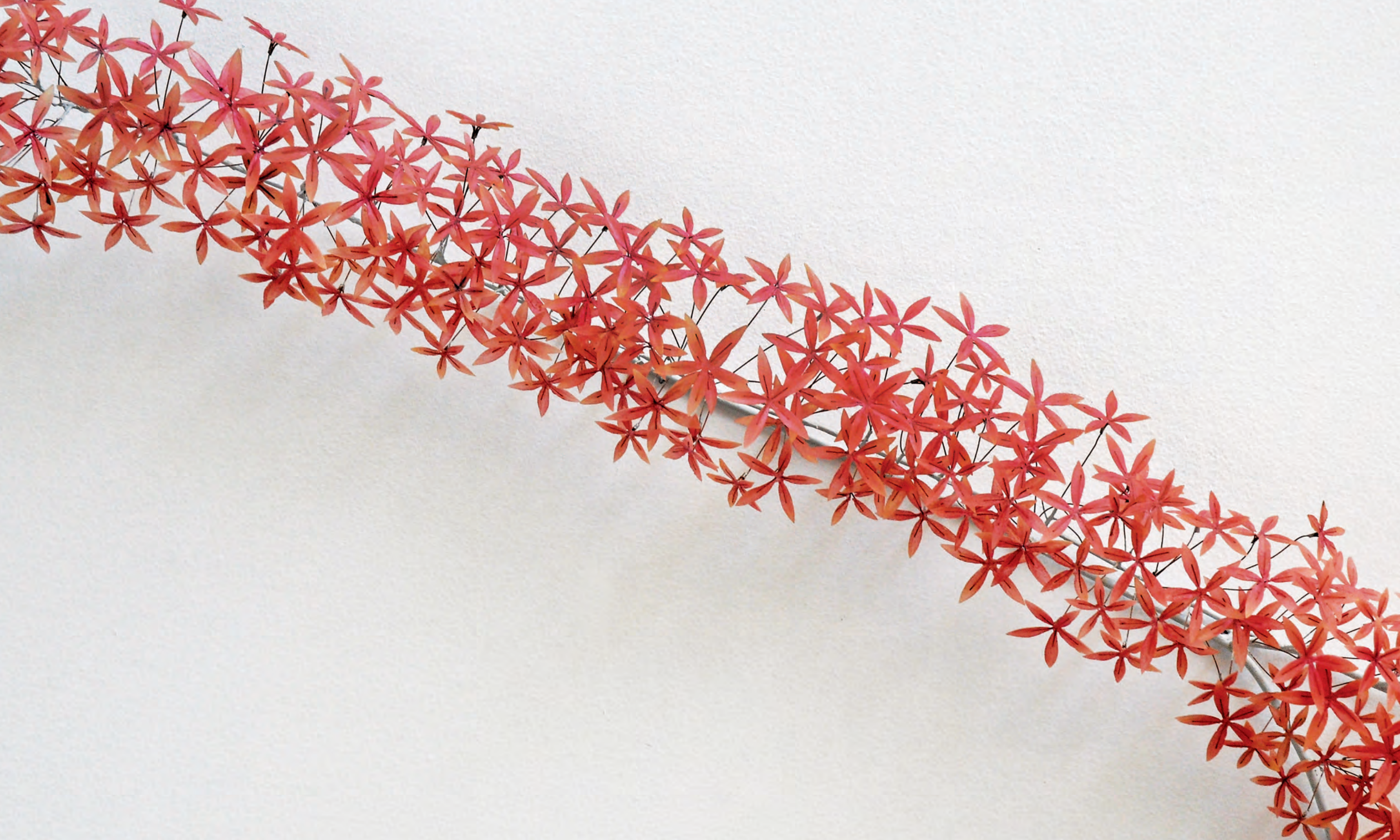




FIELD GUIDE

MARKUS BAENZIGER



Presented by Haverford College
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Haverford, PA 19041

www.haverford.edu/exhibits



Printed in conjunction with the exhibition *Field Guide: Markus Baenziger, Curated by John Muse*, September 2- October 7, 2011.

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ISBN: 0983050031 / ISBN-13: 9780983050032

Photographs by Markus Baenziger and Lisa Boughter.

Design by Jon Loudon at Smyrski Creative (smyrskicreative.com).

Printed and bound in Canada by The Prolific Group.

The text face is set in Adobe Garamond Pro. The footnotes are set in Filosofia. The captions are set in Filosofia, Adobe Garamond Pro, and Gotham. The text paper is 100lb #1 Centura gloss and the cover paper vis 100lb #1 Centura gloss cover.

FIELD GUIDE

MARKUS BAENZIGER

Curated by John Muse

Object Lessons

by JOHN MUSE, 2011

So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement.

—ROLAND BARTHES, “Plastic,” *Mythologies*

I. Natural Causes

What do we find over the rainbow? Plastic. Plastic plants, perfect colors, the glint of the new and clean, greener than green and much greener than black-and-white. The plants that introduce Dorothy Gale to Oz, that articulate the first and most vivid difference between Kansas and Oz, allegorize both the work of this film and film’s material support. Oz is the soundstage, the technologically saturated audio-optical machine that fabricates the rainbow, the *over* of Oz, and the *under* of Kansas. Oz too is the movie as a whole because every film takes you somewhere else even as it keeps you in the theater. And finally, every film unfolds on a ribbon of plastic: film, what there is to see, is film, the effusion and hinge of industrial production. The artificial plants *in* this film refer to the artificial plant that *was* this film: cellulose film stocks were made from cotton treated with various acids. Over that rainbow we find plastic plants and we find plants that have become plastic—and we find

other translations: these plastics decay, burn easily, fall into dust and acid.¹

But when we want to get a grip on paradise, do we still reach for plastic? Is there still a great future in plastics?² There was certainly a great past: promiscuous and affirmative, the word “plastic” named the art of sculpture, the sculptor, the sculpted, and the “creative or procreative principle” as such.³ Only then could Charles Baudelaire deride it: “Plastic! Plastic! The plastic—that frightful word gives me gooseflesh.”⁴ What then of the industrial material? A material we will find all over the sculptural work, the *plastic* work of Markus Baenziger? This work is plastic, is *about* plastic, is involved with plastic. With plastic plants and plants as plastic, formal and formed and the basis of fuels and resins. This material matters. But what of its ubiquity and its meaning?

Because we find plastic in *Mythologies*, because in this mid-50s book we typically enjoy the obliteration of ideology, the destruction of overripe signs, signs that cloak the cultural, historical, and contingent in Nature and Eternity, because we hope to witness the triumph of an incisive wit over the merely popular—Roland Barthes’ little essay, “Plastic,” breeds confusion. He won’t take plastic away, harm it, harm the love of it, attack its artifice, or help us now tally the disastrous effects of fossil fuels, carbon footprints, and anthropogenic global warming. Strangely, this critic doesn’t aim at plastic at all; rather, he aims plastic—the plastic of “suitcase, brush, car-body, toy, fabric, tube, basin or paper”—at what he explicitly calls “the myth of ‘imitation’ materials”: until now these materials “have always indicated pretension, they belonged to the world of appearances, not to that of actual use; they aimed at reproducing cheaply the rarest substances, diamonds, silk, feathers, furs, silver, all the luxurious brilliance of the world.”⁵ Suitcase, brush, car-body, etc., these emblemize cheap utility, common

employments, getting-things-done. For Barthes plastic keeps a utopian promise: would that the distinction between natural but useless luxuries, on the one hand, and cultural but useful ubiquities, on the other, were dissolved:

...[with plastic] the age-old function of nature is modified: it is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be regained or imitated: an artificial Matter, more bountiful than all the natural deposits, is about to replace her, and to determine the very invention of forms.

