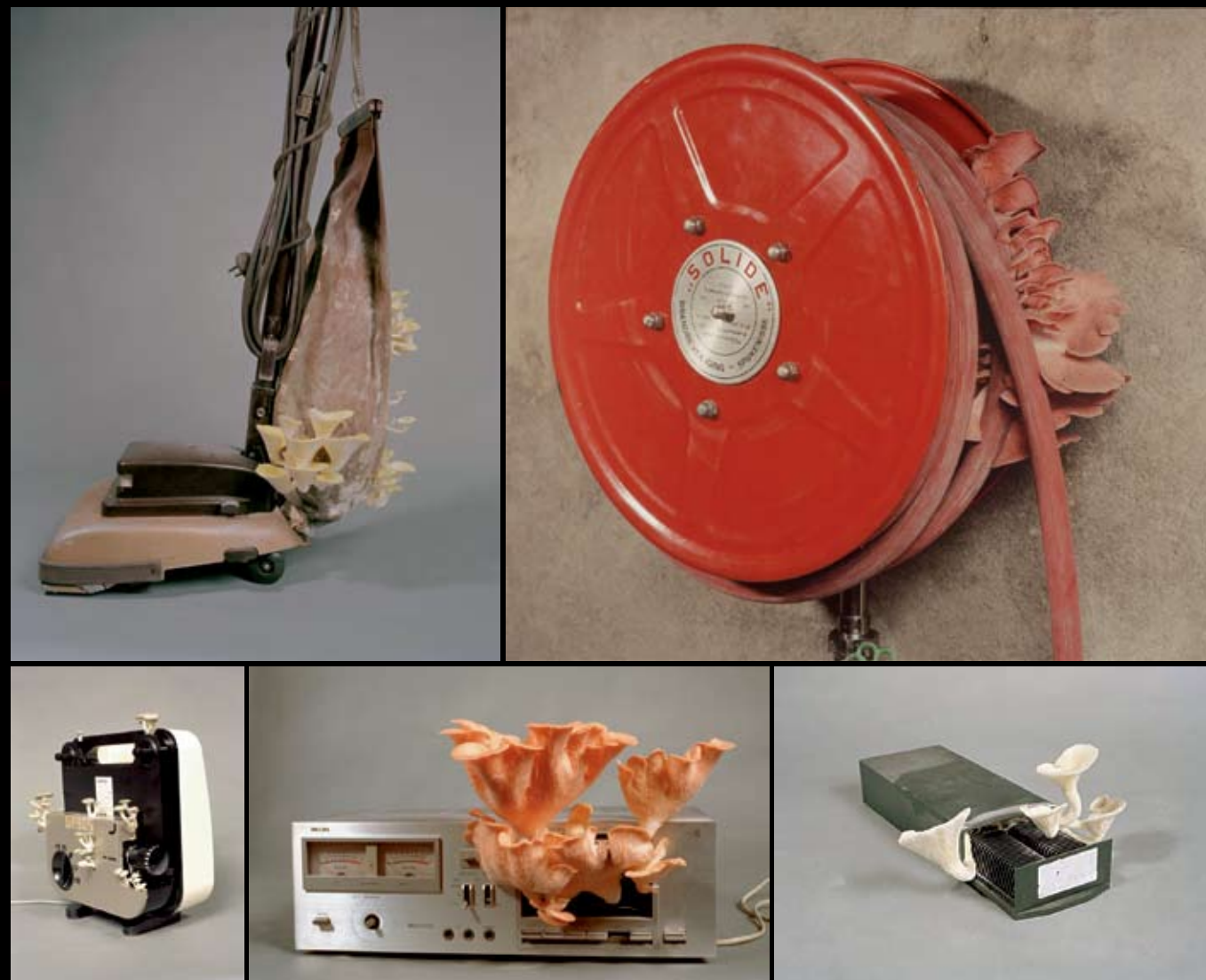


# Let it grow

## ORGANIC ART: FROM LIFE TO DEATH AND BACK AGAIN

When art goes past its sell-by date it can cause a bit of a stink, especially when you're talking about rotting vegetables. Algae, beetroot purée and a splash of fake pee are just a selection from the organic artist's palette, and in this genre, working out which side time is playing on is not so easy to discern.

Text by Anneke Bokern



The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam owns a work by Gordon Matta-Clark called *Land of Milk and Honey*. The title might sound mouth-watering, but it's rather misleading: this is not what one would call a pretty piece of art. In fact, it's an ugly, smelly rag, and hardly ever leaves the depot. But it's nevertheless special, because it's the sole survivor of a complete ensemble, created by Matta-Clark in 1969. Its siblings have long since dissolved. No wonder, considering what they made of: large sheets of agar (gelatinous algae), decorated with reliefs of organic materials such as mould, chicken stock, vegetable juices and different kinds of offal. After drying, the sheets were hung from ropes and presented – under the title *Museum*.

Rather than a mere title, the word 'Museum' was a punchline. After all, the ensemble defied the idea of the museum as a place for the presentation of dead objects, just as the separate pieces were a protest against the concept of the artwork as something of eternal or at least conservable beauty. Not that Matta-Clark was the first to create art with volatile materials. Before him, the likes of Kurt Schwitters, Claes Oldenburg, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Spoerri and several others experimented with food and plants. But due to its size, Matta-Clark's work is one of the few which had a spatial impact. And that's when organic art becomes interesting: when you're surrounded by it; its smell hits your nose and you can't help but react to it in some way.

