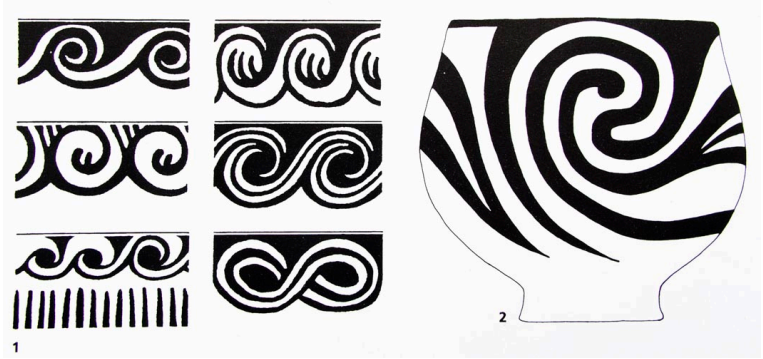
anima vitae

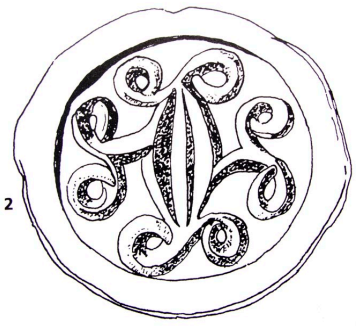
In the summer of 2014 the monastery library of the Benedictine Abbey in Admont, Austria was infested with various types of insects. The inventory of books, including volumes, manuscripts, and incunabula dating back to the Middle Ages, represents one of the world's preeminent art collections. Moreover, the library provides an important source of scientific research material, covering a wide range of different fields of knowledge. Insects such as *Anthrenus museorum* – aptly named the "museum beetle" – had infiltrated this unique cultural asset and caused substantial damage. In order to preserve these significant original historical transcripts of human knowledge, to put a stop to the infestation and make restoration possible, a pest control company employed fumigation techniques to eliminate the larvae and bugs.



Images: Binker Materialschutz pest control company

However, if this situation is viewed not just from the perspective of preserving and protecting human cul-tural heritage but also from a fascination with natural processes and the interconnections between art, knowledge, and culture, other quite interesting aspects emerge. With their eating habits the bugs and larvae are following a perfectly natural behavioral pattern. Irrespective of whether such actions are instinctive or learned, they are always part of a natural process, a part of the natural productivity that permeates and affects all life – humans included – always and everywhere.
My project investigates this interrelationship between nature, processes, and intrinsic forces that generate other forms of productivity. More precisely, this work reverses the very behavior of the bugs, which had a destructive effect on the monastery library, and transforms it into a constructive image production.
In collaboration with natural scientists, such as Dr. Rudy Plarre of the Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing (BAM) in Berlin, museum beetles were bred, their behavior studied, and then released on diverse materials. In order to stimulate and control the insects' feeding behavior, simple line drawings were made on the materials with a yeast suspension to encourage the insects to eat along the predefined lines. The drawings originate from archaeological finds dating from a very early period of human history – the Copper Age (5000–3000 BC). The motifs of the paintings, engravings, and incrustations exhibit a direct reference to the omnipresent powers of nature and their influence on human existence.





Images: Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

In a continuous cycle of destruction and re-creation, a living medium is used in another context to engender a new world of images.

Edgar Lissel
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