Can you imagine a new, secular art pilgrimage tradition—one where visiting an exhibition or encountering an artwork becomes the ultimate, accessible way to find peace of mind and joy? In Persia, since ancient times, gardens have been physical and mental spaces created to inspire, but also to instruct people on how to navigate life, how to face the ethical and spiritual hardships we encounter along the way.

Today I declare that art and culture are the garden of life. Art is the tool we need to interpret what is happening to us.

—Chus Martínez

MUSEUMS AND
COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

ART MUSEUM PAPERS 03

THE CONTINUOUS CREATION OF LIFE PURPOSES

CHUS MARTÍNEZ

The continuous creation of life purposes

Chus Martínez

Some thinking around the exhibition; *A velvet ant, a flower and a bird*

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which this publication was made: the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. We recognise and respect the role that art, image-making, storytelling and oral traditions have held in maintaining a continuous culture that goes back over 65,000 years.

CONTEXTUAL INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, we have witnessed a growing number of exhibitions devoted to exploring the relationship between the human and the non-human. Although these connections may seem self-evident, the truth is that we must rekindle them in relation to many aspects of our present lives — from our increasing forgetfulness of how to live that connection with nature in our everyday existence and integrate it organically into our understanding of the world, to the very need to insist that material realities and living beings are intertwined — because otherwise, we fail to recognise them. This is a kind of a willed act, a necessity reinforced by the compartmentalised structures of our world that lead us to perceive everything in a fragmented, partial, individual way — tailored as our own interests.

In this sense, it is true that this exhibition concerns our relationship with nature — but in fact it is more about the necessity of cultivating many and varied relationships with the multiple realms that grant us an understanding of life itself. In recent weeks, I have come across countless headlines announcing the end of the culture of experts. Those who write them lament, with a certain melancholy, that the tidal wave of social media and other media phenomena has succeeded in bringing about the demise of the 'expert'. Now, they claim, each of us can become one. There is an entire current

of thought that defines this first quarter of the century as the era of *disintermediation*. The experts — the intermediaries — have vanished, giving way to the direct action of individuals. The layers that once separated those who *knew* from those who *did not know* have dissolved, and now it seems that *everyone* has the right to an opinion. At the same time — at least in the field that concerns me, the education of future artists and my work within the university — a new vocabulary has emerged, one that rewards only 'best practice'. *Best practice* and *excellence* are notions I would call *premium*; they seem capable of giving meaning to everything that is aspirational. After all, who would choose *bad practice* when *good practice* is available? Or who would willingly embrace mediocrity when the possibility of *excellence* is on offer?

Thus, we find a torrent of people who consider themselves experts in their own domains, in an environment where practices must be *excellent* and *outstanding*. In my mind, these two phenomena do not quite align. To speak frankly, however, I believe it is wonderful that experts are multiplying, even if they are self-proclaimed.

In my view, the coexistence of learned scholars deeply versed in a field and millions of individuals who believe themselves experts in micro-orders of the world can only compel us to invent a new order of relations between these two spheres. I am convinced that the rise of self-proclaimed experts forces the traditional order of expertise to open up its

language — to reach a wider audience — and to devise new ways of collaborating.

In the old order of things, traditional experts each inhabited their own 'room' — a laboratory, a department, a museum. Now, if they wish to counterbalance the sheer number of experts on the other side, so to speak, they will have to learn how to form teams. In the past, such efforts were labelled *interdisciplinary*. Yet the rigour and inflexibility of academic disciplines have grown so strong that most traditional experts still resist mingling — or working — in this way.

It is here that I would like to return to the question of *best practice*. Collaborative work, in my view, becomes impossible if we cling to that nomenclature — if we preserve the notion of a perfect, disciplinary ideal. *Best practice* and *excellence* have introduced what I can only describe as a detestable supremacist ideal. Practices are proclaimed as 'good' and 'excellent', yet what this truly conceals is a results-oriented mode of operation which, in many cases — if not all — is not only unworkable within certain fields of the humanities, such as artistic practice and education, but also profoundly undesirable.

On the one hand, we speak of diversity; on the other, we systematically eliminate those practices that are not deemed 'excellent', in a questionable purification that excludes the wilder, more precarious, experimental, absurd and unruly ways of working. The process of

sanitisation that has taken hold of academia and the various spheres of art is now so pervasive that it is increasingly difficult for anything genuinely new, strange or inspiring to emerge from within.

Yes, I know what you're thinking — and you're right. I believe that the emergence of self-proclaimed experts is, in a way, a natural reaction — a form of balance against a world increasingly managed and controlled by false promises of goodness and excellence, and against the natural human need, shared by billions, to find a sense of relevance and significance in this world.

