

ANTENNAE



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Why Look at Plants?

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ANTENNAE

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EDITORIAL

ANTENNAE ISSUE 17

Look around. Whether you are now in your office, house or in a public space, it will not take long before something green will fall in your field of vision. Plants are around us more frequently than animals, in fact they usually then to hide them and in doing so, they fill our everyday lives with their silent but indispensable presence. *Why look at plants?* What is there to see, one may ask - an entire world, or nothing at all, one might answer; this entirely depends on your predisposition, just as much as to someone a mouse can be a pest and to someone else a pet.

To this point, plants have been silent witnesses of the animal revolution. Frequently studied for their medical properties and consistently exploited for their aesthetic qualities, plants have played a defining role in the historical and cultural development of humankind. But just as this role comes increasingly into focus, the botanical world is seriously threatened by industrialization and climate change. Forests are razed at an alarming rate as large seed banks scramble to preserve genetic material of the world's flora before it is too late.

The proposal this issue of *Antennae* puts forward is a daring one and it involves taking a few imaginative leaps in the attempt of outlining new avenues in the experimental research of new fields. What about plants as companion species, for instance? Would there be productive opportunities in attempting to understand plants from different perspectives, just as the field of human-animal studies has proved possible with animals? What contributions to our understanding of animals could a focus on plants make? Could we even envisage that, in a near future, we may have a field of human-plant studies?

Times may be ripe for this opportunity to be considered. After all, on what grounds could we so insistently provide evidence of the relevance animals bear in our everyday lives and simultaneously decide to be blind to plants? The visual arts have embraced "plants as a subject" in a very similar way that they have already embraced animals. The first ever exhibition to present plants as subjects was the memorable 1936 display of genetically modified delphiniums by Edward Steichen staged at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Steichen bred his plants over twenty-six years through a combination of traditional methods of selective breeding and the use of a chemical that altered the plants' genetic make up. This effectively constituted the dawn of what today is called bio-art, a strand of controversial artistic practice that is very well known to the field of human-animal studies.

It was then George Gessert to bring plants back in the gallery space in 1988, staging a selection of irises that summoned viewers' memories and fears of eugenics. Today, a multitude of artists engage with tissue culture and transgenic engineering with both, animals and plants. But as the present and the next issue of *Antennae* will aim to show, plants are not only present in bio-art but have appeared in many disparate artistic contexts already.

It is also on the scientific front that perspectives on the botanical world are rapidly changing. The *Laboratorio Internazionale di Neurobiologia Vegetale* (the International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology) founded in 2005 in Florence, has contributed new key evidence on plants' cognitive and sentient qualities continuing the line of enquiry initiated by Charles and Francis Darwin who conducted a series of experiments on plants between 1850 and 1882 documented in the book *Power of Movements in Plants*.

As a result, recent advances in plant molecular biology, cellular biology, electrophysiology and ecology, have unmasked plants as sensory and communicative organisms, characterized by active, problem-solving behavior. Plants are not the passive, *ultimate automata* which conveniently many like to think. What are the challenges posed by these new awareness?

This issue of *Antennae* was co-edited by Australian artist Gregory Prior, currently lecturing at the School of Communication and the Arts at Edith Cowan University (Perth, Australia). From a background in painting, Gregory Pryor's practice has evolved into many different areas, which include drawing, video, performance and object based work. After many years traveling to and making work about his experiences in Europe and Asia, he moved from Melbourne to Perth in 2003 and began to explore the visual language of the country he was born in. His interest in plants has led to the creation of a number of challenging works of art, including the ominous *Balck Solander* (2005). We will begin our enquiry by posing

the question: “what is it like to be a plant?” through an adaptation of a book titled *The Beauty of Being Plant* (yet to become available in English) written by Patrick Blanc, a French botanist who invented the now more and more popular “green walls”. His bittersweet narrative is counterpointed by an essay titled *Aspects of plants intelligence* (2003) by Professor Anthony Trewavas. The essay, a straight scientific offering, bravely addresses the concept of *intelligence* in plants and goes on to argue that, that not only are plants intelligent beings, but that they are also capable of learning through memory – plenty of food for thought.