Plastic is a myth buster because it purports to appropriate the “very invention of forms” from nature, to hand nature’s inventory to users, builders, inventors. But, for my purposes here, plastic intrigues because it is the name for invention, transformation, translation, utility—with or without the human hand, because the latter may itself submit to such reinvention.

Plastic is wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used: ultimately, objects will be invented for the sole pleasure of using them. The hierarchy of substances is abolished: a single one replaces them all: the world can be plasticized, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas.

Plastic plants and plastic aortas. The first marks the view into elsewhere and nowhere; the second, life beyond death, utility beyond humanity. Barthes’ concluding inversion doubles down: to dream in plastic is to sing the ruin of nature as limit. For Barthes “plastic” is nature: mediation, utility, destruction. It may be *less* a thing than the trace of a movement, but it is a thing too, and so are we.

Baenziger’s plastics play upon the plastics of Barthes and the plastics of Oz: plants and other organs, timeless and bright, desiccated and crumbling, useless and useful. His work



1 “Nitrate decomposition starts with the discoloration in the picture image. Noxious fumes are given off by the film. Goopy bubbles appear and form a brown, frothy foam, and when the foam dries, all that is left is a fine powder.” Slide, 1992; pg 3. Bit-rot, compatibility issues, dead players for still live media: digital media decomposes too, but differently.

2 From *The Graduate*: “I just want to say one word to you. Just one word.” “Yes sir.” “Are you listening?” “Yes sir, I am.” “Plastics.” Pause. “Exactly how do you mean?” “There’s a great future in plastics.” Nichols, 1967. I wasn’t thinking of credit cards—now I am.

3 “All Souls are inducted with the Plastic whether of Brutes or Men.” —Henry More, 1682 See “plastic, n. and adj.” OED Online, June 2011. Oxford University Press. 29 June 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/>>.

4 Cited in Garber, 2000, pg 26. Baudelaire opts to put his gooseflesh up against the formal beauties, one skin against another.

5 Barthes, 1957; pg 98.

addresses, mimics, and nervously affirms the becoming-plastic, the becoming-useful of all processes, all substances, all natures. And his work too wants to be used, wants to be swallowed up. In what follows I propose the field guide as the practical horizon for thinking about what he does, what his things do, what the space of exhibition does. I hope to employ the works in the exhibition—*Drift, Flotsam, Forever Never, Jetsam, Jul, Lightfall, Me and I, Sils, Spintread, Turn Around, Wave*, and several new works in progress—as diagrams by which events in the field can be discovered, ordered, and enjoyed. Events that will include the becoming-useful of the field guide itself.



2. Invasive Species

Two photographs. One of a workshop, illuminated from within by a clean, depthless flash. Inside, bare wood sustains the honey-warm glow of the shop. Hard to tell what might be finished, what a raw material, what precious, what collected, what trashed and on the way out. The fragment of chain-link below the table saw? The candelabra at the window? The coil of black cable? And outside, through the window: cooler air, an overcast sky, gentle light, a gentler slope, the green of green grasses and trees, a mountain, a distant barn visible in the lower right pane of the window.

The second photograph shows a utility pole, frayed bits of black plastic—perhaps a mass of polypropylene fabric?—draped about cable and box. A run of dun yellow wall, a few windows, some sky, coils of barbed wire above brick. The wooden pole’s minor riots of wiring, plastics, and circuits would be legible and orderly to someone trained in those arts: there is the power, there the communication lines, cable television, telephone, broadband, fiber-optic, etc. Ubiquitous signs of network and flow, of function and need, the delicate weave of urban living.

Both photographs were taken by Markus Baenziger. The first, from 1986, shows his grandfather’s shop in Ennetbühl, Switzerland. His grandfather had died recently. Baenziger, then pursuing a BFA at Parsons in New York, had returned home to Switzerland over the summer to pay his respects, gather a few things, and begin new projects. “The photo is as he left his workspace. This was the first time I saw the shop after a very long time, probably since my childhood visits.”⁶ Stasis. Origins. Two working lives.

The second photograph depicts the utility pole outside Baenziger’s Brooklyn studio, a studio that he had recently abandoned for one at Haverford College. This pole and these shreds and coils were visible from his second-story studio; they were on view and were the view: his other mountain, barn, and green. The photograph was taken in June of 2010 and from the street; Baenziger had just moved out of the studio and couldn’t get back in to shoot the view. And while he wanted to show me this object, he really wanted to show me the view, the view from his workshop, the bit of landscape framed by his window. Not finding that photograph, the one from his shop that would put the utility pole in the window, we have this one instead.



Two photographs. Two workshops. Two views. The first gives us both an interior and an exterior, a workshop and its landscape; the second, an exterior that was framed as landscape by an absent window, a view that, according to Baenziger, looks out over this pole and includes neither ground nor clear horizon, no point of or on the earth, only the flight paths to LaGuardia and the resonances of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway.

I pair the two photographs to delimit an allegorical field, a narrative arc that dramatizes and temporalizes a few logical inversions deeply embedded in Baenziger’s work. I’ll complicate the story soon enough, but here are the basics. Once upon a time, there was Switzerland, a childhood, a workshop, handiwork, tradition, sky and green, flowers and daylight. Once upon a time, nature and craft, separated by a few panes of glass. The work of the workshop: to transform nature into culture, to stabilize and purify the two, and to attribute all powers to human agency, which somehow is neither natural nor cultural but the absent, sovereign arbiter of both. And then comes Brooklyn, the thorough penetration of structure by infrastructure, a thick film of technical support, obscuring all land, all green, all air and water.

Every tree a utility pole; every breeze an occasion to stir trash, toxins, and weedy thickets of cable and coil. Once upon a time, man and his nature, and then, the dominion of the man-made; nature recedes, a memory; “nature” names a vanquished field, supplanted by simulacra, air conditioning, hothouse flowers and other cultivars, technological prostheses, engineered hybrids, and extreme weather. The cultivation of land and talent yields to cultic plasticity and dystopic ooze: anything can become anything else, and the “we” who makes it so is also remade; all things go under, into waste and unusable heat.

But even Switzerland has its coils, debris, and share of tools, and these tools need power. As do cameras and flashes and young men who fly away and return. On the Brooklyn side of things, utility poles aren’t only indices of utility, control, and total mobilization; they rot and crumble. And fail, long before they rot and crumble. They are exposed to air and wind and light and obsolescence—even as they and their kind alter these very forces. The weather is now us and more than us; there is no outside. Or rather, the outside is inside, not out there, through the window, framed and lovely, playing

⁶ Correspondence with the artist. June, 2011.

