

Hunter Longe & Paulo Wirz

Opening: 15.09.23 at 18:00

15.09.23 – 11.11.23

Work Descriptions

Hunter Longe

First exhibited at Swiss Art Awards in 2021, Longe's series *Relics of An Evaporated Sea* are cast sculptures made out of plaster and varying minerals. Their fragmentary quality, a seeming part of a whole incites a feeling of discovery and bewilderment: what is it we're seeing before us? They contain gypsum crystals, often called selenite, that were gathered in Switzerland. These, over 200-million-year-old minerals were formed when the Tethys Sea evaporated leaving vast sediments of gypsum and salt. Selenite comes from the Greek word *selenē* and its growth was thought to be dependent on the cycles of the Moon. Selenite's metaphysical property is as an activator of the third eye.

In some of the works in this series Longe has used squid ink, sepia, another material link to the Sea. It is a wink to fossil collector Elizabeth Philpot (1780–1857) who created illustrations with ink she extracted in fossil belemnites. By doing so, she was able to prove that these curious fossils were remains of squid-like creatures.

The crystals in *Relics of An Evaporated Sea* are lit up with flickering LED lights. The image of luminous gems is a staple in fantasy fiction and ancient myths from around the world, as sources of light on buildings, for navigating boats or for helping guide lost people. In the esoteric realm, flickering lights are indicative of the presence of spirits.

Longe finds it curious how both scientists and esoteric people can be irrationally attracted to stones. They are both petrophiles, stone lovers. There are many traditions of stone appreciation, from the natural philosopher Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24 – AD 79) with his dense scholarly writings on stones to collecting rocks in 10th-century China. Why is it that we find precious stones so precious? In 1961 writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley set about trying to answer that very question: "These are the objects in the natural world which most nearly resemble things which are seen with the inner eye by people who have the gift of vision—and which even those who do not consciously have the gift of vision—have some kind of unconscious inkling of. It seems to, as it were, remind them of something going on in the back of their minds which, on a subterranean level, they know something about."¹

In his work, Longe has been recurringly evoking mineralogic and organic relationships, but also situating them in today's context of material innovations and technology. Magnetite, which Longe mixes into nearly all of his cast sculptures, is highly magnetic and is a mineral that certain bacteria and mammals have the ability to form or "biomineralize." For example, it is found in bird beaks and acts as a compass enabling birds to navigate along the Earth's magnetic fields. It is also found in mammal brains, hypothesized to be linked with long-term memory. Magnets have also been important for technological advancements such as memory storage for hard drives which have been in use for the past half century. In *Relics of An Evaporated Sea* gypsum is, yes, a crystal, but also a very commonplace material in our daily life, found in toothpaste, plaster

and fertilizer. These archaic materials become a bit like blasts from the past. Longe's works invite us to draw connections, making us aware of the fascinating properties of materials as well as their historical sources.

It is hard to fathom the sheer colossal amounts of non-human history that has made the world as we know it. "The mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far back into the abyss of time," noted John Playfair, a scientist who worked together with geologist and founder of the term deep time, James Hutton when experiencing the rocky promontory of Siccar Point in Scotland. This cognitive shift can be compared to the Overview Effect, when astronauts see the Earth from space, setting about a self-transcendental experience and in turn conjuring a deeper connection to others and the Earth. Such awe-inspiring moments spring from contemplating big ideas like infinity or reality, or in the case of Longe's work, grasping the profound and bewildering relationships between the living and the non-living.

Throughout the ages art has oftentimes been inherently connected to worship, as a portal to divinity or our ancestors. Art has that special power of being able to exert a hold on the viewer. Some of the *Relics of An Evaporated Sea* sculptures have forms reminiscent of sacred spaces, with a round or flat arch, or structures that resemble a staircase. Stairs as a symbol of consciousness or of life change, new beginnings and death. In the piece *Relic of an Evaporated Sea XXVII (for Brian) (2023)*, Longe made a mold made using black magnetite sand, whose form is inspired by one of his father's drawings, who was also an artist. The shape evokes some kind of vegetation or a pair of heraldic wings. The drawing has particular significance for Hunter as it was done near the end of his father's life, who passed away recently. The drawing is on display in the office. Hunter Longe finds power in understanding our connections to our ancestors and the holistic wisdoms of the past. He writes: "In poems and drawings, as in dreams, we hone back in on deep instincts and intuitions that have been sequestered by striving for the lie that is reason. Strange times require that we embrace the strange, for time itself is strange." Longe's practice embodies this strangeness. Research-based with a freewheeling and alchemical spirit rooted in history, science, technology, and spirituality, it is lysergic and kaleidoscopic.

