

Werethings

curated by Mihnea Mircan

Opening November 22, 18 - 21 h

November 22, 2019 – February 22, 2020

Tuesday – Saturday, 12 – 18 h

Potsdamer Strasse 77 – 87, 10785 Berlin

For the German translation, please scroll down.

Galeria Plan B is pleased to announce the group exhibition *Werethings* curated by Mihnea Mircan with works of Raymond Barion, Becky Beasley, Camille Blatrix, Patricia L. Boyd, Sarah Browne, Erik Bünger, Lauren Burrow, Alex Impey, Ana Maria Gomez Lopez, Victor Man, Nicholas Mangan, Jacqueline Mesmaeker, Simon Dybbroe Møller, Ana Prvački, Mladen Stilinović, James Williamson and Ran Zhang to open on Friday, the 22nd of November 2019.

In his 1996 essay *Vogel's Net*, the anthropologist Alfred Gell proposed that animal traps can be thought of as functional artworks and vice versa, that there is an operational similarity between traps apprehending their prey and the capture of attention in artworks. Both types of mechanisms intertwine environments, perspectives and intentions: traps and artworks rearrange, in the form of a weapon or in that of a question, perceptual or technological thresholds between worlds, or ways of being in worlds, boundaries that are turned into lures, snares or meandering interpretive pathways. While it does not focus on works explicitly preoccupied with the forms, signs or mechanics of trapping or on artistic projects that explore the posterity of the essay in conversations about the post-Duchampian canon and indigenous artefacts, this exhibition revisits Gell's argument through a series of oblique takes on capture and entanglement, that reproduce the sway between potential energy and kinetic burst that unites the hunter's design and the prey's demise, between the concealment of the trap and the moment it reveals itself by springing shut. *Werethings* brings together works that inhabit spaces between species and *modi operandi*, ways of form- and sense-making, the visual and symbolic agency of 'promiscuous' objects, Gell's word for artefacts that move freely between transactional domains to activate an indefinite range of potentials. The exhibition thinks about things that draw and detain our thinking and make thinking accessible or imaginable as a kind of thing, things that do things and thus borrow the traits of personhood or usurp the prerogatives of the self, about relations between things that *were* and might return, futures and pasts, extinctions and emergences, about werethings that mutate, veer and swirl in much the same way that medieval werewolves and other metamorphic beasts transgressed the formal and moral frontiers of the monstrous.

"Every work of art that works is like this, a trap or a snare that impedes passage, and what is any art gallery but a place of capture, set with what Boyer calls 'thought-traps', which hold their victims for a time, in suspension?". Subtitled *Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*, Alfred Gell's¹ essay consists of three 'acts', the first of which is an analysis of the exhibition *ART/ARTIFACT*, curated by the anthropologist Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art, New York, in 1988, meshed with a polemic response to the catalogue essay penned by Arthur Danto. A series of examples culled from a variety of anthropological sources and Gell's own fieldwork frame a remarkable examination of the ways in which traps form at – and perhaps as – the intersection of the world of the hunter and that of the prey, as their deadly tangle. Finally, works by Marcel

¹ Alfred Gell (1945-1997) taught anthropology at the London School of Economics and was a Fellow of the British Academy. His books include *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries*, *The Anthropology of Time*, *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* and the celebrated *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, where he discusses the agency of visual artefacts in relation to the enchantment of technology and technologies of enchantment, social scenarios in which objects take on a particular kind of agency, an interiority akin to personhood. The anthology *The Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams*, which included the essay *Vogel's Net*, was published posthumously in 1999.

