

Porre la questione dell'essenza alla fine della postmodernità significa liberarsi da ogni timore nei confronti del passato, sbarazzarsi di tutti i neo-, i post- e i trans- per esporsi a un gesto originario, a un gesto iniziale. La questione dell'essenza non è altro che la necessità di affrontare nuovamente la questione dell'inizio, della creazione, cioè la questione dell'arte *tout court*. Porci al fondo del nulla della contemporaneità, alla ricerca dell'essenza del tempo e dello spazio.

Raising the question of essence at the end of postmodernity means to shed all fears with respect to the past, thus freeing ourselves from any and every notion of "neo-", "post-" or "trans-", and to opt instead for the openness of an originary, initial gesture. To address the question of essence is to speak of the need to confront anew the question of beginnings, of creating, of art itself. We stand at the bottom of the void that defines the contemporary world, and from there search out the essence of space and time.

Il volume accompagna la mostra
presentata alla Collezione Maramotti
di Reggio Emilia e al Frankfurter
Kunstverein di Francoforte.

The book accompanies the show
presented at Collezione Maramotti,
Reggio Emilia and at Frankfurter
Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main.

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arte essenziale

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karla black

—
gianni caravaggio

—
alice cattaneo

—
thea djordjadze

—
jason dodge

—
francesco gennari

—
ian klaer

—
helen mirra

—
federico ferrari



Silvana Editoriale

ian kiaer

The office window facing Pennsylvania was dappled and smeared
with the oil of Lyndon's nose.



Veduta della mostra / Exhibition view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Melnikov project, silver flower, 2011

Carta, cotone, biacca, lino, smalto, tavola, gomma, pallina da ping pong, alluminio, cartone, acetato / Paper, cotton, white lead, linen, enamel, board, rubber, ping pong ball, aluminium, cardboard, acetate

Dimensioni variabili / Variable dimension

Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery & Alison Jacques Gallery

Photo: Brian Forrest



Veduta della mostra / Exhibition view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Melnikov project, silver flower, 2011

Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery & Alison Jacques Gallery
 Photo: Brian Forrest



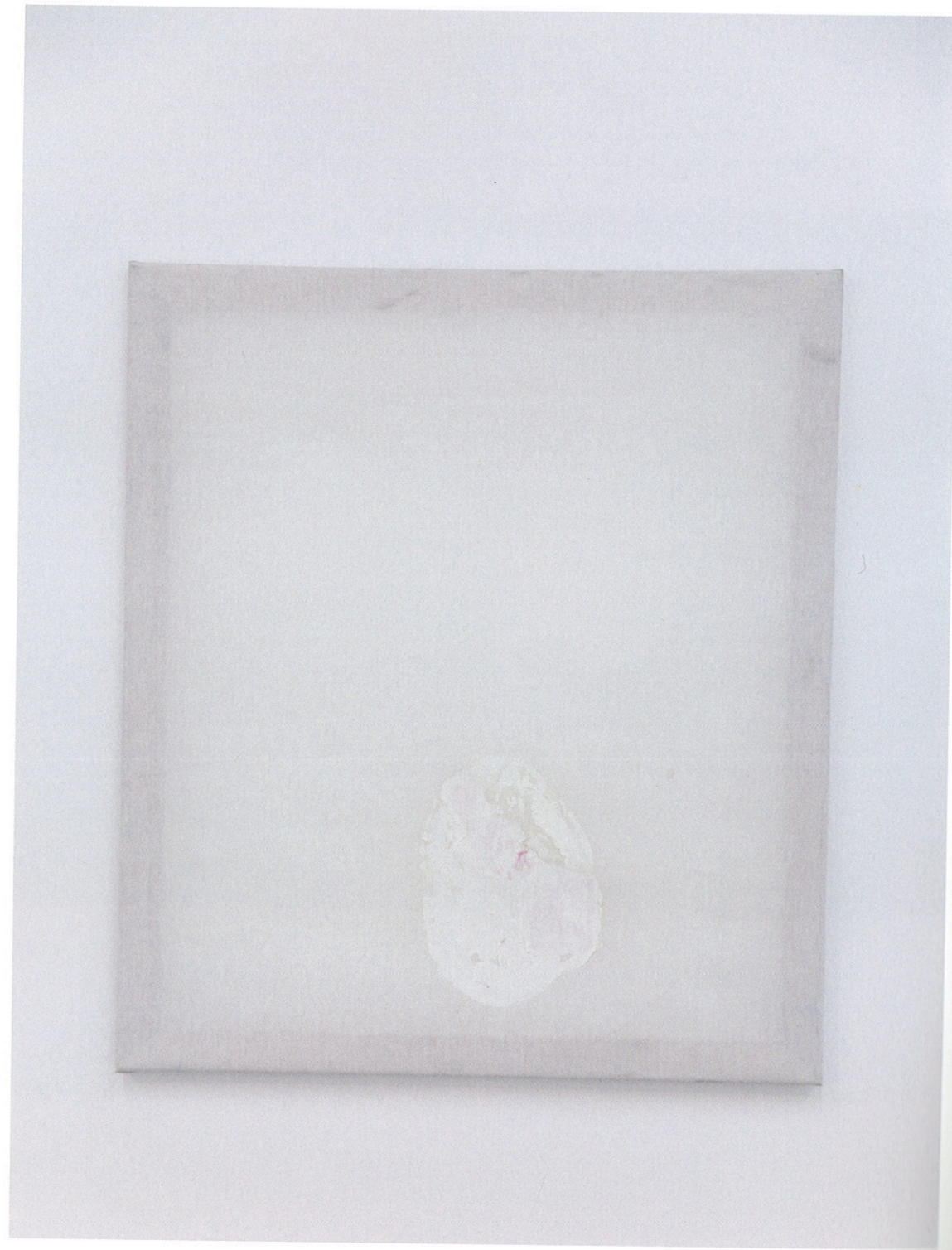
Veduta della mostra / Exhibition view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Melnikov project, silver flower, 2011

Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery & Alison Jacques Gallery
Photo: Brian Forrest



Melnikov project, silver flower, particolare / detail, 2011

Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery & Alison Jacques Gallery



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way of gestures that even in name are mimetic with respect to what they claim to desire to supersede: post-production. Exit from a system of artworks reduced to merchandize and products won't be found in a tactic of reassembling or recycling products; it will lie, instead, in fully experiencing the void into which everything collapses (art, tradition, identity, critical thinking), following it down to its nadir, down to its very end, in order there to discover or demonstrate the possibility of a new beginning, and of a beginning, that, basically, has never ceased to begin.

So, when Alice Cattaneo turns to materials of common use (pieces of scotch tape, sticks of balsa wood, cardboard) for the creation of her sculptures—sculptures that cull in surprising ways the instability and fragility, in reality quite marked, of our current times and contemporary world—the gesture she performs is anything other than an act of post-producing. Her praxis can in fact be understood to consist of two fundamental components that in summing themselves together give origin to something absolutely new, and never seen before. On the one hand, her work can be seen as an original continuation of the gestures of Gordon Matta-Clark and his commitment to “an-architecture,” by means of which Cattaneo deconstructs constructive space, thus bringing about the emergence or unexpected essential structures. Constructing, she deconstructs; and deconstructing, she constructs. The apparently serial nature of her works is rather to be seen as the result of her attempt to examine all the possible hypotheses, all the unthought thoughts and unseen sights that lie within constructions and architectures of which the *principio* (*arché*) is constantly lost and regained in the artist's praxis, in her inexplicable foray out beyond all logic into regions that are unacquainted with single or exhaustive explanations. Not only, moreover, is there never a single possible explanation or a single and unique principle: every principle presents itself as ambivalent and endlessly multiplies itself, turning subtly and ironically always into something other than itself. “A virtue? That I stick together pieces of scotch tape in a way that no one else does. A defect? That no one sticks together pieces of scotch tape the way I do.”

From another point of view, Cattaneo's work is an attempt to rethink the artistic gesture itself, its operativity, and its operations. Every work (*opus*, *opera*) consists of the infinite process of its own construction, of the work that makes it a work. In this respect, her *Untitled* works are strictly connected with the performativity of her videos: the two different sides of the same gesture. The video works express the movement and *élan* of the gesture, its repetition, the impossibility of its calling itself to a halt. The *Untitled* works present the condition of unstable stasis in which the gesture suspends itself in order to be able to observe itself, even while never being able to give itself a name, or to see itself as definitive. Finally, even

the gesture could be said to disappear. There is no longer any body, and all that remains is an essence: an essence grown solidified into an open metallic structure with a seemingly inexhaustible store of compositional possibilities.

Ian Kiaer likewise eludes the postmodern categories, with their weak re-elaborations of the theory of the Romantic fragment. Kiaer, in fact, is interested in relationships: his art is an art of relationships with one another and their circumambient space. His projects are imbued with an almost metaphysical air, but it's a question of an utopian metaphysics, open to the interior movement of its essence, to its continuous shifting and reformulation. Ian Kiaer's interest in the fundamentals of architectural construction—his interest in the *arché*—is for the purpose of taking it back to its initial phase, to its always active origins: active and in progress.

