

Lois Weinberger

Ruderal Society | solo exhibition | september 19 - november 14, 2021

"The entire cosmos was there, in that meadow, under the sky, in those barely visible urban horizons and in that intoxicating smell of summer". Pier Paolo Pasolini ¹

72 springs*

A tribute to Lois Weinberger

All it needs is to be observant and in tune with the elements to understand that spring has returned. We can feel it in our bodies as if we were plants, and it's no accident if we feel this new energy coursing through us and occupying our senses. Do we experience what plants feel when they are reborn—a kind of contagious exuberance? For anyone who is the least bit connected with their environment, this feeling is unmistakable. The primrose (*prima rosa*, the first rose) is the first guest to arrive at the great awakening party. Cut off as we are from wild things, we often only perceive this resurrection through vegetation: at best in its natural environment, otherwise in the artificial setting of parks and gardens. We know how flowers affect our mood and how the year's first buds spark our impulses and fire our imagination. What should we think, then, of a man who, throughout his life, talked to plants, especially the humblest ones: the ones we call "weeds" and unflinchingly wrench from the soil in the name of a certain idea of tidiness and order? How should we characterise this tendency to judge whether a living thing is harmful or useless? We must, as always, call it ignorance. Throughout his life, Lois Weinberger's work, knowledge and sensitivity brought him into permanent contact with the vast world of plants.

Born in 1947, he saw spring come and go 72 times; he died on 21 April, as did a certain Jean Racine—who, had he been English, might have been called "John Root"... To stretch the "root" metaphor further, I might even suggest that Lois is now, as the French saying goes "eating dandelions by the roots" ("pushing up the daisies", the British would say). In any case, we can rest assured that he is now well and truly at one with nature. But the aspect of the root that we find most compelling is its "radicalness", which places it at the very essence of things. What is most affecting about Lois Weinberger's life and work is the way a simple, clear gaze can bring us closer to the immense complexity and boundless intelligence of nature. There is a sense of great humility with regard to what lies beyond our grasp—outside our ways of living in the world. If I might digress for a moment, I would like to mention the simple, wonderful memory of helping Lois to clear an area of waste ground in order to set up one of his artworks, *Portable Garden*, to coincide with his first show at Salle Principale in 2016. Armed with my (manual) weed-cutter, I understood, as I watched Lois cleanly and quickly remove the weeds by hand like some hoary countryman, how ridiculous my mechanical tools were. A man of few words who would reply in German to

¹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio*, Einaudi, 1992

questions asked in English, he was able, calmly yet forcefully, to get the message across. As well as being given a useful gardening lesson, I was privileged to experience a genuine connection with the nature of the artist. Though ostensibly trivial, this is one of my most treasured memories—akin to the return of spring.

How, then, can a simple exhibition, in a modest gallery, pay tribute to such contained complexity? From the artist's countless projects, the gallery has chosen his favourite "domain": the exterior of his studio in the Vienna suburbs, which he called the "Ruderal Society". Lois cleared this area—outside a former mirror factory—to give nature the opportunity to express itself freely, adding plants of his own to these natural incursions. Some were rare species; all belonged to the family of unloved plants typical of areas that are neglected, forgotten or spurned—a subtle, elegant evocation of exiles in search of new roots. Such plants often grow on ruins, and are thus dubbed "ruderal" (from the Latin word *rudus*: ruin). We all come across them, in town and in the countryside, growing on waste ground or under trees, peeping from cracks in the road, lining the edges of paths... They are so unexceptional that we hardly even notice them. Could this be because of their size? Their lack of flamboyancy? Their less than attractive surroundings? Their traditionally discriminatory names? And yet how amazing it is to watch a humble dandelion as its flower turns into a feathery cannonball of seeds! Is this not a demonstration of intelligence, of painstaking ingeniousness, of wondrous beauty? Do you need a magnifying glass to convince yourself of this? I could also remind you that with a bit of bacon, some eggs and a scattering of croutons, dandelion leaves can be used to make a delicious salad... Our ignorance, which prevents us from seeing beyond our prejudice and from understanding that transcendence is all around us, will be our downfall. It shows humanity to be a species sick with its own arrogance. Only Man creates discriminatory classifications and hierarchies; nature is content with going about her business. Simply being alive is the ultimate goal of all living things. By choosing to use these belittled plants as the raw material for his art, Lois Weinberger references our own humanity and its preservation—at the same time constantly reminding us that this does not make art any more humble.

This is because "Ruderal Society", despite its apparent spontaneity and its natural overgrowth making it almost imperceptible to the eye, is nonetheless a dazzling revelation of obvious realities that we are unable to see. And yet the artist does not launch into an overblown demonstration that might increase his value on the market—or in the eyes of some critic afflicted with a sense of his own erudition. The intention is "merely" to spark the emergence of meaning freed from the fetters of the subject from which it originates. Lois thus seems to hold out a mirror—a gesture that makes the former mirror factory all the more evocative—so that we might behold our own gaze. He creates, one might say, a dialogue of mirrors that can only make us reflect upon what we see... The photographs that record his undertaking express the same sense of humility and realism that prevent us from being swept away by prejudice and corporatist expectations: they are evidence of profound integrity. The drawings and texts that accompany the photos speak to a mystery that the artist attempts in vain to solve, aware of his self-confessed failure to find words or graphic representations commensurate with the inexplicable. They seem to open up a yawning chasm vis-à-vis the subject, showing how little yearning Lois had for power or control.

Caring / paying tribute / celebrating / blending in / informing / transmitting / taking part / belonging... this is how we in turn might vainly attempt to explain what we understand about Lois Weinberger's work by attaching it to a centuries-old tradition: that of the representation of Nature in art. We feel an evocative power comparable to that of Caravaggio's paintings, which, despite transcending their subject and despite their underlying provocations, were tolerated in their time because of the undeniable truths they contained. Lois, too, was completely of his time, and his work resonates all the more powerfully in the current context. The idea is not so much to preserve nature as to rescue us from our own desire for conquest and our impudent tendency not only to judge everything but also to want to understand everything. "Any contemplation of the world's beauty carries within it a feeling of self-dereliction, of the self imprisoned within the self"². The desire to converse directly with nature quickly reaches its limits, making such dialogue sterile. Though it may appear thrilling and grandiose at first, it soon turns into an impenetrable enigma. This explains our feeling of extreme solitude when faced with the "landscape", whereas there is a sense of total unity when we manage to travel into the depths of our soul.

"Death is not no longer communicating, it is no longer being understood"³. We can be sure that Lois Weinberger's work will support our attempts at resilience so that we will no longer ever be alone when we gaze at the horizon. Franziska, Lois' companion, knows better than anyone that looking at things together is a fertile and special form of communication.

The day of Lois' death is associated, in the French Gregorian calendar, with Saint Anselm, who has his own folk saying: "*À la Saint Anselme, les dernières fleurs on sème*": "On Saint Anselm's day, the last flowers are sown". This proverb will have a special place in our thoughts from now on.

Dominique Mathieu – March 2021

² François Jullien, *De l'intime*, Grasset, 2013

³ "la morte non è nel non poter comunicare, ma nel non poter più essere compresi", Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Una disperata vitalità*

* Text for exhibition initially planned for spring 2021 and postponed because of the health situation.

salle principale
28 rue de Thionville
75019 Paris
+ 33 09 72 30 98 70
gallery@salleprincipale.com

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thursday to sunday | 2 - 7 p.m.
and by appointment
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www.salleprincipale.com
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