Lucy Davis looks at *Tree Duet*—a performance series by Singapore theatre company spell#7 (Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan)—through a series of explorations of trees in modern and contemporary visual art works from Singapore and colonial Malaya. Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey follow the footsteps of Joseph Beuys and travel to Germany in order to collect acorns from one of his original piece in order to create theirs. The issue then explores the work of *Futurefarmers* a group of artists whose work challenges current social, political and economic systems.

Pil and Galia Kollektiv brings to us a very unusual performative experience involving asparagus, whilst Renee McGarry's explores a small subset of Mexica stone sculpture that used materials and technique to naturalistically represent plants. In a curious botanical milieu peopled with costumed creatures born from myths and folktales, Janaina Tschäpe produces extremely fascinating works of art employing diverse media such as painting, video and photography. This issue closes with a look at Lauren Berkowitz's complex and multifaceted practice concerns issues of humanism, contemporary feminism and the environment, explored through the binary lenses of order and chaos.

Our hope of course is that you will find this issue as interesting as challenging and that above all, upon looking around you, you may begin to see plants in a different way. But in order to prevent any relapse into the older “mode of looking” we have already prepared another plant-dedicated issue that will be available at the end of summer. Spread the green word!



Giovanni Aloï
Editor in Chief of Antennae Project



Edward Steichen with delphiniums (c. 1938), Umpawaug House (Redding, Connecticut). Photo by Dana Steichen. Gelatin silver print. Edward Steichen Archive, VII. The Museum of Modern Art Archives

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Have you ever wondered what being a plant may be like? A book by internationally renowned botanist and inventor of the vertical garden, Patrick Blanc attempts to give us an idea and in the process it accidentally questions everything about life and otherness.

Extracts from Le Bonheur d'Être Plante by Patrick Blanc, translated and adapted into a short story by Giovanni Aloï

10 Aspects of Plant Intelligence

Intelligence is not a term commonly used when plants are discussed. However, I believe that this is an omission based not on a true assessment of the ability of plants to compute complex aspects of their environment, but solely on a reflection of a sessile lifestyle. This article, which is admittedly controversial, attempts to raise many issues surrounding this area. To commence use of the term intelligence with regard to plant behaviour will lead to a better understanding of the complexity of plant signal transduction, the discrimination and sensitivity with which plants construct images of their environment. It will also raise critical questions about how plants compute responses at the whole plant level. Approaches to investigating learning and memory in plants will also be considered.

Text by Anthony Trewavas

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In this essay, Lucy Davis looks at the recurring references to Tree Duet—a performance series by Singapore theatre company spell#7 (Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan)—through a series of explorations of trees in modern and contemporary visual art works from Singapore and colonial Malaya. Tree Duet is a poetic meditation on the “demands” that “trees make of us” in theatre and everyday life. Davis extends this thesis through readings of the “demands” made by trees in visual art works.

Text by Lucy Davis

63 Beuys' Acorns

Beuys' Acorns was exhibited in London at the Royal Academy of Arts GSK Contemporary Earth: Art of a changing world, December 2009/January 2010. Ackroyd & Harvey conducted a series of public 'in-conversations' with invited guests every Friday evening throughout the run of the exhibition.

Text by Ackroyd and Harvey

72 Futurefarmers

Futurefarmers is a group of artists and designers working together since 1995. Our design studio serves as a platform to support art projects, artist in residency programs and research interests. They are teachers, researchers, designers, gardeners, scientists, engineers, illustrators, people who know how to sew, cooks and bus drivers with a common interest in creating work that challenges current social, political and economic systems.

