

Mutual Adaption

Rasmus Kleine in conversation with Chris Bierl

You received the Kallmann Prize in the "Animal" category and consequently bring live animals into the museum, which is comparatively unusual in the context of contemporary exhibitions. How did you come up with the idea of working with praying mantises?

There are many different ways to artistically engage with animals: I can work with specimens, I can sculpt animals, I can draw, photograph, or film them, translating and conveying them through media. However, I was interested in integrating an unpredictable element into my art, relinquishing control to some extent as an artist. For me, it's less about creating a work for eternity and more about creating one that evolves and changes within an exhibition. This idea, essentially subverting the principle of the "genius" artist, was a decisive step towards working with animals. However, even before working with animals, I had already worked with materials that change during an exhibition, adopting a new state of matter, transitioning into a different structure, acquiring a different appearance. Chance plays a role in this, even though it is planned chance. The work is preceded by experiments in the studio, allowing me to estimate how a material will behave over several weeks, but I still cannot fully control it. These are facets that I was able to pursue in collaboration with animals. In 2012, in "OrganicMatterBiosphere," I first used an animal as an image for a living being that could have existed in a fossilized vegetation because mantises are animals that are millions of years old. With their plant mimicry, they appear as hybrid beings between animal and plant. That fascinated me because I recognized significant potential for my further artistic work in it.

Did you never have concerns about using animals as artistic material to achieve a certain result?

The animal is much more to me than a mere object or material. The mantises have become accomplices over time, further developing my work even when I am no longer present. I establish a relationship with them in which I perceive them as beings with their own character. This creates a space for reflection. Both as an artist and as a viewer, I have to reflect on my relationship with the animal before me in the exhibition. Do I feel disgust, affection, curiosity? What do I recognize in the animal? Do I perhaps recognize myself? Or not at all? When we ask ourselves such questions, it reveals a lot about our relationship with animals. Is what I'm doing animal cruelty, or are the animals doing well? Are they being used? Or are they free? Do I view them as beings that must be respected as individuals, or are they beings I can casually crush with my sneaker? With a mantis, such a delicate but graceful being, the threshold is very high, unlike with a mosquito. We're not talking about large mammals here, but insects. However, they are insects that I can make eye contact with, and they observe me. I have often heard from people who have cared for these works or seen them in exhibitions that it has changed their relationship with insects. So, a successful process of transformation has taken place, not only in the work itself but also in people.

In your work, you provide animals with habitats, including terrariums where they sit on natural branches, and monochrome canvases that appear highly artificial. What does it mean to place a mantis on a picture hanging on the wall in a museum, which has practically nothing to do with its natural habitat, even if it may resemble it in color?

Even though I use real branches in the terrariums, these small enclosed worlds have practically nothing to do with the natural habitat of a mantis. I was interested in the question of how I could combine what the animals need with maximum aesthetic reduction. So, I gradually reduced the habitat as much as possible while still feeling that the animals have everything they need to live. In this consideration, the question arises of what is essential for the animal. I observed that mantises are ambush predators that move very little. Their natural habitat is limited to requiring a certain

climate in which they feel comfortable and, of course, food. As long as there is food, they are undemanding and move very little. These were the essential factors. Therefore, I was able to continually reduce the space and coloration and align it with the reduced visual language that I have always pursued. My understanding of landscape is influenced by early Japanese ink paintings, in which, for example, a single bamboo stalk represents the entire landscape around it. When I presented my work at a lecture in Japan, many visitors were reminded of Ikebana, which is also not an opulent flower arrangement but rather aesthetically reduced. For me, it was then a logical step to "Anime," where monochrome canvases represent an even more radical reduction of habitat. My personal experience also played a role because landscapes I explore primarily remain as color impressions in my memory and less as details or forms.

You mentioned that mantises evoke reactions such as disgust, curiosity, or affection in viewers, thus triggering emotions. In your installations, you also use additional materials that instinctively evoke a response and have significance for us. These include so-called "dirty" or "poor" materials like sulfur, oil, or earth, which you present in a very clean and pure form.

I like to use materials that have the inherent capacity to change their state and form connections—and that stand for something. For example, oil always has a political dimension, even though I don't consider myself a politically motivated artist. During the research preceding my works, I repeatedly come across aspects that particularly interest me, things that are interconnected, additional sources, names, biographies, scientific discoveries that reveal new connections. I try to relate these aspects to each other like mental hyperlinks that I didn't know before and find images that represent them.

While working on "OrganicMatterBiosphere," for example, I read about geological processes and the formation of crude oil and discovered that comparable processes can be observed in the Black Sea. I wanted to incorporate these considerations into a work

but not depict them directly in a photograph, for instance. Instead, I took water from the Black Sea, presented it on a bed of oil sand, which might say just as much about the situation there that interests me. The question also arises regarding the oil in the same work: What does it represent? What associations resonate with it? What does it convey to me? These materials can trigger thought processes and establish connections that may be entirely different for the viewers than for me.

"OrganicMatterBiosphere" also includes two burned magpies, which remind me of deceased animals after an oil spill in the sea. What is the significance behind them?

I obtained the birds from a museum where they were part of a temporary work related to Martin Luther. They referred to the church practice of selling magpie ash as a remedy for epilepsy. However, this background is not essential for my work at first and is not communicated to the viewers. Instead, I am more concerned with the idea of a destroyed, exploited, and literally burnt earth. It is a Vanitas motif that directly brings death into my work.