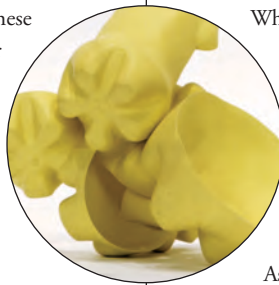
7 Take a ship. Add and then subtract some cargo. Or bits and pieces of the ship itself. Flotsam floated away or floated to the surface after said ship went down; jetsam—and Baenziger has a Jetsam too—was jettisoned to lighten the load. Both terms. “flotsam” and “jetsam”—and two others, “lagan” and “debris”—articulate a legal real: these things belong to someone. See the Wikipedia entries for “Flotsam and Jetsam” and “Marine Salvage.” In the United Kingdom under the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, jetsam, flotsam, lagan, and all other cargo and wreckage remain the property of their original owners. See <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1995/21/section/237>.

8 “In 2002, Paul Crutzen, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist, suggested that we had left the Holocene and had entered a new Epoch—the Anthropocene—because of the global environmental effects of increased human population and economic development.” [Zalasiewicz, 2008] Michel Foucault famously concludes The Order of Things with a dose of finitude and contingency: “[O]ne can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.” But we, the “us” of Flotsam, have erased the sea and the sand. Which are no longer simply natural, if by natural we mean to say, untouched and beyond our reach. Nor are our bodies natural. We dump our plastics in the sea; these are pulverized by light and wave, consumed by fishes, which we in turn consume. We are plastic.

contemplative object to our aggrandized subject. There is no away, and yet the wilderness is everywhere. You can throw something away, but *away* is always somewhere, somewhere nearer to and dearer to someone and something else. The outside is inside: you can clean the house, wash the clothes, tend your garden, but other organisms, chemistries, and objects gnaw their way into everything, loving the taste of you, peeling your paint, plumping your MDF, proliferating tumors, and minding their own business. What comes around takes us with it; water comes in bottles, bottles fill the ocean, the oceans erase the shore.

Once upon a time, there were stories of before and after, nature and man. These stories are broken. Baenziger neither tells them nor proffers toys that might help beautiful souls enjoy their melancholic relation to a permanently and perpetually lost Nature. Rather, he’s awed by and concerned with the new confusions; his work stages these confusions and invites us to relate to them anew. That tattered black polypropylene fabric is not only his view, a sight for sore eyes that want nothing better than to decorate the pain; it also exemplifies a mode of becoming. It is both a figure for the *away* that is near, the new natures you find almost everywhere you look—and it is also a figure for the workshop that percolates at the dark core of all things: growth and decay, metamorphosis and deformation, parasitism and other modes of symbiosis, junk and archive fever. Derelict and high-functioning as they appear to be, this fabric, pole, coils, and dun yellow wall are still becoming what they are, whether with us or beyond us or on their own.

Baenziger’s *Flotsam* teaches one of these lessons. It is yellow, uniformly so, but neither the yellow of flowers brought close by window box or gardening catalog, nor the yellow that says “sunshine” or “clear conscience.” The yellow



of *Flotsam* is a neither-nor kind of yellow: a bit acidic, greenish but not green enough, impure, matte, jaundice tinged with seasickness. In this sea, five conjoined plastic bottles tumble and swirl into a muscular jet of frozen, opaque fluid, which concludes at the top in what is both a trumpeting mouthpiece and an alien ear. Spin the thing and the iconic starfish bases of soda bottles—did we see the ocean in these bottles before, these five-pointed stars?—become shallow dishes, more like shells and smoothly cupped petals than relics of panic, purity, and convenience. These castoffs fuse, charmed into a form neither contained nor containing: whatever fluids were in these bottles are now these bottles.

Whatever bottles they were, they are now also trumpets, bladders, lungs—and these organs have been filled with my breath. I can hear the ocean in this shell, but it’s the roar of another ocean, the one bounded by polyethylene terephthalate. By soda, water, and “Hand me a bottle.”

As the title suggests, *Flotsam* has been lost and recovered.⁷ It is residual, a prosthesis to get-a-grip thirsts; it bears the stamp of agencies beyond its utilitarian origins. Who or what uses it now? To what wreck should it continue to refer?

From the bottom of *Flotsam* to its top, a fabric unfolds, a temporal process being given spatial form—a gift borne by much of Baenziger’s work: by *Jetsam*, *Spintread*, *Sils*, *Drift*, and *Turn Around*. At the beginning of this work, i.e., at its bottom, is the *anthropocene*: the geological now of human invasion.⁸ And something builds and improvises on this other foundation: neither celebration nor doomsday, just time above and beyond our time. *Flotsam* diagrams the emergence of an as yet nameless successor, something with another breath, other appetites. It’s less a picture of an individual entity, a worked thing to appreciate or consume, than a recipe—no, not only a recipe, but a recipe, the ingredients, the implements, a few

dishes, and the very hands that wrestled with everything, all presented at once. As though one could present this *all* all at once. As self-sufficient artwork, *Flotsam* attracts attention, but as diagram, as an element in a guide it sends you away and into the field. It is too much of the world, in title, reference, and material: plastic.

As relay, as mediator and spectral medium, what does *Flotsam* help us see? Learning how to see it, what else becomes visible?



3. Accidentals, Strays, and Others

The exhibition title, *Field Guide: Markus Baenziger*, promises double duty. The show is to be a guide to the work of this artist, and the work of this artist, installed in the gallery, is a field guide, i.e., a guide to something else. The show and this essay will try to keep both promises.

But what is a field guide? And to whom is a field guide addressed? What do its aims and modes of presentation tell us about its presumed user? Generally speaking, field guides indeed speak very generally of particulars but not, for example, of particular plants, particular animals, particular minerals, etc. Rather, most field guides—and here I’m working with only of a few venerable lines and only a few instances⁹—assemble representative samples and distinctive traits of a species so that a particular plant, animal, or mineral can be

identified by someone, proverbially “in the field,” or someone, who, having carried home a few leaves, might then say, “that tree is a *Quercus rubra*, a Northern Red Oak.” Field guides answer the question, “What is it?” And these answers typically begin with the indefinite article, “a,” and not the definite one, “the,” concluding with a name. Field guides traffic in a rigorous generality and the presumption of manageable variation.

Though applicable to different fields, the guides share common assumptions about the role played by pictures. In his classic guide to birds, Roger Tory Peterson gives us illustrations, multiple per page. The drawings are characteristically flat and serial; for example, he arranges each finch species identically, in profile for the sake of easy comparison. In the opening section, “How to Use this Book,” he writes:

The plates and cuts throughout the text are intended as diagrams, arranged so that quick, easy comparison can be made of the species that most resemble one another. As they are not intended to be pictures and portraits, modeling of form and feathering is often subordinated to simple contour and pattern. Some birds are better adapted than others to this simplified handling, hence the variation in treatment. Even color is sometimes unnecessary, if not, indeed, confusing.¹⁰

Diagrammatic, schematic, abstract, decontextualizing: in these books creatures and parts stand against white or monochrome backgrounds, surrounded by a vortex of numerals, captions, arrows, and other pictures. Guides create a language game in which pictures play an important part—but only a part.¹¹ They train observers in the field to identify species by teaching them to read images and creatures, texts and field marks, to look back and forth, from the world to the book to the world again, while attuning to taxonomic imperatives.

