Painstaking investigation of the troubled relationship between man and the natural environment, analysis of contexts and objects capable of freeing up narratives that take stock of reality, the consequences of colonialism: these are some of the key research areas of the multidisciplinary work of the Australian artist Nicholas Mangan. With Mariana Cánepa Luna, he talks about the central role of the concept of transmission in his projects, and the cyclical or linear progressions addressed by his works.

WHAT LIES BENEATH

BY MARIANA CÁNEPA LUNA
Unearthing narratives embedded within matter has been at the core of your practice for some time now. Your most recent sculptural and film works have investigated natural materials, their transit and energy flow and how their transformation—be it human-induced or ecological—has a social, political and economic dimension. I’m particularly thinking of your 2010 project *Nauru: Notes from a Cretaceous World*—shown at the New Museum 2015 Triennial—which focuses on the story of the tiny Micronesian island republic of Nauru and its financial collapse as a result of a century of corrosive colonial exploitation of its phosphate ore resources. Could you elaborate on how this notion of transformation is explored in your sculpture works (traditionally static) and films (moving image), and how you have come to interrelate the two in the spatial narrative of your installations?

**NICHOLAS MANGAN**

Since transformation is a process occurring in time, the necessity to explore duration has led me to test moving image as a sculptural possibility, to express not only the temporality of the assemblage, but also the forces and drives that produce such aggregations. In the video *Nauru: Notes from a Cretaceous World*, narration is placed over found footage and material I shot myself, providing an account of Nauru’s material history as shaped by anthropogenic forces. The narration attempts to draw out the various histories that are embedded in material forms. In more recent projects, such as *A World Undone* (2012) and *Progress In Action* (2013), I have attempted to produce an intensified intersection between moving image and sculpture, enabling the materials to narrate themselves.

**M C L**

In Sergei Tretyakov’s 1929 essay “The Biography of the Object”, the Russian avant-garde writer appeals for a literature centred on the object rather than on the hero. He uses the analogy of the conveyor belt to call for a narrative structure in which “a unit of raw material is moved and transformed into a useful product through human effort”, and “where the moment of consumption occupies
only the final part of the conveyer belt”. I see this idea of objects as conduits as very pertinent to how you approach subjects and devise a “final” presentation. Do you agree? N M

The conveyer belt is an interesting form with respect to the theme of human intervention in the already-flowing of things, as both a system and a metaphor. It is also analogous to the mechanisms and movements of filmic material and film's conveyance of still but flowing moments. The notion of conveyance has a two-fold function in many of my projects: first, in the movement or redirection of materials, objects and narratives; second, as a system of communication in relation to the filmic event and its knowledge effect.

M C L Could you share how, in what are long-term context-specific investigations, you go about narrowing down the various narrative possibilities and directions the project might take? Or, to put it another way: in the Nauru project, what came first? A need to narrate from this dense story of ecological and economical interests, or an idea of arriving at a certain formal conclusion, a work? N M

In the case of the Nauru project, both the larger and minor histories were already bound up in physical, predominantly geological, forms, from the strip-mined island itself to the original phosphate-rich rock that was taken from the island by a cargo ship in 1896. The latter was originally thought to be petrified wood useful for making children’s marbles, but it ended up as a doorstep at the British Phosphate Company’s outpost in Sydney, Australia. Forms symbolically and physically pry Nauru open to Western mining exploitation. The form most significant to my project centres on an anecdote of an American journalist who reported that president of Nauru at the time, Bernard Dowiyogo, had talked of plans to save the bankrupt island’s ailing economy by turning the large pinnacles of coral limestone (pretty much all that remained of the strip-mined island) into ancient coral coffee tables to be sold on the US market. I learned that three coral pinnacles were originally shipped to Melbourne to adorn the entry court of the city’s Nauru House skyscraper as symbols of prosperity. These pinnacles had mysteriously disappeared when the building was sold off along with Nauru’s other foreign assets. After some detective work I discovered that the pinnacles were in the backyard of the home of the former public affairs consultant for Nauru. For the right price she was willing to surrender possession of one of the smaller pinnacles for my project. My aim was to enter into the history of Nauru physically through the gesture of slicing through the coral pinnacle, while implementing Dowiyogo’s coffee table proposition in the process. The natural shape of the tables also referenced the form of the island, and the geological makeup of the coral limestone pinnacle revealed a deeper timescale of the island’s history of physical transformations. The production of the coral tables served as a material conduit between the myriad stories resonant in the geology of Nauru that had been subject to human intervention. In that sense they became, literally, conversation pieces.

Most of your works—and this is also latent in the Nauru project—have shown an interest in conceptual or material circularity. Are you concerned about loose ends?

N M

For me it’s a process of pulling things apart in an attempt to understand them, prying open certain narratives and materials to generate new readings. The cyclical nature of the projects responds to the systems and structures that are inherent in the forms that I’m mining. The works often oscillate between situations that behave as either cyclical or linear progressions (or sometimes both). If we accept that history repeats itself, both in terms of human behaviour as well as in the natural world, then it still proceeds, and for me the future is really only the loose end. That said, I am again and again drawn to the past to understand the patterns of behaviour that result in certain events.

