

**EXHIBITION**  
**FROM JUNE 8 TO AUG. 25 2019**

***IMPRESSIONS DE VIES***

**VANESSA BILLY**

PRESS KIT



**PARC**  **SAINT LÉGER**  
**CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN**

For her first major show in a French institution, Vanessa Billy presents an environment where human figures intermingle with representations of plant life, minerals, microbes and mechanical parts. These different elements are testament to her fascination with the interaction between humans and technology and the recycling and the transformation of forms of matter. Her most recent explorations seem to be leading her toward the production of objects that, to put it more precisely; interrogate the concept of transmutation and by extension nature's epistemological limits. While her sculpture has an abstract and poetic dimension, it is deeply rooted in the physicality of her materials. This logic runs through this show whose "impressions de vies" is meant both literally and metaphorically. In her sculptural practice, an impression means to leave a mark, make an imprint, mark the effect of one body on another. The result of this process is a collection of casts that represent elements inspired more or less distinctly by the human body, set against more ambiguous moulds of other living organisms.

The ambivalence of these shapes demonstrates a kind of infinite transmutation of organisms and their interdependence with their milieu. A central piece in this show employs a cat's cradle, the construction of simple figures using string wrapped around the hand of one or more players. This very basic technique makes it possible to invent an infinity of figures, ranging from the very simple to the highly complex. The biologist, philosopher and science fiction essayist Donna Haraway considers the game of cat's cradle to be a possible model for reconsidering our place in and relationship with the world. Unlike evolutionist models, Haraway sees this practice as a way for players to link and knot paths that have consequences but are not determinist. The game is like a common process or journey, a communication between outstretched hands, in opposition to individualism and competition. Thus it becomes a logic of thought and action suggesting that we reconsider our relationship with the world from the viewpoint of improving the cohabitation and imbrication of different metabolisms.

With this assessment as her point of departure, Billy explores forms that highlight the metamorphoses of the human body, the mutations between animal and plant and between plant and the mechanical.

Here the human is considered to be just one geological entity among others and to exist on the same plane as all other life forms. In the most literal sense she studies structures taken on by the living, the constraints of life being what confer different appearances to plants and minerals according to the functional demands of their environment. The concepts of the hybridization and transformation of energy are essential to her practice and she uses this as a way to break out of the dualism of nature and culture, and inscribe the human in a dehierarchized continuum. Her most recent works, devised for this exhibition, seek to give these ideas a tangible form.

**Catherine Pavlovic**

# PLASTIC WATER (ORANGE ISOTOPES)

2019

Bio-resin, dye  
100 x 80 cm



Courtesy de l'artiste

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# LES FONDS QUI PLEURENT,

2019

Nylon net, bio-resin, dye  
Variable size



Courtesy de l'artiste



# REFRESH, REFRESH (MOLD SQUEEZE)

2019

Polished and patinated bronze  
21 x 9 x 14,5 et 24 x 4 x 14,5 cm



Courtesy de l'artiste et de Galleria Gentili, Florence

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# THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

2015 - 2019

Car engines, chain, platform with rotary engine  
Variable size



Courtesy de l'artiste

# NO BONES

2018

Glass, calcium carbonate  
Variable size



Courtesy de l'artiste et de Galleria Gentili, Florence

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# CENTURIES

2016

Jesmonite, sand, dust  
165 x 56 x 40 cm



Courtesy de l'artiste et de Galleria Gentili, Florence

# FINGERS

2015

Fake shrimp, plastic bag, water  
Variable size



Courtesy de l'artiste

## CONVERSATIONS

Substance and Its Behavior: Vanessa Billy  
Vanessa Billy interviewed by Mousse

"I work with matter and materials as a way to relate to the world, as a way of being in the world, as an attempt at finding sense. How to compose an object, how to decompose it." On the occasion of her show at Galleria Gentili, Florence, *The White Goddess*—which owes its title to Robert Graves's book exploring the sovereignty of the Great Goddess in semimatriarchal pre-Greek and pre-Roman societies—Vanessa Billy opens up about how her practice is deeply engaged with the intrinsic transformative attributes of substance, with the preeminent role of materials in her works, and with making tangible the processes of constant exchange within our environment and within other living organisms, while analyzing her recent switch toward more natural subjects by focusing on the human body.

MOUSSE: Could you introduce us to the "white goddess" for whom the show at Galleria Gentili is titled?