You also display dead birds, but in a completely different form, in the video "Conference of the Birds." With this work, you refer to a famous Persian poem from the 12th century. What is it about?

The poem by Fariduddin Attar is an impressive allegory for the path of knowledge. It begins with the realization of the hoopoe bird that all animals have a ruler except for the birds. Therefore, in his opinion, the birds should also search for such a ruler. He calls a great conference and urges the participants to embark on the arduous journey to find the king bird, the Simurgh. However, the other birds are initially skeptical, each presenting detailed arguments about why it is a good idea in theory but they cannot undertake the journey themselves because they are preoccupied with other matters. The clever hoopoe exposes these excuses, and ultimately, the birds set out on the quest. They must cross seven valleys, each filled with many challenging trials, which most birds do

not pass. In the end, only thirty exhausted birds remain. They feel that they have finally found their ruler. However, they are rejected at their destination and are deeply disappointed. Yet, in their disappointment, they eventually realize that they themselves are the king, that the king has always been among them, but they could not recognize it. I find this allegory very relevant because, in essence, we already know what we should do and how we should act collectively to solve the problems of humanity, but we continuously find excuses not to do so.

You filmed the "Conference of the Birds" in a natural history museum, where birds are preserved, examined, and researched. In your spatial installations, on the other hand, you create laboratory-like situations with hoses, vials, and other materials, suggesting that something is also being studied there. It seems to me that the theme of knowledge, the question of how we approach nature to understand it, plays an important role in your work.

Originally, I studied a natural science discipline, which certainly influenced my artistic work, although it is not scientific in nature. I work more in the realm of pseudoscience or speculative science. In my pseudo-laboratory, it is about pretending, raising the question for the viewers whether something is genuinely being studied or if it is an illusion. Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that it is not a functional experimental setup. It also touches upon credibility, truth, and concepts that are currently heavily debated in the era of conspiracy theories, which are not a new phenomenon but are currently very present. During my research, I came across writings discussing scientific categorizations in different eras and decades. For a period, pseudoscience was a relevant category because its unscientifically explored questions could eventually lead to them being studied in the realm of science. However, it was later removed because it does not adhere to scientific methods.

Let's move on to another medium that naturally plays a role in science but that you have only recently started using more: photography. In the first room of the exhibition, there are three

large views of the area around the Russian city of Karabash, where copper production has had devastating consequences for the environment. How did you decide to show photographs here instead of materials from the region?

I avoided photography for a long time because it presents a very direct image, and I wanted to create something more abstract from a pool of materials that allows for various links and interpretations, as described earlier. Lately, I have been traveling a lot because traveling offers me a new experiential space. As a result, I have been taking more photographs, and it has been beneficial for me to develop my ideas not only from the studio. Through photography, I can collect images and capture impressions. However, on the photographs, I have found many elements that have always interested me in my installations, such as landscapes of the Anthropocene where natural resources are extracted. By juxtaposing my abstract arrangements with the imagery of photographs, new cross-references emerge, emphasizing certain aspects differently and redirecting the viewers' attention in a new direction. It is not about whether the image was taken in Russia or elsewhere but rather about the practice of resource extraction today.

However, you haven't only photographed landscapes heavily influenced by human activity, but you have also ventured into untouched nature, where you hike and try to be as far away from civilization as possible. This has resulted in a photographic series showcasing pristine landscapes, rocks, and rock formations. What does this journey mean to you?

I search for places where I am less exposed to human influence. It's about boundary experiences that make me feel incredibly alive. Nowadays, achieving this requires significant efforts. In Europe, it is best achieved in the Nordic sparsely populated landscapes, where one can march for days without encountering another human being or even animals. In these areas, outside of the comfort zone, one realizes how little is needed and how refreshing it is not to receive information from the outside and to trust one's own instincts. There,

one only needs to do what nature dictates. When traveling through such a landscape, questions arise over time about what one perceives as animate or soulful. One might expect to encounter animals in these places, as their tracks are constantly visible, but actual encounters are rare. However, the animate, the essence, can also be discovered, for example, in stones. For some reason, certain stones catch one's eye, appearing exceptionally beautiful or as if they were placed right at one's feet. A special connection develops with such stones that exude a certain aura. They provide a sense of orientation in this inhospitable environment, as if guiding the way. Of course, the stones are indifferent to my presence or absence, but it matters to me that they are there. In Norway and Iceland, I have, in a way, traversed different geological eras, walking through history. One can see traces of things that were still under glaciers 60 years ago. This creates a geological experiential space that instills a completely different awe for nature.

For the exhibition, you had a sound composition created specifically, which captures essential aspects of this experience in the landscape.

In collaboration with Francesco Previtali, also known as derderder, my aim was to make the sensations I experienced while traversing the Breheimen Mountains tangible through sound. When all the sounds of civilization fade away, the perception of the sounds in this barren landscape becomes intensified. Silence is no longer just silence but roaring noise when one listens to the wind or the clattering of breaking rocks carried by the wind from another valley. At times, however, one actually hears nothing, but it is felt as a bass resonating within the body, as if the rock itself is resonating from the inside and penetrating your own body directly. I perceive the sound in the exhibition less as music but more as sonic spaces that evoke phenomena of nature without being representational. They are open, just like the materials in my installations.

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