

The slow and invisible

”The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space) [...] We don’t displace our being into theirs; they step into our life”

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project (Das Passagenwerk, 1827-1940)*

Markus Mai’s artistic work focuses on the representations and encounters between nature and civilization. His practice discusses primarily a subjective relationship to the processes of life containing both logic and disorder.

Mai’s work is built around a far-reaching and wayward research process based in the intensive discovery of Berlin as a young graffiti writer who created an ever more intimate relationship with the city. The city became both the starting point and the presence, life and darkness – a place he could own entirely or feel completely estranged in. By writing his name on the city walls, he experienced the city in a deeply physical manner. Through a self-created system of codes and symbols perfected after years, days and hours of exploration and urban writing, Mai owned the city in such a way that Berlin belonged to no one else but himself, and thus became an augmented place. Markus Mai recreated it again and again. The city had thousands of layers.

While experimenting with graffiti as a form of expression, Markus Mai began to explore a new stylistic direction in which nature became a new source of investigation. The forest bore a likeness to the act of writing, as in the graffiti lines and shapes he had already mastered on the city walls. Mai transferred the writing onto nature, where letters took shape in installations made with whatever material at hand. And yet, there was a resistance in the forest which Mai could not fend off nor evade. Nature was not as easy to handle as the city as he initially thought. In contrast to the city, nature is uncontrollable. In the city, people continuously prune and polish building façades and sculptures from natural erosion, and, without maintenance, it becomes subjected to nature’s inevitable takeover. As such, the city is a façade that allows humans to believe that nature is something that happens elsewhere. The city wants to keep nature under control.

As in the city, there is a rhythm in nature that affects people. Mai strives to make this visible by creating encounters and finding different ways of approaching and collecting knowledge. In the installation *Can Spirits Write?* (2008), Mai hangs twenty six blank notebooks at various locations in and around Berlin for the duration of twelve to fourteen months. The books are empty from inscriptions and thus submitted for a possible encounter with nature. Instead of written words, worms and snails leave their traces like topological maps on the book’s empty pages. Mai surrenders his work to nature’s definitions of what a meeting and what language can be.

Mai finds connections and discovers materials that witness natural processes in several locations – ‘things’ that carry something beyond their materiality. In *The Lowly* (2013) and *Stumpfer Humor und gute Absichten* (2011), randomly found objects are categorized in two different systems whose presentation, however, is conceptually alike. In both works, the ‘things’ have been affected by something external to them as well as shaped by nature’s wear and tear. Is it nature the eye perceives? In some instances, it is the artist himself who interferes and transforms the ‘things.’ In other cases, they are the exhausted remains of the civilized world. Either way, the different ‘things’ are systematized into a new order, resulting in an equality of things among things. The collection, originating in both civilization and nature, as well as nature-like places in the urban environment such as parks, is the result of the artist’s actions of walking, climbing, and getting close to various places. Both pieces are contained within specific thresholds: *The Lowly* can be experienced through a camera lens and *Stumpfer Humor und gute Absichten* lies behind a glass display case.

For the artist, the display case, this object from the museum, becomes an elevated space dedicated to the transformed ‘things’ and, as such, he reevaluates the collection of found objects. It becomes a room within a room with length, width and height. Time constitutes a fourth element stilled by the glass frame which prevents any event from taking place within it. The encased objects are thus safely protected from a continued process of deterioration. Like watching television, staring at a display window is based on an agreement about what it is we think we see – a consensus on what reality is and where an illusion is believed to be real. The illusion is also one of the most important characteristics in a display cabinet: when you cannot touch the objects, the mind becomes open to speculation, guessing, and uncertainty. What is it we are actually looking at?

In *Der ewige Biumsen* (2012) Markus Mai produced three site-specific display cases in a park area in Stockholm, Sweden. The three display units are custom-made to the size of tree trunks, embracing live matter. Here, the display case also acts as a symbol for a specific way of seeing whereby framing the tree trunk focuses the gaze onto a specific part of the natural landscape. Today, everything seems to have been already explored and known. Mai then asks: “Can we look at nature with new eyes and marvel at its tenacity? Can we experience it as the most real in life? The oldest drama in life.”

Inspired by J. G. Ballard's novel *The Crystal World* (1966), Markus Mai assumes the role of an alchemist and begins to experiment with crystallization as form and method, applying to it his own unique process. The artist blends found objects with Internet bargains – stuffed dead animals purchased on Ebay.com – and lets the crystals climb over them, as if devouring carcasses. The crystals sparkle and bewitch by capturing and reflecting light. They arise out of the rock magma, these bowels of the Earth, where they transform matter from liquid to solid. Crystals also symbolize magical properties. An untameable phenomenon like nature itself, crystallization has been occurring according to laws of nature for millions of years.

In his practice, Markus Mai expands the work he began as a graffiti writer from taming certain forms (first letters, then actual objects) to the desire to understand events occurring in certain places. Mai is interested in that which lies beyond direct perception, in search for an eternal state of things. According to philosopher Immanuel Kant in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), the sublime is primarily a border to the beautiful. When Mai's collection blurs the boundaries between what we see and what we can not yet name, he cons the viewer's gaze. Again: is it nature the eye perceives?

The eye perceives forms that are unusable as objects. Between the difficulty of identifying the forms and their aesthetic beauty, there is a movement within the 'thing' itself. Movement, for Kant, is something that is experienced by the senses, and this causes the mind to be in a state of in-betweenness. Moving forms exist beyond certainty and between two given points. Kant argues that the sublime is something which is large in the absolute meaning of the term - it is not about the size of things but rather a conception of the world which one cannot grasp all at once. The ungraspable is also uncertain as it creates an experience of formlessness and movement without beginning or end. Mai seeks to capture the movement in-between, and ends up in the gaps within the process: what happens when we are not present, when we turn our backs, and when we least expect it, life itself changes, mutates, and finds new directions.

The investigation of the environment's various constituent parts such as sea shells no longer inhabited by mollusks, animals that are no longer animals but a mere likeness of themselves, Yoda's plastic head without a body, and a seemingly dysfunctional CD – how the artist relates to the essence of stuff. Display cases become an important part of this ontological approach in which the artist presents possible processes and utopian forms of that which is not yet seen. In Markus Mai's contemporary wunderkammer, the viewer is confronted with a series of contradictory statements. Along the confines of the display case's borders, these elements create an eerie silence that indicates vanitas. If the late 19th century tradition of natural Romanticism devoted itself to mimesis in painting, Mai turns instead to an investigative experimental practice. His awe for the magnificent takes shape by way of an aesthetic systematization and control of forms that give scale to the ungraspable.

The artist creates a connection between what nature and culture produces, placing his artistic practice critically towards an increasingly alienated time. As we chase time in a capitalist society, Markus Mai searches for the opposite: the slow and the invisible. What is required today is more than fast production and consumption. Mai's works discuss the consciousness of presence in a time where social media fragment time and space.

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(Translation from Swedish by Isabel Löfgren)