9 E.g., I have in hand The National Audubon Society’s Field Guide to the Eastern States, National Geographic’s Field Guide to the Birds of North America, The Sibley Guide to Birds, The Sibley Guide to Trees, both by Allen David Sibley, and the ground-breaking A Field Guide to the Birds of the Eastern United States by Roger Tory Peterson.

10 Peterson, 1947: pg xviii.

11 In an essay on field guides, John Law and Michael Lynch employ the concept of the language game, which they borrow from Ludwig Wittgenstein. They write, “The notion of a literary language game brings into relief the way in which naturalistic observation and representation require an apprenticeship in a social organization of ‘reading’ and ‘writing.’ When encountered through such an apprenticeship, ‘natural order’ is discovered and organized through the basic texts in the language game. ‘Natural kinds’ are not simply representations of what the eye (or the mind’s eye) sees. In place of this perceptual model for observations we are substituting a model of reading and writing. We are suggesting that birdwatchers do not simply see birds.” Law, 1988, pg 273; emphasis in the original. Some guides, e.g., the Audubon series, offer photographs of exemplary individuals instead of composite illustrations. The game is different, but the rules are similar.

Thus and in sum, a field guide implies: a., that the subject-in-the-field is perplexed and yet desirous of the right language, the right order, a system. Without the guide, chaos, confusion, and nearly illimitable multiplicity rule. But with training, clusters of discrete entities appear. b., that the subject-in-the-field is oblivious and yet wants to see significant differences. “An oak, yes, but which one? How deep is the cap on the acorn? Is the bark broken into irregular rectangular blocks? Etc.” This subject has her hands on a book and thus understands the trouble with the unaided eye: it sees too much and too little. Technical extensions, including words and pictures, reconstitute direct experiences of real entities, entities that the same direct experience would have missed. And c., that the subject-in-the-field is speechless but wants to speak, wants better questions. This subject begins with, “What is it?” But soon will be able to say: “What else could it be?”¹² “Given the habitat, the season, the latitude and longitude, it’s exactly what I expect to see.” “Perhaps I didn’t see it clearly enough.” “I’ve never seen one of these before.” “Not close enough!” “Seen by others, not me.”¹³ A linguistic menagerie emerges, extending “what is it?” to subtler phenomena.

The field guide testifies to and seeks to ameliorate fundamental confusions, obliviousness, and silence. But the *wanting* to clarify, *wanting* to see, and *wanting* to speak presuppose pleasures, affective notes. What do the latter imply about the subject-in-the-field? Explaining his diligence and dedication, in the Preface to *The Sibley Guide to Birds* Sibley writes:

I kept on bird-watching for those two decades for all the reasons that anyone watches birds. Birds are beautiful, in spectacular as well as subtle ways; their colors, shapes, actions, and sounds are among the most aesthetically pleasing in nature. Then there is the adventure

of seeking out scarce species in remote wilderness or in specialized habitats close to home; the wonder of seeing thousands of birds pass by on migration; the excitement of finding a stray from some far corner of the globe.¹⁴

Here and at the outset Sibley appeals to beauty, spectacle, subtlety, aesthetic pleasure, adventure, wonder, excitement. I don’t want to argue with “birds are beautiful”; rather, I want to argue *with* it, to use it as a tool. What beauty problems are proffered and solved by the field guide? And how does the reader of the field guide, the one looking for beauty with and through the guide, compare to the subject-in-the-gallery—this gallery?

The subject-in-the-field is not only confounded, insensate, speechless, but also hungry for what is here called beauty. This beauty is neither a staple nor all that common; it is fleeting, wayward, scarce, rare, “out there,” the very promise of the field, of distance and time. The guide emerges from these wonders—without them, no dedication, no writing, no painting, no taxonomic frenzy, no communicative ambition. But the map is not the territory. No matter how lovely, does not the guide rank second to the free beauties of nature? The guide should play frame to an otherwise dimly perceived landscape: the guide touches upon and demarcates—without literally touching or setting off—zones of experience, views, qualities of feeling.

But that’s not beauty-according-to-the-guide; without the question, “what is it?” without the “colors, shapes, actions, and sounds,” in their distinction and relative singularity, no beauty. This map constitutes the territory just as the workshop window constitutes the view, establishes its visibilities and affective intensities. Seeing a stray from some far corner of the globe, *wanting* to see this stray, is only possible for one who knows these corners, who can see the

otherwise insignificant details that mark what Peterson calls the “accidental”:

The great hope of every field man is to see a rare bird... a bird that is rare in your region might be common in the next state or even the next county... ¶ *Accidentals* are the rarest of the rarities—those birds that should not occur in your region at all.¹⁵

And now, to move to the gallery, the works, the exhibition as field guide. The subject-in-the-field, new to the field but with guide in hand, is perplexed, weak, hungry, and without words beyond, “what is it?” When we call this gallery exhibition a field guide, we treat it as an aide, as an element in a language game—then what? The works are mediators; they don’t stand as singular, as ends in themselves. Rather, the works are diagrams for the perplexed, for those who barely know the field, who don’t know what’s in it, who don’t know what counts, what’s distinctive, the significant differences, for those who are hungry for beauty. Let me pervert Peterson’s description to serve these purposes:

The *works* throughout the *exhibition* are intended as diagrams. As they are not intended to be pictures and portraits, modeling of form is often subordinated to simple contour and pattern. Some *events* are better adapted than others to this simplified handling, hence the variation in treatment. Even color is sometimes unnecessary, if not, indeed, confusing.

If we set the analogy to work here, we have a few unlikely consequences and a few imperatives. Pose *Flotsam* as an element in a game; treat it not as an autonomous entity, but as one lashed to practices, new utilities, new expectations; it is not the beautiful bird but a diagram that offers, in the hands of an enthusiast, great hopes. *Flotsam* should thus be

the answer to a question; the difference between *Flotsam* and *Jetsam* should reveal differences that otherwise go unnoticed. Wander into the field with *Flotsam* in mind or hand; then its resins and bottles should help you satisfy and even invent hungers, diminish existing perplexities and invent new ones, and reseed sensory fields. But only if we are prepared to follow the indices, to look through these opaque, liquid bottles, the spasm of fluid, the not-quite-yellow, the organs and apertures, in order to see something else. We are to move from these diagrams to events, i.e., systems, artifacts, processes: from *Flotsam* to flotsam and jetsam, to any and every plastic bottle that floats away to come back, that bears futures of its own, deadly to some, lively to others.

