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NIELS SHOE
MEULMAN
DEVON
SCHOEMAKER

*Chacun des vivants produit des œuvres pour
les autres et pour lui-même.*

Emanuele Coccia, Métamorphoses

*“Do animals like deer, beetles, or squirrels,
ever get lost in the forest?
Do plants and trees have free will?”*

Niels Shoe Meulman

Text by Vittorio Parisi

Let us imagine that we are walking in a forest and come across something that, at first glance, does not seem to belong there.

We immediately notice that it is large sheets of paper. Some are stretched between two trees, others seem to encircle trunks, or hang from branches. Still others lie on the ground, probably fallen, covered with foliage and small piles of soil.

What arouses our curiosity are above all the signs that those sheets bring as a dowry to our gaze: we recognize the passage of broad liquid brushstrokes, of sketches and drips, in some we even seem to glimpse letters. We then ascertain that all this can certainly not be the result of chance, but of a voluntary gesture: indeed, an actual artistic gesture, and that what we see in front of, and all around us, are works, organized according to a display logic. In other words, an exhibition. An exhibition to be visited and seen among the trees.

Could it also be an exhibition for the trees? As if the forest was not just the exhibition space, but also and especially the recipient, the audience of that exhibition? A forest is, indeed, much more than a space, or a place: a forest is first and foremost a living organism, a body made of millions of other bodies, millions of skins, millions of limbs. A forest is a life made up of millions of other lives.

As we wonder what prompted someone to hold an exhibition in a forest, we begin to notice that those works show signs of transformations most likely due to weathering, and to the forest itself, to that uninterrupted metamorphosis that plants and animals produce, simply by means of their own existence. The brown color of the brushstrokes somewhere faded, the texture of the sheets loosened or shrunken by moisture, the edges gnawed by some insect or wild animal...the creative gesture at the origin of this in-and-for-the-trees exhibition had foreseen and intended for all this to happen. That, in a sense, the forest would participate with all its vital impetus in the creation of the works in the exhibition. The forest as place, audience and artist as well.

It is to the woods of Cavazzone that Dutch artist Niels Shoe Meulman decided to delegate the most important part of his exhibition: that of finalizing the works. In that same forest, Devon Schoemaker's plate photographs took shape to render the artist's gesture to us.

Such a gesture has a crucial consequence: the exhibition and the works no longer belong to the artist alone, but equally to the forest and the multitude of living beings it carries in itself. The works end up belonging to the forest, no less than the trees and everything else belong to it. A process, if you will, opposite to that of another great artist, Herman de Vries, who shares the same nationality with Niels Shoe Meulman, and who has a decades-long collaboration with the forests. If de Vries's work consists of collecting and accumulating pieces of the forest - leaves, branches, flowers, blades of grass, piles of soil... - and then displaying them in the gallery space, Niels Shoe Meulman chose in this case to proceed in the opposite direction, namely, to bring his own signs into the forest and submit them to it, so that the latter can break into the creative process.

It is not surprising that Shoe has taken such a path. For those who, like him, come from the world of graffiti writing - and all the more so if they have marked the history of that world - leaving a tag in that absolute forest of signs that the city is, means, in a way, abandoning it to a fate which the writer will no longer control. Depending on the case, it will be erased or covered by another tag, the surface on which it was inscribed will be restored or destroyed, or, quite simply, that tag will disappear over the years, fading under the effect of countless suns and countless rains. In graffiti, detachment from the work is part of the game, and the work makes sense also, and above all, because it is part of the continuous metamorphosis of which the city is the expression.

Moreover, the city is itself, albeit in a radically different way from a forest, traversed by countless lives. So much so, that even the nonliving seems to come alive when humans maneuver and animate it. Thus, a train moves and "lives" thanks to the people who carry it and are transported in it. It becomes a body together with the whole city: in Baudrillard's words, "*a body without end nor beginning*", on which graffiti acts in the same way as tattoos.