In other words: for quite some time now, we have all been longing for a new avant-garde — the emergence of languages capable of rekindling hope, of sustaining, collectively, the belief that we are indeed capable of invention and delight all at once; languages capable of producing an eloquent sense of collective possibility, one that allows us to believe that a new world might yet come into being.

This new world, let me warn you, will be an irreverent one — ingenious and convivial rather than excellent — able to mingle with other worlds and to forge new forms of affiliation. Let us say that the world we should aspire to is a slightly more disordered one, and therefore a safer one: more capable of sheltering us, of creating nooks and folds in which we can truly be ourselves, instead of becoming beings cut from the same pattern.

THE EXHIBITION'S MIND

And this is where the idea of the exhibition comes in—as both a working method and a source of inspiration for becoming more unruly, less excellent. Exhibitions have traditionally been conceived as spaces for presenting artistic practices of the past and present according to a script, an order. Yet they could just as well be imagined as sources of inspiration for creating a new logic, a different experiential and verbal language capable of generating not one but many orders of connection.

We are all preoccupied with finding a space, a place, for the multiple histories, canons and identities that nourish our realities. At the same time, this search often turns not into a quest for an infinite space or even one as vast as that occupied by dominant histories, but into the pursuit of a slot, a drawer, a small compartment in which to conceal those other epistemologies and existential realities that require *worlds*, not mere *chapters*, in order to exist.

What, then, might help us to create infinite spaces—parallel universes that restore to us a vivid, experimental sense of what it means to *coexist*? Coexistence, after all, is a source of *bad practice*: the ongoing effort to find balance, to make room for the other in a regular, sustained way.

In this sense, we might say that the great difference between the exhibitions of the last century and those of this one lies

in their purpose. Today, we need to exhibit in order to grant ourselves freedom — to find ways of aligning past practices and definitions of intelligence with the forms of the future. Exhibitions will no longer be mere presentations, but *training grounds for experience* — spaces for generating infinite forms of disorder, incredibly fertile in intuitions and in new ways of relating materials, ideas, experiences and things that until now have appeared to us as belonging to entirely separate orders.

It was during the Middle Ages that a genre called bestiary emerged: a collection of descriptions of animals, both real and imaginary, each accompanied by a moral, religious or allegorical interpretation. Certain languages were especially quick to adapt allegorical and didactic prose and that was probably the reason why the philosopher Ramon Llull wrote *Llibre de les bèsties — The Book of Beasts* — as early as 1289 in the Catalan language. The book became a hit of the time because he gave the genre a radically new political purpose: the animals are no longer just symbols of virtue or vice, they are the actors in a narrative that explores power, justice and moral reasoning.

In being asked to explore the manifold and complex collections of the University of Melbourne and exhibit them under non-historical or non-academically conventional parameters, I came to the idea of calling the animal wisdom into account. Collections are complex entities

that emanate and sustain different kind of narratives: historical, cultural, economic, but also narratives about the history of materials and their functions. The expression 'artificial intelligence' has been contributing to the binary: natural versus inorganic. And this binary greatly contributes to the common belief that what humans do always has more value, since our doing creates inorganic artefacts and not nature. Hence my idea of creating an imaginary parliament of *beasts*—of living beings—presided over by three of their representatives: a velvet ant, a flower and a bird.

The ant—which is not truly an ant but a wasp—is a wise being, a connoisseur of materials and renewable energies. Recent research on a specific velvet ant (*Traumatomutilla bifurca*) found that its cuticle, or outer shell, absorbs more than 99% of visible light, making it one of the darkest biological materials ever measured. She inspires and stirs science to create solar conversion surfaces that mimic the hierarchical, light-trapping structures of the velvet ant's cuticle.

In this constellation, the flower is the mastermind of an ultimate code—a sun-fed intelligence that sustains itself through renewal—while the human-made computer, bound to external power, mirrors life imperfectly in its linear consumption. Flowers are active, intelligent agents that perceive their environment, integrate information and behave adaptively.

And finally, the bird brings to us a new understanding of the collective's role in the

interpretation and function of intelligence. As demonstrated by the work of Giorgio Parisi, awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2021, birds in flocks display a form of more-than-individual intelligence—an emergent cognition arising not from any single bird's mind, but from the dynamic relations among many. Parisi's models show that each bird acts locally, yet their interactions create global patterns of awareness and adaptation that no individual could achieve alone. This stands as ultimate proof that togetherness itself can generate a higher order of intelligence—a social body at once more fair-minded, more adaptive, and more fertile than any solitary mind.