For me that something else, that hunger, emerges between Ennetbühl and Brooklyn, the familiar green through-the-window and the “strange stranger” wrapped around—if not exactly perched on—the cable.¹⁶ These works imply that we are in trouble and that we want to see, find, and understand this trouble. When I follow *Flotsam*’s lines and carceral swerves—its beauties—I find myself wanting to see into the



12 Peterson, 1947; pg ix.

13 “My old copy of Peterson’s has all my notations on sightings from 1987 on, so it is like a memory book as well as a reference guide. Here’s my marginilia [sic] for Prothonotary Warbler. ‘Seen by others, NOT ME, CP, ‘oo.’ With this notation I can remember, and still feel, that awful frustration as a dozen other observers on the Central Park bird walk oooohed and aaaaahed upon spotting the bird, and me, the idiot, not finding and not finding it. Happily, immediately next to this notation, is the triumphal scribble, ‘2005! CP! 4-18-05! YEAH!’ and I can enjoy that specific thrill of seeing my first Prothonotary anew.” See <http://thecluelessgardener.blogspot.com/2007/05/roger-tory-peterson-vs-david-sibley.html>

14 Sibley, 2000; pg 7. Peterson gives a comparably cooler motive. “Field birding, as most of us engage in it, is a game—a most absorbing game.” Peterson, 1947; pg vii.

15 Peterson, 1947; p. 185; emphasis in the original.

16 “The ecological thought imagines interconnectedness, which I call the mesh. Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom? The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully ‘itself.’... Our encounter with other beings becomes profound. They are strange, even intrinsically strange. Getting to know them makes them stranger. When we talk about life forms, we’re talking about strange strangers. The ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers.” Morton, 2010; pg 15; emphasis in the original.

17 But of course these guides show me more as well. Every page has been measured to the perceptual cut of the human observer. Peterson opens his book with “Roadside Silhouettes,” acknowledging the roadside, our roadside, as an new ecological niche. But further, some guides put the human animal on both sides of the guide; the guides are as well—not only but also—guides to the nature we’re making and that’s making us. For example, The National Audubon Society’s Field Guide to the Eastern States includes in their list of habitats, “Open and Disturbed Areas,” subdivided into “Grasslands,” “Power- and Gas-line Easements,” “Roadsides,” “Managed Fields and Croplands”; they include as well a section entitled “Effects of Introduced Species.” And on the back of The Sibley Guide to Trees we read, “The paper of this book is FSC [Forest Stewardship Council] certified, which assures it was made from well managed forests and other controlled sources.” The book is a thing, assembled from the very things it assembles—which Baenziger does in each work, with plastics, not paper. But, unlike these guides, he gives vivid, spatial contours to things that are temporal and otherwise imperceptible.

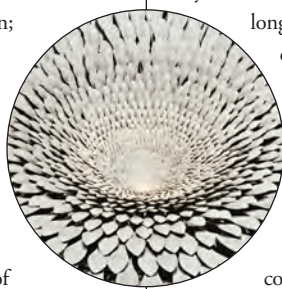
18 The tradition of the readymade, which nominally began in 1913 with Bicycle Wheel by Marcel Duchamp, has been used to smash the sedimentary vestiments of the art world, all of its instruments and all of its games. The readymade helps to reveal and undermine the context of exhibition, the authority of craft, the expectations of viewers, and the commodity form of the artwork. The readymade can smash, a useful tool in the hands of an iconoclast, but it can also build; found objects, readymade forms, or casts of these forms can be put to other kinds of work, work I’m trying to do here. See Latour, 2002.

19 Bletter, 2007.

mesh of relations that entangles its forms—from shipping containers lost at sea to my latest sugar jag. And I find myself. Both in the guide and through it—which doesn’t happen with the field guides of Sibley and Peterson: they purport to show me nature, purely and simply.¹⁷ Baenziger invents the guide, the arc of reference, and the phantom but real referents; his creations refer to ongoing creation elsewhere and outside, efficacious, ineluctable.

And so I here bring together a few of Baenziger’s inventions. His works diagram and reveal striking taxonomic regularities observable in the field. The works need to be described, analyzed—seen for what they are—but it’s the field that finally needs articulation; it’s the field man who hopes for vision, the guide would train his eyes and tune his attention. So, if he only looks *at* the works but doesn’t look *through* them to the world, to their referents, to their bit and pieces and processes, he’s doing it wrong. For example, many of these works grow up around found objects.

Drift incorporates fragments of conch shells and delicate disks of twisted copper wire harvested from extension cords. *Lightfall* includes feathered bits of this same copper wire. Just as *Flotsam* “begins” in bottles, so too does *Jetsam* begin in a folded, crushed, and bleached newspaper. So too does *Spintread* build up from a shredded fragment of tire tread, the patterning of which is repeated in the delicately fanning web that tops it. And so too does *Sils* originate in a geometrically precise sliver of 6” pipe—which I will discuss by way of conclusion below. *Wave* mimics a Tropicana billboard ad. *Turn Around* includes chain-link fencing and a post. But rather than only picture the picturesque in detritus, and rather than only encounter these found objects as readymades, think of these objects as irritants around which something grows, think of them as mutagens and other enabling obstacles, think of



them as spurs to algorithmic elaboration.¹⁸ They are grains of sand to a subsequent pearling; they are plastic aortas to a few still thriving bodies. And thus does this regularity here, in the work, teach us to see such meshed encrustations there, in the field.

Another taxonomic regularity insists: many of these works are white or off-white, or so delicately tinted and/or feathered as to be translucent: even color is sometimes unnecessary, if not, indeed, confusing. *Forever Never* is entirely white: the petals, satin to semigloss, gleam. *Lightfall* is primarily white, with a cloud of yellow floating off to its right, which only resolves into individual yellow filaments in the middle distance of a

long approach. *Drift* is an explosive swirl of off-whites. The spine of *Me and I* is white. The newspaper cast of *Jetsam* is old-newspaper beige, the “white” of a newly blank page. But rather than think of these whites as only a paint color or as a trap for shadows and the formal play of light, consider instead two possibilities: a.,

as Peterson suggests, these whites disqualify color as a relevant feature of what lay beyond in the field. Petals, per se, not a particular one; artificial flowers as such, artifice as such, not a particular species of the taxon *Simulacraceae*.¹⁹ Or b., the white is art gallery camouflage. *Lightfall* literally emerges from the wall, sharing its color so as to disappear and blend. The white of this work refers to the white of the typical context of exhibition and folds the site into the work, makes the site itself a wonder of the field. And here then we have a relevant trait: as diagrams, these works refer to the implication of context. Environments aren’t containers but machines, assemblages; “white” here says, look for the edges of things, camouflaged though they may be.