There are various strands of thoughts, such as panpsychism, the symbioscene and Earth-centered religions that deem the Earth's phenomena and cycles of life as inter-related. The Earth as agential with absolute force rather than a rationalist idea with an anthropocentric ethic. The Gaia Principle, heavily debated and controversial to some, posits humankind as not separate from the Earth and where the living and inorganic are thought to have evolved together; the Earth as alive and as a superorganism. For Longe consciousness and sentience permeates matter and he fully embraces that things are irrational. If sentience permeates materials, plausibly the materials that make us, also make us sentient?

The first encounter with an artwork is the front door handle. The granite stones were gathered at Lake Tahoe, where Longe grew up, and were collected during a period of grief at a place he frequented with his father. "Opening the door to something," an idiom in English that makes room for new beginnings or possibilities, a new cycle of life. Cycles seem to be an important theme in Longe's practice. Granite, a hard durable rock has been a common building material throughout the ages, for both gravestones

and monuments alike. With its capacity to conduct heat away, it feels colder to the touch. Beyond physical properties, rocks are also thought to imbue energies, of a symbolic or metaphysical nature. Granite with its hardness is supposed to grant people with resilience and courage and in various cultures it is placed on top of one's door as a protection against evil spirits. The handle as a shared surface and locus for touch, grasped by the many exhibition visitors upon entry and exit becomes a physical point of connection making a threshold.

Initiation (2023) is made out of Calcite. Though the origins of the particular specimen used in this work are uncertain, calcite is often related to limestone - a rock formed from sedimentary deposits in ancient oceans.

Vessel (2023) contains a quartz crystal with siderite (an iron oxide) formed onto it. This stone is from Binntal in Wallis, where the base was also cast directly in the dry river bed of the Binna river. The color gradient of the piece is a result of letting the object soak in copper sulfate solution for several weeks.

Rebirth (2023) is the fossil shell of bivalve from Crimea, its center containing the mineral vivianite that formed inside. Usually a translucent green, light can cause oxidation, and in this instance turned the mineral black. Projected onto it is a video of a reflection of the sun on water. What might look like a white-painted exterior is in fact all natural, it is calcium carbonate.

In *Offrande* (2023) the recorded sound of a crackling fire is being sent through LED lights making them flicker with the frequency of the sound. A solar panel is placed into this light and plugged into a speaker, converting the scintillating light back into sound. In this work, the soothing sound is reminiscent of sleep sounds or ASMR content in which sounds of whispers or videos of pimple popping bring about an auditory-tactile synesthesia. Longe describes the effect as a "very contemporary and technological kluge-like solution to the anxiety and insomnia probably often caused by the very technology itself."

Immolation (2023) contains a slag, a discarded rock, from an immolation site of Goldbichl in Austria. In the Neolithic Age it is believed that the immolation (the sacrificial burning) of goats, bovines and sheep was commonplace. It is thought that there are some 200 ritual immolations sites in the Alps. These sites have been studied for the past 40 years, in which scientists are interested in investigating the interaction between man and rocks. A mind-boggling thought: sacrificial burnings causing the formation of new minerals. Projected onto it is a video simulating heat distortion.

Paulo Wirz

The cult of objects can be a testimony to the human urge to hold on to the past. Photographs, souvenirs, relics, and memorabilia, are some of the many ways in which the past is crystalized into a form. This act of "traveling" to a past that could be staged in nostalgic, affective, and at times imaginative impressions is an instrumental tool for managing our identities. It is performed both intentionally as well as unintentionally, and is a pervasive and inexplicable act of self-grounding. When looking at objects used in spiritual contexts, be they cults, rituals, and sacred ceremonies questions of not only symbolism, but also utilitarianism seem to arise. These objects become

repositories of power, sedimenting on the one hand the energies, virtues and charisma of certain holy figures and on the other concretizing the mediative nature of such objects, i.e. the inherent connection between the sacred (the transcendent, or supernatural, realm) and the profane (the realm of time and space, the here and now).

Thoroughly questioning the urge to reach spirituality via the material world and our need to preserve material objects as a connection to the past, the future that Paulo Wirz has been interested in, is one in which faith and technology are in a simultaneous process of development. Be it in the form of large-format sculptures and site-specific installations, objects are important in Wirz's practice. Often arranged in symmetrical structures, his objects' configurations are suggestive of board games, burial sites or shrines. These objects become reliquiae of a symbolic past, vanitas for our ritualized everyday and material punctuations of a cosmological future. This material quality is both seductive and often of a fragile beauty, oscillating between the visible and the invisible, the past and the future.

