

mumok  
Museum moderner Kunst  
Stiftung Ludwig Wien  
Museumsplatz 1, 1070 Wien

*Natural Histories*  
Exhibition dates  
September 23, 2017, to January 14,  
2018

Press conference  
September 22, 2017, 10 am

Opening  
September 22, 2017, 7 pm



Candida Höfer  
Zoologischer Garten Paris II, 1997  
Edition 3/6  
Farbfotografie  
26 x 37 cm  
Courtesy the artist  
© Bildrecht Wien, 2017

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## Natural Histories Traces of the Political

The exhibition *Natural Histories. Traces of the Political* explores representations of nature in reference to social processes and historical events. The works on show undermine both ideas of nature as a realm disconnected from history and the fiction of an unchanging, natural concept of history. Looking at various themes, they illustrate the mutual interrelations between nature and history beyond all romantic idealization of either. On three exhibition levels, the presentation spans a period from the 1960s to the present. It shows that art that takes a critical view of contemporary issues and systems, that refers to colonialism and its consequences, to totalitarian ideologies and military conflicts, and also to social transformation brought about by political system change is still highly relevant today.

### Nature as an Oppositional Field in the Neo-avant-garde

*Natural Histories* begins with neo-avant-garde works that include the dimension of a critique of history and society in their reflections on the conditions of artistic production and reception. Examples include works by Marcel Broodthaers, Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Mario Merz, Hélio Oiticica, and the artist groups Sigma from Romania and OHO from Slovenia. In his installation *Un jardin d'hiver II* (1974), Broodthaers uses exotic plants and animal motifs to refer to the bourgeois longing for distant and foreign lands and also their colonialist exploitation. In his action *I like America and America likes Me* (1974) Joseph Beuys uses a coyote—the symbolic animal of the indigenous American Indians—to refer to their violent colonialization. While Mario Merz critiques civilization using the motif of the igloo as a sign for nomadic ways of life close to nature, Hans Haacke's *Grass Cube* (1967) undermines the form of the imaginary sober and purpose-free minimalist cube to activate instead natural and physical processes as a way of countering a concept of art and society that is blind to reality.

Works that refer to nature by artists from Eastern Europe and Latin America also take a critical approach to contemporary society and systems. The Sigma group (Stefan Bertalan, Constantin Flondor, Roman Cotosman, Doru Tulcan, and others) was working during the increasingly repressive 1970s under the Ceaușescu regime in Romania, and their works used nature and science as the platforms for nonconformist art. In Yugoslavia under Tito, the OHO group (Marko Pogacnik, David Nez, Milenko Matanovic, Andraz Salamun, Nasko Krizna, Marjan Ciglic and others) drew on conceptual art and a retreat to rural nature to express their critique of the political ideology of progress and also the idea of a career in art. The global significance of nature as a political motif in the late 1960s is also seen in Hélio Oiticica's installation *Tropicália* (1968), which refers to the protest movement of the same name against the Brazilian military dictatorship at the time.

## **Nature in the Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts**

Representatives of the next generation of artists make use of traditions in the critique of colonialism and also the neo-avant-garde's critique of society and history, updating these for their own contemporary environments. A critical and analytical view of colonial and postcolonial history can be seen in works by Jonathas de Andrade, who addresses Brazilian plantation labor, and in works by Matthew Buckingham, Andrea Geyer, and Stan Douglas, who thematize the colonialization of the American continent. Mark Dion's installation about a fictitious ethnographer, Candida Höfer's photographs of zoos, Christian Philipp Müller's and Isa Melsheimer's references to the relationship between colonialization and the transfer of plants, and Margherita Spiluttini's photographs of exotic backdrop painting of the eighteenth century also all illuminate aspects of colonial history and its consequences today.

## **Natural Processes and Dynamics in History**

Works by Anri Sala, Ingeborg Strobl, Lois Weinberger, and Anca Benera and Arnold Estefan all address changes in or the transformation of public and historical places by natural processes. Nature grows back and over everything—and is thereby an indicator of historical dynamics. In *Arena* (2003), Sala shows the decay of the Tirana zoo as a consequence of and a metaphor for a broken social order. While works by Strobl and Weinberger witness processes of decay in rural and urban environments as the loss of significance of once working structures in crisis regions, Anca Benera and Arnold Estefan highlight the deliberate camouflage of former military facilities by means of artificial natural environments.

## **Genocide, Persecution, Flight, and Resistance**

Representations of nature are also features of works that address genocide in totalitarian systems and military conflicts. The history of Nazi terror and the Holocaust is considered in works by Heimrad Bäcker, Mirosław Bałka, Tatiana Lecomte, Ion Grigorescu, and Christian Kosmas Mayer. Mayer explores the history of the "Hitler oaks" that were given to winners at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, while Bałka, Lecomte, Grigorescu, and Bäcker focus on the victims and the landscapes, buildings, or remains of concentration camps as a way of pointing out the repression of history.