Many of these works are resolutely partial, and so refer to absent wholes, wholes that include systems, temporal extension, and uses. *Sils* and *Jul* are individual leaves. *Turn Around* is a torqued

segment of streetscape, and its dangling vine grows both up and down, rooting nowhere but in the chain-link itself. *Me and I* is a proliferation of flowers but no leaves, no roots, no habitat, no plausible botanical referent, thus more parade float than quasi-organism; everything that I wouldn’t have but now could cover with flowers. *Forever Never* is all flower, hyperbolically so: thick plastic petals, carved, cast, and whorled. No stem, no pistil, no stamen, no roots, no leaves, no thorns. But then it’s not even a flower, never was and never will be, because sexless, without reproductive organs, sterility incarnate, marmoreal. But instead of carrying these parts *back* to vanquished totalities—every artwork a fetish, a memorial, a compensatory spasm—the guide carries these parts *forward*: they are traits that plug and play over many systems and many machines: from kitsch calendars to florists’ ruses to cartoon hypertrophy to the vases of cheap restaurants. The works diagram the traffic of part-objects and the promiscuous assault of bits and pieces as elements of syntax. *Forever Never* helps me see the petals of a shower curtain flower and other decorative flora—and their reproductive organs: we reproduce them, everywhere.

Finally, all of these works are also made by hand. *Sils* is built piece by hand-carved piece. The petals of *Forever Never* are cast and repeated but each was bent and molded by hand. The flowers of *Me and I* are each made by hand. *Wave* was modeled in clay, cast, and polished by hand. *Spintread*’s delicate webbing was soldered together by hand. But rather than only think of Baenziger’s hands, his skills with these materials, the touch and signature of the artist as author, think also of the handmade as a trait of what-there-is, even when what-there-is has been made by machine or by non-human “hands.” Peterson’s and Sibley’s illustrative drawings and paintings show us their affection, their personal dedication



and powers of discrimination. Their handiwork also connotes mastery of the field: they’ve each individually wrestled the specimens onto their tables. Baenziger’s handiwork works differently. “Fabricated” can mean both built and fraudulent. Baenziger fabricates and *fabricates* because the field is both *fabricated* and fabricated: in this field dwell hybrid entities assembled by human and non-human actors. His having-worked, his touch, his invention, refers to the bottles, petals, newspapers, pipes, leaves, fences, tires, sticks, wires, etc., that touch each other now, inexorably—that touch and invent new relations and new objects. His guide doesn’t play culture to the enigma of nature; nor does his guide

rescue a nature everywhere threatened by culture. Rather, his guide partakes of the invention and collusion that is the ontological condition of the field.

In sum, this field guide is us, wondering, trying to find the rare beauties that have something and nothing to do with us: the things we make, the things that make themselves, the things that make us and make us up. The works map and invent a territory and attendant hopes; learning how to see the work means learning how to read fabrication stories in everything, how to read for invention.

4. *Transplants*

I will conclude with a brief discussion of *Sils*, which will let me enact the hopes of the field man and distinguish this guide from its progenitors and accomplices.

Sils bears a place name. *Sils*, Switzerland. Drop these two words into the search field of a browser and Google serves up MySwitzerland.com, “Official website of Switzerland Tourism.” The tagline reads, “Switzerland. Get Natural.”

And the natural you get is replete with hotels and framing flora. Baenziger's *Sils*, fictively poised between hemlock, fern, and mimosa, mimics a bipinnate leaf, a frond. He pegs it high on the wall, a bright and elegant trophy. *Sils* like many of these works—particularly *Jul* and *Forever Never*—stages Nature as specimen clean, visually clear, and neuter.

But mimicry here and in these other works is never a means to verisimilitude or worship of a vanquished original, either as wonder or exemplar of true growth, true becoming. *Sils* gets you into this natural form, but only from a distance. When you come even a bit closer, it falls apart and falls together as something else. Each of the *pinula*—I opt for the language of ferns, for me the closest, living relative—is unique: mold two-part epoxy clay around a length of bright copper filament, sand the cured epoxy on four sides to make a 3/4"-blade, sharpen the tip, let the wire extend from the other end, use this length to solder the blade to the midrib of the *pinna*, also properly called the *costa*. This copper peeks out on some blades, in the middle or at the tip. The *costa* is also copper, but covered with silver paint to match and extend the solder. The *rachis*, the spine to which the *pinna* are soldered in turn, is also copper and is painted as well. Too close to *Sils* and there's nothing ferny about it, though you get the too-close when you're still rather far away.

Still another element obtrudes at this middle distance: the base of the stem. From a distance it reads as a curl of branch, of a piece and yet also split between the new curl and the steel rod that continues into the stem. The curl is a cleanly cut and clearly measured diameter of steel pipe. Thin, almost a circle, it lies against the wall, from which it seems to emerge, a dark moon against a white sky. And so while it appears to be a curl, it's a lip of pipe to which has been welded to a short length of bent rod. The rod then transitions through a segment of epoxy to the copper *rachis*. What's the point of joining

steel pipe and steel rod to epoxy-covered copper? Approach the work, see into its fabrication and into its materials and away from its similitude, and the pipe is what it is, transformed by the syntax, by the joinery. But the curl is even more obdurate than the *pinulae* and *pinnae*; it hasn't been made to look like anything. The pipe was a castoff from one of Baenziger's own projects; he salvaged the rod from a waste bin at the Brandeis sculpture studio where he was teaching at the time. And then he built them out by building them together. The frond and branch emerge from the salvaged pieces as though nourished by them.²⁰ *Sils* sweats this union, though as a sign of vitality not decline.

This specialized vocabulary, the terms of a botanical lexicon for parts and pieces of a fern frond, is here less a scholarly requirement than a pleasure and a provocation. The language of plant-life and taxonomy clatters against the copper, epoxy, solder, and paint, on the one hand, and against the activities of fabrication, on the other: molding, sanding, sharpening, and soldering. This noise illuminates and troubles a distinction between two modes of making and two field guides. While a plant emerges out of itself, i.e., makes itself, *Sils* emerges in and through another, i.e., in and through Baenziger the artist, who has worked upon found, raw, and refined materials that might otherwise have nothing to do with plant life. And yet each entity, this proverbial plant and *Sils*, recruits allies at all scales and of all kinds: chemical, cellular, solar, animal, vegetable, and mineral. A plant recruits a multitude: sun, soils, waters, pollinators, inhalers of oxygen, exhalers of carbon dioxide—most if not all animals—and even the window in my hallway, which filters the light and regulates the temperature. And *Sils* recruits allies as well: copper, steel, paint, walls, humans—artists, assistants, viewers, and writers—and petroleum, which recruited plants and pressures and time and darkness. These two lexicons, the botanical and the artisanal, don't

delineate distinct modes of becoming. Rather, the works—as diagrams and as elements in a guide—reveal fabrication and invention all the way down; I am to see the same artifice, that is to say, *making*, in everything, the same ties, allegiances, dependencies, contingencies, and accidents.

These lexicons rub up against each other during the approach as you discover the difference between what *Sils* looks like and what it is. The approach, the coming-closer, is used by *Sils*—and many of the works, notably *Lightfall*, *Me and I*, and *Drift*—as a taxonomic trait. The slow or possibly impatient movement from “What is that supposed to be? A leaf?” to “each of these needles has been carved by hand, and is that glint, copper? And what's growing out of that torn bit of pipe?” recapitulates the experience of being-in-the-field. The approach allegorizes the discovery of invention and the fit of the two lexicons, and thus the two networks: the plant, earth, sun, botanist network and the epoxy, wire, artist, viewer network. And it's precisely these two networks that are at issue.