Frederick Kiesler, Kenzo Tange, Konstantin Melnikov e Claude-Nicholas Ledoux are a few of the visionary architects in whom he finds inspiration, or to whom he directs his gaze in order to go beyond them. His work has nothing to do with any postmodern penchant for citations. Instead, he might be said to show an interest in montage, in the sense in which Walter Benjamin employs the term. Kiaer “mounts” elements drawn from architecture with others that are strictly artistic while also making use of the sometimes modest materials that he retrieves from his utopian projects' construction sites. If his constantly evolving projects somehow furnish a map of our contemporary condition, the phrase that best describes it was pronounced by Oscar Wilde: “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at...” But utopia, here, has a place and a space: it's a utopia squared, not opening out into a non-place, but into another space. Kiaer, indeed, is attempting to find a gaze that reveals the utopian side of every project, the way no project is ever completely present or fully realized, even while always standing in the here and now. His utopia is no world to come, but is here, in this space and time, and in what this space and time continually become in their uninterrupted flow of works and days. If he voices a poetic of the fragment, it insists that the fragment's value lies not in its isolation, but in the system it forms with other fragments: an open and variable system to be seen no less in its underlying concept than in sublime and delicate paintings. With their leaning toward an infinity which is not postponed to the end of time but which, instead, takes place today and thus is entrusted to each of us, these paintings might be reminiscent of the German Romantics' *Blaue Blumen*. Contemplation of the essence of this system of fragments, of the *arché*, the *principio*, the beginning of this *tekton*, of this mode of construction that typifies the contemporary world, is, finally, the focus of his praxis. Kiaer's art made it clear to me that one doesn't combat one “post-” with another, nor indeed

by way of any improbable translation of an "alter-," which in many ways boils down to the same thing. The solution, instead, lies in holding the ground on which one already stands, revealing, rendering unto the power of the image that which is already there, that which makes it so that we are what we are. Revealing, that's to say, that essence of art or of creativity that's always at our side, that conducts us to ourselves, recalling us to the ethical imperative of revealing that essence, of becoming our essence, of becoming what we are.

This mode of operation, this radical search for essence, for an essence in becoming and always to be achieved, is all the more evident in the work of Helen Mirra. Inserted somewhat hastily into the ranks of American neo-conceptualism, Mirra is a rare example of an American artist who is capable of uniting philosophical reflection, the founding themes of western thought, with considerable visual power. Her works investigate nature and history, life and biography, the notion of the voyage, within a complex but also simple idea of mapping. Her explicit cultural references are many and various: from Friedrich Froebel to W. G. Sebald, from John Dewey to William James, and on to that great "walker" named Robert Walser. But on viewing her found (re-found) objects, the *Wunderkammer* that the results of her creative gesture tend to create, one also remembers the visionary tales of Herman Melville. Her objects, once isolated and inserted into a narrative frame, grow animated, recounting secret and incredible stories: nature is once again alive in the gesture that grasps it and that couches it in words or images. Mirra makes nature visible; she turns it into nature through art. In this sense, her art is a form of ecology, in the most radical sense of the term: an art of nature and the necessary mode of poetic thought that can truly render it something other than an artifact or product. One refers to her art as pragmatistic not only because of her explicit references to the founding fathers of American Pragmatism (Peirce, Dewey and James), and not entirely because of the roots she sinks into American culture; it's rather that the meaning of her works is entirely imbedded in what they permit her to do. Art is a practice, a way of doing things, a pragmatism, a praxis. The problem of the meaning of the work is in no way redirected to any ulterior sphere of meaning (cultural, historical, ideological, or the tradition of art), but instead is wholly within the work; in the relationship it institutes with space; in its entirely direct relationship, with no possible mediation, with the experience of the viewer. The elementary objects that make up her installations are there to form the alphabets and signs that will aid the construction of a new discourse (on nature and our role within it), or the deciphering of a map that allows us to perceive our position in the cosmos: a cosmos understood not so much as an abstract and universal entity, but as the place of our journey on this earth, here and now, as it lies beneath our feet, within the reach of our fingertips. The art of Helen Mirra, like that

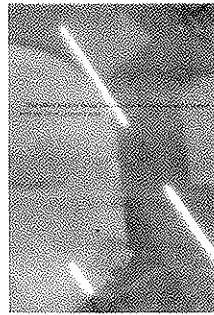
of other artists (Francisco Tropea, at least, must be mentioned) is strictly connected with a first philosophy, a philosophy of nature, a search for the meaning of that irreflexive obviousness which is Nature. Basically, her entire body of work might bear the title *De rerum natura*. Not a first philosophy, but a first art.

Essential art thus points out the need for a praxis that takes account of the always inaugural, initial character of the gesture of the making of art. That gesture is concerned with the frequentation of a beginning, with the opening of a road on the part of the subject towards him/herself.

