

Marie Matusz

Fall

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The *Victoria amazonica* is native to the Brazilian Amazon and is one of the most impressive aquatic plants in the world. Its gigantic floating leaves can reach up to three metres in diameter, and underwater it has a sprawling, rhizomatous root structure. The first published description of the plant in the 1830s and its name tell of colonialist expansion and the dominance of Western systems of describing and organizing the world. I encounter the giant water lily one August afternoon in the studio of Marie Matusz. The artist received several *Victoria amazonica* plants from the botanical garden in Basel. In the new works she developed for the exhibition *Fall*, she places dried *Victoria amazonica* together with thistles (another plant that forms underground rhizomes), wrapped in organza fabric, in a display case of tinted glass. *Coated in compassion* (2022) is what Marie Matusz calls the installation.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use the concept of the rhizome as a metaphor for a post-modern model of knowledge organization and cosmography that functions as an interwoven, non-hierarchical system (i.e., precisely the opposite of the system of thought that gave *Victoria amazonica* its name). Meanwhile, feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti describes the linkages between human and non-human, organic and technological entities in this world as rhizome-like. In my view, Marie Matusz ties in with this way of thinking in many contexts and without hierarchies. She moves nimbly through cultural history, working with references from pop culture, literature, and film, borrowing approaches from philosophy and sociology, dealing with language and music, and conducting research in historical archives. She considers these things from a perspective that is decidedly committed to the present, sometimes connecting them strictly logically, sometimes freely and associatively, and always leaving room for others' own readings. The rhizome roots of the *Victoria amazonica* in the exhibition represent this artistic approach as well as many other strands of thought and worlds.

Fall (the exhibition title is ambiguous for Marie Matusz, referring both to the season and the act of falling) begins with an ensemble of vitrines in which various objects have been placed. The dark glass obscures my view of the objects. To see what is inside, I must get close to the display cases,

and I keep running into my own reflection. The new works produced for *Fall* are loosely associated with Samuel Beckett's *Mirlitonnades*—a series of poems, at times laconic, wry, or melancholic, which the poet quickly jotted down on calendar pages, timetable margins, and napkins in 1977. Marie Matusz is interested not only in the potential of these fast rhymes but also in the moments of obfuscation or alienation that are hidden behind the notion of 'mirliton'. In French, the term refers to plain, simple rhymes, but it is also the name of a kind of kazoo—an instrument that distorts the human voice over a stretched sheet of paper. With *Fall*, the artist addresses aspects of rhythm, repetition, and composition as well as distortion—which Marie Matusz calls a 'visual mask'. As a viewer, I find myself in an open labyrinth of semi-transparent plexiglass, which reflects me just as much as the objects and sculptures on display.

Long Ago, Tomorrow (2022) is what the artist calls this installation of vitrines, which occupies the front area of the exhibition space. It implies a sense of temporality: many of the objects in the vitrines have been used by Marie Matusz in previous installations, and they will reappear in new works after this exhibition closes. At the same time, the dried plants and even the shark jaw skeleton in *Everybody feels the wind blow* (2022) tell of conditions that bear a yesterday and a tomorrow inside them. And, of course, the artistic tradition of still life (significantly called 'nature morte' in French) resonates, reminding us of the transience of life. Marie Matusz named a further display case *The balance of terror is the terror of balance* (2022). Behind its reflective dark glass, I think I see another skeleton, but this time it belongs to a creature from the future rather than a shark. The artist installed aluminium elements at eye level, making me think of a hybrid creation with steel legs and conscious thoughts. In yet another case, I recognize a different skeleton-like structure: two cast iron piano frames that form the backbone of a piano—a piano body, so to speak. *There is no document of civilization that is not a document of barbarism* (2022) is the title of this work. The quote is from Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, written during a time when National Socialism was on the rise. Marie Matusz also refers here to the social philosopher Aziz Ali Dad, who questions the concept of 'civilization' from a postcolonial perspective. I think (once again) of Rosi Braidotti, who argues pointedly for a posthumanism that eliminates the

opposition between nature and culture, between humans and non-humans, and harshly criticizes humanism as a Western, white, and male construct. And I also think of the *Victoria amazonica* and its history. Yet another vitrine emits construction sounds—*Nostalgia's a venom* (2022) is the title. Marie Matusz developed the sound work together with pianist Hanna Syrneva and artist Semuel Lala. I have to get closer to the dark glass with my ears to hear anything. The piano composition is a sort of translation of a poetic text by Marie Matusz, with which the artist has in turn captured emotions evoked by the piano playing. The two voices in dialogue recite poetry as a form of learning English for an uncertain future.