Duchamp, Judith Horn and Damien Hirst illustrate the trajectories via which Gell's thinking on trapping and its combative bent may be extrapolated to the analysis of artworks, illuminate their conceptual and material operations: the casting of diaphanous speculative nets, the unfurling of painterly or algorithmic grids, symbolic decoys and allegorical ruses. Seen from the perspective of the trap, the artwork articulates ambush, prehension, reverie and release.²

A hunting net, rolled and placed on a pedestal by the curator of the 1988 exhibition, unfolds slowly into the latticed, ramifying form of an argument about the internal armature of the artworks and its tentacular expansion into the world. Gell sets out to assemble a textual exhibition of diagrams and descriptions from anthropological literature, aiming to outline a new category of objects, squarely placed between the ethnographic exhibit and the display of the contemporary art gallery. An anecdote recounted by anthropologist Pascal Boyer, about the difference between the different traps Pygmies make for chimpanzees and antelopes, the former taking advantage of the primate's playful curiosity, the latter of the force the animal, sets into motion a reflection on traps as signs in suspension, that seek to escape notice and are legible only in the mind of their author and in the fate of their victims, on snares as static violence, a congealed malevolence that prosthetically extends and sustains the hunter's vigilance. In Gell's conceptualization, the trap appears as a working model of personhood, capable of producing action-at-a-distance, like a subsidiary self or automaton. Adam Jasper writes, following Gell, that "the arrow trap in the forest, with its tensed bow and arrow delicately held by a tripwire, is a physical manifestation of the hunter's will, more dedicated in its unpausing anticipation of prey than any human could be. The trap is therefore a more faithful representation of the hunter than any figurative statue, for with the tripwire as nervous system and the bent bow as muscle, it is a functioning robot, crystallized intent."

Yet traps also incorporate the animal's world: they are mimetic of the appetites and reflexes on their intended target. Gell calls this subversion of parameters in the prey's behavior a "lethal parody of the animal's Umwelt" – a mouse trap, for instance, will take advantage of the rodent's propensity to burrow. Thus the trap is the site of a dual, reversed mimesis: a copy of two absent figures in inimical relation, profiled against a copy of the ground (the trap is camouflaged, is 'not there'). This dialectical compression of perceptual worlds and intentionalities that become superposed or enmeshed in the trap reads like a collage of perspectives, of what the 'interlocutors' of hunting see, a cut through different temporalities. Yet this is also as a scene of synchronization, a scenario where absent protagonists are aligned in time and space, at the intersection of effort to produce or eschew an outcome, of predetermination and avoidance. It is at this point that Gell's heuristic snare latches on to the transactions between artist and viewer, aligned in mechanisms that produce images and counter-images, propositions and counter-arguments in the experience of art.

Being captivated might be to do with something that has not yet fully revealed itself, a 'premature' affect, a vivacious anticipation, but also – simultaneously – with a belatedness, with it being too late to disentangle oneself from the critical and sensuous effects of having encountered the work: too late to flee the springing shut of its symbolic devices, the closure of the cage, its 'yet-at-the-same-time's and its 'on-the-other-hand's. The trap's prosthetic articulation of selves, species and environments corresponds to art's assemblage of framing devices and fragmentary vistas, of functions that contradict and undo the very notion of function (just as traps have to vanish in order to work), of expectations and intensities, protraction and acceleration, stillness and vertigo. Images not encompassed by a single explanation, enriched rather than exhausted by being decrypted, and never interpreted without remainder – artworks exist as residues of complex intentionalities, lattices of words woven to contain or hold together the simultaneity of a thing's existence and non-existence, as compositions of and separations into theoretically incompatible parts.

The levitating monochromatic rectangle in Becky Beasley's work, titled *Trap II* and suggesting that it might crush the small animal that would seek refuge underneath it, reads like 'Suprematism in the wrong place' – a Modernist emblem in an utilitarian, horizontal position, as opposed to a symbol of vertical élan. Another idiosyncratic black square responds to it, a trap of dark absence filling the screen halfway through James Williamson's film *The Big Swallow*. Made in 1901, at the threshold between views (and anxieties) of the soul and the machine, this prophetic

² Mariana Castillo Deball's remarkable project on – among other questions and references – Gell's idea of the trap, including a plaster replica of the Central African net that was the central image of his essay, bore the title *What we caught we threw away, what we didn't catch we kept*. It was presented in 2013 at CCA Glasgow and Chisenhale Gallery.

film is literally and metaphorically cut in half by the moment when its disgruntled protagonist, refusing to be filmed, swallows camera and operator. The film then continues, in the emphatic absence of its technical conditions of possibility, as an incursion into an anxious a-visibility, as a detour through an abyss. Raymond Barion's *Projector* visualizes the gargantuan apparatus that could re-scale and beam such non-images into a social auditorium, as political control through projection rather than surveillance, as a panopticon that emits, rather than collect, information, and bombards with images rather than retrieve them: as power enacted as intensification and overstimulation.

