

From: *Claudia Comte. How to Grow and Still Stay the Same Shape*, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 31 October 2019 – 23 July 2021), Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino 2022, pp. 8-10.

At Your Service: The pattern connects

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Claudia Comte gives me joy and to see her works fills me with optimism. Heir to the Op and psychedelic art of the 1960s, vigorously defended in the Lausanne art school where she trained as a young woman in the 2000s, Comte creates immersive environments into which I want to enter and take my time. They recall the abstract digital geometries of virtual worlds, but she never asks me to sit and wear a headset to access them. I slide into her spaces with my body, swim in them, run in them, play in them. It is not a mental nor a virtual trip in the metaverse, but a physical journey in which my body glides into a space freed from contingent reality, freed from the narrative storytelling of a Netflixed realm, freed from specificity and singularity, immersed in the abstract patterns of the world.

There is something childish in all this, and something pleasurable in being able, as an adult, to revisit the aesthetic, sensual pleasure of a child who draws repeated lines on large sheets of white paper with different colored markers, experimenting with the repetition and variation of forms. The bodily and emotional vibrations that these patterns cause at an empathic level remind me of my inner child—fascinated by the life of insects, leaves, cats, fish.

“Pattern” is an English word of Latin origin (from *patronus*, “patron”), which was used extensively in the second half of the twentieth century to describe a characteristic motif or decorative image that tends to repeat itself structurally. The fortune of the word moves in parallel with the development of Optical research in art and early Cybernetics in science in the 1950s–70s, aimed at analyzing repeated models in a significant sample of data in order to know and understand the world, society, and nature. At the time, as the Macy Conferences¹ suggest, it was often explored for scientific research purposes, but was ultimately used for advertising and even military ends. This was during the Cold War, at the dawn of computer statistics, and the cultural and political system already intended to reprogram the world through pattern recognition, which is at the basis of today’s Artificial Intelligence programs. Foundations began consulting artists, computer scientists, psychologists, and anthropologists looking for behavioral analogies between machine, mind, society, and nature for predictive purposes. As part of this research, anthropologist, sociologist, psychologist, and biologist Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) studied systems as early as the late 1930s. His key books were *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (1972) and *Mind and Nature* (1979), and he laid the foundations for family therapy, the concept of a supra-individual or collective mind produced by relationships and interactions in a group, and non-human linguistic communication systems. He was looking for relationships and patterns that repeated themselves, everywhere, between living beings.

When I saw Comte’s works for the first time, Bateson came to mind. He viewed idea and form in a connected way, and was looking for the patterns in living systems to understand how the world, which even then he understood as ecologically compromised, was made of interconnected entities: “What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose, and all four

of them to me, and me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and to the schizophrenic in another?”²

At times, Comte’s abstract environments come alive with performers who show no individual faces since they wear tight suits from head to foot—thus becoming monochromatic bodies just as abstract as her environments, moving to the rhythm of abstract soundtracks that seem to be computer-generated. The epiphenomenon is not there, the specific is not there. Instead, there is the search for the essence of dance, of human movement in correlation with the patterns of the world, and away from the mass vanity of our time characterized by singular faces pervading social media.

At first glance, Comte’s art seems outside the trends of current art: there are no conceptual or activist or relational projects, no documentary films or video installations, no expressionist paintings; much less are there works based on archival techniques or inspired by anthropology. There is instead a lightness, a willingness to transform spaces creatively, with the artist almost acting as a designer who applies herself to making a place more “pleasant” and user-friendly, and therefore more useful and happy. This vision of one’s role as an artist at the service of an aesthetic transformation of the world, at the root of the notion of decorative arts, allows Comte to be placed in the line of the Bauhaus school, the movement of the last century that put art at the service of a social revolution toward a democracy of aesthetics, and no longer just the prerogative of the wealthy classes. In this spirit, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Comte accepted our invitation to host a vaccination center in her exhibition space at Castello di Rivoli. She created a new sound work, *The Pattern Connects*, to accompany the people being vaccinated in space, reflecting her works painted on the walls and “inviting relaxation, and daydream.”³

Bateson comes to mind again. He saw the ecological problem as early as the 1970s as an issue related to the lack of perception of, and lack of use of patterns: his vision of the ecosystem was systemic (“What now must be said is difficult, appears to be quite empty, and is of great and deep importance to you and me. At this historic juncture, I believe it to be important to the survival of the whole biosphere, which you know is threatened,”⁴ he told his art students at Calarts in California as early as the 1950s).

Comte grew up in Switzerland, in the midst of forests, streams, mountains, in a place similar to where she still lives today. The forms and shapes of the natural world are important to her, and the abstract lines in her work recall them. Comte talks about the ecological crisis, the Anthropocene, and the artist’s responsibility toward the well-being of the world—for example by not transporting large crates full of art from museum to museum, to avoid increasing our carbon footprint when making an exhibition. Being a digital native, however, she grew up interacting with and dependent upon screen-based life—the human experience since the 1990s, when cell phones and the culture of “googling” took root. The sharing of a plethora of interconnected individual knowledges that ensued ushered in a form of collective knowledge on the net. Comte understands the entangled nature of this digital/natural life, and her art shows how pattern-making rather than pattern-recognition fulfills the task of making sense of it. In this way, we can achieve forms of awareness of our artificial skin-producing tendencies, of how we wrap information around the world, unable to breathe autonomously in an ecologically balanced, autonomous way.

Comte talks about forests, trees, and geological layers, and is fascinated by the patterns that repeat themselves in the organic and inorganic world. But her works are crisp, “clean,” hardedged, cartoonish, and make you think of anything but the vital world of earth or composting. One of the most interesting qualities of her work is precisely this split between what Comte talks about—for her, curved lines are “algae,” dots are “fish,” spirals are “smoke”—and the abstract geometry that you see in her wall paintings. Her words prompt us to imagine the pictographic essence of fish, seaweed, or smoke as fundamental movements of creation. Indeed, looking at her works seems to

suggest that we have stopped in a place and time in which the alphabet has not yet become completely symbolic (made up of conventional letters with no relation to the content of the signs we are making) but is no longer ideogrammatic (made up of pictograms referential to the images of things). This causes one to think about the origin of language and history, when we had not yet detached ourselves with a sense of superiority from other species and were still part of an interconnected world, neither abstract nor figurative. The actors of that time/place were human and non-human, and the winds, ocean waves, rays of sun, raindrops, forests, crabs, primroses, and brains were all moving and dancing together in a unique climate and habitat.

The art of Claudia Comte suggests that if the real world has by now become abstract and digitized, translated into a realm of numerological data under the skin of things, then the abstract, invisible world that we do not generally see can become a new biological imaginary, a new world. A cosmos of patterns that connect on an elementary level, with no need to write any algorithm. A yoga for both the mind and the senses.

¹ The Josiah Macy Jr Foundation Conferences were part of a broader program to create communication across different fields of science. The Cybernetics Conferences were held from 1946 to 1953.

² Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), from a lecture held on November 17, 1977 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, p. 8.

³ Statement by Comte in the press release for the vaccination center, April 29, 2021. The sound work was composed by Comte together with Egon Eliut.

⁴ Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, p. 8.