Interview questions by Renny Pritikin

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Pil and Galia Kollektiv are London based artists, writers and curators working in collaboration. Their work addresses the legacy of modernism, exploring the promises and ruins of the avant-garde discourses of the twentieth century. It deals with the way these failed utopias operate in the context of a changing landscape of creative work and instrumentalised leisure. Pil and Galia Kollektiv are interested in the relationship between art and politics, and the role irony and belief play in its current articulation. They often use choreographed movement and ritual as both an aesthetic and a thematic dimension, juxtaposing consumerism and religious ceremonies to find the underlying rites and convictions of a secular, post-ideological society. Reading Dada, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus backwards through punk and new wave, they find new uses for futures past.

Text by Pil and Galia Kollektiv – Interview Questions by Rikke Hansen

86 Familiar Contact: Plants in Mexico (Atzec) Stone Sculpture

Renee McGarry provides an exploration of a small subset of Mexico stone sculpture that used materials and technique to naturalistically represent plants. Many scholars have focused on the entrenched symbolic function of these sculptures and have produced no satisfactory explanation. McGarry eschews questions of symbolic value and discusses the relevance of the represented plants in Mexico everyday life.

Text by Renee McGarry

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In a curious botanical milieu peopled with costumed creatures born from myths and folktales, Janaina Tschäpe makes extremely fascinating works of art employing diverse media such as painting, video and photography. Julien Salaud interviewed the artist for Antennae.

Questions by Julien Salaud, Translation by Joann Kim

102 Lauren Berkowitz: Manna

Lauren Berkowitz's complex and multifaceted practice concerns issues of humanism, contemporary feminism and the environment, explored through the binary lenses of order and chaos. Typically working within the stylistic idiom of post-minimalism, Berkowitz collects various natural and recycled objects to create sensuous hanging and floor-based installations. Her process-based drawing practice similarly reflects her sculptural methodologies of collecting, arranging and repetition.

Text by Dr. Alana O'Brien

JANAINA TSCHÄPE: BOTANICA

In a curious botanical milieu peopled with costumed creatures born from myths and folktales, Janaina Tschäpe makes extremely fascinating works of art employing diverse media such as painting, video and photography. Julien Salaud interviewed the artist for Antennae.

Questions by Julien Salaud, Translation by Joann Kim

New York based Brazilian and German artist, "Janaina Tschäpe shares her forename with a Brazilian water goddess, and, not coincidentally, her photographs and performances-to-video feature sumptuously organic, watery, distorted female figures," writes Frieze. Since 1997, the artist has employed the female body as her muse, creating universes of polymorphous landscapes, embryonic forms and ambiguous characters. Tschäpe's drawings, photographs, films and installations seek to give form to the trance of art making, portraying not a dream world, but the sensation of being in one as she deftly exploits and subverts notions of identity and reality in her work.

Her first solo exhibition in Ireland opened to the public at the Irish Museum of Modern Art on Wednesday 25 June 2008. *Janaina Tschäpe: Chimera* was structured around the genetics of the fabled beast, to create a very specific atmosphere. Comprising some 20 works, the exhibition focused mainly on Tschäpe's latest paintings that embody a sense of the extraordinary through colourful botanical notations. Displayed and intertwined amongst these paintings are her film and photographic works.

Chimera stands for a fusion of multiple

identities in a single body or creature. In her interview from the exhibition catalogue with Rachael Thomas, Head of Exhibitions at IMMA, Tschäpe describes the relationship between the *Chimera* and her work:

What makes the chimera a fearful monster isn't any of [its] traits in particular, but the fact that they are all combined in a single being. It is this notion of the chimera that applies to the way I structure the process of my work. Whether I'm making videos, photographs or paintings, the process is similarly multifaceted to the point that it departs from being a work strategy to become the reason for the work to exist. When I am immersed in this sort of media amalgamation I am allowed to lose control and be free.

