

## Lois Weinberger

**Systema Naturæ** | solo exhibition | May 20 to September 18, 2016

opening Thursday, May 19, 6 - 9 p.m.

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*The Austrian artist Lois Weinberger occupies a unique place on the art scene: he operates as an interface between art and nature, challenging the concept of beauty using subtle anarchistic means. He considers himself to be a field researcher. In the 1970s, in a rural setting, he created artworks using the waste materials of civilisation. He then became interested in spontaneous vegetation that develops without human intervention.*

*"Systema Naturæ", his first solo show at Salle Principale, explores the diversity of his preoccupations. The meandering exhibition layout gradually reveals more than twenty recent or past works, some of which refer to projects he has carried out in public space. In addition to the works on show inside the gallery, we are presenting Transportable Gardens, an outdoor work activated over an extended period.*

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**Species / Genera / Family / Order / Class / Division / Kingdom / Empire / Living**

*A society's approach to plants is also a mirror image of itself.<sup>1</sup>*

Born in the Austrian Tyrol in 1947, Lois Weinberger is now a recognised figure in the international art field. The list of hundreds of exhibitions and works in public space he has produced over his career also reflects his presence at major influential art events: the São Paulo Biennale (1991), the Venice Biennale (2009), Documenta in Kassel (1997), and group and solo shows in many prestigious museums and art centres.

And yet approaching Lois Weinberger's work from this angle does not do justice to the characteristic features of his art. With a combination of modesty and conviction, he explores the relationships between Man and Nature. From this research field, which forms part and parcel of a single biotope along with his day-to-day life, he draws a principle of applied experimentation that shapes the way he works. To situate this position, where the professional is subordinate to the personal, it is useful to recall the notion of the "professional outsider" formulated by Pierre Bal-Blanc at the exhibition entitled "The Death of the Audience" (at Secession, Vienna, in 2009, in which the artist also took part): *By using this paradoxical expression, I wished to allude to [...] strategies in recent history that cut into institutional practices, movements, or artistic "parties"*

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<sup>1</sup> Bergit Arrends Jessica Ullrich, Lois Weinberger: « Lois Weinberger : Green Man » (interview), *ANTENNAE - The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, N° 18, 2011, London, p. 37.

[...] These artists stand at a distance, they do not intersect with attempts to define oneself as anti-, alter-, or neo-modern; they relate to the idea of being outside and also in-between.<sup>2</sup>

Describing the relationships that link and separate Man and Nature is an endless task, with implications that range from the universal to the infinitesimal. On the modest scale of this text, I propose to draw an analogy with the wide-ranging scientific classification enterprise that is taxonomy.

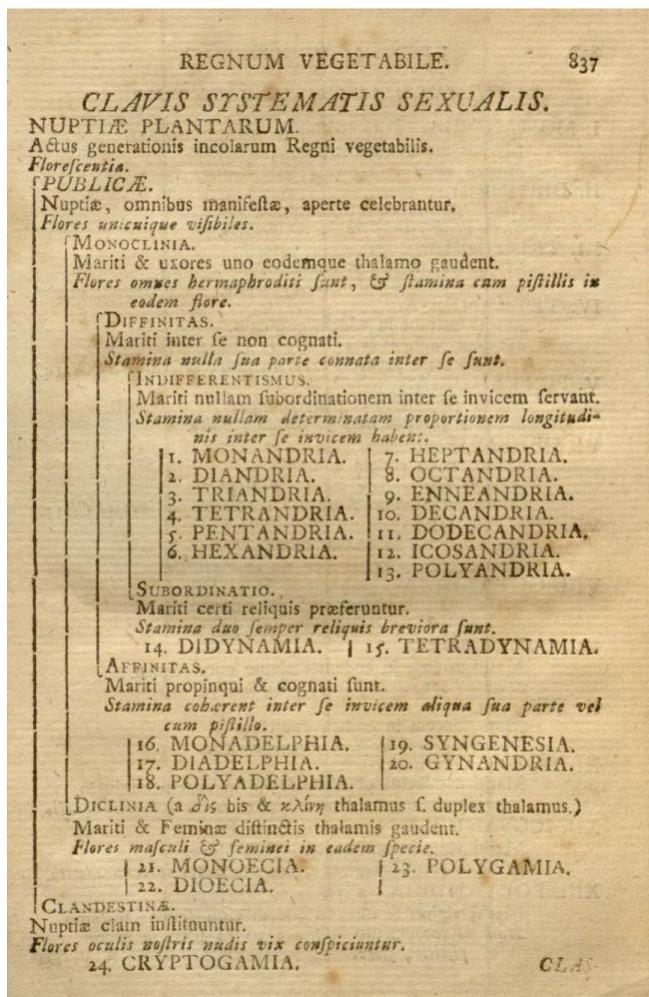


Chart mapping the "sexual system" of plants (*Systema naturæ*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, 1758, p. 837)

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the first edition of *System of nature through the three kingdoms of nature, according to classes, orders, genera and species, with characters, differences, synonyms, places*<sup>3</sup> was published. Written by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, it would profoundly transform the discipline of natural history. It laid down the foundations for the standard (Linnean) classification of living species, which was to be the dominant scientific paradigm until the 1960s, or even the early twenty-first century for certain schoolbooks, and some aspects of which are still applied today. Developed before the appearance of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, the classification is built on the certainty that species are fixed and organised in a pyramid of subordinated strata. Referenced in the title of this text, the names of these ranks makes use of a pronounced form of anthropocentrism, considered by

more recent studies to be insufficiently objective. Moreover it is expressed via a series of concepts that refer to a social order dating from the era of absolute monarchies. Consequently, this work of science refers not only to the subject being studied, but also to the historical and social conditions that predetermined its content at a transitional point between darkness and Enlightenment: the work, which meticulously establishes, in its successive editions, a

<sup>2</sup> *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, interview between Pierre Bal-Blanc and Elisabeth Lebovici, in Pierre Bal-Blanc, Agnes Falkner, Tina Lipsky, Karin Mihatsch, *Ver Sacrum / The Death of the Audience*, Seccession, Vienna / CAC Brétigny, 2011, p. 203

<sup>3</sup> Carl Linnaeus, *Systema naturæ per regna tria naturæ, secundum classes, ordines, genera, species, cum characteribus, differentiis, synonymis, locis*, Leiden, 1735.

nomenclature of countless plants, ends up implicitly providing us with a portrait of the scientist and his world.

