

Title	Taking a look at dust, for example	Author	Moacir dos Anjos
Date	2003	Artist	Rivane Neuenschwander
Publication	<i>Rivane Neuenschwander</i> . Recife: Museu de Arte Moderna Aloísio Magalhães (MAMAM), 2003.		

Taking a look at dust, for example

Taking a look at dust, for example. Not as an inseparable whole, an opaque and indistinct cloud. But looking in depth at each of its tiny particles suspended in the air (and also in the small spaces between them), identifying what is not noticeable to the hurried common sense. What is more: not only breaking up into parts what is seen so often as a whole, but acceding to the fact that it is from the perception of the ordinary and almost intangible that one engenders, in a unconscious cognitive process, the perception of what is relevant and visible.¹ And it is from this impulse to know the world escaping from all-embracing and amnesic judgments on its constitutive parts that, in a decade of intensive production, Rivane Neuenschwander has created a work that has proved itself impermeable to broad definitions.

Making use of a variety of forms of expression (installations, films, the construction of objects), the artist makes manifest what in everyday life is mere rumour, fragment, or glimpse. To this end, however, no praise is handed out to fragility or contingency, given that her work is not concerned in creating a refuge from the discomfort that one can feel in life. There is, on the contrary, the desire to give due power to the incessant murmuring of the small things that both form and inhabit this world, be they a word, a gesture, an image or a moment. The subtlety of her works is thus on a level with that found in the prose of Clarice Lispector or in Eric Rohmer's films: it states that what is important presupposes the prosaic and depends upon it to exist.

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What is important presupposes the prosaic and depends upon it to exist. Modern experience of time, however, is one of synthesis, not of particularization. One no longer measures the duration of individual, social or physical affairs on the basis of what is specific to them, such as sleep, harvests or tides. Through gradual learning and the construction of regulating numerical symbols (calendars, clocks), social awareness of time slowly gave up what was singular to become a synthetic means of orientation in the flux of events in which life is woven.² In a series of works, Rivane Neuenschwander reflects on this shared forgetting of what is unique, demonstrating the idealized nature of the habitual marking of time and stating the specificity of its origin.

In *Deadline calendar* [2002], the artist cuts, from the packages of several food items, small bits where, normally in faint or minute letters, the dates that indicate the validity of the products are printed – moments in which these products lose the status of goods appropriate for consumption and are converted into rubbish – and groups them in such a way as to create a calendar for twelve consecutive months. By means of this simple procedure, she relates each of the 365 days of the year to the reminder of the end of the shelf life of a distinct food item, thus opposing the notion of time as a social regulator set apart from mundane things. She reveals the conventional nature of how time is counted and displays signs of organic transience as proof that it is *not* the days, after all, that “pass”; it is, to the contrary, innumerable and everyday life and death cycles (short or long) that gives them content and temporal significance.

¹ This path of knowledge is suggested by Gilles Deleuze, for whom small perceptions are less *parts* of the understanding of a fact than its *requirements* or genetic elements. Deleuze, Gilles. *A Dobra. Leibniz e o Barroco*. Campinas, Papirus, 1991.

² Elias, Norbert. *Sobre o Tempo*. Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar Editor, 1998.

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Almost as a memorial for the inevitable and gradual falling away of all matter in the world – a process against which one can measure the chronological extension of the rest of life's incidents –, Rivane Neuenschwander films, in another piece, the drifting of a bubble that, silent and fragile, floats rhythmically past empty and gray landscapes, just as an organic metronome made for a non-existent piece of music. This *Inventory of small deaths (blow)* [2000; co-author: Cao Guimarães] could well include the short lives of beings and things that, though scarcely visible or audible, occupy both the normal day and a number of the artist's works: ant tracks, food scraps, soap left soaking in water, talcum powder spilt on the floor.

The association of the concept of time with common occurrences – set against the prevalent understanding of time as a generic measure of the duration of facts – emerges also in the installation *Chove chuva* [2002]. Hanging from the ceiling by steel cables, dozens of aluminium buckets with small holes in the bottom are filled with water, which rhythmically drips onto another group of buckets, placed on the ground directly underneath the suspended ones. After a certain time, the former are emptied and once again filled with the water that drained away in this period, starting an identical process of draining.