In this exhibition Tschäpe created an environment of dream and fantasy, where the everyday world metamorphoses into a mythical place, populated by fabricated creatures and florescent vegetation. The four screen video installation, *Blood, Sea* (2004), is a mesmerizing example of



Janaina Tschäpe

Moon Blossom, oil on canvas, 90" x 60", 2007 © the artist, courtesy of Nichido Contemporary Art



Janaina Tschäpe

Lair, oil on canvas (triptych), 118" x 79", 2009 © the artist, courtesy of Forest Vilaca Gallery

Tschäpe's fantasy worlds. Its narrative plays with the evolutionary biology of sirens and mermaids, from fables such as the water sprites of Irish lore to the Brazilian Iemanjá - spirit of the seas, lakes and fertility - from the Candomblé religion. In this work Tschäpe plays creator to magnificent and fantastical creatures and environments.

The fertile worlds found in *Blood, Sea* and the photographic series *Botanica* (2004-05) are juxtaposed with the simplicity of an earlier series spanning over a number of years. *100 Little Deaths* (1996-2002) explores danger and the horror for an artist of a failure of ideas. This exhibition is a unique opportunity to discover Tschäpe's contemplative and melancholic, yet surreal, practice.

Images of sleeping women are recurrent in your artworks since your first exhibition (Exercises, 2002). It is noticeable that your images attempt to capture a dream-like dimension. Did your dreams influence the development of your artistic process? In what way?

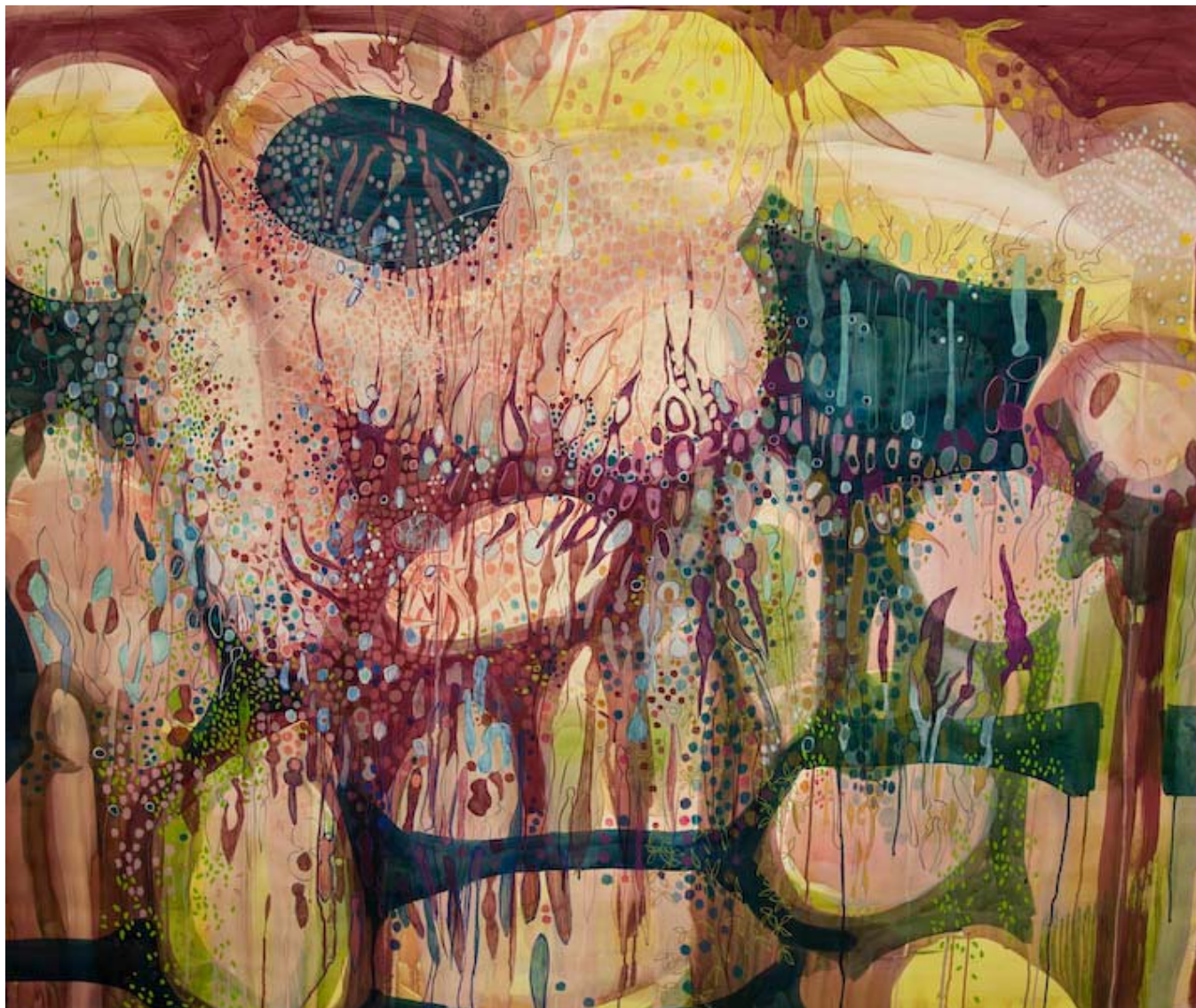
Janaina Tschäpe: Dreams are but one component of what influences my work. I draw as much inspiration from nature, fairytales, water, and the subconscious as I do from dreams. Dreams can reflect our desires, both secret and blatant, through the subconscious state of our