*Systema Naturæ* can be used as a litmus test to monitor and measure the evolution of society since that time, including its current concerns, and to identify Lois Weinberger's position within it. Ultimately, for someone who says *I don't want to clutter this world up with art. I am a kind of functionary / who does not function that way*<sup>4</sup>, would it not be legitimate to compare his particular approach to the world to that of systematicians seeking the appropriate method for classifying all living things?

Instead of fixed, simplistic categories, Weinberger introduces open propositions that are more akin to the rhizome (also a term from biology) than to the hierarchical pyramid:

The "Empire" he proclaims is tentacular without being autocratic: *In 1988, I began to plant a ruderal area on the outskirts of Vienna that served as seed storage and distributor for unwanted plants, so-called weeds, underdogs.*<sup>5</sup>

His equivalent to the concept of a "Kingdom" is *[The] perfectly provisional realm: a term I developed in the early 1990s for my work. A perfectly provisional solution is a framework that just keeps from falling apart, but still works wonderfully, and doesn't cost anything.*<sup>6</sup>

As for "Division", his works do not seek to be topical at any cost, and yet, like other long-term undertakings, their relevance is confirmed by subsequent events: *At Documenta 1997, I planted a disused train track of 100 meters with neophytes<sup>7</sup> from southern and southeastern Europe, which was intended as a metaphor for the migration processes of our time [...] Dealing with the foreign, the notion of territory, and nationalism is implicit in my work.*<sup>8</sup>

The idea of "Classes", translated into his terms, might be demonstrated in the statement that *[the] actual garden can be found beneath / in the soil / one descends into it / only in so doing is it perceived – and above, partial results and remains.*<sup>9</sup>

His idea of "Order"? *The best gardeners are those / who abandon the garden.*<sup>10</sup> [...] *Ultimately, I described my approach to nature around 1990 using the term "precise carelessness."*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lois Weinberger, « Hajek Symposium Dinner Speech, 2013 » in *Lois Weinberger*, Innsbruck, Klocker Stiftung & Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Arrends, Ullrich, Weinberger, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> A neophyte is an exotic plant accidentally or intentionally introduced into the natural environment. Invasive species are those that spread rapidly to the detriment of native species. Their biological characteristics, such as rapid growth or high reproduction rates, allow them to compete with and supplant the typical species in a natural environment in the medium to long term. (Source : Wikipedia)

<sup>8</sup> Arrends, Ullrich, Weinberger, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Lois Weinberger, « Present Time Space – Hiriya Dump 1998 », in *Kunstforum international*, 145 (May – June 1999), p. 224. (reproduced in Tom Trevor, « Three Ecologies », in Philippe van Cauteren, *Lois Weinberger*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2013)

<sup>11</sup> Arrends, Ullrich, Weinberger, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

What is the "Family" he grew up in? *Nature was never a topic of discussion on my parents' farm, even though everything revolved around it. We lived off it and from it.*<sup>12</sup>

His theory of the evolution of "Species"? *Nature has nothing to do with general notions of purity.*<sup>13</sup> [...] *A counter-picture to visible nature / in which a flower is not only as brilliant as a ketchup bottle but can even be a ketchup bottle.*<sup>14</sup>

Based on these principles, Lois Weinberger has been able to develop a corpus of artworks that highlight a range of relationships that exist where nature and culture meet. The exponential number of concepts and fields of application that they introduce (language / etymology / categorisation / control / domestication / anarchy / rebellion / hegemony / religions / beliefs / folklore / animism / cannibalism / inertia / repetition / change / rhythm / geography / territory / architecture / urban planning / nature / space / public / society / enclosure / migrations / exclusion / circulation / medicine / cure / poison / exchange / freedom / economics / accumulation / value / waste / culture / agriculture / breeding / eradication...) ultimately reveals an on-going body of work with complex implications, comparable to a blueprint for society. Unlike the particular use he makes of the backslash (/) that punctuates his writings, no diagram or hierarchy can articulate the present or future connections between these elements; ultimately, for Lois Weinberger, the idea is to breathe life into a world, not into a system.

*Émile Ouroumov*

*Emile Ouroumov is an art critic and curator, born in 1979 in Bulgaria.*

*He has assisted the curators Hans Ulrich Obrist at the Serpentine Gallery, Odile Burluraux at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Pierre Bal-Blanc at the CAC Brétigny, and has also gained experience at gb agency in Paris and the conservation department / public programmes at MAMCO. He has curated exhibitions in France and abroad, such as "Theatre of Operations" (Théâtre de l'Usine, Geneva, 2015) and "The Galápagos Principle" (Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2013). His current research and prospective interests include the political nature of exhibition spaces, the conflicting porosity between the roles of the curator and the artist, the unstable formats of curating, the relationship between language and art and the paratext accompanying contemporary art exhibitions such as critical writing and press releases.*

*He is currently working on the exhibition "Tension Economy" for the art centre Parc Saint Léger (May – August 2016, with the participation of Lois Weinberger).*

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Lois Weinberger, *Present Time Space – Hiriya Dump 1998*, op. cit., p. 244. Cf. note 11.