The script of the exhibition is simple: each museum floor is presided over by a natural entity. In this confluence, the viewer finds themselves in a kind of garden where there is no pre-established order guiding the reading. Rather, an ecosystem has been created in which the analog (the objects) and the digital (the videos) interrelate to give rise to a fantastic mental realm.

At a time when our fragile intellectual life is dominated by fantasies of domination—when technology threatens to establish a new colonial hierarchy under the rule of the human—it becomes crucial to create training grounds for free thought, and to exercise new ways of forming connections and generating knowledge.

The ambition of this exhibition is to create multiple ongoing conversations about

the future of coexistence, and to collectively test how each community, group, body of knowledge or discipline wishes to contribute to the creation of a relevant society. What is a relevant society? For me, it is the shared sense that a group strives to define ways to improve the health of the common good and to give expression to the multiple forms of knowledge that a community brings together. To create eloquent languages capable of capturing interest and inspiring those who engage with them is an aim also shared by the museum.

FROM CABINET TO BRAIN

One of my inspirations is Mark Turner. Turner, a cognitive scientist and literary scholar best known for developing the theory of conceptual blending, writes: 'At the most basic levels of perception, of understanding, and of memory, blending is fundamental.'[1] Turner believes the brain doesn't think by separating ideas into clear, logical boxes or by following rigid rules (as Descartes imagined). We constantly make connections between different mental 'scenes' or ideas that the brain blends together into new mental spaces — new ideas, metaphors or ways of understanding. And from these blends, new meanings appear that weren't in the originating ideas — this is what Turner calls *emergent structure*. For Turner, the brain is a creative integration machine, not a calculating machine. If, in the past, imperial and colonial orders imposed a system of reading, a system of

production and a system of interpretation of the world, and modernity later embraced the idea of order as the embodiment of reason, it becomes interesting to consider that reversing the very idea of order may be the best way to respond to inherited problems. In other words, decolonisation is not merely a matter of restitution or of introducing new narratives; it must also involve the creation of disorder as a means to invent a different world. In this sense, we could speak of a shift from a Cartesian model of rationality to an integrative rationality, one capable of positively absorbing all the disorder of the world. It is important to emphasise that the ways of making art and culture are co-dependent on specific historical, geopolitical, economic and technological contexts. To invoke *rational disorder* means to call for experimentation with new forms of perception—forms that are more attuned to the current understanding of how our minds operate. Our conception of the mind has already changed and will continue to evolve in light of new technologies.

It is precisely the emergence of what we call 'artificial intelligence' that compels us to avoid, at least for a time, linear forms of organisation when creating exhibitions. Exhibitions today, more than ever, offer a field of study for analog modes of connection and thinking—modes we will increasingly need if we are to understand and limit our dependence on the digital tools we have created but still must learn to use properly.

Our experiential and creative behaviour is vitally important, and will become even more so, if we are to avoid falling into unbearable passivity or such deep demotivation that we lose any horizon of meaning. One could say that the renewed — since there have been several throughout history — interest in nature, in the practices of Indigenous peoples and in cultures that have preserved vernacular forms of knowledge is, to a great extent, a collective research project on how to face the arrival of artificial intelligences. To *disorder* does not mean to spill all content onto a surface.[2] Rather, it means that in our desire to establish new connections aimed at understanding, we move through countless intermediate steps in which we relate materials and ideas without fully knowing what the final outcome of that process will be.

We could call this method the ability of an exhibition to sustain intuition over time — intuition that remains open to collectivity. It is as if exhibition visits themselves were guided by the sharing of multiple and growing intuitions about our capacity to perceive and interpret what we see. The meaning of the exhibition, therefore, is not directed solely toward understanding each individual work, but toward the creation of families or constellations — groups of works and ideas that connect in different ways with each visit, and later, in our memory. Although it may seem an easy task, it is in fact

a complex exercise—both in its production and in its reception. How should we face it?

CHILDHOOD, TRAVEL

In recent years, I have become deeply interested in stories. The growing fascination with storytelling has many reasons behind it, but here I will try to elucidate my own. One of the main reasons is the realisation that stories—and their rather conventional narrative logic—manage to hold people's attention. In a moment as complex as the one our minds are currently facing, attention has become a precious commodity and, as such, it is subject to a continuous and ruthless predatory onslaught. More and more instances demand our attention, and thus its deficit seems to be an evolutionary response to this constant and unsustainable demand. The structure of stories soothes our attention. Since childhood, we have been familiar with the mechanisms of storytelling, which make it easy and even pleasant for us to follow their narrative thread. We do not expect major argumentative challenges or conceptual obstacles that we cannot overcome. This allows us to lower our guard and relax; it grants us the quiet happiness of being able to follow what is being told without feeling the constant urge to escape from it. To explore the world of storytelling is to explore many wonderful places at once: the transformation of writing into orality, the constant emergence of fantasy, and the

introduction of childhood as a condition that re-emerges within a world that both compels us and reminds us that we must be adults.