Opposite page:  
**Steiner & Lenzlinger, *Sleeping Seeds* (from the installation *Four Vegetative Sleeping Rooms*), Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.**

Photo: Gerda Steiner & Jörg Lenzlinger, 2006

This page:  
**Springing up like mushrooms: *Works from Zeger Reyers' installation Hortus Conclusus*.**  
Courtesy Galerie Maurits van der Laar, The Hague



### GREEN HAIRY WALLS

A decent work of art is a stable thing. It promises to stay in shape and thus retain its aesthetic and financial value for decades or even centuries. If not, you can always call a conservator. Artworks that incorporate living organisms, in contrast, are a conservator and investor's nightmare. They are manifestations against predictability, durability and often also against good taste. And worst of all, they introduce a time factor to the museum or gallery space; visitors witness only a short moment of an ongoing process, which oscillates somewhere between growth and decay. In this sense, organic art is the successor of the Old Masters' vanitas paintings. Only that now, the depiction becomes reality.

In the same way as it reintroduces a time element into the world of art, organic artworks also let nature reconquer human space. Sometimes this happens in a subtle and poetic way, like in the installation *Hortus Conclusus* by Dutch artist Zeger Reyers. In 2001, he vaccinated some sober everyday objects - found in the basement of Rotterdam art centre Witte de With - with oyster mushroom spores. Shortly afterwards, colourful fungi sprouted from improbable places, such as dusty slide projectors, fire hoses, index card boxes and a discarded pair of wellies, creating beautiful contrasts between functional, lifeless devices and voluptuous, thriving mushrooms. In a similar way, for his work *Luxaflex*, Reyers planted grass on the slats of sun-blinds of the kind that disfigure the windows of many offices. Then he covered the walls of a room at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague with them, creating a space with living, green, hairy walls.

Top, both images:

**Luxaflex is the name of this installation by Zeger Reyers and of a Dutch producer of sun-blinds. Normally, they don't come planted with grass.** Courtesy Galerie Maurits van der Laar, The Hague

Above, all images:

**Beetroot purée, soy noodles and old orange peels are some of the materials Michel Blazy used for his installation *Post Patman*. It was on show during the exhibition *Nouvelles du monde renversé* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.** Courtesy Galerie Art Concept, Paris

Facing page:

**Steiner & Lenzlinger's installation *Table Garden* (2007) consists of a desk, plants, fruit, tree trunks and wallpaper.** Photo: Serge Hasenböhler, courtesy: Galerie Stampa, Basel





Left:  
Artificial pink urea trickles down tree branches, slowly crystallising. Steiner & Lenzlinger, *Crystal Forest* (from the installation *Four Vegetative Sleeping Rooms*), Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Photo: Gerda Steiner & Jörg Lenzlinger, 2006

Right:  
Steiner & Lenzlinger, *My Aunt from Borneo* (from the installation *Four Vegetative Sleeping Rooms*), Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Photo: Gerda Steiner & Jörg Lenzlinger, 2006

### VALUE OF THE DISGUSTING

In Reyers' works, life suddenly develops from dead things. 'I'm a real aesthete, and I'm struggling with that all the time, but I work with things which in principle aren't aesthetic,' he says. Some might find his fungi installations slightly spooky, but in fact they're rather clean and odourless. It's only when artists start to use dying or decomposing material that art starts to become really messy.

This is certainly true in the case of installations by French artist Michel Blazy, in which alien life sprouts from decaying matter. Last February, he set up his installation *Post Patman* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris: an environment composed of a giant soy noodle mushroom, chocolate chickens, worm-like carrots fingers, stacks of squeezed-out oranges and a wall painting made of mashed potatoes and beetroot purée. Just a few days after the opening, the stench that attacked the visitors' nostrils was already overwhelming. But in a strange way, Blazy's works also demonstrate the aesthetic value of the disgusting. He creates a sculptural fairy-tale world full of weirdly beautiful shapes and colours, which addresses all the senses – some in a more, some in a less enjoyable way. From time to time, he intervenes into the development of his sculptures by nourishing the organisms. Their evolution, however, remains largely uncontrollable, which adds an element of surprise to his works. The artist resembles a child, shaping funny faces out of mashed potatoes on its plate – without mum or dad around to go on about playing with food or washing the dishes. And Blazy himself doesn't even think his works are repulsive: 'I just leave a tomato to rot, and then I watch from nearby what happens. It's really marvellous what happens inside it. There's nothing disgusting about it at all. It's just death meeting life.'

### FAKE PEE

Like Blazy, Swiss artist couple Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger also invite museum visitors into strange new worlds. At first sight, their environments, composed of plants, twigs, leaves and crystals, seem similarly playful, but far less unsavoury than Blazy's creations. They're dreamy, even girly compositions. But although their works lack the element of disgust, they do incorporate a slightly dubious material: industrially manufactured urea, which is – in its natural form – the main nitrogenous component of urine. So in reality, the beautiful candy-coloured crystals which grow on twigs and under glass domes in their installations are nothing but, well, fake pee. The speed at which the salt solution crystallises depends on its saturation and evaporation rate. Slowly but surely, the liquid mutates and turns into a crust of glittering little rocks. Covering branches and leaves, it creates a synthesis of natural and artificial materials. The pseudo-organic crystals are the ironic icing on Steiner's and Lenzlinger's cake, made of real plants, textile blossoms, plastic insects, taxidermied animals, bones and lace doilies.

The works of all these artists are crossovers between nature and culture, reminiscent rather of the curiosity cabinets of the Renaissance than of well-behaved white cube art. They're perishable, sometimes even stinky, but also undeniably beautiful. And a large part of their attraction is based on the fact that they carry on mutating after the visitor has left. All one ever gets to see of them are snapshots. #

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