Simon Dybbroe Møller's film *Cormorant* switches between media and regimes of representation, with the cormorant – on whose reptilian gracelessness and evolutionary inadequacy the introduction comments – as intercessor. The bird dries its wings in the breeze after an incursion in search of prey, as unlike other aquatic birds it has not developed the gland that would produce an oily water repellent and protect its open-structure feathers from getting soaked. The cormorant's phylogenetic jetlag sets into motion a drift through a range of aqueous associations and moist scenes, vagaries of saturation and absorbency, fluid transmissions between screens and stains, traces of analogic impregnation and digital melting, secretions and gels that lubricate the relation between figures of speech, imprints and their referents. The artist's other work in the show, *Maison de Regret*, functions between the tradition of the trompe l'oeil and a kind of deadpan symbolism (per critic Paul Pontprofond), suggesting both the notion of painting as window towards a metaphorical elsewhere, and that of a freeze frame in real time, a literalized diorama of a prosaic outside – the image of a sudden gust of wind lifting whirls of detritus. A different range of oscillations animate a series of works by Alex Impey, articulating metaphorically an extended metabolism of forms, resemblances and spectres, organs, joints and secretions that suggest both the evisceration of a sacrificial animal and the fabrication of a technological Golem, a conjuring of and the apotropaic protection from the arrival of a future entity. Impey's arrays of limbs and ribs, automobile air ducts and vents, divinatory livers and mechanical lungs that purify and air-condition, demarcates a space for a reflection on magic and technology, each functioning as the other's limit. If in divination the order of the world is intuited in a heap of organs, and *monstra* point to *astra*, here everted entrails, machinic viscera and electroformed skins are articulated as dismemberment and interlock as a ruptured microcosm, rather than as a code for the correspondences between a body and its world.

Sarah Browne's *Report to an Academy* draws on the well-known story of the same title, exploring the contemporary academic environment as a neoliberal workplace, tension and emancipation: whereas in Kafka's story, an ape delivers an address on his transition into human life, the video features an octopus who speaks of her motivation to escape and transform herself from human material in search of new forms of articulacy and agility. A cross-species hybrid narrates her biography and extricates herself from an institutional trap. The pretext for Lauren Burrow's *Nuisance Flows* is the scientific study of the effect of anti-depressants on fish, whose environments have become subject to pharmaceutical pollution. As increasing quantities of anxiolytics are evacuated through wastewater into marine ecosystems, these pollutants are absorbed by fish, resulting in a reduction of predator-avoidance behavior, in passivity and vulnerability. To visualize the image of "an anonymous public body that interfaces with a body of water" (Helen Hughes) and its creatures, pieces of shattered tempered glass are arranged into the logos of the pharmaceutical companies that market anti-depressants. The logos appear liquefied and crystallized or hardened, as images pulverized and re-formed as a visual equivalent for the passage of nootropic substances between bodies and biotopes, between different states of environmental inadequacy or adaptation, epidemics of depression or passivity. Another image of multispecies entanglement appears in Nicholas Mangan's *Neural Nest*, part of the long-term project *Termite Economies*. The sculpture conflates a brain scan and a sample from a termite nest. Studied as a biomimetic 'mentor' or companion species, termites are believed capable to generate complex solutions of spatial and 'managerial' organization, to enact novel forms of collective intelligence that new industrialisms can learn from or adopt. Mangan notes that while termite mounds are made of dirt and the insect's saliva, and could therefore be understood as stomachs, they are also highly receptive structures and conscious of their environments. Integrating ventilation and temperature regulation, the mounds arise out of complex systems of task distribution, communication and command, as burrowing circumvolutions that approximate the image of a collective brain, of the eusocial structures of the swarm, which contemporary design aims to coopt as model for imagining wireless communication systems, for perfecting distributed

systems or informing the ways in which neural machines deep-learn.