sleep and through this ego-less channel storytelling emerges and freely influences my work.

Fluidity is another strongly present characteristic all through your productions. In 2003, water crossed the exhibition After the rain (Albi, France): liquid, solid or gaseous captured in video sequences; the elements also took place directly in the creation of your watercolors (Interior). Why do you attempt to depict a word through the flux?

Water is a powerful force in nature, a form that plays into many mythologies and fables within various cultures alongside providing the fluidity of narrative, both abstract and representational, within a single artwork. Water is the female, water is the womb, water is the eternal formless encapsulator of mass and volume. It is the subject of fantastical figures such as Yemanhá, the 'mother of the waters' and serves both a liberating and suffocating virtue.

In this exhibition, a cycle of photos called Livia showed several self-portraits. They all offered a figure hard to delineate: a woman, an octopus, a jellyfish or maybe seaweeds at the same time. What is the meaning of these blurred bodies and



Janaina Tschäpe

Polipos, watercolour and pastel on paper, 71" x 85", 2010 © the artist, courtesy of Forest Vilaca Gallery

what do they say about animals? Are you interested in metamorphosis?

I am very interested in metamorphosis and have utilized the female body and its multiple representations within mythologies and fairy tales to re-present and provide an alternative, and more personal, reinterpretation of the physical and psychological manifestations of sex. An emphasis in the sea, and how figures find movement and breath within the medium.

From the first drawings to the last paintings, we can notice the development of the motifs we encountered in Polipos (2010): for this piece, they have been repeated through variations of scales and colors. Initially, those forms were already showed through drawings of microcosms (Interior, 2003), landscapes (I found me in a gloomy

wood, astray, 2004), or photos of unusual plants (Botanica, 2004). But it seems that they got their autonomy as motifs from Hortus period (2005). Can you give us your perspective on this evolution?

The motifs found within my work have developed throughout the years while experimenting with a more liberated process, one that didn't involve staging, posing, propping. Painting and drawing became a practice that involved more chance and spontaneity of form than precise mark making. Within this intuitive, personal and direct mode of production there was a common vocabulary built around the works, organic shapes and fluid marks, repetitive strokes and patterns of various shapes, asymmetrical and imperfect in its handmade natural state. Each work reflects the unpredictability and non-uniformity of nature, its overwhelming and eruptive tendency to visually consume, and its



Janaina Tschäpe

Wilt, oil on canvas, 110.2" x 236.2", 2009 © the artist, courtesy of Forest Vilaca Gallery

effortless tirade of beauty and harmony.

In Untitled 2 (2010), a green swarm of those motifs surrounds a sleeping human figure. Does the repetition of motifs have anything in common with the natural laws that govern the appearance of the vegetal world?

