

“Nature Found, Nature Lost.”

But we must not forget...the literary and artistic description of the 'human environment,' which carried out the delicate operation of transforming a philosophical notion into a fact of sensibility, a scientific construct into a fact of perception.

Tomás Maldonado, 1970.

A classic assessment of the work of Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan would have it operating at the intersection of geometric abstraction, conceptualism and institutional critique. Known for installations that generally combine collage, drawing, fabric pieces, text, architectural interventions, diagrams and research, they are also recognized for juxtaposing their characteristically abstract work and the literary sources that inspire them. Here, form dominates but is never autonomous; it is instead supplemental to an interdisciplinary endeavor that is unhinged from the specificity of a medium. A characteristic formulation produces micro-environments constituted by a number of components that owe much to the stylized abstract aesthetic of Concrete art that flourished in Argentina, their native country, in the mid-forties. It was during those years that the leader of the Asociación de Arte Concreto Invención, Tomás Maldonado, transitioned from painter committed to the autonomy of form to ultra-rational designer and advocate of a scientific and systematic approach to design. His 1970 book *Design, Nature, and Revolution: Toward a Critical Ecology*, aimed for total design, not as a practice that resigned itself to the one-dimensional marketplace but that was embedded in, and needed to respond to, the multifarious material and ideological dimensions of the human environment. More than a decade later, Abraham Moles proposed a much narrower project for design. In an article from 1986, he argued for the legibility of the world as a project of graphic design. As such, design practice was to minimize the cost of decoding our surroundings by fostering a



Misky Mayu - Still - Rancho de Belén, 2019. Graphite and crayon on paper. 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (30 x 30 cm). (Detail).

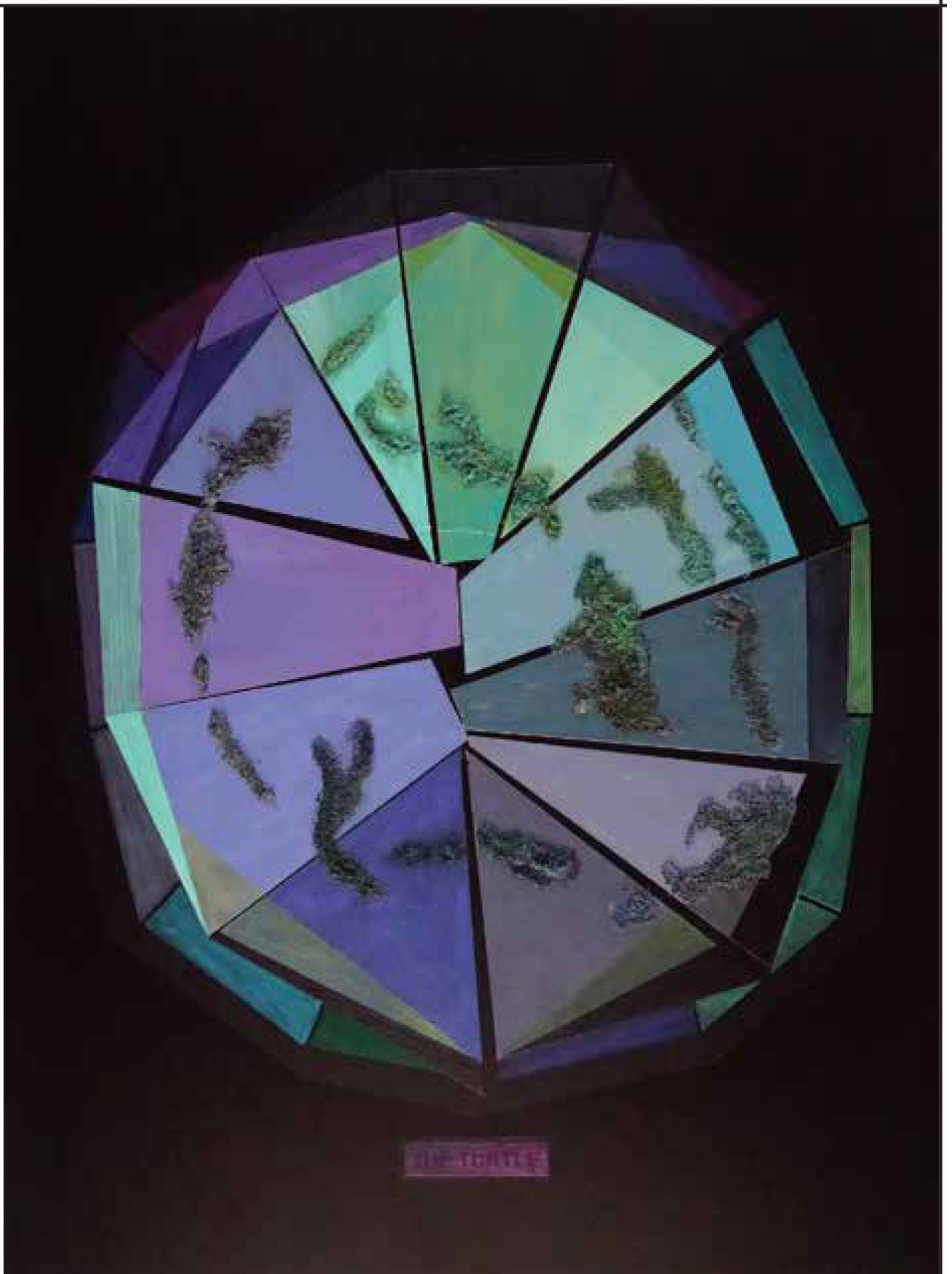
habitual world of semantic smoothness where stimuli would be colonized by a standardized language of symbols that the digital revolution has only exacerbated. To Moles, rectangles, frames, lines, angles and circles are abstractions and “schematic representations of the fragments of the real world.” Design works within the logic of the abstract diagram, he stated, which aims to simplify “the apparently infinite diversity of reality.”¹ Normative through and through, this design-form dialect was supposed to tame ambiguity.