Jacqueline Mesmaeker's *The Androgyne* is composed of two parts: facing one another, they mark the sightlines of the work's invisible protagonists, a ship in distress and a landing plane, trying to establish coordinates of altitude and direction against an ominous sky. A photograph of a painting of a tempestuous sea and a detail thereof, installed at different heights on opposite walls, suggest that sea- and air-borne navigators face one another through a screen of obscurity, carrying or acting out two complementary and reciprocally oblivious views of the same blurred horizon line. Between their perspectives, diminished by clouds that cover both sun and earth, we – as viewers – function as mobile hinges, as points of articulation in a 'complete picture' that would conjoin these halved visibilities. Pain has been a theme for a series of works by Mladen Stillinović, such as his *Dictionary of Pain* (2000-2003), where definitions of all words are painted over in tempera and replaced with 'Pain', so that the whole of the dictionary is reversed into a delayed, grueling definition, or a game for one player throwing a die that has the word 'pain' written on all sides, rehearsing an agonizing repetitiveness. In the *Buried Pain* photographs, three mattresses, acquiring contextually a solemn monolithic quality paired with the connotations of privacy and rest, are inscribed with the word 'Pain' and interred. In the last image, planks of wood bearing the same word are installed to mark the three graves, suggesting the corruption and inescapability of language like a tightening noose, its tortured use during politically oppressive times. Victor Man's *The Chandler* extends this circular movement by adjusting the relation between portrayed bodies and pictorial fields: we could assume that what is beheaded by the upper edge of the canvas is recuperated at the center of painting, that painting paints what eludes its own imposed rules, much in the same way that allegory persists in doing what it has established it cannot do. The cropped image of a woman has become the image of a cropped woman (Joanna Fiduccia). Read as superpositions of anatomy and abstraction, of vivisection and re-placement, the modes of assembly in *The Chandler* are not meant to mend metaphorically a shattered relation, to soothe the shock of amputation. Returning the head to the headless model is not a symbolic reparation, but a multi-perspectival geometry, made of acts of painting, cuts across strange spaces and immeasurable distances. As opposed to falling into place to the sheltering lap from its former abode, the beheaded head arrived at its current position via an alienating, inhuman drift.

The question of the cut recurs in three works, by Patricia L. Boyd, from an ongoing series of casts that reproduce in negative form parts of an office chair, de-constructing and reversing its ergonomics, everting it into an aberrant anatomy. The Aeron chair was marketed by Herman Miller, the influential furniture manufacturer also credited with the invention of the office cubicle, associated with the "dot-com bubble" that occurred in the US from 1995-2000. Marketed for its ergonomic properties, it was a fetish of sorts for a then-growing self-tasked cognitive workforce, attesting to a disciplining of the body in a bid to prolong time spent at work with computers and increase productivity. Boyd acquired this chair from a liquidation auction of a company undergoing intensive restructuring. The casts are made with grease purchased from a refinery that source their raw material from the oil vats of restaurants across the greater San Francisco area. This material, at a point of stasis – before it is cleaned, refined, and re-sold as fuel for cars – is both the result of waste processes and a source of potential energy. The artist describes these negatives of the original objects as, also, negatives set with the gallery wall, dependent on a physical and logistical architecture. They manifest a vitality that is beyond exhaustion, a half-life of discomposed things and spent materials, their left-over energies enmeshed, residue tangled with residue into an equivalent of presence. Ana Maria Gomez Lopez's *Punctum* involves the creation of a living aperture: an incision from which to transfer blood outside the body via an artificial extracorporeal circuit. It is inspired in part by German surgeon Werner Forßman's pioneering self-experiment in cardiac catheterization: in 1929, Forßman inserted a urinary catheter into a vein in his left arm, driving this thin tube all the way to the right atrium of his heart. Rather than tracing blood vessels from within, *Punctum* proposes a mirroring structure of synthetic conduits for the circulation of blood outwards: visual approximations of self-transfusion, simulations of point-to-point cannulations in different parts of my body using hypodermic syringes, extension tubes, and valve fixtures. These alternative anatomical configurations present the vascular system "inside out" – an inverted and disembodied depiction of the internal circulatory architecture.