M C L

In a recent talk in Barcelona, Irish artist Sean Lynch—whose work we have previously discussed as sharing many interests with your practice—said, “when an exhibition is over, the work becomes a conversation”. I’m very attracted to this idea of a project triggering narratives which may have been unearthed over the process of investigation yet left dormant or completely glossed over in its exhibition form. How do you deal with the challenge of “excavating” a project that has many different parts, some more visible, or verbal, than others?

N M

Like many research-based practices my projects are often accompanied by a publication or text. Also the conversations that happen during the work’s production are also important to the formation of the work itself, functioning like a constellation of nodes giving a particular shape to knowledge production. The research is crucial to the production of the work and informs much of the decision making, providing an armature for the content to lean against, but it is not my aim for the final form of the work to explain itself in a didactic or factographic way. It is my hope that the core concerns of the project will find their own way to resonate or to speak through a material metalanguage, and that the assemblage of material forms, images and sounds coalesce to enhance the objectives of their counterparts. It’s a thing of constant negotiation for each project. I find that both physical matter and language display a reluctance to fully yield to imposed forces.

M C L

to close the circle and go back to where we began, matter is the protagonist of your film A World Undone (2012). You filmed falling dust at high speed, particles made from crushed rock containing zircon crystal, the planet’s first terrestrial crust. Seen in slow motion against a black background it gives the impression of a meteor shower. This rock is a fitting example of what art historian Norman Bryson has identified as the intertwined categories of “megalography” (the depiction of great things—in this case cosmological time) versus “lapography” (the depiction of trivial, everyday things, like rock, which is seemingly quite banal). In relation to this, how did you approach the irreversible loss of the approximately 4 billion-year-old zircon crystal as it dissolved into the air?

N M

The age of the geological material was the critical feature of the work, serving as evidence of when the Earth began to ossify and aggregate into tectonic plates. This event marked a significant point in the Earth’s transformation. My intention was to trace back to a certain point of fixity and then physically intervene to disrupt and redirect its trajectory. It’s similar to the gesture of slicing into the Nauruan coral pinnacles, aggressive gestures that produce some kind of physical consequence. In this sense, they are entirely sculptural actions, but not in terms of producing static sculptural objects. Rather they are actions that narrate and animate the temporal features of the rock in question, unearthing the stories held within.

2 Currently on show at Witte de With, Rotterdam in the exhibition “Art in the Age of… Energy and Raw Materials” (23 January–3 May 2015).
4 Sean Lynch’s presentation about his work at Halfhouse Barcelona, 8 September 2014.
WHAT LIES BENEATH
M. C. LUNA


Bottom - Dowiyogo’s Ancient Coral Coffee Table, 2010
Nauru - Notes From A Cretaceous World, 2009-2010

All images - Courtesy: the artist; Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland; LABOR, Mexico City
Un’indagine metodoica del difficile rappor
to fra uomo e ambiente naturale, l’analisi di
testi e oggetti in grado di liberare narra
tiva e ricostruzione del processo di
tuzione del colonialismo, sono alcuni dei
elementi cardine del lavoro multidisciplina
re de Nicholas Mangan. Con Mariana Cánepa
Luna, l’artista parla della centralità del concetto di trasmissione all’in
terno dei suoi progetti, e della progressione,
cicliche o lineari, cui rimandano le sue opere.

MARIANA CÁNEPA LUNA Da qualche tempo a questa parte, riportare alla luce gli elementi che compaiono nei progetti a mio
senso la ricerca dei metodi e alla luce dei quali si è effettuato il concetto di trasformazione nelle tue opere scultore
tradizionalmente statiche) e cinema
dati (immagini in movimento) e concetto
to di fissità per poi intervenire fisicamente
la durata mi ha portato a sperimentare
uomo nel tempo a questa parte, riportare alla luce contenuti narrativi e materiali rimasti
un’idea di un progetto che inneschi una serie di
incontro di un grattacielo Nauru House come
saggio di Sergei Tretyakov del
3 Sergei Tretyakov, “The Biography of the Object”, in MCL (2013), ho cercato di produrre un’in-
terme dei condotti mi pare assai pertinente al modo
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

NICHOLAS MANGAN Dal momento
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NM Nel caso del progetto Nauru, tanto
le prospere di più ampio respiro quanto quelle mi-
progetti potrebbe prendere, in quelle che
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

NM Come molte prospere artistici basa-
thefilmico e al modo in cui il cinema trasmette
consapevolezza aggreg-expand in placcette
la natura ciclica dei progetti risponde ai

c讽刺:
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

MCL Per chiudere il cerchio e tornare al
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

NM L’anticipazione del materiale geologico era lo spunto più significativo
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

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la natura ciclica dei progetti risponde ai

c讽刺:
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

MCL La maggior parte dei tuoi lavori – il
progetto Nauru, sebbene in forma più velata,
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

NM NM: Ho la tendenza a fare a pezzi le cose nel
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

NM L’anticipazione del materiale geologico era lo spunto più significativo
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

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le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

MCL Recentemente, a Barcellona, l’artista
le condizioni ambientali che danno come risultato certi eventi.

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