Positioning themselves in-between the interstices of a techno-digital crux where the immediacy of media design defines the core of contemporaneous subjectivity, Zinny and Maidagan relish in slowness, ambiguity and opaqueness. In their work, banners and collages, drawings and templates feature geometric patterns that deploy a combinatory chroma that favors primary colors, black and white as well as unexpected pinks, golds and greens, constituting


¹Abraham Moles, “The Legibility of the World: A Project of Graphic Design,” in *Design Issues*, Vol. III, No. 1, Spring 1986: 48, 51.

form-as-interface. These objects and interventions de-symbolize form while treating information as any other artistic material. The excavated research-based data—generally related to the history and the archive of the site where the work is displayed, usually concerns architecture, urbanism and public space. Through a semantic universe of abstract signs redolent of an outmoded Constructivism that embraces equally archaic methods, such as cutting, pasting, sewing, tracing (no data analysis or CAD here), theirs is abstractionism-cum-design as hesitation, always deeply historical and representational but unstable. Form is not neatly codified, only abstracted, and these abstract forms are not rational models of the mind (as Concrete artists would have it) nor manifestations of an expressive self-presence (as Abstract Expressionist artists insisted). Instead, projects are usually the result of site-specific commissions and have taken place in cities across Europe and the Americas. These situated interventions occupy galleries, buildings—inside and out—façades, courtyards, domestic, industrial, and public spaces.

So why nature? Why now? A 2017 commission by LACMA, entitled *Word for Word: Décor for Distance*, arguably already addresses nature-as-image through two monumental fabric murals that cover the façade of the museum. Depicting outlines of palm trees and palm leaves in gold yellow, white and grey over a black background, they are overlaid by rows of real palm trees along the two “decorated” façades. Real and represented, abstracted imagery and decoration, perceptual distance (the murals are likely to be seen mostly by cars passing) and informational delay (title and textual supplement, as well as related drawings are displayed inside the galleries), articulate the persistence of a graphical interface as it dilutes the materiality of architecture. The latter is considered an exemplary form-giving endeavor, an ideal historical-material record from which Zinny and Maidagan exhume discursive regimes that frame collective subjectivity and performativity, agency, ideology, desires and disciplinary apparatuses. In their current turn to nature they seem to



The Turtle, 2019. Acrylic, canvas and sand on MDF. 31 3/8 x 23 1/2 in. (80 x 60 cm)



suggest that it, too, is the locus of representations forged at the intersection of a relentless assault on natural resources, colonization, and scientific knowledge. However, ambiguity prevails.

Their most recent project utilizes an amateur film made by Maidagan in 1990 during a three-month-long youth-induced adventure along the Rio Dulce in Santiago del Estero, Argentina. The twenty-hour travelogue along Misky Mayu (in Quechua) is the core of an investigation that seems to bet not on abstraction but on realism. Contrasting the “schematic representations of the fragments of the real world” characteristic of previous works, the documentary quality of this archival register brings center stage the force of the real. Or at least that’s the impression that we have when we see the images and the voices of those whose apparent misfortunes are portrayed in a short clip recording the monumental efforts necessary to take an old lady across the river because boats are not available. On a precarious raft, driver and passenger navigate the cumbersome and unstable process within a landscape that looks as virgin as it looks austere. Subsequent images offer the viewer a conventional documentary scene: five locals (four men and a young woman—their spokesperson) declare to the camera their discontents regarding lack of transportation, doctors, food, basic infrastructure. Nature is not paradise lost but a zone of conflict, of lacks, of marginality. In radical contrast to the melancholic cadence of the 3 minute 48 second clip, still images, some diffused by the screen monitor from where they are taken, serve as template for a series of abstract paintings and representational drawings that recall the impressionistic renditions of those traveling artists that accompanied the exploratory European expeditions of the 19th century.

It is tempting to contrast the documentary quality of the filmic image (and the urgent *topos* of nature lost) to the artistic identity of the paintings and drawings, or the installation that accompanies these visual registers. However, a twenty-hour loop is as elusive as any abstraction and in this fluid exchange between archive and subjective



Manga Pozo, 2019. Acrylic, canvas and gravel on twelve MDF panels. 94 3/8 x 94 3/8 in. (240 x 240 cm)

form, Maldonado's words come to mind: "the making of our environment and the making of ourselves has been a single process."² This may sound as a celebratory ratification of anthropocentrism but in fact is a reminder that it is we who hold the sway of agency in driving change, for better or for worse.

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²Tomás Maldonado, *Design, Nature, Revolution. Toward A Critical Ecology* (originally titled *Speranza progettuale*, 1970), trans. Mario Domandi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019: 3.

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Conquer y Racismo Tropical, 2019. Graphite on paper. Diptych, 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (30 x 30 cm) each. (Detail).