Porre la questione dell’essenza alla fine della postmodernità significa liberarsi da ogni timore nei confronti del passato, abbandonare il fenomeno neo-, post- e trans- per asportare a un gesto originario, a un gesto iniziale. La questione dell’essenza non è altro che la necessità di affrontare nuovamente la questione dell’inizio, della creazione, cioè la questione dell’arte tout court. Porsi al fondo del nulla della contemporaneità, alla ricerca dell’essenza del tempo e dello spazio.

Raising the question of essence at the end of postmodernity means to shed all fears with respect to the past, thus freeing ourselves from any and every notion of “neo-”, “post-” or “trans-”, and to opt instead for the openness of an original, initial gesture. To address the question of essence is to speak of the need to confront anew the question of beginnings, of creating, of art itself. We stand on the bottom of the void that defines the contemporary world, and from there search out the essence of space and time.

Il volume accompagna la mostra presentata alla Collezione Marini a Reggio Emilia e al Panathinaikos Kritismonia, Atene.
The book accompanies the show presented at Collezione Marini, Reggio Emilia, and the Panathinaikos Kritismonia, Athens.
ian kiaer
The office window facing Pennsylvania was dappled and smeared with the oil of Lyndon’s nose.
Veduta della mostra / Exhibition view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Melnikov project, silver flower, 2011
Carta, cotone, lino, smalto, lattex, gamma, pallina da ping pong, alluminio, cartone, acetato / Paper, cotton, white lead, linen, enamel, board, rubber, ping pong ball, aluminium, cardboard, acetate
Dimensione variabile / Variable dimension

Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery & Alison Jacques Gallery
Photo: Brian Forrest
Veduta della mostra / Exhibition view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Malinkov project, silver flower, 2011

Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery & Alison Jacques Gallery

Photo: Brian Forrest
Meinkov project, silver flower, particular / detail, 2011

Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery & Alison Jacques Gallery
Photo: Brian Forrest
the gesture could be said to disappear. There is no longer any body, and all that remains is an essence; an essence grown solidified into an open metallic structure with a seemingly inexhaustible store of compositional possibilities.

Ian Klaer likewise eludes the postmodern categories, with their weak re-elaborations of the theory of the Romantic fragment. Klaer, in fact, is interested in relationships: his art is an art of relationships, but not a relational art. He is interested in the way his works establish relationships with one another and their circumambient space. His projects are imbued with an almost metaphysical air, but it's a question of an utopian metaphysics, open to the interior movement of its essence, to its continuous shifting and reformulation, ian Klaer's interest in the fundamentals of architectural construction—his interest in the arché—is for the purpose of taking it back to its initial phase, to its always active origins: active and in progress.

Frederick Kiesler, Kenzo Tange, Konstantin Melnikov et Claude-Nicholas Ledoux are a few of the visionary architects in whom he finds inspiration, or to whom he directs his gaze in order to go beyond them. His work has nothing to do with any postmodern penchant for citations. Instead, he might be said to show an interest in montage, in the sense in which Walter Benjamin employs the term. Klaer "mounts" elements drawn from architecture with others that are strictly artistic while also making use of the sometimes modest materials that he retrieves from his utopian projects’ construction sites. If his constantly evolving projects somehow furnish a map of our contemporary condition, the phrase that best describes it was pronounced by Oscar Wilde: "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at..." But utopia, here, has a place and a space: it’s a utopia squared, not opening out into a non-place, but into another space. Klaer, indeed, is attempting to find a gaze that reveals the utopian side of every project, the way no project is ever completely present or fully realized, even while always standing in the here and now. His utopia is no world to come, but is here, in this space and time, and in what this space and time continually become in their uninterrupted flow of works and days. If he voices a poetic of the fragment, it insists that the fragment’s value lies not in its isolation, but in the system it forms with other fragments: an open and variable system to be seen no less in its underlying concept than in sublime and delicate paintings. With their leaning toward an infinity which is not postponed to the end of time but which, instead, takes place today and thus is entrusted to each of us, these paintings might be reminiscent of the German Romans’ Blaue Blumen. Contemplation of the essence of this system of fragments, of the arché, the principio, the beginning of this texton, of this mode of construction thattypifies the contemporary world, is, finally, the focus of his praxis. Klaer’s art made it clear to me that one doesn’t combat one “post-” with another, nor indeed
by way of any improbable translation of an "alter," which in many ways boils down to the same thing. The solution, instead, lies in holding the ground on which one already stands, revealing, rendering unto the power of the image that which is already there, that which makes it so that we are what we are. Revealing, that is to say, that essence of art or of creativity that is always at our side, that conducts us to ourselves, recalling us to the ethical imperative of revealing that essence, of becoming our essence, of becoming what we are.

