the movement of the forms in the drawing, it happens as a kind of phenomenological dance: you end upside down. When I was trying to explain that in Barcelona people looked at me like I was crazy, but here in Brazil everyone was like,

“Oh yes, I see it, nice!,” obviously because of their tradition of participatory abstract art. My work is full of these echoes. I’m really enticed by how the internal echoes, the web of relations you can establish inside a show, or inside a body of work, can render meaning dynamic.

LC *Lichtzwang* also recalls the work of Brazilian artists Helio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, and Lygia Pape, who are known for breaking down Modernist geometries, making them more dynamic, tactile and contextual. I know these artists were strong influences for you. You’ve told me before that you moved to Rio de Janeiro after your undergraduate degree because you were so inspired by them.

DSM One of the first things that struck me when first saw Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica’s work is that it was through abstract language that the body was involved in the work. That was in the mid-90s when many artists were elaborating on narratives about the body, intimacy, and the biographical. Most of the work that dealt with the body was figurative work, and was pretty much straightforward representational, many times in the form of a diary. Most of those practices were about representation of the body rather than an engagement of the body with the work. Or, even better, an entanglement. And suddenly I found those artists who very directly pointed to something I was intuiting, but that was still very vague to me. I guess the works of Oiticica and Clark can be a model of an entangled practice, one that doesn’t treat the viewer as a disembodied eye and the artistic object as an autonomous being.

LC Clark, Oiticica, and Pape emerged in the 1950s, a time in which Brazil’s culture flourished and then, shortly afterwards, was clamped down on by an isolating dictatorship. Their historic break from Concretism, the prevailing movement at the time, and subsequent engagement of more participatory forms was very much a political expression, a manifestation of art’s transformational role in society. How does the current political moment—one of polarization, global realignment, and humanitarian crisis—inform your work or thinking?

DSM We are in a moment of reformulation. Because of technology, and because of the ecological crisis we are facing, our very understanding of what we are is rapidly changing, collapsing the boundaries between subjects and objects, between man and its environment. Brazil is a privileged place to think about this reformulation. First of all, because it’s a model in its own: every single global problem, be it concentration of wealth, ecological crisis or political corruption, and every consequence those might have, you find it in Brazil. So if we ever find a solution for Brazil, this will be a worldwide solution! Having said that, I’m also aware that we live in a moment where the most important challenges require global governance, a global agreement. That’s specifically true if we talk about ecology and economy, but not only, and it is disheartening to face these urgencies at a moment when the illiberal aspects of our democracies are increasing enormously. The problem is that we are inhabiting the world with a conceptual model that is two centuries

old and that doesn’t acknowledge recent advancements, nor seems useful to face our current crises. It’s in fact the model that caused those crises!

If we think of the process of modernity as something that started with the Cartesian division between *Res Cogitans* (the subject perceiving) and *Res Extensa* (the world-at-large) and the subsequent elaboration and purification of this division, it’s easy to see how this division allowed us to understand nature as something external to us, something that can be manipulated at our will, and grounded the belief that this mishandling wasn’t mishandling us back at all. We lived a few centuries putting ourselves above the world, detached from it, in a comfortable split between humans and non-humans, between culture and nature. But climate change is here, and it’s here to remind us that we are all part of the same single organism. Those binary divisions doesn’t seem to apply correctly anymore. Just to put forth one example: a flood or a drought, caused by the anthropogenic changes we inflicted in the climate—how can we describe it as “natural phenomena”? We can’t, it’s an hybrid: half natural, half man-made. Humanitarian and ecological crises are totally linked processes. With technology a similar thing happens; more and more entangled in our very own bodies, be it with surgical prosthesis as artificial arteries and valves, be it with genetic modifications, or with our cell phones, self-driving cars or AI, suddenly everything to which we tried to deny a subjectivity, seems to emerge with its own will and its own agenda!

These are indeed very strange times, but this ontological shift is also an

incredible opportunity for art to engage and have political leverage, as speculative as you can imagine it.

LC You have returned, again and again, to the Mata Atlântica to capture such an ontological shift. What does it represent to you?

DSM For me the rainforest is paragon to think many of those questions. The Mata Atlântica, which is the coastal rainforest of Brazil, is one of the richest and most biodiverse ecosystems in the world, but it's also one of the most endangered. When you see the rainforest and all its lushness it's difficult to realize that all those forms, species and strategies found, are actually fruits of scarcity of nutrients, light and water. The forest is so thick that rain and sunlight almost don't reach the soil, which is mostly sandy, very poor in minerals. What makes the rainforest so fertile (and so difficult to reforest) is the intricate interdependency between the species where one metabolically sustains the other. In the forest nothing is entirely fixed but it's in a process of transformation where biotic and abiotic elements are constantly influencing each other.

I cannot think of a better metaphor of how the body of work of an artist should be, and it's also a great model for how an exhibition, or even the relation between art and institution should work. But that's not only a model for art, it can be a model for a whole new cultural paradigm: one in which everything is interdependent, and everything is entangled. I think we urgently need to drop once and for all the modern model of

opposite ontological binaries to acknowledge the interdependent entanglement we live in. The Rainforest is a metaphor for it.