Orality, as a fundamental condition for transmission, interests me deeply. To transmit is such a complex and vital act that it has become a form of activism within my own practice. We acknowledge—often uncritically—the mainstream's immense capacity to transmit; we give it credit, we follow it, we admire it. Meanwhile, art and culture do not seem to share that great capacity for transmission and appear to have lost their eloquence, turning too often to morality, to 'good practice', and to notions of excellence as means of reaching others. Sadly, this has created around us a halo of opacity that is difficult to confront. Each time we struggle not to be boring, we often fall back into conventional modes of entertainment that end up being twice as boring—precisely because they are out of context. In truth, we have hardly explored how to transmit differently without imitating those who communicate in corporate ways.

What lies beyond that? In my view, nothing is more mischievous and subversive than being like a child.[3] Exploring childhood as a way of being in the world is something that deeply interests me, even if I have not yet explored it in all its breadth. There is nothing new about this, since at many moments in history the perception of the world through the lens of childhood has been invoked as a way of reprogramming the senses and language. I

insist on the importance of understanding this statement within the horizon of the emergence of artificial intelligence posing as mature, wise, expert — and adult. I suppose no one has yet thought that an artificial intelligence could be programmed by following the intelligence of Totoro and his young friends.

But those worlds are imaginable. It may sound like a fantasy, yet it is an important one — the fantasy of reversing the synchronisation between technology and adulthood. We endlessly repeat the importance of de-synchronising the Western historical horizon from that of cultures — many, far too many — still subjected to its colonial-temporal yoke. There is no single timeline; there is no linear sequence of events in which everything fits. So why can't we imagine a de-synchronisation of the timelines of 'maturity' that assume all minds are aligned within that same moment of life: adulthood. I understand that one of the functions of the exhibition — not only of this one, but of many others as well — should be to situate our perception within a world that I call 'childlike', for lack of a better notion. The creation of such a world in our senses and minds is clearly aimed at separating us — at least for a while — from the technological synchronisation machines in which we are immersed. This is not about judging the project of creating and implementing artificial intelligence — I am not the one to do so — but rather about creating

spatial and mental environments radically different from those that such a project entails. Believe me, this exhibition is one of them.

1. Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p. 110.

2. 'To disorder' can here be read as a coexisting notion with the term 'unlearning'. Unlearning arises from critiques of Eurocentric modernity and its systems of knowledge.

3. It is important to note that *the childlike*, or the possibility of situating oneself in a state of *childhood*, should not be confused with the search for an 'inner child' or with any essentialist interpretation that such a notion might imply.

Spanish born curator, Chus Martínez has a background in philosophy and art history. She is director of the Institute of Art Gender Nature at the FHNW Academy of Arts and Design in Basel, Switzerland, associate curator of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, TBA21, as well as curator at large at The Vuslat Foundation in Istanbul. Recent publications include 'The Oracle: On Fantasy and Freedom' edited by Chus Martínez (with Ajda Ana Kocutar) Sternberg Press (2025); 'The Complex Answer: On Art as a NonBinary Intelligence' Sternberg Press (2023); 'I Hear a New World! Revamping Public Programming with Joy' Friday Beyeler (2023); 'Like This. Natural Intelligence As Seen by Art', Hatje Cantz (2022); 'Coding Care' (edited together with Sabine Himmelsbach), Hatje Cantz (2022); 'The Wild Book of Inventions', Sternberg Press (2020); 'Corona Tales. Let Life Happen to You', Lenz, (2021). She is the guest curator of the exhibition *A velvet ant, a flower and a bird.*

This is one of three Papers commissioned by Art Museums at the University of Melbourne on the occasion of *A velvet ant, a flower and a bird* presented at the Potter Museum of Art (19 February-6 June 2026). The other Papers are written by Laura Tripaldi and Neha Choksi.

A velvet ant, a flower and a bird re-enacts a 'garden of knowledge' structured around three simple entities: a Velvet Ant, a flower and a bird. Each of these offers ways to envision intelligence as living, continually evolving, interconnected and interdependent.

In conceiving of this exhibition, Chus Martínez considered historic and contemporary material culture and art from a number of collections, including the University of Melbourne's Classics, Biology, and Art collections. As the theory of quantum paradigm proposes, here everything affects everything and is influenced by everything.

Art Museums Papers is a series of publications produced by Art Museums at the University of Melbourne and offers a platform for critical and creative engagement with Art Museums projects.

Colophon

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