



Rochelle Goldberg

No Where, Now Here

ballistic game. As it colonizes the soil, some shoots are crushed and rendered inert by the ceramic masses, while others vacate their bed to spread out and inhabit the coils.

If there is a center, a hybrid figure is facing away from it. Made of metal and ceramic, it acts as a link between the metal arcs and the masses. What houses its head is an ageless, genderless face. Linear traits carve a prominent expression although its eyes may be open or closed. Its body has no content, held together only by straight and concentric frames. Freed from any kind of reference, it soars resolutely outward, away from the center of the plot. It might be a symbol of the mystic weightlessness of thought on a territory indifferent to reason.

I The plot

On its polyester bed, a seed drinks as it grows and gradually expands. The granular, earth-toned chia inhabits the rust-colored fabric, fed by water. *Settling in*. Little by little it will lose its brownness as it takes on the vibrant color of chlorophyll. *Emergence*. Stems bloom with narrow oval petals. They soar, defying gravity. There are droves of them, absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. *Decline*. At the end of the cycle or for lack of water, the stems sag, abruptly darken, then dehydrate and turn yellow.

This multi-aged territory is inlaid with a blackened metal structure that cuts through it. Sometimes hidden in plots of fresh, verdant ground, it traces geometric lines across the floor. The metal undulates, rising in arcs or vertical lines before falling again, on the hunt for perspective. The frames sequence the terrain in order to transform it into a conquered zone: They organize the diversity by delimiting discrete spaces and establishing points of view.

Between the floor and the ceiling, the molded earth has given rise to forms created for the eyes. They are fired, covered by layers of glaze with metallic and refractive accents. From silver to black, sometimes tinged with green or brown, the oscillating hues of these objects reflect their environment. Though the masses are stationary, their traits engender the illusion of movement. They writhe, or perhaps they coil. While the contours seem to outline primitive birds and attaché cases, their contents are masses of intertwined snakes. The result is a form torn between its contours and contents. In their entanglement, each follows or counteracts the other. Pelican eye, briefcase lock, wings and beaks, snakeskin. There seem to be no rules here, only a multiplicity of facts after the battle. Between the snake, briefcase or pelican, which of them is prey and which is predator? With the cross-stitching of the entanglement, over under inside outside melt into one another. The chia also takes part in this canni-

II Shaking up the order

At first glance, the work *No Where, Now Here* conceived by Rochelle Goldberg could seem like a simple scene taken from a fantastic or post-apocalyptic tale and elaborated in three dimensions. Dark pelicans and snakes are bathing in a swamp, protected by a mysterious gardener. But closer inspection of its construction and movement reveals a never-ending process of emergence, death and mutation like the one described above. *No Where, Now Here*, is a tableau vivant that refuses to rest.

What enables it to play so intensively is a precise structure conceived by the artist, one that can be ordered in four intersecting planes. On the first plane is a polyester carpet covering a room. It could be called a “base” that supports an exhibition. Above it, within a limited area, sprouting chia seeds at various stages of growth make up the second plane. Let us call this “the landscape”. The third plane comes next, the “perspective”. Black metal bars divide up the space in order to provide visibility. A “narrative” is created by a set of figurative and hybrid ceramics: pelican-like and briefcase-based forms composed of snake bodies spread around a mystic figure. Base, landscape, perspective, and narrative are the operators that allow us to compose a story in the midst of diversity. This structure recalls basic systems of representation like those established in the history of classical art.

Goldberg uses these well. Indeed, a historical painting was on her mind when she conceived the work: the *Madonna of the Meadow* (circa 1505), by Venetian artist Giovanni Bellini. Its narrative is ordered by a set of specific rules. A Virgin-and-Child is at the center of a pyramidal structure containing a sprawling rural landscape. Behind the central figure, a sequence of motifs summons a symbolic coding: a snake, an eagle, a wading bird. If we assume it to be an official vision of the Venetian republic within its sixteenth-century

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context, we might read it as an allegory for devotion and protection for Venice.