«I think of a sound that does not sound, a mute piano, and of flowers that do not smell», Marie Matusz writes to me in February of this year. And so *Fall* is not only about a kind of masking but also about absence. The objects placed in the display cases tell of it. A sense of absence that the artist (and likely all of us) felt especially during the months of the pandemic: while real bodies were absent, we 'swiped' across the glossy surfaces of our phone screens, hoping for emotions. The 'Metaverse' sends its regards. The mirrored display cases remind me of that. They evoke a sense of distance; the objects somehow remain hidden, eluding my gaze. These observations also evoke the peculiarities of the capitalist systems of our times, in which the circulation of goods, knowledge, and data also happens via the shiny surface of images and screens, and much remains concealed behind shimmering appearances. «The slippery nature of appearances», notes Marie Matusz. In this context, we also have to think about 'the art' or the 'art system', which is closely connected to the capitalist system. The display case installation *Long Ago, Tomorrow* is a commentary on this. The vitrine infuses a work of art with value, a value that is usually quantified in numbers. The dark plexiglass used by Marie Matusz reduces this production of value to absurdity. Quick, fleeting swiping, scrolling, and liking are not possible (because, yes, we frequently view art on screens these days). I must get very close to the showcases and move around them in order to recognize something. In encountering my reflection, I am reminded of my position in the art world. As an artist, as a curator, as an exhibition visitor, and as a consumer. And perhaps the question also arises to what extent we need or want to look at art in a crisis-ridden present.

In the adjacent room, the video work *The Lying Oaths* (2022) can be viewed as a large projection. Filmed with a video camera from the 1990s, the images seem strangely old and behind the times, now that our eyes have become accustomed to high-definition quality. We see rain falling on mirrored glass panes, on asphalt, and in puddles, creating ring-shaped movements on the water's glistening surface. We look at trees, the sky, and roads. The images are underlaid with a slow text, perhaps a kind of stream of consciousness, a flow of thoughts, constantly in motion, like the surface of water. The sounds of the camera merge with the rustling of the leaves. Repeatedly, she zooms in very close, and the images dissipate. Similar to the vitrines, *The Lying Oaths* is also a reflection on seeing: «I'm watching. You too. Closer. And the closer we get, the less we see».

The sculpture *All systems create the conditions of their own demise* (2022) forms the conclusion of the exhibition's dramaturgy. Ten stacked acrylic sheets all have a rectangular engraving, referring to an object once placed on them. In this sense, they bear a trace, a memory, of the past. Gazing down at the sculpture, I think of a kind of timeline and lose myself in its depth while the nearly six-metre-high exhibition space hovers above me. «The heavy emptiness above our heads», writes Marie Matusz about it. Leaving the exhibition, I encounter the shark (again). He grins at me. I grin back, at both him and my reflection.

Gioia Dal Molin, September 2022

Marie Matusz (1994, Toulouse) lives and works in Basel and Berlin. Her work results from critical engagement with forms and their inherent meanings, evolving through in-depth research into philosophical, sociological, and linguistic theories. By juxtaposing elements and textures, she creates an aesthetic of management and develops a choreography for the viewers while the works seem to remain motionless and static. This suspension goes beyond the physical, as it seeks to activate a suspension of time. Her work plays with this moment of idleness by presenting objects from various historical archives taken from our classical lexicon, and reexamining them through contemporary lenses and production techniques. Recent solo exhibitions include *Until We Turn Blue* (Dorothea Von Stetten Art Award), Kunstmuseum Bonn (2020); *Epoche*, Kunst Raum Riehen (2020); *Golden Hour*, Atelier Amden (2019); and *Caravan*, Aargauer Kunsthaus (2019). Marie Matusz received the Swiss Art Award in 2021.

1

Long Ago, Tomorrow, 2022, plexiglass showcases, variable dimensions

1A

Coated in compassion, 2022, dried giant lily pads (*Victoria amazonica*), thistles, fabric, copper, steel, aluminum, variable dimensions

1B

There is no document of civilisation that is not a document of barbarism, 2022, cast iron piano frames, 140 × 105 cm, 140 × 125 cm

1C

The balance of terror is the terror of balance, 2022, aluminum, stainless steel, 150 × 16 × 4 cm (each)

1D

Nostalgia's a venom, 2022, sound piece in collaboration with Samuel Lala and Hanna Syrneva, 08'48"

1E

Everybody feels the wind blow, 2022, shark jaw (*Charcarinus obscurus*), mirror, acrylic glass, 45 x 18 x 45 cm

2

The Lying Oaths, 2022, video, stereo channel, 21'53"

3

All systems create the conditions of their own demise, 2022, acrylic glass, 60 × 80 cm (10 platforms, stacked version)

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