

**NATURE IS AN  
OBTUSE MATTER**

Angela Vettese, 2012

*Elisabetta Di Maggio, Dis-nascere*

Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa

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The rite of life and its inevitable propagation – with dry branches being left sometimes to die and sometimes to live with an exaggerated vitality – are repeated throughout the entire repertoire of Elisabetta Di Maggio. Her sources are not only anthropological, botanical and scientific illustrations in general, but also lace and wallpaper patterns, seen as the translation by man of nature's tendency to repeat, permute and constantly proliferate in an unaltered way, if possible – although this is often upset by trauma and shocks.

In the Palazzetto Tito installation, resting on a long aluminium table that serves as an introduction to the exhibition, there is a display cabinet with a giant, concave leaf, cut with the patience of a surgeon along the lines where the lymph used to flow, before being paralysed by death. In another cabinet, on two levels, there is the outline of a nerve cell cut out of paper in a three-dimensional form, as in the body; and then, under something resembling exaggeratedly large laboratory glassware, more cell-like structures.

Elisabetta Di Maggio takes her subjects from the real world and reads them as structures of force with energy flows running through them. Her cutting work, starting as an imitation of embroidery but soon distancing itself from the restricted field of female handiwork, serves the purpose of highlighting two salient elements of life: the network of communications needed to transmit information on one's own regenerating, and the time needed for this action to take place. The works resolve themselves in constructions that are often extremely delicate, such as in the small room lined with tissue paper cuttings in a phantasmal, three-dimensional version of wallpaper. The forms may appear fragile, but they reflect strong and invincible tendencies of vital processes. For this reason they are also the result of an interminable, disciplined and solitary physical process, so fierce as to make one think (although the artist has never wanted to say it) of a performance that broadens out day after day.

Years ago she started cutting the plaster on the walls of her home, carving out a repetitive, decorative pattern with hard, very sharp cutters.

Slowly, at a rate of about ten square centimetres a day, she uncovered the different layers of paint on the wall, decorating – for once – not by covering but by revealing the different lives the place had lived, from light green to pale pink, right down to the bare mortar and grey damp stains. Shortly afterwards, the same intense process began on a wall of the Bevilacqua La Masa offices, to be interrupted by the birth of her son, Andrea. It was there that the delving into lived material began, which, over the last ten years, has come to mark the distinctive maturity of her working methods.

“Lived material”, which Elisabetta Di Maggio works on by carving it, cutting it, scratching it, weakening it and piercing it and transforming it in such a way as to emphasise its force lines, actually means all material, both living and not living, provided that it starts from a context in which there lives some form of existence. Us men, for example, but not only. A house is the material in which a human being lives, the network formed by the river Po and its tributaries is the place where, by means of the water, a vast range of beings live or are transported. The forms that the material assumes in its spreading and organising are the artist’s field of action, that which she describes and accentuates, including in it the movements, the lines. The apparently fragile aspect of the work is thus turned on its head and becomes its opposite, with a visual impact which, while not without a participatory element, is basically that of the rawness of reality.

In another room, on white panels made of the same penetrable material that entomologists use, bizarre lines (made with the pins used for pinning insects in scientific collections) mark out the shapes of different flying butterflies: Nymphalidae, Papilionidae and Uraniidae. According to recent studies, butterflies have three ways of moving their wings, none of which allows them to fly in a straight line. Their flight, however, is anything but aimless. Each line, therefore, is the resultant of the purpose, the chosen type of flight and the air turbulence that forces the insect to change its course continually.

In yet another room there are three *Victoria Regia* water lily leaves – so huge that, in their places of origin, they used to be used for rocking babies to sleep – taken from the Botanical Gardens in Padua and displayed with the hidden side exposed. Although dehydrated and shrunken, the network of veins that hydrated the living leaf are visible. In one corner, branches of ivy have been partially rehydrated with glycerine to allow the spaces between the lymphatic vessels to be removed with scalpels, and partially left to dry so as to make evident the innate twisting and curling tendencies in their structure. A number of these branches, despite their apparent weakness, can come together to form a support column – we all know how the tender ivy attaches and grips to become stronger than the trunk or wall it grows on.

One room is mainly about thorns, or rather, the means of defence of living material. The tendency here is towards a construction of space in quite regular patterns, with the rhythms altering only in specific cases – an arid season, excessive rain, the effect of wind or parasites,

a poor feeding period or an illness. Arranged according to a set rule but with a flexible adaptability, hence, there are also the thorns on a rose branch, which the artist embroiders on sheets of A4 – standard and, these too, repetitive; thorns or the vertebrae on the spinal cord of a mammal, sculpted in flesh-coloured soap; or on the surfaces of prickly husks, displayed unaltered under lightweight, unstable display cabinets.

Man constructs his world according to the same basic rules. In the last room we see what looks like Chinese boxes with blocks resembling those used in parlour games such as mah-jong or dominoes. By their smell, we realise they are made of soap. Arranged like puzzles, yellowed over time and from the chemical reaction of the fats to the light, the street maps of a Baroque Paris, Mexico City and the Casbah of Algiers have been carved out like monochrome relief models, each one differing according to its prevailing sinuosity or geometrical form, but with a surprising revelation, namely, that town planning does no more than persist with the innate planning to be found also in spontaneous agglomerations. Rhizomes are what we are made of and rhizomes are what we reproduce.

Back to the first room. Here we see drawings of cells, viruses, vegetables, towns, railways, architectural designs, lace and decorations – ideas put together on a wall of the artist's home and then brought to the gallery; her work album, where everything is composed in a mesh of paratactical points and repeated analogous structures.

The entire work thus takes on the flavour of a reflection on our own existing as parts of a whole that tends to repeat certain laws of fractal growth. The apparent emotiveness is re-read by the precision of the artist's skill. The sign of an unexhausted will which Schopenhauer saw as coinciding with life itself. At the end of this excursus – heartfelt and yet detached, enamoured and yet lucid – existence appears as something constantly oscillating between the mechanicalness of our fate and the desire for poetry and pleasure, induced by the spirit of survival to react, in a grid-like way, to danger and precariousness.

Life here is reduced to a skeletal form, probed and vivisected. Even the lines of the Paris and Berlin metros tell us of the need to go, the need to be there, the need to run – for the human community and cells and insects alike. The artist takes us back to an original preconscious or unconscious state, ossified and definitively stunned by the process of growth. The malaise that actually derives from ceaseless activity – of the artist and of nature, inasmuch as the one mirrors the other – seems to leave us with just one way out: action, doing, even when there is no goal and it becomes a form of meditation and, as such perhaps, merely an anaesthetic. Even the quest for beauty – without being taken in by the gracious appearance of the installations, which is an allurements and a consequence of the work but not its aim – can be a way to feel less. To be dis-born while accepting the need to exist.