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## An End without an End

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*The creature gazes into openness with all its eyes. But our eyes are as if they were reversed, and surround it, everywhere, like barriers against its free passage.*

R.M. Rilke. "Duino Elegies: The Eighth Elegy" (1912-1922)

Natural History collections exist in museums since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that these collections have to be subject not only to preventive, repair and restoration techniques, but also to priming techniques to avoid their decay and to allow their study at different organisation levels. The estimated figure for the currently existing natural history specimens and objects is 2,500 millions, distributed among 6,500 collections. A UK report claimed that there are 104 million samples of organisms in the 22 largest collections of the mentioned territory. The *Real Academia Española* (Royal Spanish Academy) defines collection as an ordered set of things, for their common elements within a class, that have been reunited by virtue of their special interest or value. We could say it is the set of specimens collected during the development of exploratory or research projects, contributing a specific knowledge.

Collections are always artificially divided, depending on their social purpose, we can differentiate collections for exhibition, dissemination, education or research. However, we can also classify them according to a historic outlook, as classic or new. How about the infinite collection? The collection that Nuria Rodríguez presents in *Natural History, The Infinite Collection* is an evocation, even reverential, of the natu-

ral object, of detailed, minute observation which is the basis of her work. It also refers to the source of inspiration, the aura that Benjamin would speak of in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, since Nuria's work recreates precisely that moment, the origin. I pause in the word origin, to bring Darwin's work to mind, since, with her own work, Nuria pays homage to those who made of observation their life, and who drew knowledge from natural study. Observation of nature is the mother of thought, would Adorno say in *Aesthetic Theory* "that [quality] through which the behaviour of works of art reflect violence and the dominion of empiric reality is more than analogy, the compactness of works of art as a unity in their multiplicity, immediately transfers the behaviour of dominion of nature to something removed from its reality". The artist's dialectics with the object are and have been a constant in aesthetic reflection in contemporary art, which has become, in C. Danto's words, "a privileged place for experiments in thought", and, as exciting and provocative this exhibition is, getting deep in these questions is not the purpose of the present text.

I must thank Nuria Rodríguez for generously sharing her conceptual knowledge, the maps elaborated with fragments of natures in which she represents that pictoric reality, distilled with that extremely subtle, delicate gaze.

I first saw Nuria's design work; she treats all around her with deep respect, and that was the key for that marvellous little piece that was the catalogue for Mery Sales' exhibition on María Zambrano. It was presented in May 2012 in the Sala de la Muralla. When we first considered this exhibition I did not doubt it for a second, Nuria Rodríguez brings us closer to infinity.

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## Painting and Gathering

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*We study what we find in the field: nothing is as useful as knowing those that surround us, that always accompany us, among whom we are born and among whom we will die; nothing is loftier than studying nature in its different manifestations: source of life, source of wealth, source of civilisation; enfolding sublime lessons.*

Odón de Buen.

*In general, the body of trees, just as that of other living beings, has skin, blood, flesh, nerves, veins, bones and marrow. The skin is the bark.*  
Pliny the Elder.

*In my opinion, the biosphere is unfathomable in the same manner as is the particular configuration of atoms that make up this pebble I am holding in my hand.*

Jacques Monod

In an old 1905 school handbook written by the oceanographer Odón de Buen, perceptive and forceful advocate of Darwin's theories opposed to ecclesiastical mistrust, nature is presented as a harmonious whole of lights and worlds. On the Earth's surface there are seas and continents, mountains and plains, rivers and lakes, plants and animals; all the beings in their most diverse and varied forms. The science that described nature from classic times was called, despite inexistence of written texts overlaying the occurrence of physical and biological phenomena, "Natural History" and the men devoted to the study of the Book of the World, are called, even in this century, "naturalists". We picture these men tenacious, unconcerned by their own health, used to dealing with all kinds of people and with undeniable talent for observation and drawing. We recall, of course,

Antonio José Cavanilles, Alexander von Humboldt, Rousseau, and even Goethe, perhaps more famous for his annotations on the eye, colour and shadows. However, the first naturalist who loved equally the mountain and the whims of physiology was, perhaps, Empedocles, the philosopher who reduced the movement of the universe to generation and corruption, and the roots of the world to fire, earth, air and water, constituted later in elements. But Empedocles died, as Moses, in unclear circumstances, leaving a bronze sandal in the Etna crater as evidence of his grand finale.

Nuria Rodríguez exhibits, mounts and places her new work in the *Colegio Mayor Rector Peset* in the damp yet prestigious basement of the *Sala de la Muralla*, next to a selection of objects gathered here and there in undetermined time or place. Several cabinets with sketch albums, geography books, different zoologies, pebbles, dried vegetables, small dolls with their furniture; some used graphic tablets, representing references and composition loops. Objects or images self-represented without becoming depleted or overturned because, evidently, they are protected by glass from touch and curiosity. They remind us of Joseph Cornell's boxes, or of the smallest museum in the world, housed in the cupboard of the musician and phonometrician Erik Satie.

What does the artist keep in cupboards? Is it possible to visit attics? Are there pig carcasses, smoked fish or oriental algae in the pantry? Perhaps. We look at the exhibition, making an abstraction of sideboards and cabinets. We must consider a discrete ensemble of work and some polyptych. This last format, which allows combining a great variety of techniques, formats, sizes and types of frames, from