The exhibition presents further works that also deal with politically motivated violence, flight, or resistance. These include Christopher Williams's photo series *Angola to Vietnam* (1989), in which glass models of plants recall political murders, and Sandra Vitaljic's photos *Infertile Grounds* (2012), in which hidden natural places are revealed to be witnesses of military massacres. Sanja Iveković's reference to a refugee camp during the Balkan Wars in her work *Resnik* (1996) and works by Sven Johne, Alfredo Jaar, and Nikita Kadan are also relevant here. Johne's work explores social reality by means of a fictitious biography showing the fate of a man who fled former East Germany, while Jaar portrays Vietnamese boat people fleeing across the sea to Hong Kong during the Vietnam War, and Kadan takes a stance on the Ukrainian revolution of 2013 in Kiev. He presents a slide show of the provisional gardens as a natural reservoir for the people protesting in 2013 on Maidan square against Viktor Yanukovich, ex-president of Ukraine.

### **External Projects by Christian Philipp Müller and Mark Dion Associated with the Exhibition**

In *Drei-Schwestern-Korridor* Christian Philipp Müller explores the import of plants as an aspect of the appropriation of foreign culture and nature. His installation of vegetable plants and fruit trees of American origin was first created in 2006 for the monastery garden in Melk, where it has remained and been cultivated. For this exhibition, it will be restaged in Vienna's MuseumsQuartier. Plants that are now seen to be at home in Europe, such as the potato, the melon, maize, runner beans, the pumpkin, tobacco, paprika, courgette, and tomatoes were once the basic means of subsistence for the indigenous population of what was called the "new world." The European invaders first thought that some of these vegetables were decorative or poisonous plants, before they realized that they could be cultivated and eaten. The European mistrust, deprecation, and misuse of these plants is also a reflection of the invaders' corresponding perception, evaluation, and treatment of indigenous peoples. In *Drei-Schwestern-Korridor* Müller assumes the role of a researcher and historian whose universalist approach to social, cultural, and art history makes the embodiment of history in the form of contemporary art possible. His work raises awareness of processes of internalization, forgetting, and misunderstanding. Müller's work shows us that we are literally consuming foreign culture when we eat these fruits. Harvesting, cooking and eating the fruits in Müller's installation is an aspect of the work that links historical insight and memory directly to sensual and physical experience.

During the exhibition, Mark Dion is showing *The Tar Museum* in the nearby Vienna Natural History Museum. This work displays stuffed and tarred animals on transportation boxes, offering a picture of nature destroyed that also highlights a specific phenomenon of perception and repression. It is not only a critique of economics and ecological and environmental catastrophes that is at stake here, but also the fact that it is only the macabre black of the tar that makes us aware of death and the act of killing, and not the mere presentation of stuffed animals. Dion is especially interested in this aspect, as he raises our awareness of how we internalize and accept techniques in archiving and museum presentation that simulate life where death long reigns.

**We thank our media partners Der Standard, Falter, and Ö1. Realization of *Three Sisters Corridor* in cooperation with MuseumsQuartier and evn sammlung. Realization of *The Tar Museum* in cooperation with Vienna Natural History Musuem.**

**Symposium**

***Nature—Careful: History!***

Saturday, November 25, 2017, 2 to 7 pm

Entrance free

The exhibition *Natural Histories. Traces of the Political* will be accompanied by lectures and discussions on the historical and contemporary relevance of representations of nature. Nature will be discussed as a motif and mediator of history and politics beyond romantic and ahistorical perspectives.

Including the following participants: Noit Banai, Anca Benera und Arnold Estefan, Constantin Flondor, Maja Fowkes, Sanja Iveković, Sven Johnne, Nikita Kadan, Christian Kosmas Mayer, Tatiana Lecomte, Christian Philipp Müller, Ileana Pintilie, Margherita Spiluttini, Raluca Voinea, Christopher Williams

**Catalogue**

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with texts by Noit Banai, Maja Fowkes, Cristina Freire, Rainer Fuchs, Karola Kraus, Ileana Pintilie, and Raluca Voinea.

## Fact-Sheet

### Natural Histories. Traces of the Political

Exhibition dates	September 23, 2017 to January 14, 2018
Opening	September 22, 2017, 7 pm
Exhibition	mumok, MuseumsQuartier, Museumsplatz 1, 1070 Wien, levels 2, 3, 4
Curator	Rainer Fuchs
Exhibition production	Sibylle Reichmann
Catalogue	<i>Naturgeschichten. Spuren des Politischen / Natural Histories. Traces of the Political</i> With essays by Noit Banai, Maja Fowkes, Rainer Fuchs, Cristina Freire, Ileana Pintilie und Raluca Voinea 312 pages, 27,5 x 19,5 cm, Hardcover Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln German / English € 24,-
Opening hours	Monday: 2 to 7 pm, Tuesday through Sunday: 10am to 7 pm Thursday: 10 am to 9 pm
Admission	Normal € 11,-, reduced € 8,50 bzw. € 7,50
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