But let us take a closer look: although most history books purport to identify the species of the three animals, much uncertainty can be revealed in the painting. First of all, identities seem to be unstable. The bird on the ground may not be a wading bird, while the raptor perched on a branch may not be an eagle but rather a vulture. Thus the symbolism is also open to question. If the black bird were a raven, it would portend death. And if it were an eagle, it would suggest victory. The outcome therefore remains unresolved and open. Furthermore, some of the perspective at play defies natural laws and hunts for other territories. The snake in the background, situated to the left of the Madonna, is depicted with the tip of its tail breaking the hem of the Virgin’s gown in the foreground. The snake is equally threatening to both to the wading bird in the mid-ground, and the Virgin seated in the foreground. Slightly lower, the bodies of certain elements fade into transparencies. A seam extends the line sharply separating grassy land from dry ground. Two bulls are represented on this arid soil. The fence behind them shows through the diaphanous body of one of the two.

Unstable identities, transparent bodies, a perspectival chase: the *Madonna of the Meadow* can be seen as a battlefield staging the rules of representation. Elements are divested of their usual function, intermingling and destabilizing structural orders. In fact, the painting was created during a major period of reconfiguration for the Venetians. Their world was in peril. The Treaty of Blois, signed in 1504, set the stage for a war against Venice, and the Americas had been discovered only a few years earlier. The opening of new geographical territories called for a redefinition of thought categories. But this was a slow process. Reaching for one point while still rooted in the other, migrating thought occurs in resistance to categorization.

III Breaking through

Let us return to the four distinct planes of *No Where, Now Here*, and consider how Goldberg destabilizes the structural order she crafted. The base and the landscape are, in fact, taken hostage together. The artificial carpet adapts to become the chia’s bed, which in turn adapts to grow. Perspectival zones no longer converge towards a single point, but unravel as a set of frames offering a variety of possible scenarios. Boundaries fade, the contours of bodies slacken. Each entity acquires a thwarted ontology.¹ Am I seeing a snake nest, or an attaché case? Do I have to choose, or can I accept a hybrid of both? Unable to settle on normative categories, our own thoughts are forced to migrate incessantly from one coordinate to another. Boundaries, thresholds, essences, and elements are sliding, upsetting established systems. If unstable identities, transparencies and a perspectival chase are the core of the battlefield in Bellini’s paint-

ing, *No Where, Now Here* enlists material vitality and its natural laws to destabilize its own order. They break through the structure from every direction and through everything. Firstly underneath, as the work’s base has a double role. Sometimes giving, sometimes receiving, the plastic fabric that irrigates the landscape also sustains the visitor’s steps. Secondly, through the outside: through scent, speed, temperature and touch, elements external to those Goldberg has placed in the work react and attract. Flies, ants, spiders—what was hidden in the walls is called out to join the habitat. Thirdly, through the inside: the intensified and fluctuating interior causes the work to dry out, die or grow. The natural laws are beyond the control of both the visitor and the artist: visitors are challenged, led to perceive the work as an unstable entity spreading towards them in an encompassing movement. As for Goldberg, she neither controls nor sanctions that which happens once the work is exhibited. She enables the piece to get caught up in the same flow it generates, granting it a form of autonomy. Both its fortune and its risk lie in its mutative potential.²

Since the mid-eighties, but much more intensively in the past ten years, many thinkers have been using materialist strategies to revise and challenge the boundaries of categories. For example, through the study of biology, zoologist and philosopher Donna Haraway works on the meeting of species,³ and physicist and philosopher Karen Barad uses physics to develop the notion of entanglement.⁴ Although their approaches are very specific, both materialist thinkers posit the study of living or animate entities as a paradigm for the elaboration of a philosophy. From electrons to dogs, entities are framed in such a way as to challenge the classification systems that place human beings in a fixed universe and separate them from the rest of their environment. New categories are built, taking fluid ontologies into account. Animal/human, inert/living, immaterial/material: these and other modern dichotomies are revised to give way to inter-species dynamics, and to further assert the interactive spaces between bodies.