In addition to my work reflecting natural laws of repetition, pattern, and cycles, the motifs also developed out of a personal vocabulary emphasizing the spontaneous and liberated, expressive and irrational.

In some of your paintings, plants seem to be depicted through the overlapping of different points of view, different focal distances (Wilt, 2009). Is it relevant to consider Wilt as an image mixing the microscopic interiors of plants and their external appearance?

I draw my influence from both microscopic and grandiose, both internal and all encompassing perspective of nature.

What are the productivities of these overlappings of the artist, the artworks, and the audience?

Specific to my artistic practice, I'd like to think the audience viewer is entrapped in a world that is created through my paintings, photographs and

videos. Perhaps a temporary escape from everyday reality, entering a world laced in fantasy, mysticism, mythology, and inspire viewers to take the fragmented narratives to formulate their own.

Can you explain your 'plastic use of colors'?

I wouldn't say the colors have a plastic value in my work, the colors are mostly hues of a dense and opaque nature, layered and stroked in shades of deep crimson red, green, and blue. I use plastic mediums such as plasticine to experiment with shape and form in the same way I would use paint to create a painting. There is also the latex balloons and condoms, elastic that is used to morph and mutate figures within my work, to gorge and fill with water, its material providing brightness and flexibility.

From those thematic and plastic characteristics, one could conclude your artworks often have a lot in common with the paintings of an Australian native representing the Dreamtime. Is this comparison relevant to you?

Dreamtime images are of a completely different context but reflecting on my works from a purely formalist perspective, one can say that the organic shapes and motif as well as the color palette are similar.



Janaina Tschäpe

Veratrum Bulbosus, from the *Melanotropics* series, 40" x 49", C-Print, 2006 © the artist, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

The recent reorganization of Pompidou Center's permanent collections for an exhibition called Elles ("They, (women)") included some of your artwork. Can you explain us the feminine dimension of your artistic process? How does this affect you relationship with plants?

Mythological female characters, 'mother nature', the sea as the womb and source of renewal, religiosity and maternity, these are all elements that influence much of my work. But more than my work being "feminine" and not "masculine", I'm more interested in defying the notions of the permanent and rigidly defined and focus on playing with sexual and emotional anatomies of the figure and converge the internal and external facets of personage. Nature is in a constant state of change and metamorphosis, there is no certainty, no permanence, no sameness within it. I explore the same concept with the stories and figures reflected in my work.

According to you, what would be the beneficial effect if contemporary art was more "feminine" than "masculine"?

As an artist, my utmost priority in my career is that of being an artist. Within that component there is not much room or hearsay to consider if contemporary art is feminine or masculine. The art world, both in its history and in its current state, both in cultural production and commercial output, it is a white-male-centered majority. It is easy to describe a specific such as a particular artist's oeuvre as more feminine, or conjuring subjects of the maternal, sexual, natural and organic but to group an entire sector of society to a particular sexual orientation is outside of my interest.

Could men possibly "work as women"?

Men could work as women as much as women could work as men. How either case is received



Janaina Tschäpe

Cadmium Infecto, from the *Botanica* series, 9.125" x 13", Digital C-Print, 2005 © the artist, courtesy of Calier Gebauer

might differ and bend significance toward that of a "dominating" sex's change of role. My interests purely lie in producing works that are not dependent in its being received of a particular sexual orientation or culturally modified gender.

Would it be desirable?

Not any more than vice versa.

Born in Germany in 1973 to a German father and Brazilian mother, **Janaina Tschäpe** lived primarily in San Paulo, Brazil as a child. She studied at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg from 1992 to 1998 before moving to New York and completing her MFA at the School of Visual Arts in 1998. Tschäpe has exhibited her paintings, drawings, photographs and video installations throughout the world, with solo shows at the University at Buffalo Art Gallery, the Scottsdale Museum of Art, the Reina Sofia Art Center in Madrid, Artforum Berlin, and Centre d'Art a Albi, Toulouse, France, among others. Her work is included in numerous private collections and the permanent collections of museums in Europe, the United States, Brazil and Japan.