

PETER BENSON MILLER

THE NATURALISTS

A field guide

Castelluccio La Foce
2013

Gli
Ori

THE NATURALISTS / I NATURALISTI
Castelluccio di Pienza – La Foce
July 13 – September 15, 2013

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One of the numerous events that have been organized to mark the 25th anniversary of the *Incontri in Terra di Siena* this year, the exhibition THE NATURALISTS is a special project, involving twenty-two artists working in different media and expressing various points of view. They are linked however by their interest in nature and the disciplines of natural history. Another common denominator uniting these otherwise diverse artists is the curator, who has gathered them together on this occasion with a certain idea in mind, a notion originating in the collections of the baroque period and translated here into contemporary terms. The result is both original and timely. Peter Benson Miller has created a modern *Wunderkammer* full of surprises, leading visitors from the dilapidated rooms of Castelluccio di Pienza to the formal gardens all'italiana at La Foce, both sites framed by the ancient landscape of the Val d'Orcia.

After the important installations created at Castelluccio in 1990s by Plinio De Martiis, and the fascinating exhibitions of Etruscan objects curated by Giulio Paolucci with archeological finds from the nearby necropolis at Tolle, as well as the two group shows entitled "Per la Musica" organized by Peter Noser, we are very happy to welcome Peter Benson Miller to Castelluccio. We extend heartfelt thanks for his generous and creative participation in this special edition of the *Incontri*.

Benedetta Origo

La mostra I NATURALISTI viene quest'anno ad aggiungersi alle celebrazioni che si stanno allestendo per il venticinquesimo anniversario degli *Incontri*.

È una mostra speciale. Coinvolge ben ventidue artisti, diversissimi tra loro sia come mezzo che come spirito, ma tutti legati da un tema forte: la natura. Sono legati anche dalla persona che li ha invitati a far parte di una sua particolare concezione: un'idea nata nella storia del collezionismo barocco che viene tradotta al contemporaneo per generare un insieme originale e di grande attualità. Peter Benson Miller ha creato una *wunderkammer* moderna, piena di sorprese, che porterà il visitatore dalle camere fatiscenti del Castelluccio di Pienza al giardino all'italiana de La Foce, nella cornice dell'antico paesaggio valdorciano.

Dopo gli storici allestimenti al Castelluccio creati negli anni novanta da Plinio de Martiis, dopo le affascinanti mostre etrusche fatte da Giulio Paolucci con reperti della vicina necropoli di Tolle, dopo le due mostre collettive "Per la musica" di Peter Noser, siamo veramente felici di accogliere Peter Benson Miller al Castelluccio e lo ringraziamo sentitamente per la sua generosa e creativa partecipazione agli Incontri.

