

**MATTHEW SHAUL**

**Valentina Murabito – *The Travels of an Alchemist / Die Reisen eines Alchemisten***

Developing the themes explored in her project “Paradise Lost” at the Kunst Museum Erfurt I have titled my proposal for Valentina Murabito: *The Travels of an Alchemist / Die Reisen eines Alchemisten*. In my conversation with Valentina in December we discussed a broad range of questions relating to her work including:

The human desire for perfection  
The perceived imperfections of biology  
The urge to manage and curate nature  
The desire to remake the world (in our own image)  
The desire to harvest nature’s bounties  
the desire to fundamentally change genetic programming the building blocks of life in pursuit of this

as a corollary to these questions and with specific relevance to Valentina’s working practices are questions round:

The building blocks of photography (I sometimes describe this as the DNA of photography) quite literally light and silver salts, carrier materials like photographic papers (or in Valentina’s case wood and concrete)  
Analogue printing technologies  
How images (like genetics) can be garbled / changed / manipulated.  
The instability of the photographic image.

With these questions in mind I began to think about how we map and understand the world and how ideas and opinions gain authority and achieve a currency -- even when they are based on highly contested findings.

Our conversation reminded me of the remarkable medieval Travelogue *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*<sup>1</sup> (which was probably actually written by a Flemish Monk Jan de Langhe (ca 1300 - 1383)) in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century - and eponymously given the fictional Sir John Mandeville’s name. Mandeville was a knight supposedly hailing from St Albans in Hertfordshire southern England. The travelogue is a fantastical account of travels to Turkey, Persia, Syria, Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia, India, the Malay Archipelago and China beginning in 1322 and believed to be a highly distorted and embroidered amalgam of the accounts of Dominican and Franciscan missionaries’ visits to these far flung locations .

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century the processes through which humanity sought to map, image, understand and tell the stories of the world were easily disrupted and misrepresented, as they were passed from person to person and through the generations by word of mouth.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-mandevilles-travels-showing-headless-men-1430> & <https://www.lindahall.org/about/news/scientist-of-the-day/john-mandeville>

Examining the work of an artist who works exclusively with analogue processes and materials it is interesting to conjecture about whether the today's digitally disseminated stories contorted as they are by images manipulation and the bush telegraph of social media are any more reliable than those circulated in the middle ages.

While it might be argued that modern technology gives us wider and more accurate reach than was available to the explorers of 700 hundred years ago, the questions Valentina raises in what she chooses to photograph and how she chooses to reproduce and present her images suggest that contemporary understandings of the world may be as contingent, contested and equally subject to the falsehoods, fantasies and misrepresentations of religion, superstition, ideology, avarice and opportunism as Sir John Mandeville's fantastical tales were.

The English Poet John Milton despaired of politicians' and the ruling classes' efforts to use status privilege and patronage when he wrote his epic. Poem *Paradise Lost* in 1667, but I would equally ask whether the urge to create a world in their own image is not just a basic human instinct with an ancient heritage.

What were the fables presented in Mandeville's travels (some of which had a basis in truth), what are the conspiracy theories frontloaded by social media, if not an attempt similarly to establish dominion over the world by moulding opinion, by stage managing nature, measuring it and attempting to predict the unknown. This is. the contextual framework within which I would like to present Valentina's work

And what are Valentina Murabito's images if not a record of humanity's often misjudged efforts to establish dominion over nature to tame it, to subject it to the disciplines of civilisation, in recent years to remake its genetic building blocks? And what do the questions she asks (in her consistent use of analogue printing technologies tell us about the durability of the image? The durability of human heritage and legacy?

### **Installation design - Phoxxi Space:**

Wall text:

In her new installation *The Travels of an Alchemist*, Valentina Murabito looks back in time comparing the image making and storytelling of the past with contemporary practices asking us to consider how ideas gain authority and are presented as fact and how are they canonised as part of the world's collective bibliography, particularly when, their origins are (or should be) highly contested.

The concentration throughout her career on the questions that analogue processes raise, represents a fascinating opportunity to create an immersive installation around her work and to pose searching questions around uniqueness, singularity the artist's individual thumbprint and the technology of reproduction and dissemination. I describe Valentina as an alchemist also because of how she interrogates the interface between photography and other artforms (sculpture in particular), but also because she examines biology, animal and

plant evolution, biomedical science how these ideas are immortalised inscribed in and light and silver salts -- which are the DNA of photography.

In this way in her enquiries she harks back to a time when there was less differentiation between art and science recalling luminaries like Goethe, John Soane and German pioneer of colour photography Adolf Miethe were engaged in both artistic, creative and scientific enquiries.

## **Phoxxi Space – Ground floor**

### **Entry, First additional wall**

Entering the space we are confronted by the first picture wall which feature a full bleed image (floor to top of wall) of 'Headless Blemmyes -- Men with heads in their breasts' as described and illustrated in Mandeville's Travels. The Exhibition Graphic and logo would be superimposed over the image.

An accompanying wall text will track mythical origins of these strange creatures, crucially pointing out that their existence was presented (and widely believed in educated circles) to be fact -- so much so that they appear in the Mappa Mundi -- an authoritative map of the Christian world (created ca 1300 and domiciled in Hereford Cathedral, UK) <sup>2</sup>

### **Ground floor – continuation (left wall)**

#### **Title: Dominion / Herrschaft**

From front to back this series of five images mark humanity's (or the artist's) urge to harvest nature's bounties and to manage and control it. The images are presented directly on the gallery wall but also over a diffusely printed floor to ceiling image from Mandeville's travels

These images are complimented by images on both sides of the hintere Extrawand referencing natural origins and the industrialised management of livestock

Auf dem hintere Seite des vordere Extrawändes befindet sich das Bild *Natura - Estinta* to emphasise the fleeting and impermanent nature of all life

### **Ground floor -- continuation (right wall)**

#### **Title: Biosphere / Biosphäre**

From front to back this series of five images mark humanity's (or the artist's) desire to observe, classify and intervene in nature on a genetic level. The images are presented directly on the gallery wall but also over a diffusely printed floor to ceiling image from Mandeville's travels

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.themappamundi.co.uk/index.php>

## First Floor

### Title: **The Dying of the Light / Das Sterben des Lichts**

This part of the exhibition examines Valentina's more sculptural works focusing specifically on the three-dimensional images printed on concrete or wood. By shifting photography's frame of reference into three dimensions and immortalising her images by printing on concrete and wood she is asking us to consider the fleeting (physical and perceptual) impermanence of contemporary image making and how it is disseminated. By extension Valentina suggests contemporary meanings crystallised in images and the "bush telegraph" of social media are as open to misinterpretation as were the egg tempera paintings of the renaissance and by stories passed on (and contorted by) word-of-mouth.

The back wall features a final image from Mandeville's travels, which like other 'Mandeville' Images presents medieval humanity's attempts to map and define a world they could not see, only imagine.

The left-hand wing of the upper floor will be a "Lese-Ecke" where visitors can read the travels of John Mandeville, and contextual publications like F&D Cartier's *The Never Taken Images* to underline and top provide further resources and reading on photography's building blocks its temporary fleeting and impermanent character.

How in the past and now images and idea were distributed, popularised and canonised, how mythologies are constructed and how they gain acceptance in wider society.