From Shoe's point of view, leaving a sign in a city - a brushstroke, a word, a letter - is not so different from doing so in a forest. In both cases that sign enters into relationship with other signs, little matter whether they are the "natural" ones left by the weather, fallen leaves, animals or fungi, or the "artificial" ones caused or created by other human beings. In the mind that knows no discontinuity between forests and cities, the distinction between natural and artificial, as well as that between nature and culture, tends to vanish altogether. The only thing that counts for it is the collaborative relationship that the artist establishes with the space in which they intervene, which is no longer the exclusive and anesthetizing one of the gallery or the museum. Like the city, the forest is a space in which one necessarily enters into a relationship with a community (of humans, animals, plants, in other words: an interspecific community) of creatures and creators capable, by means of their mere existence, and the reciprocal interactions between different existences, of transforming the real. This relationship that all living beings share with each other and with the world around them is to all intents and purposes an aesthetic one. As Emanuele Coccia reminds us, it is the result of "arbitrary behaviors, which are not necessarily the best and most useful" for the living, but which incessantly lead the latter to "produce works for others and for themselves". Shoe's willingness to submit his work to the forest stems from a question: "Do animals like deer, beetles or squirrels, ever get lost in the forest? Do plants and trees have free will?". Such willingness is revealed to us in all its simultaneously poetic and meta-artistic meaning of "seeing into the trees": a mise-en-abyme of interspecific creative exchanges, prompting us to wonder where the artist ends and the forest begins, where the work ends and the tree begins.

We have not had this experience ourselves and, for the moment, we can only imagine it. Yet our imagination is not just a fiction of our minds. Devon Schoemaker's plate photographs allow us to reconstruct the stages of the creative communion between Shoe and the Cavazzone forest. The photographs show us the works and the trees. Sometimes both, and then the light they capture flirts with abstraction, and the quadrangular space of the photograph becomes the theater of new forms and compositions: in it, the works and the trees are one, a place of the mind where the boundaries between the trees and the sheets, between the balsamic vinegar strokes and the leaves, between the letters and the branches, are forever suspended.

Devon Schoemaker's photographs are not created to document what happened in the forest, but to transform it in turn, by means of the gaze and the light. They add a chapter to that metamorphosis, taking part in a creative process in which collaboration no longer occurs only between different species, but also between different artistic mediums. This collaboration reaches its climax at the moment when the two artists allow their respective mediums to meet, and that is when Shoe paints on Devon Schoemaker's photographs.

The result is a palimpsest of signs, of brushstrokes that add to the light imprinted on the surface, a light that shows the interweaving between the brushstrokes in the woods and the sheets, between the latter and the trees, between everything that contributes, in the here-and-now of the photographic shot, to restore in unprecedented forms the metaphysical and penetrative experience of seeing into the trees.

NIELS SHOE MEULMAN (Amsterdam, 1967) is a visual artist known for his gestural paintings that blend graffiti and calligraphy experiences. He revolutionized the art of writing when he started the Calligraffiti movement, stating that "a word is an image and writing is painting". As a pioneer of writing, Shoe created tags in the 1980s in New York alongside artists like Dondi White, Rammellzee, and Keith Haring. Influenced equally by Abstract Expressionist painters and Pop artists, he gradually found a unique way to translate his art from the streets to galleries and museums. By experimenting with traditional canvas painting, as well as venturing fearlessly into other realms like conceptual installations and poetry, Niels Shoe Meulman continues to push boundaries for the global contemporary urban art movement. He has exhibited his work in numerous solo shows and in many international museums, and is represented by Unruly Galleries (Amsterdam) and Magda Danysz Galleries (Paris, Shanghai, and London).

DEVON SCHOEMAKER (Amsterdam, 1974) graduated from the Amsterdam Photo Academy in 2012, and has since held several solo exhibitions, interviews, and publications. She prefers solitary experiences with her camera, completely forgetting her audience, and it is this ambivalence that characterizes her work: Devon captures the essence of the city, where stress and chaos are part of daily life, but she is also intrigued by nature, capturing the beauty of growth, shapes, forms, lights, shadows, and decay. Specializing in photography on glass plates coated with gelatin - a photographic technique used since 1873 - she uses original antique wooden cameras that allow her to capture and emphasize the intensity of contrasts. Thanks to the extended shutter speeds required to capture enough light, her images exude a certain tranquility and capture almost unreal movements. The emulsion becomes an integral part of the photographs, introducing some "imperfections" that reflect the characteristics of the real world, sometimes hidden from our eyes.

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