

Transcript of the film **The Archaeology of Cognition**

Paul March

We are at the Swiss Ceramics Museum, Geneva. At the back entrance which is guarded by two magnificent sphinxes.

Directly underneath where we're standing there is an exhibition organised by the Museum for the Congress of the international Academy of Ceramicists on the theme of migration.

We are going to look at an installation by the artist Paul March which is called **Tekenu's intent**

When you approach the work, what's striking is how the atmosphere changes. Things get more serious and the visitor finds himself suspended in time in front of the four figures on the wall

It feels like their role maybe to stand in judgement and yet, if they are judgmental it is imbued with empathy and wisdom perhaps that's what creates this atmosphere of quiet calm and contemplation

It is almost like a place of worship. like a side Chapel dedicated to a favourite saint for example.

The four figures are clearly undergoing a metamorphosis, but it is one of slow disintegration and what's striking is the dignity that they find in their decay. There's nothing monstrous in their deformity but instead there is something which is at the same time Pharoah-like and alien about them. They are imposing and stern but they don't seek to intimidate and somehow they succeed in creating a presence which is both uncanny and comforting.

On the ground here in front of them is this figure whose undamaged form and polished almost glistening surface recalls the resemblance to a massively oversized chrysalis.

This large bug shaped thing lies on sort of sledge which is weirdly surreal. But the four figures that look down upon it take it seriously, absorbing some of the absurdity into themselves. It's not clear whether they are welcoming this figure onto the scene or preparing it for its departure... and perhaps that is what brings time to a halt.

We've now left behind the finished work in the Museum and we here in an art space in the building of the Contemporary Art Institute in central Geneva and in this space Paul March, the artist has created an exhibition which gives a quite unique view into the whole system of creativity through which the final work, **Tekenu's Intent** came into being.

So now we're going to hand over to Paul to walk us through the exhibition.

I have called this exhibition **The Archaeology of Cognition** and I'll explain why that is in a minute.

I've set up this exhibition for two reasons. First, I wanted to show how a work of art comes into being. People, especially people who are not artists have perhaps an idea that artists wait immobile for an idea to arrive and once the idea comes, they make it. This, in my experience and the experience of many artists is I think, very far from the case so here I've taken the work that you saw in the Musée Ariana, called **Tekenu's Intent** and in this space here I have put all the artefacts, all the elements that came together to make that work

And along with the ceiling I attached pages from my notebook so that, as I was doing this work, whenever the work led me think of something I noted it in a notebook with images that make reference to that page and sometimes a QR code that will take you to a short 30-second video that shows the sculpting action or whatever that goes along with the text or the image.

The second reason why I wanted to do this exhibition is because common sense and cognitive science, or at least traditional cognitive science, hold the idea that ideas happen in the mind which is situated in the brain and I think this is very much not the case, that the mind is situated in the world

And so by laying out all these elements and artefacts and I wanted to show how ideas jump from material to material, from artefact to artefact and this act of jumping is the act of thinking itself. It is not a thinking person who does it to the things and to the objects. It is the things and the objects that interact with the movement of the person that is thinking.

For me, how this all came about was when I read this book which is by the archaeologist, Lambros Malafouris and it's called **How things shape the mind** - a theory of material engagement.

And what I found is that if you cross out all the words to do with archaeology and you replace them with words to do with art it still makes sense.

Over here I have put an explanation of the exhibition **The Archaeology of Cognition** and next to this there is this picture of René Descartes.

As you can see, the picture is not horizontal and the reason for this is that when Descartes famously said "I think therefore I am" he separated thinking from being and this whole exhibition, the book **How things shaped the Mind**, material engagement theory are all alternatives to that and so I put it non-horizontal because I want the visitor to question where they are feeling that sense of non-horizontalness. Whether they are really feeling it in the brain or whether they feel it, in fact, in the frame itself.

So this section of the exhibition contains some earlier works that make connexions with what went on to become **Tekenu's Intent**.

By including them here in the exhibition, I don't want to suggest that the past inspired the later work I want to try and get across a different notion.

That it was the activity of the Tekenu project that brought these works into the present creative system.