The last cluster of works in the show operates between media and scales, switches between proximities and distances. Erik Büniger's video *The Girl Who Never Was* takes as point of departure the discovery, in 2008, of "the first recorded voice ever": the 148-year old voice of a little girl singing the lullaby *Au clair de la lune*. One year later, another researcher experimented with the

playback speed and determined that the recorded voice was in fact that of an adult man. This same lullaby is sung by the computer HAL 9000 in the French version of Stanley Kubrick's *2001 - A Space Odyssey*. That inhuman tone performs precisely the same glissando as the voice of the non-existent girl: a high-strung, persevering voice is gradually slowed down into a deep, sleepy intonation. The film takes a detour through history, pursuing the voice of a child as it echoes forwards and backwards through time. Camille Blatrix's sculptures present themselves as artifacts from a near future, emulating the forms of everyday objects while obscuring their own purpose. Machine-like in their appearance, the surfaces disguise the artist's labor, as each is a combination of elements industrially fabricated and meticulously handcrafted with a variety of traditional techniques. Ana Prvački presents three episodes from *Detour*, a project made in collaboration with the De Young, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Google Arts & Culture. *Detour* is a series of vignettes that activate different, slanted, unusual perspectives onto museum space, and reimagine the environment of the museum as a site of unprogrammed experiences and encounters, metaphorical and actual pollination, intimacies between works sited at different positions or within different histories that the museum accommodates, exploring how 'life' might be stifled and displayed, domesticated, transcribed or simulated in the museum. Ran Zhang is preoccupied in her practice with the visual debris that photography needs to eliminate, edit, clean or elide in order to produce a desirable image. Something like visual lint, fleeces of appearance, or the shed skin of pictures accumulates in her work into the opulent, abstractly baroque still lives. *Chiral* looks at the differences between regular and microscopic proportions, magnifying dust and information that is not available to the unaided senses, into images of vaguely repellent surplus that are in fact more faithful copies of reality. Microscopic photography recurs in the series *Natritine Gaze*, which mixes inkjet printing, CMYK silkscreen printing and painting on paper to balance out simultaneous processes of seeing and understanding, the recognition of the subjects and the awareness of the physicality of an image, aiming to find a position where these lose their strict significance and consolidate as a flickering, subjective image, as an event coproduced by similitude and difference, occurring in a mind alike and alien.

Mihnea Mircan

For more information, please contact the gallery at contact@plan-b.ro and +49.30.39805236.

German translation:

Die Galeria Plan B freut sich, die Eröffnung der von Mihnea Mircan kuratierten Gruppenausstellung *Werethings* am 22. November 2019 ankündigen zu dürfen. Gezeigt werden Arbeiten von Raymond Barion, Becky Beasley, Camille Blatrix, Patricia L. Boyd, Sarah Browne, Erik Bünger, Lauren Burrow, Alex Impey, Ana Maria Gomez Lopez, Victor Man, Nicholas Mangan, Jacqueline Mesmaeker, Simon Dybbroe Møller, Ana Prvacki, Mladen Stilinovic, James Williamson und Ran Zhang.

„In seinem Essay *Vogel's Net* aus dem Jahr 1996 entwickelte der Anthropologe Alfred Gell den Gedanken, dass Tierfallen als funktionale Kunstwerke angesehen werden können (und vice versa). Es bestehe eine operationale Ähnlichkeit zwischen Fallen, die ihre Beute in Beschlag nehmen, und Kunstwerken mit ihrer spezifischen Art und Weise, die Aufmerksamkeit auf sich lenken. Beide Arten von Mechanismen haben die Eigenschaft, die Umwelt, Perspektiven und Intentionen miteinander zu verflechten: Fallen und Kunstwerke verändern – in Gestalt einer Waffe oder einer Frage – wahrnehmungsspezifische und technologische Grenzziehungen zwischen Welten oder Daseinsformen in Welten. Grenzen werden zu Ködern, Fallstricken oder mäandernden Pfaden der Interpretation. Diese Ausstellung richtet ihren Fokus nicht auf Arbeiten, die sich explizit mit Formen, Zeichen oder dem Mechanismus des Fallenstellens beschäftigen oder auf künstlerische Projekte, die etwas über die Konvention des Essays anhand einer Auseinandersetzung mit dem post-duchampschen Kanon und mit indigenen Artefakten in Erfahrung bringen wollen. Vielmehr wird Gell's Argument in Form einer Serie undurchsichtiger Ansätze zum Thema Beutenahme und Verstrickung aufgegriffen, die die Wechselwirkung zwischen potentieller Energie und dem kinetischem Ausbruch, der das Design des

