

## The botanies of art

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The controversial documentary *Statues Also Die*, directed by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Ghislain Cloquet in 1953 begins with a black screen with a voice-over saying ‘when men die, they enter history’, and ‘when statues die, they enter art’.<sup>1</sup> It is a film on African art and the devastating effects of colonialism on it, particularly as a result of demand from collectors. As a result, it turned into mannered craftwork empty of its original meaning. This process, which the film calls the ‘botany of death’ is also, according to it, ‘what we call culture’. (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

Art, history and culture, in the words of the film’s creators and of a number of 20th-Century theoreticians and artists, are therefore territories of death: places where human beings and their creations are shrouded and custodied for posterity. Inanimate

<sup>1</sup> Marker, Chris; Cloquet, Ghislain; and Resnais, Alain, *Les statues meurent aussi*, documentary, b/w, France, 1953.

works of art, displayed to the public in museum cabinets or treatises, are condemned to remain locked up. Art and nature are turned into antagonists, and the old debate on the relation between the two is taken to its extreme.

Without doubt, art and nature have always formed an inseparable pair which has generated a great deal of literature and constituted one of the core elements of artistic theory and aesthetics. Artists of all ages have dreamed of either reproducing the natural environment or detaching themselves from it. Throughout history, art has either imitated nature or, as Oscar Wilde would put it, nature has imitated art. Artistic practice has always been subject to the warm embrace of the natural environment, but also to the fertile tension produced by the desire to escape it.

Today, this tension and debate take on a special currency in the light of the environmental crisis we are facing: a critical juncture that paralyses both the world and art. Many creators and theoreticians are now reflecting on the role that art plays in protecting nature; looking not only at the most modern art, but also offering renewed and interesting perspectives on the art of the past. Rather than the idea of nature as a dead entity to be exploited for the wellbeing of human beings, the new ecology proposes recognising it as a living system which is necessary for our future. At the present time it is essential to change our way of life and our means of production if nature is to survive. In a brutalised world, art offers a creativity that is needed for change, for life to continue to flow and for humanity to be restored to us.

The cover of this volume has the image of a sculpture created in the Villa de los Artistas, in Lleida, by the artist Eva Lootz. (Figure 2) It is a work called *Huella* (Footprint) where we see a monumental outline marked on the ground in stone of a footprint, and the heel that extends upwards from it. Looking at it we can imagine a walking female giant, but a giant who is walking upside down under the earth. An olive emerges from the heel. It has been transplanted from the same fields where the work now lies; but now it plunges its roots into the human and becomes one with this female giant pulsating underground. The footprint tells us of the presence of what is absent, of the physical and organic imprint of men in the world; of what remains imprinted and also what walks, passes by and is ephemeral. It is a beautiful reflection on the human beings who belong to the earth and travel through its interior, rather than the men who impose themselves on nature and whose steps trample it.

Among our visitors' gallery here we have had the pleasure to receive a text from Salvatore Settis, which has been translated by Professor Alexandra Uscatescu with exquisite care. It is an essay on the painted garden of the Villa of Livia *Ad Gallinas Albas* at Prima Porta, which analyses this key work and also reflects on the origin of garden painting in Rome. The text is a magisterial analysis on the painting commissioned by the wife of Augustus for a semi-underground room. It transmits the rhythm of nature, but is a human artifice in which all the flowers bloom out of season at the same time. It is a beautiful reflection on nature and illusion; on the capacity of art to transcend time; on the meaning of painted gardens; and also on life and death, on how art can accompany us in death and allow us to remember the joys of life.

In the same section, Concepción Lopezosa interviews Mónica Luengo on the occasion of the candidature of the Paseo del Prado and the Buen Retiro for World Heritage status. It is the first time that a candidature has included the natural heritage in an urban context, thus integrating nature and human works to configure what has

been called the Cultural Landscape. An interdisciplinary team of specialists has been working on the project for some time. Its name, *Paisaje de la luz* (Landscape of Light), alludes both to the light of the Madrid sky and to the Enlightenment and reason; two focal points around which its spaces are arranged, resulting once more in a magnificent encounter of art and nature.



Figure 2.

Among the articles sent to our forum, we have included as always a range of time and place which takes us through multiple essays tackling subjects of great interest to our present theme: an analysis of the process by which art captures living nature. The articles include the following: a reflection by Asenjo Fernández on ‘ecosophy’, ‘ecosocial’ transformation and the connection between ecology and nature on the artistic scene in recent decades; an essay by Miguel Sánchez Moñita which deals with the cultural construction ecology; studies on the landscapes of the Argentinean Pampa; the Chinese landscape as a reflection of Taoist thought; the landscapes of the Basque Country and how they echo a nationalist identity; the landscapes that accompany Saint George’s dragon; and the most up-to-date reflections on the introduction of animals into works of art.

From Universidad Nacional de la Plata, Rocío Irene Sosa and Ana Magdalena Milomes propose contribute a study on artistic pieces that demonstrate the

environmental problems caused by mining; there is also a critical study on the plan to restore the Indian gardens of Rāy Pravīṇ Mahal in Orchha; a study on nature in the religious stained glass of Gaudí; and one on the transformation of gardens and landscapes as a consequence of the introduction of the sculptures of Picasso.

Thus, from one article to another, from the present to the past, and from the East to the West, through kaleidoscopic and at time conflicting approaches, we propose to continue with this necessary debate on the nature of art and the art of nature. And the goal is also that art may set aside its nature as the botany of death and transform itself into the botany of life.