

## **Mariana Castillo Deball interviewed by Katie Guggenheim**

*Chisenhale Gallery, May 2013*

**Katie Guggenheim:** There are several references to ‘traps’ in this exhibition: in the title – What we caught we threw away, what we didn’t catch we kept; in the paper sculptures, which you’ve called Tree Traps; and also in the replica hunting net which you’ve installed in the exhibition (Vogel’s Net, 2013). I wanted to ask you about this idea of artworks functioning as traps or traps functioning as artworks.

**Mariana Castillo Deball:** The reference to the trap starts from the essay by the contemporary anthropologist Alfred Gell, which is called Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps. It was an excuse for me to look at a lot of concerns which I’d been researching, regarding not so much archaeological material but more the techniques that have developed in order to capture these objects, capture them in different ways: to capture their meaning, to capture the place where they are, to capture their form, or to understand the inscriptions or the different connections that they have.

In that sense, the work of Alfred Gell is very interesting, because he speaks about agency, so it’s not so much how we appropriate the objects but also that the objects have an impact on us. It’s like a double relationship. When he speaks about traps, for instance animal traps, he says that the trap is already a kind of ‘cast’ of the animal it is going to trap – something that is at the same time the negative and the positive of the possible victim. In that sense this exhibition is an experiment: how can you catch an object, or how can you catch an experience, and what is the imprint of this experience?

When I was working on this show I suddenly understood that a lot of my background when I studied art – because I was trained in printmaking – a lot of the experiments were somehow related to the process of printing, where you have a negative and you make a positive. This relationship between the positive and the negative developed – in different ways – through a story or through an object, or through the distortions that an imprint makes.

**KG:** This exhibition was co-commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery, CCA Glasgow and Cove Park in Scotland where you had a two-part residency. While you were there you visited two archives, which were really important to your research. One was the storage facility of the British Museum in London, where you studied the casts made by the 19th Century archaeologist, Alfred Maudslay. The other was the archive of ephemera collected by the artist, Eduardo Paolozzi, at the Scottish National Galleries. What prompted you to make these visits and how did they impact on your research?

**MCD:** In the case of the archives at the British Museum, I have been interested in the negatives of different Mexican ancient monuments that they have in their collection for some time. When visiting other museums, like the ethnographic museum in Berlin, I discovered this technique – ‘paper squeezes’ – moulds made out of papier maché, which was a very good technique because it was light and easy to transport. They would just transport these paper squeezes and make the positives out of plaster later on. The first time I approached the British Museum was in 2006, when I was looking for another cast that was not made by Maudslay. That’s when I discovered that Maudslay was one of the pioneers of the paper squeeze technique, and also that he made several of these experiments when he was doing expeditions in the Maya region. From an ethical point of view, there were a lot of explorers at that time in the Maya region; many of them were just looting, taking all the objects back to museums as originals. Somehow Maudslay was not so interested in that, but was more interested in the meaning of the artefacts and keeping the objects as they were – not destroying the site and bringing the whole pyramid back to Europe. I think that’s also important to point out. All these objects that Maudslay brought back to London have been in storage for many, many years in the British Museum. They were held back because the researchers are always more interested in the originals than these copies, or casts, so the collection hasn’t been studied enough. I wanted to visit it to see the state of the objects and how they catalogued them.

When I started researching the Maudslay casts, I also discovered the exhibition that the Scottish artist Eduardo Paolozzi made in the 1980s – Lost magic kingdoms and six paper moons from Nahuatl – at the Museum of Mankind, which was the home of the Ethnographic department of the British Museum. Paolozzi showed some of Maudslay’s paper squeezes in this exhibition. I was already interested in Paolozzi’s work before, and I was pleased to find a natural link between the work of Paolozzi and the work of Maudslay. When I had the opportunity to go to Cove Park, I also visited one of the many archives that hold some of Paolozzi’s work – he was a very prolific artist, some of his work is in London, some is in Glasgow and some is in Edinburgh. The archive in Edinburgh is mainly all of his books, documents and letters; it’s what they call a personal archive, but there was also a lot of ephemeral material that they haven’t found the resources to study in depth yet. Both these cases are interesting because of how institutions manage this kind of material – how they archive it or how they study it, or how they just leave it behind because they don’t have the resources to integrate it into

the institution, or into the exhibitions. It seems very difficult to show it or to bring it back into the light; they prefer to show the actual work or the actual paintings or sculptures.

**KG:** And both Maudslay and Paolozzi were producing so much – these great accumulations of paper: the paper squeezes in the case of Maudslay and the personal papers and letters in Paolozzi's case.

**MCD:** Exactly. And Paolozzi's documents are not just letters; the more ephemeral material in the archive includes things like restaurant receipts, or invitations for other exhibitions he visited. There are also the books that he liked. All the stuff he accumulated.

**KG:** You've made references to these archives through individual works and images included in the exhibition, but you've also appropriated certain elements. I'm thinking of the metal storage racks from the British Museum stores that you've recreated, and the Paolozzi imagery in the plaster reliefs.

**MCD:** I wanted to divide the exhibition into different atmospheres. I wanted this atmosphere of the storage to be present – it was important to bring back into the exhibition space some of the elements present in the storage facilities from the British Museum. Also, it is a formal coincidence that the pyramids in the Maya region often have a triangular shape, which is very similar to the racks in the British Museum. That was a coincidence and it became one of the solutions to presenting the material. Also I wanted to stay away from the walls, to position all the material more as a sculptural work, and these racks, which are a technical device to store stuff, become a sculptural element.

