
An End without an End

Ana Bonmatí

Directora Col·legi Major Rector Peset
Universitat de València
(University of València)

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 18th 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.

Painting and Gathering

Luis Armand

Universitat Politècnica de València
(Polytechnic University of València)

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

the most luxurious ones to the most inexpensive and minimalistic, had already been used by Nuria in several exhibitions, some even as curator. On one occasion, actually moving an entire wall from her home to the gallery, or was it the other way around? Nuria places her polyptych at the very back, behind, inside, so that it cannot be confused with the cabinets, that highlight the main work, that are, of course, painted or repainted. However, let us attend first to the denomination and then to the images.

Thus, the paintings are called: *Prospect nr.1; Chance and Need; Memory, Reason, Imagination; Curio Cabinet; Underground Library; Expedition to Antarctica; Winter; Approximations; Moving Times; The Key to Dreams; 67% Dog; Thinking Theories; Salthills; Gymnopédie; Notes; Ways of Seeing...* titles that are sometimes generic, others falsely precise, would seem absolutely interchangeable with respect to the representations they contain.

Painting is a science of the unique. And we note: Two and two metal casks on a bench, four sofas and three empty arm chairs, three red cinema theatre seats, one phonograph; twelve white saline piles, four stones with four snow landscapes, a stone with an earthenware jar and beehives, one stone, two stones, three stones, four stones, five stones, seven stones, twenty stones on grout, thirty three stones on a red background; four blondes in red with binoculars, a girl in an armchair, two women in short dresses on a sofa, two young men with boxes and a yellow frog, two other young men; two winter landscapes, a landscape with a scale, a golden videogram, nineteen penguins, three parrots, three ostriches, a pair of birds, a bird on a branch, two branches

and a fork, nineteen small broken branches on a white background, a sheaf, a piece of wood with antelope, eight more pieces of wood, eight black seeds, a pipe and two tops; a ballerina dancing in a red box, a ballerina and another one between two identical chairs, two ballerinas with a plush toy, a ballerina facing away, a girl in a bathing suit and two sheep, two women on a speed boat; a green book and two red ones, two shells, two balls and a small snail shell; two dogs with a collar, a gardener with a dog, an explorer with shovel and dog, a team of huskies without a sled, two small bookend dogs, a small pug dog, two calves, almost certainly female, with a dog, another one facing away, also a portrait of a dog; a portrait, this one of an old-fashioned man, a man with a grey beard, a grey man with a moustache and three fish, two red goldfish and an abyssal fish, an illustration of spongiforms, two pictures of grey curtains, a small texture, a clipping and the ring mark left by a glass.

The pebbles and bits of wood that Nuria, in her wanderings, collects and treasures in the palm of her hand, become the images of greater importance, just as other minute things, including pictures and illustrations from prospectuses, books, and never better said, handbooks. Here handiwork is essential, limiting both the initial condition and the stylistic quality of the material exhibited. Before being newly represented in their uniqueness, these objects must be chosen, gathered, harvested and collected again and again.

This procedure, as I have stated elsewhere, seems similar to the combinatorial games of the *OULIPO*, or Potential Literature Workshop, and specially to Georges Perec's particular use of sociology and space. For this super-specific author

who saw nearly all his family die in the concentration camps, all art, as does play, develops through constriction. We must choose the elements and define the rules. From this constriction, unlike with other group mates, it is possible and indeed desirable, to eliminate any trace of humour, emotion or sentimentalism. In the case of Perec's novels, and despite all differences, in the case of Edgar Allan Poe's, and E.T.A. Hoffmann's, the result is still terrifying, precisely due to the meticulousness with which the objects are described, the most diverse routines and the anticipation of degradation itself.

Nuria Rodríguez seems to take pleasure in the possibilities of poetry: the construction of metaphors, the simple delight in developing plastic and pictorial resources. She likes painting and she likes to paint. To these simple joys, a passion not devoid of rebellion, for the necessary vindications of women, must be added. These vindications necessarily occur, in the case of an artist of our time, inquiring on the matter of the construction of self, the feminine self. From this point of view, we can ask ourselves if here, tangled in the images, there is some type of natural history, biographically speaking, that can and should be specifically commented. There must be, but contrary to the normal discourse of female artists, typified by literalism, obviousness, obscenity, carnality, sexuality and false passions, here duplicity and deceit inherent to the entire symbolisation process are more important. All are, or seem to be, memories. Memories lived, read, dreamt, drawn, but it is impossible to know why. Perhaps only the expression of its uniqueness is important, this exceptionality of which she knows how to let us participate.

The female identity in Nuria's paintings seems to deal with childhood, adolescence and discovery of the maternal and filial figure, revealed and projected through maturity. The anxiety of exercise and rest seems to be affirmed, the expectation of dance, the chromatic and pictorial mysteries of blood and milk. However, the face of the woman, the portrait or self-portrait is denied. Only a domestic animal, belonging to the house, is given the privilege of sight. It seems curious that there is not only that reserve before the mirror, but that there seems to be an identical precaution with respect to masculine representation. No children, no young people, no friends nor lovers. In a place not painted, nor sketched, there is the companion of the sofa and the twin chair symmetrical, but both are empty. This dialogue belongs to the strictest intimacy. However, for the schooled observer some blurry silhouettes seem to assume the role of a distant paternal figure, hetero-patriarchal. Someone who travels, who has the capacity to carry weight, who hunts and fishes in a hard and hostile environment, lugging with him the prerogative of causing death and violence.

It is an honour to write this text. I have truly liked the landscape that says: France.