

ARTFORUM

Lothar Baumgarten

Marian Goodman Gallery | New York

By Jeffrey Kastner (February 2009)

A long hallway separated the two primary elements of Lothar Baumgarten's recent show at Marian Goodman, suggesting the distance between the locales of the projects—one focused on the South American rain forest, the other on the Hudson River Valley north of New York City—as well as the contrast in approaches (soundless imagery for the former, imageless sound for the latter) to what turned out to be congruent conceptual goals, namely an investigation of how “knowledge” of a given place is constructed.

The exhibition demanded real commitment from viewers, with the works unfolding over hours rather than minutes. This challenge to attention is of a piece with the brand of poetic pedagogy that has long marked Baumgarten's work, in which difficult questions around history and context, around the complex relationship of natural and cultural systems of knowledge, always trouble conventional notions of places and people. Baumgarten's project is to interrogate, if not destabilize, such received wisdom, and he has deployed a wide range of methods—both didactic and aesthetic, often in concert—to enact his reassessments.

Fragmento Brasil, 1977–2005, which occupied the gallery's large front room, is a complex, synchronized slide piece featuring a half-dozen projectors cycling more than five hundred images from three sources: Albert Eckhout's seventeenth-century paintings of Brazilian birds; abstract drawings the Yanomami people of the Amazonian rain forest produced between 1978 and 1980; and black-and-white landscape photographs Baumgarten took during a five-month walking tour of Venezuela and Brazil in 1977.

Eckhout moved from Holland to Brazil in 1637, and made portraits of the region's people, flora, and fauna. Yet the exotic birds here, seen in fragmentary glimpses—beaks, crests, wings,

talons—have been unexpectedly recontextualized by Eckhout, perched over improbable *Mitteleuropean* landscapes. Baumgarten's choreographing of the paintings with his own matter-of-fact photos and the Yanomami drawings, whose superficially simple fields of lines and hash marks ultimately reveal themselves to be remarkably resonant echoes of the birds' plumage, suggest the divergences between deeply felt local knowledge and objective anthropological inquiry. In a move presumably calculated to further emphasize this notion of indeterminacy, the installation itself was essentially impossible to view in its entirety. Crisscrossing a room that also included *The Origin of Table Manners*, 1971—a piece (named after Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological study of Native American culinary practices) in which feathers and porcupine quills replaced knives and forks on a formally set, damask-draped

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table—the projections produced a spatial metaphor for the artist’s skepticism regarding the comprehensiveness of any single vantage.

At the other end of the gallery, *Matteawan/Fishkill Creek*, 2004–2008, was set in a disorientingly dark space, where viewers were immersed in an auditory swamp. Recorded over one spring night in 2007 at Denning Point, a peninsula on the east bank of the Hudson River near Beacon, New York, and played back at high volume, the eighty-minute sound track enveloped the listener in a riot of buzzes, chirps, and clicks. Sitting in the space on a pillow, I found that wristwatch-checking eventually gave way to a kind of unexpected reverie and a growing sensitivity to the work’s subtle trajectory—a lonesome train whistle approaching and departing; a tiny nozzle in the wall coming alive with hot mist to humidify the space; an incessant chorus of croaking frogs slowly fading away as birds begin to chirp. After nearly an hour, I was no longer the disengaged observer but a presence woven directly into the auditory matrix of the absent/present space— so much so that when my solitude was finally broken by an intruder who stumbled in and then almost immediately started to feel his way back toward the door, I found myself wanting to tell him to wait, and to listen.