Jagdgegenstandes und das Sterben der Beute miteinander in Bezug setzt. Dieser Einfluss wird zwischen der Verborgenheit der Falle und dem Moment wirksam, in dem sie sich offenbart, indem sie federnd zuschnappt. In *Werethings* werden Arbeiten zusammengeführt, die zwischen verschiedenen Gattungen und Modi Operandi angesiedelt sind, die vielfältige Arten des Gestaltens und der Sinnproduktion, der visuelle und symbolische Handlungsspielraum von ‚promiskuitiven‘ Objekten – Gell’s Bezeichnung für Artefakte, die sich ungehemmt zwischen transnationalen Feldern bewegen, um eine unbegrenzte Bandbreite an Potentialen freizusetzen. Diese Ausstellung stellt eine Auseinandersetzung mit Dingen dar, die unsere Gedanken lenken und sie einhegen, und die das Denken zugänglich oder vorstellbar machen als eine Art Ding. Derartige Dinge machen Dinge und eignen sich somit einen Wesenszug des Menschseins an bzw. nehmen die Vorrechte des Selbst für sich in Anspruch. Es findet eine Beschäftigung mit den Beziehungen zwischen Dingen statt, die einmal da waren und die vielleicht wiederkehren, mit Zukünften und Vergangenheiten, mit dem Verschwinden und der Emergenz, mit einem Etwas, das mutiert, das ausschert und herumwirbelt und das – gleich mittelalterlichen Werwölfen und anderen metamorphen Bestien – die moralischen Grenzen zum Monströsen überschreitet.

(...) Das Gefangen-Sein könnte eine Verbindung zu etwas aufweisen, das sich noch nicht vollständig offenbart hat, zu einem ‚unreifen‘ Affekt, einer lebhaften Vorahnung, sowie – zugleich – zu einem Verspätet-Sein, dazu, zu spät dran zu sein, um sich noch selbst aus den bedenklichen und sinnlichen Folgen der Begegnung mit dem Werk befreien zu können: zu spät, um dem federnden Zuschnappen von dessen symbolischen Instrumenten zu entkommen, dem Abschließen des Käfigs, dessen ‚Jedoch-Zugleich‘ und dessen ‚Andererseits‘. Die prothetischen Erweiterungen der Ichs, der Spezies und der Umwelten, die der Falle eigen sind, korrespondieren mit der Gesamtheit der Apparatschaften, die in der Kunst für die Rahmung verwendet werden, mit den fragmentierten Perspektiven in der Kunst, mit den Funktionen, die zur Idee von der Funktion an sich im Widerspruch stehen (so wie auch Fallen verschwinden müssen, um ihren Zweck zu erfüllen), mit den Erwartungen und Intensitäten, der Verzögerung und Beschleunigung, der Stille und dem Schwindel. Bilder, die nicht durch eine einzige Erklärung erfassbar sind, die durch ihre Dechiffrierung eher bereichert denn erschöpft werden, und bei denen stets ein Rudiment bleibt, wenn sie interpretiert werden – Kunstwerke sind Residuen komplexer Intentionen, Netzwerke aus Wörtern, gesponnen, um die Simultanität der Existenz und Nicht-Existenz einer Sache in sich zu vereinen und zusammenzuhalten, als Kompositionen aus und Unterteilungen in theoretisch inkompatible Teile.“

Fragmente aus Mihnea Mircans Begleittext zur Ausstellung