

## Exhibition Review

### ***Formafantasma: Cambio***

Serpentine Galleries, London

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Walk into the Serpentine Sackler Gallery and you will be hit with the smell of freshly cut pine. The exhibition *Cambio* begins by engaging the olfactory and I'm transported to crunching pine needles underfoot, and scented memories of surfboard wax, car air freshener, Christmas, and disinfectant. Amidst these heady recollections, my vision kicks in— a huge felled tree lays stripped of its bark and branches, sawn into lengthy timber planks that have been chocked and stacked to mimic the shape of a trunk. It is not quite material, but not yet an object, a type of matter lodged somewhere in between.

For anthropologist Adam Drazin “Imagining the materials world is difficult, because one simply cannot see the wood for the trees except through deliberate acts of distantiation.”<sup>1</sup> Materials, according to Drazin, become visible to us through types of transformation. Tracing their flow across processes, cultures and geographies is the locus of this exhibition by Studio Formafantasma, the Italian design duo Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin. More than a contemporary design exhibition, *Cambio* is a multi-modal research project into the material flows and invisible ecologies surrounding wood and the timber industry. Its title is a reference to the cambium membrane of a tree which produces wood, and also a play on the word ‘cambio’ in Italian, meaning *change*. Presented by the Serpentine Galleries and curated by Rebecca Lewin, *Cambio* positions itself at the forefront of current material culture and ecology debates by drawing largely on the history of bioprospecting and the establishment of

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<sup>1</sup> A. Drazin, ‘To Live in a Materials World,’ in *The Social Life of Materials: Studies in Material and Society*, ed. by Adam Drazin and Susanne Küchler (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), pp.12

economic botany as a field of study in the 19th century. In an attempt to illuminate what are often obfuscated global manufacturing chains, *Cambio* charts the consequences and the culpability of design for mass production, and the culture of material consumption from which design has emerged. Collaboration and interdisciplinary thinking are at the heart of this enquiry which brings together scientists, historians and creative practitioners to explore the ubiquity of wood, grafting it to the extraction of natural resources and revealing it to be ever present throughout the endeavours of colonial expansion.

Over 200 xylarium objects form a generous and significant loan to the exhibition. This authenticated collection of wood specimens comes from Kew's Museum of Economic Botany founded in 1847. Their inclusion sheds light on the history of this institution as the world's first museum dedicated to the collection of economic botany and the dissemination of botanical knowledge. Each specimen labelled by species notes the provenance of each wood, its material qualities and possible uses, and notably its display at the Great Exhibition of 1851 or the International Exhibition of 1862. Both exhibitions and other subsequent world fairs functioned as a major acquisition resource for the museum. The first official museum director Sir William Hooker became actively involved in a variety of steering committees and commissioning juries, no doubt affording him the ability to request particular specimens with a view to growing the Kew collection, which at the time was responsible for accepting and redistributing biomaterials across a burgeoning network of institutions throughout the British territories.

Caroline Cornish has argued that “knowledge is produced in museums through the disposition in space of concrete objects”.<sup>2</sup> In *Cambio*, Kew's xylarium specimens visually map and

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<sup>2</sup> C. Cornish. 'Nineteenth-Century Museums and the Shaping of Disciplines: Potentialities and Limitations at Kew's Museum of Economic Botany,' *Museum History Journal*, 8:1, (2015), 8-27. 12.

spatially reveal the relationship between the museum collection, commercial trade and knowledge production whilst proposing a new type of spatial disposition, one that charges this 19<sup>th</sup> century collection with vitality in the contemporary moment, and with renewed importance in our current state of climate crisis. The wood collection presented in the exhibition has been reimagined as the poignantly titled installation *The archive of lost forests* (2020), and includes specimens of *Casuarina Stricta* from Victoria, *Zanthoxylum Ochroxylum* from Dominica in the Caribbean Islands, *Fraxinus Americana* from North America, and a small piece of *Melhania Melanoxylon* from Saint Helena, a small volcanic island in the South Atlantic, its label noting ‘now extinct’. This is a trophy wall of timber engaging directly with the politics of collection access and display. It yields a particularly foreboding affect on the viewer, demonstrating the loss of biodiversity as a transformative process that can be traced via shifting material geographies. By foregoing enclosed cabinetry and glazed vitrines, Formafantasma agitate against the exhibition aesthetics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century natural history museum with an installation that appears to be actively ‘in transit’. 41 large timbers are casually leant against the gallery walls or left on freight palettes, held upright under the tension of bright green ratchet straps. The elevation of material over object is made more visible through this process, as is an understanding of the collection itself being in a particular moment of transition.

Formafantasma play to the affordances of the exhibition format to do this, yet they also acknowledge its limitations. The exhibition catalogue and the project website expand the research through long form interviews and critical essays that become interchangeable, expansive and compendium resources to the exhibition itself. The *Cambio* project helps to reveal the fraught geo-politics of wood and the renewed importance of Kew’s xylaria specimens, as they shift away from a purely colonial and antiquated archive they have

become a materials collection that can function as a tool for the practices of wood anatomy and study of sustainable wood science.

*Cambio* is scholarly contribution that shouldn't be siloed within a single field, though in this instance, it's contribution to museum studies is in furthering debates around the mobility and vitality of historical collections, specifically how specimens can perform as critical objects in current discourses. This is an exhibition that doesn't forgo complexity for designerly aesthetics, and in the process it asks something more of our museums and the historical collections they steward.