VANESSA BILLY: *The White Goddess* is the title of a book by Robert Graves, where he investigates ancient myths and traces the sovereignty of the Great Goddess in semimatrimonial pre-Greek and pre-Roman societies. She was the mother of all gods, the earliest deity, also known as the moon goddess, the goddess of pregnancy and birth, the goddess of dawn—phenomena to do with renewal, with the cyclical. This Mother Earth figure made perfect sense in connection with a particular piece called *Centuries*, made in 2016, that I had wanted to show again. It is a cast of a pregnant woman, facing the ground, balancing on her belly—a precarious position, impossible in real life and hard to even bear imagining. This particular predicament she finds herself in reflects some of my deepest fears about living on a damaged earth and the responsibility of bringing new life onto it. Her belly, the sphere on which she rests, symbolizes the earth.

When Rita Selvaggio first approached me, I spoke about this work, and she suggested that I read *The White Goddess*. The next secondhand bookshop I went in had it on its shelf—it jumped out at me! This show had a very short inception time, but things kept falling into place as if by themselves, and that happened both conceptually and spatially once on-site. The works feel alive in that space, they breathe, they radiate, and that doesn't often happen.

M: One of the most relevant examples of funerary statues in *pietra fetida* (a kind of limestone), *Mater Matuta*, from around the fifth century BCE, is preserved at the Archaeological Museum in Florence. Did you have the chance to visit the museum and be inspired by it while designing the exhibition? Could you articulate the genesis of the project?

VB: Galleria Gentili is located around the corner from the Archaeological Museum, and the initial idea was to place a work at the museum and have an exhibition in two parts. Searching through their collection, the *Mater Matuta* statue seemed to contain a synergy of all the ideas mentioned above; she was the obvious choice. Unfortunately, we weren't able to show a work there as a new law prevents contemporary pieces from being shown next to ancient remains... Anyway, in the end, I think *Mater Matuta* is there in spirit. It is most evident with the fragmented body casts on the walls (*As one*, 2019); their surface and display mode recall remnants from an older time.

M: Hybridism, transmutation, and transformation of energy are concepts often linked to your work. Could you expand on their meaning and application in your practice?

VB: Bodies and machines are consuming entities, relying on processing food or fuel for their existence. Consuming elements from various parts of the world, that have gone through various levels of processing beforehand, it's a constant, interminable "digestion," made of transformation, permutation, assimilation, ultimately spent in heat and movement. It is mind-blowing! Only one-third of our weight is made of human cells. The rest is nonhuman bacteria. That means we are made of other [living things], invisible to the naked eye, unknown to our senses. Every particle that was there at the formation of the earth, whether aluminum or carbon, still exists within us. We live in a process of constant exchange with our environment and other living organisms during our lifetime. And we are the products of long chains of events that happened before our lifetime; we exist in a continuum.

I suppose, when it comes to my work, I try to make some of these ideas more tangible, accessible, felt at a physical level.

M: Materials and their behaviors are crucial in your praxis. How do you choose these materials?

VB: I work with matter and materials as a way to relate to the world, a way of being in the world, an attempt at finding sense. How to compose an object, how to decompose it—the enormous, urgent environmental problem we are facing right now has to do with that. We have been enjoying "composing"—changing oil into plastic, for example—and we need to learn to decompose. Nothing disappears, it might change state but it remains, we live in a closed circuit. In the past, I've used cement, liking the idea that it's stone broken down and re-formed. I've used the basic qualities of oil, floating sump oil on water (*Surfaces for the mind to rest or sink into*, 2009). More recently, I've been using bioresin, attempting to arrest it in its viscous stage, therefore revealing its constitution. Generally speaking, a successful piece for me is when intrinsic properties of a material play a lead role. I find it has the effect of binding the piece conceptually and sensually.

M: In your recent production, there is a switch toward more natural subjects, forms, and substances, compared to that of earlier creations. Can you talk about this tendency?

VB: Do you mean "natural subject" in the sense that I've used the human body? It is true that it was quite a jump for me, suddenly being so literal. I felt I needed it; I needed to be more consequent, clearer, more pressing, more urgent—and face the human right on.

M: The titles of your works are historically and conceptually dense, bordering on the mystical. Could you open up about them?