And then on this wall here, what we've got is the four major elements that came together over months perhaps even years and ended up with **Tekenu's intent**.

I will very briefly go through them

On the left there are four stakes that can be found in the Art History Museum in Geneva. Bronze Age stakes from a village that is now under the waters of lake Geneva.

Then this is called the **Wall of the Reformation** and here you see what are known as the four founding fathers of Geneva.

Here is an exhibition that I saw a couple of years back by Genevan artist Jérôme Stettler and shows a drawing of four chrysalises on a wall

And finally, this strange figure is found on tomb walls in ancient Egypt and its function is not really understood. But let me explain how I came across this strange figure in the first place.

I made this piece a few years ago. It was for an exhibition but I didn't have a title for it. I had an idea that it was like an obelisk but I didn't really want to call it "obelisk"

So I did some research on the web and I found that the ancient Egyptian for "obelisk" was "tekhenu" but "tekhenu" with an "H". I carried on my research for a while and then I thought, no that's what I want to call it, so I went back to do a little more research on Tekhenu and I typed in the word but I left out the "H" by mistake and I was taken to a page showing those strange figures that you saw a moment ago. And so that's how I first came across that figure.

Up there is a QR code that takes you to a short film that I made for social media about these four elements. Let's watch a section of it now.

I called the four elements "The Gathering" and below them there's this yellow circle and inside the circle there are four horse's teeth that were sitting on a shelf in my workshop for years and during the months working on the technique project I found myself playing with them, looking at them and rolling them around in my hand.

I found they acted as a sort of Talisman. Their influence on the project was powerful but obscure.

There are several of these objects in the exhibition - each one has a yellow ring around it and each one acted as a catalyst or a facilitator but in some undifferentiated or undetermined way.

Let's now move to these first two tables which you could call a phase of exploration and it's here where those four elements which I called the gathering start to come together and try and find a way of making an artwork. So here for example there are some first attempts to see how a chrysalis and Tekenu might come together

Which resulted in this one and then I moulded that one.

And here are four stakes and the idea of these stakes was not so much that I needed to make stakes. It was more that, doing them was a way of thinking about how the stakes, the chrysalis and Tekenu might come together.

These are the moulds of the stakes and these are the first stakes that I pressed in the mould made out of clay.

Above them here - these are photos of some more stakes that were brought out from the village of Plonjon which is now under the waves.

And here - there's another yellow circle which contains a postcard of an unexploded missile that was hanging around in my workshop for years.

And here is a dried carrot that I found in the bottom of the fridge in my workshop and felt somehow encouraged by it.

Let's move to the development of the sledge.

I made different versions and tried each with the chrysalis-tekenu element until they seem to come together happily enough.

And these were the first attempts to cast a chrysalis. I was trying different sorts of Clay and different sorts of surface treatments.

This is the first attempt to integrate and some of the elements together - the wood and the clay.

As you can see it wasn't wholly successful.

At some point in the process I'm describing, the Ariana Museum announced a competition for their exhibition MIGRATION(s) and so I made this maquette in order to create some images of a work that didn't yet exist.

And, as with most competitions, I needed to write a text to go with it but instead of writing an explanation I wrote a story, **The Myth of Acherontia** which weaves together the four elements that we met earlier.

In making the maquette, what I want to underline here is the way different mediums work together and how ideas get transferred across mediums.

For example here - this is a computer screen. This is photoshop and so I take pictures of the maquette, open it in Photoshop, I change the colours to see how the colours work in relation to the wall.

And I also cut these out in Photoshop and moved them backwards and forwards and moved the sledge backwards and forward.

In Photoshop the proportions and the distances are easily adjusted and then they can be transferred back onto the to the maquette and then re-transferred back onto Photoshop.

So there's a sort of backwards and forwards between mediums which I think is very important in terms of the transference of ideas.

Here. there is the first attempt to make a full-size version of what you just saw in the maquette.

In this version, what I tried to do is build it using *le processus du colombin* you make sausages and then you roll it round and flatten it out. The great advantage of this is that it is completely hollow inside, so it has a great flexibility to change shape by pushing or pulling it out.

The disadvantage is that it is very fragile and although it had a temporary structure it twice it fell off that structure and after the second time, I decided this just wasn't going to work.