This mode of operation, this radical search for essence, for an essence in becoming and always to be achieved, is all the more evident in the work of Helen Mirra. Inserted somewhat hastily into the ranks of American neo-conceptualism, Mirra is a rare example of an American artist who is capable of uniting philosophical reflection, the founding themes of western thought, with considerable visual power. Her works investigate nature and history, life and biography, the notion of the voyage, within a complex but also simple idea of mapping. Her explicit cultural references are many and various: from Friedrich Froebel to W. G. Sebald, from John Dewey to William James, and often to that great "walker" named Robert Waltzer. But on viewing her found (re-found) objects, the Wunderkammer that the results of her creative gesture tend to create, one also remembers the visionary tales of Herman Melville. Her objects, once isolated and inserted into a narrative frame, grow animated, recounting secret and incredible stories: nature is once again alive in the gesture that grasps it and that couches it in words or images. Mirra makes nature visible; she turns it into nature through art. In this sense, her art is a form of ecology, the most radical sense of the term: an art of nature and the necessary mode of poetic thought that can truly render it something other than an artifact or product. One refers to her art as pragmatic not only because of her explicit references to the founding fathers of American Pragmatism (Peirce, Dewey and James), but not entirely because of the roots she sinks into American culture. It’s rather that the meaning of her work is entirely imbedded in what they permit her to do. Art is a practice, a way of living things, a pragmatism, a praxis. The problem of the meaning of the work is in no way redirected to any ulterior sphere of meaning (cultural, historical, ideological, or the tradition of art), but instead is wholly within the work; in the relationship it institutes with space; in its entirely direct relationship with no possible mediation, with the experience of the viewer. The elementary objects that make up her installations are there to form the alphabets and signs that will aid the construction of a new discourse (on nature and our role within it), or the deciphering of a map that allows us to perceive our position in the cosmos: a cosmos understood not so much as an abstract and universal entity, but as the place of our journey on this earth, here and now, as it lies beneath our feet, within the reach of our fingertips. The art of Helen Mirra, like that of other artists (Francisco Tropa, at least, must be mentioned) is strictly connected with a first philosophy, a philosophy of nature, a search for the meaning of that inreflexive obviousness which is Nature. Basically, her entire body of work might bear the title De rerum natura. Not a first philosophy, but a first art.

Essential art thus points out the need for a praxis that takes account of the always inaugureal, initial character of the gesture of the making of art. That gesture is concerned with the frequency of a beginning, with the opening of a road on the part of the subject towards him/herself.

It’s in the work of Thoa Djdjade, that this search for an identity grows most clear, this search for a gaze turned back upon itself, and on the way the self proceeds to shape itself within a space that at the very same time is no less anonymous than intimate. Djdjade is a complex artist in whom many different dimensions—in appearance nearly opposed to one another—come together. On the one hand, we find extremely fragile materials, or materials from a domestic context: ceramics, sponges, silicone, fabrics, soaps, clay. On the other, decidedly cold metallic structures with a tendency toward abstraction delineate themselves in space. Djdjade has the ability to hold these two dimensions together; she has the creative power that’s necessary in order to be able to reveal how abstraction dissolves into the rigidity of organic materials, and how these materials find an order in geometry. Basically, her art leads one to think of Spinoza’s Ethics, of his demonstrations, more geometrico, of the incandescent material of the affects. An art that searches for an ethic by way of the freedom of its materials. An art in which words become things, and where the meaning of a word is what that word does. A daring and courageous attempt to hold together necessity and freedom: necessity as entailed by materials and compositional rules; freedom as expressed by a gesture that can’t be contained within the confines of pure form or programmatic process. The fusion of these two dimensions holds the essential structure of art.

Experimentation on a great variety of media, as practiced by Thoa Djdjade, shows no complicity with the mediatic eclecticism of the art system, but seems instead to arise from the attempt to sound the limits of the freedom of art, its possible deviations and errancies among tumults and rocky shallows in the not always luminous territories of the sudden pools and currents of the river of life.

As though charged with residues of time, its banks show stabilized trees, African beetles, spiders, clods of earth painted gold and containing living creatures, anamorphic images of metaphysical subjects reflected on a surface made of mint syrup. Gennari is a metaphysical
Ian Kiaer
Statement, 2010
Stampa a getto d'inkjet / Inkjet print
29 x 19.5 cm

Melnikov project, black facade, 2011
Carta, ink/paste, vece, legno, plastica, tela di cotone / Paper, ink, paste, wood, plastic, cotton sheet
Dimensioni variabili / Variable dimensions

Melnikov project, corner, 2011
Gomma / Rubber
72.5 x 51 cm

Helen Mirrre
Statement, 2010
Olio su lino / Oil on linen
18.5 x 18.5 cm

Hourly directional field recordings, Massachusetts, 2012 (progetto / project)

- 18 October
Olio su lino / Oil on linen
155 x 155 cm

- 28 October
Olio e grafito su lino / Oil and graphite on linen
155 x 155 cm

- 31 October
Olio e grafito su lino / Oil and graphite on linen
155 x 155 cm

- 7 November
Olio su lino / Oil on linen
150 x 155 cm