
Maria Laet
Interview with Michael Asbury — January 2008

1. The work you present at this exhibition seems to stand out from most of the other works you have produced, which present themselves, or perhaps offer themselves would be a better description, to the environment. I would therefore like you to speak a little bit about the relationship that your works have with the idea of fluidity, literally its relationship with fluids and/or gases.

The elements in nature express the different ways in which we relate to the world, with the other and with ourselves. I am attracted by fluids because of their vulnerability in relation to the context, their capacity to get involved with the movements and spaces of the world, the fact that they are organic, mutable and in a sense, inapprehensible.

As in Francis Ponge ('Le Parti pris des choses', 1942), writing about his perception on the water:

It is white and shiny, formless and fresh, passive and persistent in its only vice, the weight; it has at its disposal exceptional means through which to satisfy such a vice, penetrating, eroding, filtering. Within itself this vice also acts: incessantly collapsing, renouncing at every instance any form, only tending to humiliate itself spreading its arms on the floor, almost like a cadaver such as the monks in some orders [...]

We could say even that water is mad due to its hysteric necessity of obeying only its own weight, that it possesses a fixed idea [...]

LIQUID is by definition that which prefers to obey the weight of its own form, that which refuses all form in order to obey its weight. And that it loses all composure due to this fixed idea, this sick scruple [...]

The restlessness of water: sensitive to the smallest chance of inclination. Throwing itself from staircases with both its feet together. Playful with its puerile obedience, returning as soon as we call it by changing the inclination towards this side.

2. So the gauze work acts as a porous body, a divisive apparatus, which doesn't quite divide, but indicates perhaps the limits of a transition, or perhaps marks the outline of an otherwise invisible movement, like the other balloons that being almost free, trace or capture the movement around them. This is precisely why, I see the single balloon, imprisoned in a glass box, as being so distinct from the other works. Could you speak a little about this distinction that exists in the function of what is after all the same object, a white balloon, but which in one work acts as an object, a sculpture perhaps, set in a glass box, while in other works acts as part of an apparatus, the driving force in this apparatus for almost random drawing.

First it is one breath inside a balloon, the exhalation of all the air that we have inside, as a poetic visualisation or externalisation of our internal space, of our vital space. This balloon is placed inside a very thin glass box, made with the exact same measures, so that that they slightly touch each other. The balloon and the glass box stand for a poetic as well as frustrated attempt of apprehending or protecting this space, of separating inside and outside spaces. As time goes by the balloon empties itself.

In a second work with balloon, the air that fills it does not come from inside the body, but from nature. At the height of a person's chest, I place a helium balloon attached to a string with cotton dyed on black ink, which makes it stand in equilibrium. The balloon moves with the displacement of air that the body generates when it moves through space. As the balloon moves it makes marks, drawings (on the paper that has been placed on the floor), as an imprint of a rhythm.

The work with helium balloons stands not only for an acceptance of the impossibility of apprehending or preserving the air, this internal space, but also for an exposure of this 'object' to the movements in the world. The air comes from outside of the body, from nature. It gets involved by the movements of the air that are external to it and, after that, it empties itself. It expresses this vulnerability towards the context and towards the other, in a way that is more alive and creative, less conformed maybe.

The balloon goes from one opposite to the other, maybe expressing postures we have in relation to the world, as well as the duality between inside and outside.

The gauze and the balloon are both in a way envelopes, membranes which separate and join two spaces, usually the gauze in relation to the skin, and the balloon in relation to the air. It is as if they were that which involves an internal space, though there is no way of apprehending or protecting it, since this membrane is as fragile and fluid, organic and mutable as that space itself. There is no way of entirely separating internal and external realities, but there is a way of letting them get involved.

In the question you mentioned that the balloons are 'almost free', I would rather think that they are imminently between equilibrium and the lack of it.

3. In the balloon drawing works another issue arises, which is the difficulty of locating the work. What do you consider to be the work? Is it the object, what I have been calling the apparatus? Is it the spectator's interaction with it? Or is it the documentation whether, the video, the photo or the actual drawing itself?

The 'object' is not only an apparatus. It is a 'body', which speaks of a relationship with the other, with space and with air.

The work goes through different medias, which can exist together, or in some of them, independently. The process in it self is not to be exposed.

4. There seems to be a certain modesty in the work, in its scale or in its materials. How intentional is this?

Maybe it has something to do with silence. Or perhaps something to do with the fact that the work is feminine in the sense that it is delicate, fluid and organic.

Apart from that, I believe it is because the whole thing for me is something rather simple as opposed to something complex in the sense of its means, its 'instruments', the materialization or visualization of something, although this 'thing' in itself is not necessarily simple or modest. So, it is the process of this materialization that may be seen, from a certain point of view, as modest. Usually, in my way of working, an excessive 'professionalization' of these means, would function as a way of anchoring the work to a series of visual or conceptual demands.

So, this modesty that you refer to, I believe is about an instinctive simplicity, which protects the process from closed concepts. In fact in quite the opposite sense, it gives me the freedom to experiment, to get involved with the work as in a freer (and more honest) relationship, a less pre-determined one, with less concepts necessary a priori or general requirements. I think it is an intuitive way of keeping the work even more close to life.

In any case, as far as intention is concerned, for me this understanding usually happens after the work is done.

5. My first question enquired about how your recent work seems to offer itself to the environment. I would like to ask you finally, how yourself as an artist, relate to your environment. As someone operating between Rio and London, there seems to exist, even if this happens at a subconscious level, a relation to site which is quite distinct. I wonder how much this is dependent on the familiarity/unfamiliarity of the site (such as the Parque Lage and the river images in Rio compared to the post industrial, abandoned site of your video where one only sees a street, someone's legs and shadow, lots of thread on the floor and a balloon's shadow and its endless thread that never gets into the frame) as opposed to a progression of the work itself.

I believe this unfamiliarity with everything (space, rhythm, etc) made, in a first moment, the work to address a kind of automatic, endless repetition, in a place with no identity. After a year or so, I began to turn back my attention (as well as my freedom) to the more silent movements, to the issues that always interested me the most, which rather relates to someone's inner issues than to culture.