After the failure with the first version, I decided I needed an internal skeleton structure to hold it and in order to make that I needed to do some drawings to work out the thickness of the internal structure and so here - these horizontal lines are five centimetres apart because the internal structure I built of polystyrene was of 5 cm thickness's.

There's the polystyrene and occasionally there are blocks of wood to give it more structure.

And it's got this hemp weave to give the clay something to get a grip onto.

So this is the final version it took several weeks, maybe a few months to model and I took a short video twice a day which you see here speeded up which I think shows really well how the sculpture filled out and found its own being.

And it was from this that I made the mould while it was still wet - which went on to make the final versions which are in the Ariana Museum.

This is the plaster mould in three pieces and there are two others that hold it in place.

I used this to cast the five pieces that are now in the Museum and a 6th which is this one here.

When I opened the mould for the first time and found a raw version of this, it reminded me of a work that I done a few years earlier which I noted in my notebook and it was this work

here which hadn't come to mind until I open the mould. And I think you can see that once they are put side by side, there is a clear connexion between the two which didn't happen until I opened the mould and saw the relationship.

When I was making the four mural pieces - the ones that are falling apart - when I opened the mould of one of them - this one here, number 3, I started working on it but it looked in such a fragile state that it reminded me of another piece of work that I made many years ago which is this one. It's called "Death Afterlife with Matching Doormat".

At the time I did this, I wasn't in a very good state of mind and when I opened the mould it reminded me of this state of mind. And that is why it is in the exhibition. There is something about that state of mind that is resting in those.

In order to make the internal structure that's sort of defragmenting and that I was just talking about, I took pieces of wood like this and I moulded them out of plaster like this.

And then I would press clay into the plaster modes in order to make different tryouts for different surfaces - to find the final one that seemed to work better for the final work on the wall.

I think it ended up as a mixture of these three.

These are various tests for the final surface.

This one I hesitated over for a long time and finally used it for this version here.

In the end the tests seemed to suggest something along these lines for the final installation.

I needed to fix these four to the wall. The biggest one weighs about 30 kilos and I wanted them hanging off the wall rather than fixed against the wall so I needed to attach them in a way that was discreet but strong enough to support this weight that was under torsion.

I didn't know how to calculate this from an engineering perspective so instead I made these models out of wood and fixed them to the back of the original sculpted piece in my workshop to try and get a visual idea of what would be strong enough and what would work.

This is a prototype of the final version in steel.

I showed you a little earlier how the sledge developed. From those models I made two full size versions.

This one here is made from cheap construction wood and the one I finally used - the one at the museum - is the same form as this one but it's made from a heavier wood, probably chestnut that was originally the flooring of an old farmhouse.

That is a lightning tool or maybe not so lightning tool of the exhibition.

To sum it up, as an artist people often ask me questions like “where did the idea for that work come from ?” and they often assume that there was an idea that formed in my mind and that my mind is found in my head.

What I trY to do in this exhibition is to ask the visitor to think about the notion that ideas happen, not inside the brain but outside - here in the world.

Not inside the black box of cognitive science but outside in the open air.

Here in plain view. In things that morph from one to another.

In materials that metamorphose into new shapes.

What I'm proposing with this exhibition is that the installation **Tekenu's Intent** which we saw at the Ariana museum in Geneva came, not from the brain of an artist, but from a disparate group of elements which come together to make common cause.

The archaeology of cognition shifts the focus away from the influence of the human artist and towards the dynamic system of creativity.

We find here how a collection of artefacts, artworks, images, videos, notebook extracts and experiences come together to make a network of intercommunicating nodes.

So to finish, if you want to understand how art happens and to not just art, but many other activities besides.

Don't spend time searching for clues in the artist's past.

Don't spend millions scanning the brain with MRI's.

Don't get tangled up in the cartesian divide between thinking and being.

Instead look at how ideas and things change themselves by jumping from 2D to 3D,

from digital to gestural.

from clay, to plaster, to wood and then back again.

By tracing the archaeology of cognition, I want to show you that the idea of Tekenu's Intent did not happen at the beginning of its story but at the end.