VB: "Mystical" is a term I have become less scared of. Some of the most extreme experiences of being alive... the most extreme one I can think of personally would be giving birth—well, that's mystical, connecting you with another being on earth. Being a product of the here and now, I would say that I'm pretty rational, but this inheritance is only useful as a platform from which to explore the unknown. I love titles and what they are able to do: it's a way of approaching a work, of reorientating an object; it can provide a clue, an angle, a hook. Words can reach places that objects can't, and vice versa. They complete each other.

<http://moussemagazine.it/vanessa-billy-the-white-goddess-galleria-gentili-2019/>



# VANESSA BILLY

Born in 1978. Lives and works in Zürich.

The intellectual implications of material processes are central to Vanessa Billy's work. Not only is the artist concerned with factual processes such as the extraction of raw materials, the production and use of energy, and its resulting irreversible waste products; but she also explores how these chain reactions shape human thought and activity. Her works are made using a wide variety of forms and materials, from mass-produced industrial goods at the end of their production cycle to hand-modeled pieces.

## Expositions Solo (sélection) :

**2019**

– *The White Goddess*, Galleria Gentili, Florence, Italie

**2018**

– *Future Perfect*, Assembly Point, Londres, Royaume-Uni

**2017**

– *Dear Life*, Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris, France

**2016**

– *We Dissolve*, Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen, Saint-Gall, Suisse

– *All is porous*, BolteLang, Zürich, Suisse

## Publications (sélection) :

**2019**

– *Konkrete Gegenwart*, Édition Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich

**2018**

– *Fountain*, coécrit Thogdin Ripley, Co-édition Rollo Press et Assembly Point

## Presse (sélection) :

**2019**

– « *Vanessa Billy, Conversation* », Interview by Mousse Magazine, Février

– Elena Magini, « *Vanessa Billy: The White Goddess* », Flash Art, Mars

**2018**

– Urs Bühler, « *Glut und Tränen* », Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Décembre

– Claudia Jolles « *Vanessa Billy - Tränen für St. Peter* », Kunstbulletin, December

**2017**

– Isaline Vuille, « *Le vivant et le déchet* », Le Phare n° 25, Janvier

**2016**

– Javier Hontoria, Review, Artforum, Novembre

– Deborah Keller, « *Vanessa Billy* » Kunstbulletin, Novembre

# AROUND THE JUNE – AUG. 2019 EXHIBITION

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## EVENTS

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wednesday 26 june, 14h - 16h

### FAITES VOS JEUX : THE FAIR

Clara Gensburger / La Machine à performer.

After 6 workshops with groups of children receive by the association *le Fil D'Ariane* / *SESSAD* from Nevers, centered on the discovery and reactivation of historical performances of contemporary art, a fun and participative restitution is organized in the form of a fair in the park.

from tuesday 2 to sunday 7 july

### LA FABRIQUE

In partnership with the 64th Salon de Montrouge, the Parc Saint Léger hosts the artists Flora Bouteille, François Dufeil, Pauline Lecerf and Maxime Testu for a one-month collective residency under the curation of Léo Guy-Denarcy. A presentation of their work will be visible in the Pavilion of Sources of the park.

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## TOURS

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sundays 9 juin, 21 juillet  
and 25 août, 16h

### GUIDED TOUR OF THE SHOW

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## WORKSHOP

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saturdays 22 june, 6 and 27 july,  
16h - 18h

### AROUND THE EXHIBITION

Three workshops on the themes of the exhibition.

Free admission, reservation required

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## WRITING WORKSHOP

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saturday 24 august, 10h - 17h

### WITH PIERRE BASTIDE

Free admission, reservation required

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## FAMILY WORKSHOPS

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sunday 7 july, 15h

### GUIDED TOUR, WORKSHOP & SNACK

Up to 5 years.

Free admission, reservation required.

friday 19 and saturday 20 july

### PARTIR EN LIVRE

14h - 16h

Initiation workshop on flip-book production led by director Inès Bernard-Espina.

16h - 18h

Reading in collaboration with the association *Lire et faire lire*.

Free admission, reservation required.

Opening the 07 june, 17h

Exhibition from 08 june to 25 august 2019

Opened Tuesdays to Sundays

from 2pm to 7pm and by appointment

Free entrance

Press : Clément Guignard

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association pour le développement des centres d'art,  
et de Arts en résidence – Réseau national.

L'exposition bénéficie du soutien de :

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