In other words, there aren't even two. The field guide that is this exhibition puts plastic back into nature, where it has always been, and nature back into plastic, where it has always been. The guide invites a leap into fields where flotsam and jetsam now churn, buckle, and bear dark fruits: new ecosystems span the oceans, built around microplastic debris, faux plankton, swallowed and made flesh, inextricable, real. These field are close, neither under nor over any rainbow, but right here, in your hand and under your feet. The guide teaches you that rarities, accidentals, and others occur in your region, all the time, because no region is wholly yours and no region is pure of what you've done and will do. You want to see these beauties, even when they're ugly, because you owe them your affection, your life. That is Baenziger's lesson. Every region is afloat with the very invention of forms, some

durable, some worrisome, deadly even, some fragile and in need of new allies, all enabling, all potentially wondrous.

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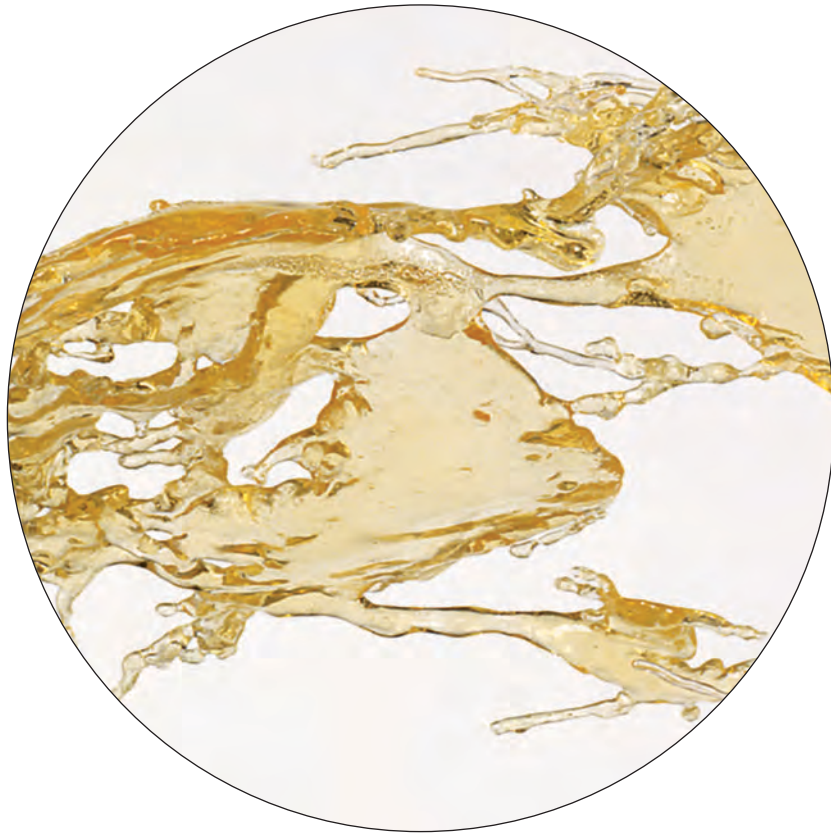
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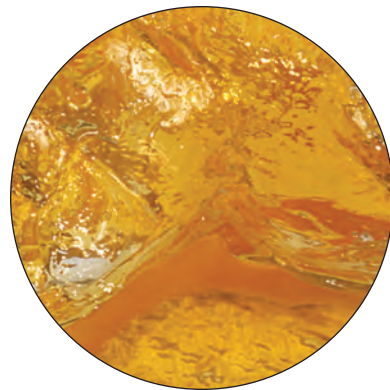
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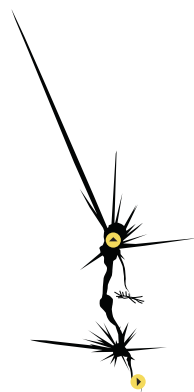
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²⁰As noted above, Flotsam, Jetsam, and other works sketch this same collusion.



Wave, 2000
Synthetic resin, wood
60"H x 20"W x 15"D
© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of
Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg

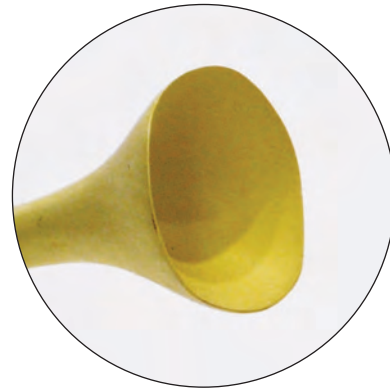




Drift, 2005
Synthetic resin,
copper filament, tin
50"H x 25"W x 30"D

© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist
and Edward Thorp
Gallery, New York





Flotsam, 2005

Synthetic resin, copper filament
11.5"H x 12"W x 8.25"D

© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist and
Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts,
Omaha, Nebraska





Forever Never, 2005
Resin, metal, wood, fiberglass
11"H x 94"W
© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist and
Edward Thorp Gallery, New York





Jetsam, 2005

Synthetic resin, copper filament
51"H x 11"W x 4.5"D

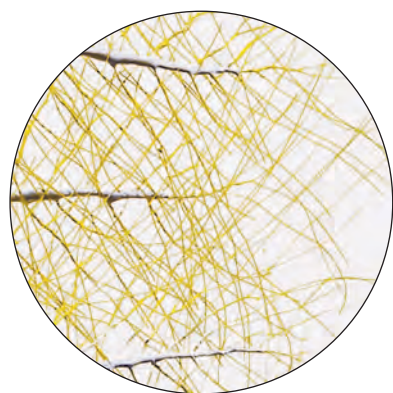
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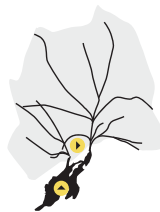




Lightfall, 2005
Synthetic resin,
copper filament
102"H x 9"W x 3.5"D

© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist
and Edward Thorp
Gallery, New York



