

MEMORIES OF A RAINY SEASON

Christopher Sand-Iversen

In the 17th century the existence of zoophytes was eagerly discussed by learned men all around Europe, one of the most striking of these extraordinary living things being the lamb-bearing tree, the Barometz plant which grew the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary as a fruit. The Danish physician and owner of a cabinet of curiosities Ole Worm, famous among other things for proving that what was said to be the horn of a unicorn was in fact the tusk of a narwhale, took a sceptical view of the existence of the lamb-bearing tree, but as the topic of zoophytes was in his day still addressed with great seriousness, he went into detail about it in the catalogue of his cabinet, the Museum Wormianum. He traces the story back to Julius Caesar Scaliger via Athanasius Kircher, who offers a drawing of the tree, more a low growing leafy bush from the middle of which a slender stem rises, blossoming into the underbelly of the lamb, which is thus held aloft, its legs and head dangling.

Among the objects that make up Ane Fabricius Christiansen's ongoing laboratory, begun during a residency in Bangkok, is a creamy white curved form that might be a large nut or a fat grub, from the outer curve of which a slender stem or horn extends, ending in a point. It lies on one of the creamy grey planes of the metal shelving system, labelled with a small piece of tape on which is written information about the material, firing temperature, origin. It has its place in the inventory of the laboratory's temporary results. Her working process is almost scientific, a form of primary research, in which she experiments with the inherent properties of clay according to methodological approaches. During the work she discovers characteristics in the clay which she continues to explore, developing her work in relation to them. The objects on the shelves are a selection that illustrates the development of a number of different experiments; they are discoveries about the material which she finds it interesting to explore further, whether they arise from technically challenging processes or from the repurposing of scraps collected in the workshop.

Cabinets of curiosities were concerned with the display of rare and costly objects, intended to reflect the extent of the owner's knowledge of the world, and by extension his power over it. They appeared from the Renaissance onwards, at the beginning of what would develop into the Enlightenment passion for categorising and classifying, for ordering the world. Yet since they stand at the beginning of this development many of their categories may seem strange to us, with archaeological finds, artworks, and entirely fanciful objects appearing side by side. Today it may be argued that we have passed through the age of -onomies and -ologies and are emerging from the other side, our habitual categories and classifications becoming insufficient to encompass the increasingly detailed and unexpected knowledge of the world which contemporary science reveals. It is a time in which the certainties of our established and entrenched ordering systems, which had seemed so secure and self-evident for so long, are being made to seem arbitrary like those of the cabinet of curiosities.

The fact that we cannot categorise the objects in Christiansen's laboratory as one type of thing or another fascinates. We recognise, but cannot classify, and a strong attraction to their in-betweenness takes hold. Perhaps they remind us in ways we can barely chart of the transformations that were once fundamental to man. The kinds of transformations to be found in the myths of Australian Aborigines and of South American tribes or in the metamorphoses of Greco-Roman myths, transformations that aid flight or pursuit, transformations that give birth and increase life. As far back in time as mankind was in the sway of transformation it was likewise in the sway of what Elias Canetti calls the figure, or the totem: "Its shape is clear and limited in every respect. It is not a natural object, but a creation of man; it is his escape from the ceaseless flux of transformation. (It should not, incidentally, be confused with the 'kinds' or 'species' of modern science.)"

These "archaic figures", for example the simultaneously animal and human gods of the Egyptians, "are regarded as beings belonging to an age of myth, a period in which metamorphosis was the common gift of all creatures and constantly practised. It has often been pointed out how *fluid* the world was then. ... These earliest figures are representations of the *process* of transformation. From the unending flux of innumerable possible transformations, one is picked out and given permanent form. The very process of transformation, or rather a particular instance of it, is secured forever and thus, in comparison with all those which are excluded, is filled with special significance. ... We must realise that the *figure* originates, not as something simple, but as something which to us seems complex and is thus quite different from our modern conception of a figure. Originally it expressed both the process of transformation *and* its result."

What attracts us is perhaps the indication of fluidity and the representation of transformation, which we through centuries of rationalism have lost our feeling for, permanent forms having come to take a dominant position in our consciousness. A mass of twig-like stems with splayed 'roots' at the bottom might be the image of a group of trees at the edge of a great tropical river, or alternatively the long legs and 'crow's feet' of some exotic bird. It is also important to note that the mythical transformations which Canetti outlines in the fluid world of early peoples is focused on human-animal or human-plant metamorphoses. Here there is also the exploration of the material itself, a testing of the limits of matter as force and energy. A joint-like clump of clay from which long curving forms extend might be branches, or the unpleasantly long and powerful legs of a large species of spider. This object not only oscillates between plant and animal, its very material slips between definitions too. Produced through the building up of thin layers of clay and glaze around a high-fired core of clay formed like a branch, in the firing process the layers split from themselves as the clay wanted to give, to move, and glided along the slippery glaze trapped between them, forcing the form to telescope out along its own construction. The objects slip between categories, as though even after firing and vitrification they continue to represent the matter's energy.

In the midst of the Rainy Season, the clay made known to Ane Fabricius Christiansen its animate relationship with water. Experimenting with pouring liquid clay over various suspended cores of clay and local flora, she gradually learned to control the material. She learned how to both stop it from and cause it to crack as it dried and contracted: she learned how to understand its interaction with water. Then the Rainy Season came and the humidity changed dramatically, changing the behaviour of the clay — it demonstrated itself as force and energy rather than matter. What she had learned about the local Thai clay in her working process, how it reacted, how long before it was ready for the next step, had to be revised. The ashes of local plants and volcanic basalt from the region also played their part in the chemical reactions.

At home in Denmark she discovered that the clay she usually uses reacts differently during working, drying, and firing. The process of working both with and against nature in order to achieve the desired effect proves never to be quite finished. In this sense she explores and discovers properties in her materials in the same way that recent theoretical discourses explore the vibrancy or actant quality of that which we have become used to calling ‘objects’ and ‘matter’, and the ways in which nonhuman living things may be said to engage in semiosis and so represent the world around them — a detaching of materiality from the figures of the passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused. In common with these ideas her working process articulates that in relearning how to live in and with nature as a result of the demise in our age of the idea of the omniscient human, we must also accept a renewed, non-ritualised sense of that *fluidity* of the world.

In Christiansen’s laboratory, scrapings of clay that almost look like residual matter, twisting and curling shrivels, striated or smooth according to how damp they were at the moment of their forming through partition, are carefully labelled in the places assigned to them on the shelving system. As though the temporary results of her experiments, their slippage between categories, are uncomfortable in their intimation of a return to ceaseless flux, and must be given a place in which to rest. Yet where she has removed the objects from their suspended state, in which their forms were built up, and smoothed over the holes and joints, the clay remembers the pressure of her fingers, unavoidably forming a subtle mark that the firing burns into permanence. As though the clay, in retreating from energy to matter, bears with it a reminder of the relationship of force with which it interacts with the human. A reminder that the meeting of life and matter in an exchange of energy can never be without mark-making, without both transformation and its result.

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