IV Holding it back

Goldberg also has a materialist approach. She stages the work into play through both its material properties and laws of interaction. With precision and risk, she activates the diversity in a whole. Chia, plastic fabric, water, fired clay: everything is brought to life and integrated into an unclassified eco-system. But are the concerns of those materialist thinkers the same as Goldberg’s? Barad and Haraway are working on feminist and ethical territory. Their works lay the foundations for a more horizontal relationship between entities, one that calls for an overhaul of anthropocentric and hegemonic constructions. Their studies seek to provide an image that would encompass diversity as a co-existing whole. Some of them, especially Haraway,⁵ see an urgent need for human beings to change their dominant and normative attitude towards the world. Whether one calls it the Capitalocene or the Anthropocene, humans have caused far too

much damage to the planet. Haraway has developed the notions of the Chthulucene⁶ and the cyborg⁷ to give humans a sense of community with the whole world. She says we have to “make kin”—be a family—with all of the other entities that inhabit the planet.

Could *No Where, Now Here* be interpreted as a parable of openness among all things, as Chthulucene or cyborg narratives? We are tempted to make it the bed of our utopia and put an end to this interpretation. Indeed, living entities that determine the whole movement of the work display an abandon which recalls a kind of openness. A feeling of welcoming and attraction is conveyed to viewers when they perceive the co-existence of natural and artificial, inert and active materials. But this is not the whole story of the work, and here we must remain faithful to the description of *No Where Now Here* given earlier, not just one side of it. Conversely to these narratives, there are also fixed, structuring elements that hold back the work’s thrust towards unlimited openness: stubborn essences, dominating movements, and resisting frames and images are determinant elements of the work, without which it would lose its strength.

First of all, it is only because Goldberg set up precise rules of representation that they could later be put into play: base, landscape, perspective, narrative. Each element had to be classified and determined in order to be destabilized afterward. The fixed and deterministic structure is part of the work and must be taken into account. Second, mirroring the feeling of openness, one must also perceive the threatening spirit that pervades the piece. The somber, even monstrous figures, including an outward-facing humanoid, are far from welcoming. Their layers of glaze with metallic accents evoke a dark atmosphere, resistant to human presence. Third, it is not a peaceful scene but more of a battlefield designed to stage the interaction between the living and the inert. We are not allowed the idealism that underlies narratives like that of the Chthulucene; it would dissolve the strength of the interactions between the elements put into play. *No Where, Now Here* is a ground full of obstacles and intimidation games whose mutant and volatile players react to its rules, either breaking or following them.

Positing an order, then putting it into play. Restricting, growing, causing a reaction. Opening it and letting it contaminate beyond its own framework. Pausing, proceeding to attack. Breaking the rules, adapting or beating a retreat. Stepping back, seeing what has changed and starting again. Risking loss here because it is also a chance to gain there. No Where, Now Here represents an active movement of thought that no longer has any choice but to be put into play.

Epilogue

Camouflaged on a beam that crosses the exhibition ceiling, Goldberg has placed a final figure in her work. (Here let us recall Bellini’s painting and his enigmatic black bird.) Its white wooden form melts into the whiteness of the roof and overlooks the ground. It represents a one-eyed owl, a cyclops. Tilted downward, its omnipresent eye watches over both the work and visitors. The move towards a bird’s-eye view, an exaggerated and omniscient vertical, offers a perspectival shift. This bystander on a perched remove is by no means a safe escape, but it offers something. The owl, a philosophical symbol,⁸ invites us to continue the restless movement of the work. No less than the elements Goldberg has staged in *No Where, Now Here*, thought is a material that must be acted upon. We cannot be at rest today. If not at first glance, it is then with a closer look, careful observation, reality will prove to be thwarted by its contents. Mutant and stubborn, colonizing and welcoming, reality both uses and breaks through the categories established by the modern mind. An artwork relies on its ability to give an imperative need to consider it, and then migrate toward the contemporary era that is ours.

^[1] In philosophy, ontology is the science of “being”.

^[2] The work requires special attention. The institution housing it must maintain it by watering the chia seeds during the exhibition.

^[3] Donna J. Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

^[4] Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

^[5] See Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Staying with the Trouble”, conference at Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene, May 2014.

^[6] Donna J. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

^[7] Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s”, in Socialist Review, no. 80 (1985).

^[8] The owl is a symbol of knowledge, wisdom and philosophy. In Greek mythology, the owl is the animal that symbolizes Athena, the goddess of wisdom. German philosopher Friedrich Hegel later used it as an image of philosophy: “The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk”, in “Preface”, Elements of the Philosophy of Right (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1820]).