In the case of Paolozzi, I think one of the key parts of his work was the idea of collage and how he used collage as a kind of machinery; he was very obsessed with machines and robots. He used all his imagination and influences and cut them up and pasted them together in different collages, which were sometimes sculptural collages or even texts or prints. I think his idea of collage relates somehow to the way I used that material. Not just the Paolozzi material, but also the material from Maudslay. In a way it's a collage of my own influences, and the way I digest the material. There is a phrase by Paolozzi I really like. He says that a really good sculpture is one that experiences – in the material itself – many different transformations: it's digested several times and it really becomes something else. Somehow all the objects in the exhibition have undergone this sort of transformation, they've been through different states.

**KG:** Could you talk a bit about one of the works in the exhibition, *Zoomorph P* (2013), which exemplifies this kind of transformation? It's been through several different states; it's a Mayan artefact which Maudslay cast, and which you've recreated and then made prints from.

**MCD:** It's one of the most complicated casts Maudslay made, because it's a very big stone monument, and he brought in an Italian master to do it. So this was not a paper squeeze, but it was actually a plaster mould. They have the cast in storage at the British Museum, and they said the original is made up of about two hundred pieces; it's like a puzzle. I was thinking of how to somehow revert these strategies, so instead of trying to make a mould again, to make an original and then to unfold the form in a two dimensional space. The experiment was to make a miniature version of this sculpture and to carve it in wood with all the inscriptions that are contained in it. I then made a series of prints from it, but as it is a three-dimensional object, you can never really have a whole picture of the object, so the image becomes a kind of trajectory of itself.

**KG:** Something you've mentioned quite a lot in relation to this work, and which relates to Alfred Gell and his research, is the idea of 'object biographies'. This is interesting in relation to the way you deal with these artefacts, or objects, in your own work. You allow complexities to unravel. It's as if the object is telling its own story.

**MCD:** I think this started when I did the first project about archaeological objects in Mexico, and I realised that, for instance when you go to a museum, like an ethnographic museum, you see a very beautiful Asian piece displayed in a showcase, and you never know where they found this object, or where it was originally, or who owned it first. Many times the trajectory of the object and how it arrived at the specific place it is in now is really interesting, really rich, but somehow it's never integrated into the history of the display itself. The object itself is so complex, and there are so many objects in this museum that it would take too much time and space to actually unfold all these narratives. But in contemporary anthropology or even archaeology, they've started to go more deeply into this subject. The idea is to take a more sociological point of view as to how the object is placed in a historical context and how it has had many different historical contexts. So you can never define an object as one single thing; the object changes depending on the place where it is and the people who are manipulating it. In the past few years I've taken some objects as a kind of excuse and tried to follow them and

build up what I call a biography of these objects, which could be from the point of view of social sciences or the historiography of an object.

There is an historian I really like called Carlo Ginzburg, and he invented something called 'microhistory'. He says that history has always been concentrated on the big protagonists of the stories – who were the kings, who were the people that were building progress. Instead, he concentrates on people who have no name, no voice, who have no documentation, and that's the most difficult thing to do. History is always viewed from the point of view of power, so how can you go down into the sources and find the history of people who have no voice? In the case of archaeological objects, these are objects that were taken by the colonisers and were taken away from people who'd lost their voice. It's very difficult to try to imagine it, to put yourself in the position of someone who lost power or lost agency.

**KG:** You often adopt methodologies or some of the practices of other disciplines, such as, anthropology or archaeology. In this case, with Maudslay's casts, you've literally used the same technique that he used in his fieldwork, in your sculptures, but also, as you've just spoken about, you are also engaged with the theory that's specific to these disciplines, which you've previously described as 'other worlds'. I was wondering how you move between these different worlds, how as an artist, you negotiate these different disciplines and bring them into your work?

**MCD:** Sometimes I even use the term 'possession', which sounds esoteric, but I think the way I deal with this appropriation is to embed myself into the working methods and try to follow them. Sometimes it can be a formal experiment, like when I try to replicate the techniques that Maudslay was doing with the paper squeezes. Sometimes it's a more intellectual or narrative approach, where I try to catch the way they describe things, or the way they study them or look at them. I try to catch the different points of view and the different ways of relating to the world. This always starts with a very specific question, let's say in the case of the exhibition at Chisenhale, it's a question about how an object survives beyond itself; it's not just the thing itself, but it's also the ghosts and the replicas that this object creates. So then I concentrate on this question and I see how different people have approached this object from their different points of view. Maybe it's an exercise in concentration. I think it's also about retrieving myself from what I think is right, or real, or correct. I adopt the position of the object and follow its path.

**KG:** You're originally from Mexico, and although you live in Berlin you travel to Mexico and work there often. Is the way that you work – adopting techniques from other, often scientific disciplines, a way to distance yourself from the subject matter you're dealing with and a way to avoid taking a position as a 'Mexican' artist?

**MCD:** This question makes me think again about the historian Carlo Ginzberg. One of his working methods is called estrangement – he uses estrangement as a tool. He tries to retrieve himself, to imagine he's a horse or a rabbit, in order to understand something more clearly. If I think about that in relation to my approach to Mexico it could also apply, because when you're dealing with your own cultural identity you can be tagged so easily; you could say 'I'm a Mexican woman artist', or 'I'm a Mexican woman artist who doesn't live in Mexico but is making work about Mexico'. There are so many things that I could be trapped by, so I always try to be careful to escape from these preconceptions. The cultural identity of Mexico is so strong and has so many layers, so I think that I'm like a chess player: I'm always trying to change my position.