

Daniel Lie, Unnamed Entities, New Museum, New York

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Daniel Lie

Unnamed Entities

Despite its theoretical complexity, along with the resilient anthropocentrism that pervades art history, new materialism has had a major impact on contemporary art. Once considered inert, art materials are today charged with agency. The radical shifts that have occurred in the relationships between artists and materials are glaringly visible at the New Museum in New York, which has bravely put on show a wholly organic installation by Portuguese artist Daniel Lie.

Whereas during the 1960s and 1970s unconventional art materials infiltrated the gallery space to subvert the rational purity of the white cube, today soil, living plants, and mould become involved in a subtler, organic dialogue with the artist and with the site in which their encounter unfolds. Lie's exhibition *Unnamed Entities* is a quintessential manifestation of this conceptual turning point. The installation, a new commission created specifically for the museum's lobby gallery, brings together traditional terracotta ceramic vases, jute and hemp fabric, natural fibre ropes, straw and hay bales, mud with spores and seeds, and thousands of cut flowers. Flying in the face of the classical conventions that still implicitly dominate the aesthetics of what we see in museums, Lie stages multi-material becomings that are impossible to preserve and collect. As time unfolds, each entity is transformed; some wilt and decay as others germinate and bloom, forming new entities along the way. Through its title, the exhibition nurtures a desire to disown the ordering systems of natural history and, with them, the Aristotelian hierarchization of the living that still informs our value systems today. The practice of unnam-ing, one that in this gallery space is performed by the agency of materiality rather than the artist's anthropocentric privilege, in essence, is a process of unlearning. As we let materials undo meaning, we begin to see afresh beneath the cultural stratifications that often occlude our experience of reality with pre-encoded concepts that have been naturalized over time.

Unnamed Entities is a sensorial experience involving smell as much as sight. It deliberately mobilizes the viewer's body to instigate a journey of discovery that is as personal as it is uncharted. Meaning appears dispersed, networked, and unscripted. Traditional symbolism is shattered. Lie invites us to make sense of the installation, its aesthetic, and its material presence outside of any notions of genre that might provide easy art-historical pigeonholing. As matter is allowed to take charge of its own independent, entropic agency, we are faced with the impossibility of saying what it is that we are experiencing exactly. Despite its earthly and floral components, Lie's installation is not a monumental *memento mori*. It is not asking us to contemplate our mortality in order to make the most of our present. Instead, it brutally grounds us in the present because, outside of our cultural constructions, this is all we truly have. But all materials in *Unnamed Entities* also imply a past. Their presence is, in different ways, evidence of atavistic processes that we have been taught to fear or ignore, tangible traces of the unstoppable becoming that governs all life on this planet, across species, upon territories, throughout time. Words such as death and life become meaningless. *Unnamed Entities* wants us to become brave enough to give up all cultural frameworks so that, albeit briefly, we might catch at least a glimpse of the pre-linguistic world that we left behind on the way to becoming human.

Giovanni Aloï

New Museum, New York
17 February—5 June 2022

Daniel Lie
Unnamed Entities,
exhibition views, 2022.
Photos : Dario Lasagni,
courtesy of New Museum,
New York