Semelhantes is made of a paired tower-like structure. Part domestic (furniture) – part daunting (ziggurat) sculpture, there is something enigmatic about them. It starts with their title, *Semelhantes*, a Portuguese word indicating something that shares similar features to something else. It is also used in religious contexts indicating the human dimension of being equals. It is also the sculpture's appearance, at once archaic yet also futuristic. They awkwardly sit in an aesthetic limbo, pushing and pulling all sort of mental associations. Gaston Bachelard and his poetic dimension of the home, its nooks and crannies, drawers and their allied aura of secrecy. Or Superstudio's *Eighth City* as part of the 1970s Italian collective's vision for the future of cities with their twelve prototypes of Ideal Cities. The Arrakeen Palace in the 2021 science fiction *Dune* film with its Jordanian architecture. Philip Dick's dystopian novel *The Man in the High Castle* or Brazilian brutalism and more specifically São Paulo and the 1960s apartment block Edifício Guaimbê. Inside the two "towers" are grids of threads criss-crossing. They create a cartesian system endlessly expanding through its mirrored walls. Round beads travel through the networked thread like an atlas of the cosmos. Punctuating our sight with a sense of perspective and time, these round beads could refer simultaneously to the sacred (praying beads) and the profane (ornamental beads) but also to the ludic (the abacus), themes that are deeply embedded in Wirz's practice. The bases are in stark contrast to one another, one is burnt the other is a lively magenta-purple. A void is created by the complete absorption of light (the blackness of the burnt one), suspending judgment in what Baudrillard calls a "violence against meaning" allowing an "occasion of pure appearance, where things lose their gravity of meaning and the sense of discourse is contested by the image of objects." What happens then when something that seems to be visible (the magenta-purple color) happens to be on the other hand not present on the visible spectrum of light? An optical conundrum toying with our perception of reality, an alleyway to a speculative reality?

The moving box and its standard measurements (30 x 30 x 60 cm) have been used as a conceptual and formal reference for many of Wirz's sculptures. Performing a trivial and yet functional role, that of storing, the box becomes a symbol to reflect on topics related to material value and material attachment. The format of the box also reminds us of the central processing unit of a computer, which, among other things, has the

function of storing immaterial things. In *Arcabouço*, the moving box has been transformed in an abstract triptych. The starting point for this work is *Parafernália* a work presented in 2022 at the Museum Haus Konstruktiv as part of the Werkschau of the Kanton of Zürich. Like the 2022 wall piece, *Arcabouço* formally evokes the notion of an opened box. It is difficult not to see a conceptual reference to Donald Judd's writings on three dimensionality in his article *Specific Objects* where "The use of three dimensions is an obvious alternative. It opens to anything," or "[the three dimensional is] that which is something of an object, a single thing, and that which is open and extended, more or less environmental."² The unfolded three parts covered by mirrors, the top folded part used as a display support. Various parafernalias can be seen on it – lamps, bottles, a dangling pair of cast legs perforated by holes and filled with amber colored candles. It is in this ornamental gesture that the work breaks away from Judd's analytical judgement of that "simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle." From an aseptic minimal wall composition, to a sculpture that activates a more affective and contemplative dimension.

The mirror plays an essential role in this. Layered with many metaphorical meanings, the reflected image has been a subject for artists as early as ancient Egypt. Mirrors, enablers of ubiquitous experiences in their capacity to refract and reflect. To be able to reflect one's own image is to, de facto, to create a tangible illustration of a something "else". This "else" is neither an "other" nor ourselves, it is something in between. It is in this liminal state that mirrors function at their best: as both a reflection of the world onto our experience and a reflection of our experience onto the world. They function as almost portals, connecting us to a spiritual dimension. Size and composition are also key. They seem to align to the dimension of a human body. Brazil, Wirz's place of origin and more specifically Cristo Redentor, the iconic landmark of Rio de Janeiro comes to mind. His welcoming stance, a sign of peace and warmth, is somewhat a repository in the work.

Janelas is another articulation on the role and the relationship between preservation, possession, visibility and invisibility in our culture and society. Strikingly reminiscent of gothic stained-glass windows, *Janelas* have an entirely different effect. Unlike stained-glass windows in churches, these let in very little light. Boxes filled almost to their brink are covered by a coagulated-blood tinted glass. A messy gathering of different objects, cutlery, plants and cables are at times appearing or disappearing from this mutiny of order and symmetry. Conjuring the austere, it feels as if these "windows" are opening up to the world of the unconscious, where mental associations are accidental and arbitrary. Paul Thek and his *Technological Reliquaries* (1964–67) series comes to mind. Catholicism and its need of preserving faith via the symbolic power of reliquaries is a common thread between the two artists. Not so arbitrary as Theks' plexiglas boxes filled with replicas of meat and body parts, Wirz's *Janelas* seems to respond to the same urge to find a solution to the parallel development of spirituality and technology. An over-abundance of debris, leftovers of consumption, in which words seem to surface from the subconscious: accumulation, corruption, hoarding, dirt, pressure, fear, immortality.

1 <https://www.organism.earth/library/document/visionary-experience>

2 https://juddfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Specific_Objects_1964.pdf