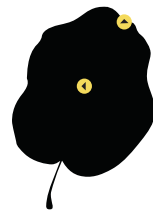
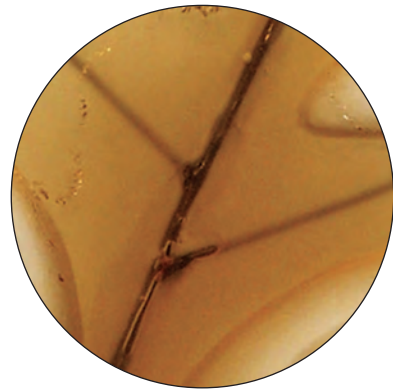
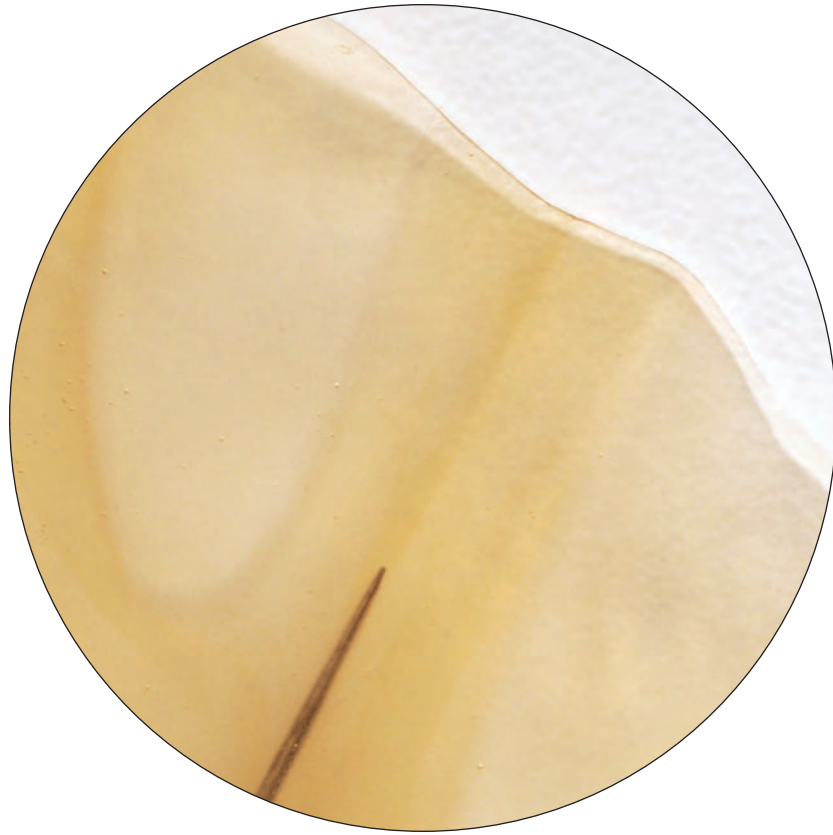


Spintread, 2005

Resin, copper filament
28"H x 29"W x 13"D

© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist and
Edward Thorp Gallery, New York





Jul, 2008

Synthetic resin, copper filament
102"H x 9"W x 3.5"D

© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist
and Edward Thorp
Gallery, New York





Me and I, 2008
Synthetic resin, copper filament
65"H x 32"W x 5"D
© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist and
Edward Thorp Gallery, New York





Turn Around, 2008

Mixed media
110"H x 47"W x 22"D

© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist
and Edward Thorp
Gallery, New York

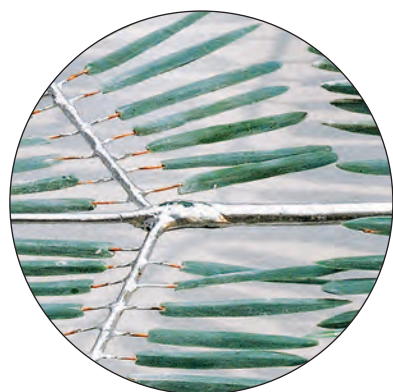




Sil, 2008

Mixed media
25"H x 20"W x 7"D

© Markus Baenziger
Courtesy of the artist
and Edward Thorp
Gallery, New York



Biographies

Markus Baenziger

Born in Zurich, Switzerland, 1959.

Markus Baenziger is currently Professor of Sculpture at Haverford College in Pennsylvania.

Baenziger received an MFA in sculpture from Yale University School of Art, a BFA from Parsons School of Design. His work has been presented in one-person shows at Edward Thorp Gallery, NY; Louise Jones Brown Gallery, Duke University; Bonakdar Jancou Gallery, NY; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, NY; and Cohen Gallery, NY. His work has also been featured in select group exhibitions at the Walton Arts Center, the Rose Art Museum; the Walker Art Center; the Yale University Art Gallery; the Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, FL; the Hillwood Art Museum, Brookville, NY; the Florida Atlantic University Gallery; the Swiss Institute; Zabriskie Gallery; C/O Gallery in Oslo, among others.

His awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship and awards from the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, the State of Connecticut Commission on the Arts, and Yale University. Baenziger's work has been written up in the *New York Times*, the *New York Sun*, the *Art Newspaper*, the *Village Voice*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Arts & Antiques*, *Sculpture Magazine*, and other publications.

His work can be found in the collections of the Walker Art Center, MN; the Agnes Gund Collection, NY; and numerous private collections. He is represented by Edward Thorp Gallery, NY.

For more details see www.markusbaenziger.com

John Muse

Born in Roanoke, VA, 1962.

John Muse is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Haverford College and the John B. Hurford '60 Humanities Center Exhibitions Faculty Liaison.

He received an MFA in Photography from the San Francisco Art Institute and a PhD in Rhetoric from U.C. Berkeley. His videos and media installations have been exhibited throughout the United States and Europe. In 2010, Muse and frequent collaborator Jeanne C. Finley installed a commissioned media installation, *Sleeping Under Stars, Living Under Satellites*, at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, CT.

Muse was the 2007–2009 Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Hurford Humanities Center. He is a Rockefeller Foundation Media Arts Fellow, a Creative Capital Grantee, and a former Xerox Palo Alto Research Center artist-in-residence. The Patricia Sweetow Gallery in San Francisco represents his installation works, and the Video Data Bank distributes his single-channel works.

For more details see www.funleymuse.com

Acknowledgments

Markus Baenziger

I would like to thank John Muse for his vision and expertise in curating this exhibition. Thanks to Matthew Callinan, the John B. Hurford '60 Humanities Center, and members of the exhibition committee for their support and encouragement. Thanks to the Office of the Provost for its research grants, and to my studio assistants Brooke Reid, Angel Genares, Milap Dixit, and Rob Williams for their skillful work. Thanks also to Rick Bechtel for his help in the foundry and to Jacob Lunderby for his assistance with the installation of the works. A special thanks finally to my wife Jenifer for her support.

John Muse

I would like to thank Markus Baenziger for entrusting this show to me and for teaching me how to think about the ecology of invention. Thanks to Matthew Callinan and Yani Chu-Richardson for helping me clarify my ideas and for supporting me through this effort. Thanks to the many who proofed and improved the catalog essay: Ruti Talmor weighed every word and helped me create something better than okay. James Weissinger and Ms. Chu-Richardson also gave invaluable editorial support. Thanks to the John B. Hurford '60 Humanities Center, in particular the members of the exhibitions committee: Israel Burshatin, Mr. Weissinger, Mr. Callinan, and Emily Cronin. The Center has breathed life into many of my projects and has here done so again. Thanks to Richard Torchia for discussing the details of this exhibition with me. Thanks as well to entire staff of the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, to Wormwood & Haze, and to Haverford College's Business, Central Receiving, Communications, Dining Service, Facilities, Housekeeping, and Purchasing Departments. Thanks finally to my family, Vicky Funari and Celeste Funari Muse, for the love, the songs, and the support, even during our summer vacation, my writer's holiday.





Using plastic resins, found objects, and various casting and carving techniques, artist Markus Baenziger invents floridly beautiful flora that often merge with or emerge from technological debris. *Field Guide*, Baenziger's first exhibition at Haverford College, maps his ecologies of cultured waste and natural hybridity, inviting viewers to reconsider the troubles and wonders of our contemporary landscape.