LC Entanglement and interdependence are vivid in your work where nothing, from color, to light, to form, to perspective, seems to be fixed. *A Transparent Leaf Instead of the Mouth*, which showed at the Serralves Museum and will travel to the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard, is a glass pavilion five meters wide which contains its own ecosystem—moss, trees, water, as well as living creatures, such as stick insects, which have an adaptive ability (a biological phenomenon known as crypsis) to blend into their environment. An environment where a tree appears to be an insect, and an insect appears to be a branch, and the entire micro-world is kind of shaking and crawling, elicits notions of metamorphosis, mutation and biological instability. Is this what you were after?

DSM *A Transparent Leaf Instead of the Mouth* is a biological and semiotic experiment: we set up the conditions of a small ecosystem and now it's evolving according to its own rules. When I was working in the film *Phasmides* I got to know Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, with whom I had fantastic conversations about semiotics and who introduced me to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. In sign theory there's this idea of morphogenesis or how the form of the sign is created and becomes recognizable. Peirce took this idea from evolutionary biology where it studies how organism forms evolve. That provided an unexpected link to my passion for biology through language

and signs, and embedded *Phasmides* with other layers of meaning. Suddenly the sign became something alive, and the stick insect a sign itself. But a sign pointing what? Its own fragility? I like very much the idea of using a fragile sign. I once read Daniel Buren saying that when using a fragile sign the whole chain where it is inscribed and that conforms it becomes apparent. Under this reading *A Transparent Leaf...* is a linguistic landscape writing itself!

LC I remember so clearly when you showed me *Phasmides* (2014) during the studio visit in which we met. Shot in 16mm, the film tracks a stick insect from a forest through to a constructed environment in your studio that resembles a white cube. In the forest, the insect is hard to discern, blending and reappearing amidst the wild; in the studio, its form is sharp but, in its angularity, not totally foreign. This work, and others, *Strange Fruit* (2013), *Masks* (2013), among them, commingle organic or natural forms with built and man-made ones, and manifest their deep interdependency and indistinction. *Phantom* positions the viewer as a part of a texture of sentience; in it, the floor, trees, rocks are all alive not inert. This piece recalls cosmologies of the forest in which it was shot that contest Enlightenment distinction between subject and the world; do these philosophies underline your work more broadly?

DSM Some of the most important and inspiring things I learned while living in Brazil are the Amerindian cosmologies. Those aren't just old legends or myths: they are a philosophical and ethical

approach to reality. Animist thought permeates everyday life here in a myriad of ways, and it is something that is especially present when you enter the rainforest. I first went there pursuing my interests in biology and end up finding a sentient web of interrelations. Wanting to know more, I started reading anthropologists Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha or more recently, Eduardo Kohn. The philosophy of the Amerindians has a very distinct approach to reality. If for Enlightenment-based thought the world is organized by a system of divisions and oppositions, by which you take the whole world and divide it in living and non-living, plants and animals, superior and inferior animals, until you reach a final slice which is the human—so everything is nature and only we are human; within Amerindian cosmology it's almost the opposite—everything is human. It doesn't mean that everything is a human being in the biological sense of the word, but means that humanity is at the core of every being: the common and shared ontological ground for every being is not nature but humanity. This has many consequences. Most notably, that if everything is human, everything can be a subject, so if everything is a subject the very notion of who is "us" needs to be asked again. That fascinates me because that question—who is a subject of full right, who belongs to "us"—that is the most essential political question. For that and many other reasons, I think indigenous thought seems to work better than the modernist model and legacy for thinking around the challenges we are facing, be those ecological, technological or moral, as it recognizes potential

subjectivity, rights or agency in all the things/beings around us.

Nonetheless, if everything can be a subject, everything has its own point of view. And that has also big consequences: for the Amerindians a point of view is not something subjects have over objects, but what defines you as a subject or an object is the point of view in which you are caught at a given moment. You are completely different if you are watched by your child, by your enemy, by a panther, or by a spirit. Actually, by a spirit you might just look like a vessel where the spirit can go in. Subjects and objects are therefore in a state of flux and permanent mutual possession.

I really like the repercussions this has for the understanding of art and how it operates, because if there are not subjects and objects in separated fixed positions, there are no artworks and viewers in fixed positions anymore either, but dynamic relations of mutual transformation, and I think that's a way more exciting form for thinking about art!

LC Where does this leave the artists? If there aren't artworks and viewers, what role do they play?

DSM I think it leaves art and all its diverse agents in a very privileged position! Art has the capacity to reconfigure our relation with/to reality. I like to do my shows not as conclusions, but as points of departure: somehow the exhibition is an opportunity to set up a thesis, and see how it operates, how it evolves, which consequences it has. I guess that if the work is truly experimental then the artist is also the very first viewer, meaning

the first one transformed. The important thing is not the exhibition itself, but what happens when you exit it and confront reality again.

If you take this and put it together with the things we have been discussing: the middle between viewer and work and the importance of the phenomenological experience, the exhibition as an ecosystem, the collapsing of binary divisions, the ability to physically influence feelings and thoughts, the orchestra of echoes at play, the ontological reformulation, the emergence of new subjectivities and forms of knowledge, the ecological crisis and the interdependencies it is revealing, you can see why the present is so full of opportunities to engage in what I would call entangled practice.

The thing is that when I make a work (and we must consider what or who is this "I," since I don't think I make alone any of my works), "I" don't think about "me" but about "us" (and we must consider what or who this "us" is).