Benedetta Origo

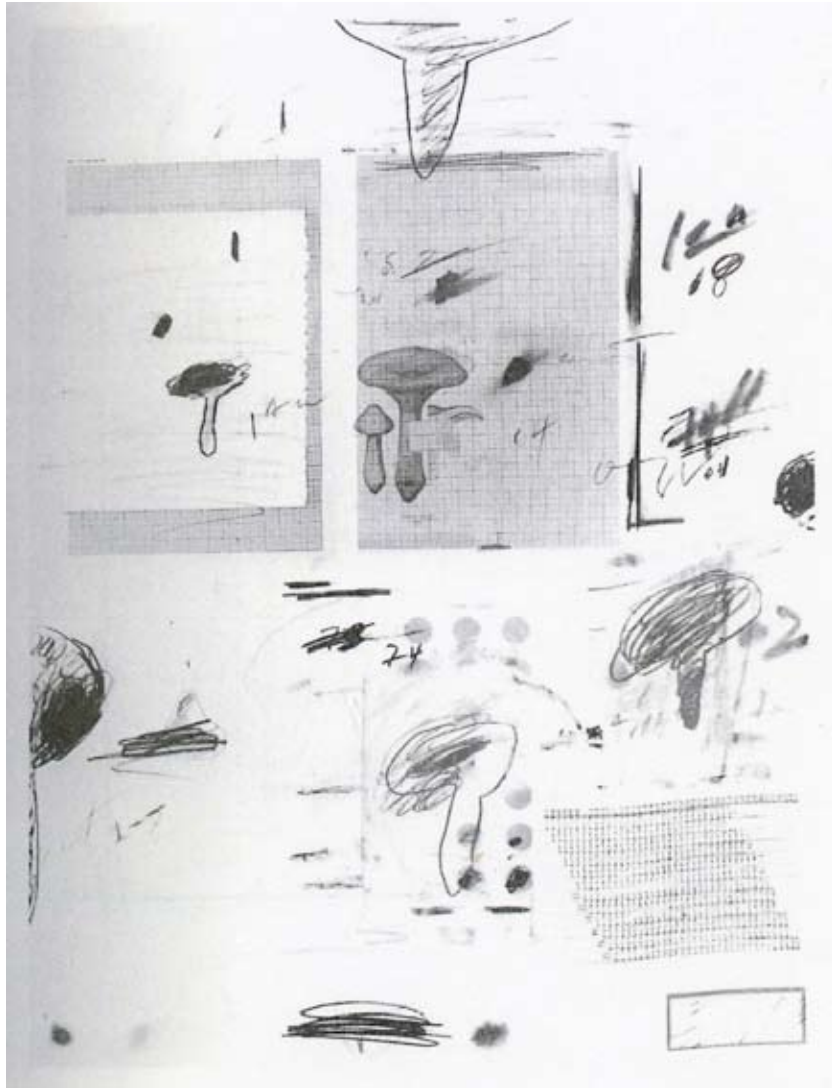


Fig. 1. Cy Twombly, *Natural History, Part I, Mushrooms, No. IV*, 1974, lithograph. Courtesy Cy Twombly Foundation

PETER BENSON MILLER

FIELD NOTES

What I have always said has been confirmed: there are certain natural phenomena and certain confused ideas, which can be understood and straightened out only in this country¹

In an age menaced by recurring cataclysms, meteor showers and alarming effects of global climate change, which together threaten the increasingly fragile human toehold on the face of the earth, it is perhaps inevitable that many artists have turned with increasing regularity to the unpredictable natural world and its archetypes. Interrogating the places where nature and culture circle each other warily, they are at the forefront of a generation for whom science – in the form of artificial intelligence, the genome project and genetically modified foods, to name only a few examples – permeates all aspects of human interaction and shapes the perception of nature. For better or worse, science is a universal, if contested, language in a new global society, and nature, as a construct, has become more contingent and elusive than ever before. At the same time, universal faith in the possibility of scientific certainty – a cornerstone of western civilization since the Enlightenment – has subsided, or come under attack, usurped by the kind of skepticism that impedes rather than furthers understanding. Thus we might interpret the interest of contemporary artists across the board in the themes and conventions particular to natural history as a symptom of a general anxiety in the face of an uncertain future. The interest in natural history has been a central characteristic of artistic practice in Rome for centuries; for the present generation of contemporary artists working in the Italian capital, it is a fundamental part of their complex creative inheritance. Goethe voiced a widespread belief when he identified the Italian peninsula and its rich and varied geography as a unique open-air laboratory for scientific research. Similarly, the current artistic scene

1. J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey*, trans. W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962): 201



THE NATURALISTS / I NATURALISTI

BOTANY | BOTANICA

Large-scale photographs of leaves, flowers, desiccated palm fronds and other natural specimens by MICHAELA MARIA LANGENSTEIN (Munich, 1952) recall the early compositions and photographic processes pioneered by Henry Fox-Talbot. She arranges plant material into abstract patterns that lend the Victorian, usually feminine, past-time of pressing flowers into albums or cataloguing botanical specimens a contemporary edge. The innate geometry of plant forms also fascinated Karl Blossfeldt, whose *Urformen der Kunst* was published in 1929. He recognized in the plant “a totally artistic and architectural structure.”

A pervasive blight has progressively decimated certain species of non-native palm trees in southern Europe, a horticultural crisis that lends pathos to our contemplation of Langenstein’s compositions. The fact that monumental palms – which brought an exotic luxuriance to nineteenth and early twentieth century Mediterranean gardens and botanical collections – are threatened with extinction transforms her photographs before our eyes into ephemeral botanical fossils, *memento mori* of a vanishing species.

I macrofotogrammi di foglie, fiori, fronde di palma essiccate e altri campioni naturalistici di Michaela Maria Langenstein (Monaco di Baviera, 1952) ricordano le pionieristiche composizioni fotografiche di Henry Fox-Talbot. Lei organizza il materiale botanico in schemi astratti che conferiscono un taglio contemporaneo all’uso vittoriano, in genere tipicamente femminile, di raccogliere i fiori in album o di catalogare campioni vegetali. L’innata geometria delle piante affascinò anche Karl Blossfeldt che pubblicò il suo *Urformen der Kunst* nel 1929. Egli infatti riconobbe nelle piante una “struttura totalmente artistica e architettonica”.

Un’epidemia ha progressivamente decimato alcune specie di palme non autoctone nell’Europa meridionale, una piaga che aggiunge pathos alla contemplazione delle opere di Langenstein. Il fatto che queste palme monumentali – che hanno regalato un rigoglio esotico ai giardini mediterranei e alle collezioni botaniche dell’Ottocento e dei primi del Novecento – siano minacciate di estinzione, trasforma le sue foto, ai nostri occhi, in fossili botanici effimeri, *memento mori* di una specie che scompare.



Michela Maria Langenstein, *Senza titolo*, 2003
Pigment print 200x90 cm

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