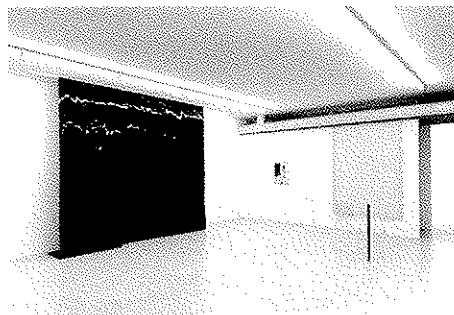
It's in the work of Thea Djordjadze that this search for an identity grows most clear, this search for a gaze turned back upon itself, and on the way the self proceeds to shape itself within a space that at the very same time is no less anonymous than intimate. Djordjadze is a complex artist in whom many different dimensions—in appearance nearly opposed to one another—come together. On the one hand, we find extremely fragile materials, or materials from a domestic context: ceramics, sponges, silicone, fabrics, soaps, clay. On the other, decidedly cold metallic structures with a tendency toward abstraction delineate themselves in space. Djordjadze has the ability to hold these two dimensions together; she has the creative power that's necessary in order to be able to reveal how abstraction dissolves into the fragility of organic materials, and how these materials find an order in geometry. Basically, her art leads one to think of Spinoza's *Ethics*, of his demonstrations, *more geometrico*, of the incandescent material of the affects. An art that searches for an ethic by way of the freedom of its materials. An art in which words become things, and where the meaning of a word is what that word does. A daring and courageous attempt to hold together necessity and freedom: necessity as entailed by materials and compositional rules; freedom as expressed by a gesture that can't be contained within the confines of pure form or programmatic process. The fusion of these two dimensions holds the essential structure of art.

Experimentation on a great variety of media, as practiced by Thea Djordjadze, shows no complicity with the mediatic eclecticism of the art system, but seems instead to arise from the attempt to sound the limits of the freedom of art, its possible deviations and errancies among tumults and rocky shallows in the not always luminous territories of the sudden pools and currents of the river of life.

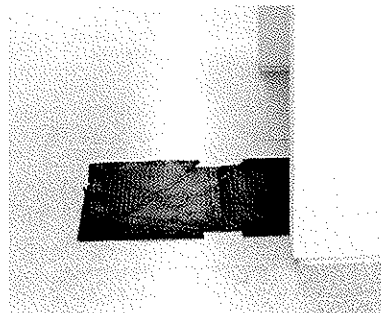
As though charged with residues of time, its banks show stabilized trees, African beetles, spiders, snails, clods of earth painted gold and containing living creatures, anamorphic images of metaphysical subjects reflected on a surface made of mint syrup. Gennari is a metaphysical



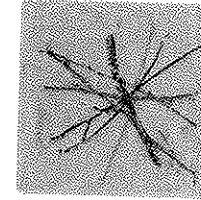
Ian Kiaer
Statement, 2010
 Stampa a getto d'inchiostro / Inkjet print
 29 × 19,5 cm



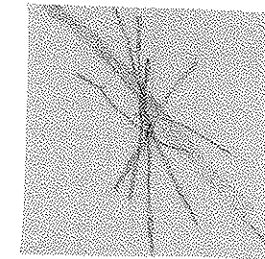
Melnikov project, black facade, 2011
 Carta, inchiostro, vetro, legno, plastica, telo di cotone /
 Paper, ink, glass, wood, plastic, cotton sheet
 Dimensioni variabili / Variable dimension



Melnikov project, corner, 2011
 Gomma / Rubber
 72,5 x 51 cm

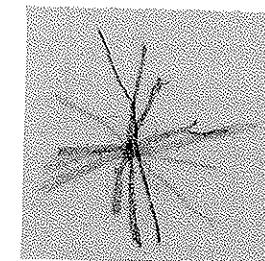


Helen Mirra
Statement, 2010
 Olio su lino / Oil on linen
 18,5 × 18,5 cm

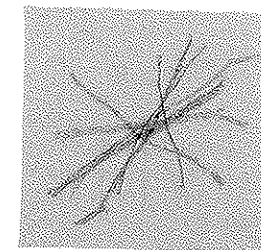


Hourly directional field recordings, Massachusetts, 2010 (progetto / project)

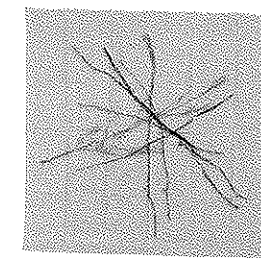
- 18 October
 Olio su lino / Oil on linen
 155 × 155 cm



- 28 October
 Olio e grafite su lino / Oil and graphite on linen
 155 × 155 cm



- 31 October
 Olio e grafite su lino / Oil and graphite on linen
 155 × 155 cm



- 7 November
 Olio su lino / Oil on linen
 155 × 155 cm