If the act of filling the buckets at repeated intervals produces, for whoever is performing this task, the accurate feeling of the duration of an event, the visual and auditory apprehension of the draining away of the water also permits the subjective relating of the frequency of the dripping to the duration of other phenomena. What is a unique event (drips falling in a given cadence) thus becomes the condition for understanding what is a generic fact (the *idea* of the time in which such a fact happens). From the ordinary, the abstract is created.³

From the ordinary, the abstract is created. From oranges, an alphabet. In the piece *Scrabble* [2001], Rivane Neuenschwander dehydrates and peels hundreds of oranges, leaving merely enough of their skins for one to read, in relief, the characters from which words and sentences are made. Placed at random in cardboard boxes that form a small labyrinth on the floor, they are an invitation to be touched by whoever passes and to the consequent rearrangement of the letters according to different desires. However, rather than merely expecting the visitor's writing

³ These and other works by Rivane Neuenschwander that share the interest for the specific marking of the passing of time (and not merely for its abstract passage) belong to a rich, diverse and long tradition of contemporary cultural production, which includes, among many other possible examples, the piece *Tacet 4'33* [1952], by the American composer John Cage (1912-1992), in which the player, instead of touching the piano keys, suspends his hands in the air for the time indicated in the title of the work, letting the public's manifestations and all the other sounds that reach the concert hall become music; the installation *Livro do tempo* (Book of time) [1960-61], by the Brazilian artist Lygia Pape (1929), consisted of 365 small painted wooden blocks, representing all the days of a year; the piece *I got up* [1968 onwards], by the Japanese artist On Kawara (1933), consisted of post cards sent by him to friends informing the place and the time in which he wakes up each day that passes; the installation *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* [1983], by the German artist Hanne Darboven (1941), the result of the grouping together of thousands of texts and images that narrate, from references to culture, politics and her personal life, the history of the century mentioned in its title; and the film *Chungking express* [1996], by the Taiwanese filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai (1958), in which, abandoned by his girlfriend, one of his characters measures the time from then on buying, every day, a tin of pineapple with the expiry date ending on the date in which he hopes she will come back to him. Just as in the work of Rivane Neuenschwander, in each of these pieces the passing of the time is associated with a succession of acts, events or facts, which provide to it a meaning and a certain order.

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of any text whatsoever, the installation is more suggestive of the denaturalization of linguistic symbols, making their origin less obscure and associating them, at the same time, with sight and smell, with touch and the memory of taste.

A similar intention of the artist is at play in the piece *Edible alphabet* [2001], in which 26 kinds of culinary spices – chosen so that their initials correspond to all the letters of the alphabet (*açafrão*, black pepper, colouring, dill, *espinafre*, *feijão árabe*, etc.) – are individually glued to rigid mounts, forming horizontal and parallel stripes, in a possible allusion to formal pictorial solutions. Fixed to the wall in the alphabetical order of the names of the food, each of the plates possesses a different colour and awakes in the public the reminder of characteristic flavours and smells, making this indirect contact with the letters an experience that simultaneously appeals to the senses and to the intellect. Instead of the neutral group of symbols that describes everything, here the alphabet allows itself to be traversed by diverse hues and memories of both taste and smell – some vague, others clear – that testify the multiple experience of the body in the world and, therefore, the permeability between diverse cognitive mechanisms.⁴

If, in these two pieces, Rivane Neuenschwander unites food and speech, in others she articulates the use of the vernacular with forms of communication anchored in experiences of affection.⁵ In all, however, she dismantles the idea of language as an institution generated apart from the course of ordinary life. The video *Love lettering* [2002; co-author: Sérgio Neuenschwander], a concise example of these works, exhibits images of little red fishes that carry, stuck to their tails, bits of paper where one reads, in the midst of the blue and green to-ing and fro-ing of the aquarium, isolated words and a few small fragments of phrases: *my love, sweet, angel, no, my dear, from, calls, news, eyes, talking, kissing, voice, hands, mouth, your, I, miss, Rio, London, come, today, next, you, here, night, wish, hotel, from:, to:,* among others. In principle disconnected, little by little the nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs and prepositions that the fishes carry begin to form *syntagmas* in the recent memory of those who watch the unfolding of the images, shuffling the order in which they were first presented and revealing conceivable fragments of a love letter. The sense of aggregation of scattered elements that the video provokes, of encounters between people that, though distant, seek written contact because they like each other, is further reinforced by the very movement of the fishes that, even if at times pass or separate from the others, at other times swim very close together. In addition, the sound track to the video (by the duo *O Grivo*) is made from fragments of mechanical and organic sounds that gradually blend into a whole, echoing, in the music they form, the appearance of precise meanings from the confluence – mediated by the fond memories of each visitor – of diffuse linguistic elements.

From the letters of the alphabet to entire words, and from these to the complete sentence. In the piece *I wish your wish* [2003], Rivane Neuenschwander no longer deals with the irreducible symbols of the language, nor with the words that, knocking each other about, merely suggest varied locutions. Having requested from forty people (all kept anonymous) that they formulated any wish on paper, she put together a collection of diverse and whole sentences,

⁴ To the visual proximity between *Edible alphabet* and the paintings of Agnes Martin (1912) – the organization of the plane with parallel and horizontal lines of colour is the most easily recognizable mark in the Canadian artist's canvases – one can add the fact that, as with Rivane Neuenschwander's work, Agnes Martin's paintings provoke distinct and transitive forms of understanding, being anchored in formalistic pictorial aspects and, simultaneously, in subjective associations between sentiments and a variety of colours.

⁵ For a discussion on the relation between food and language in Rivane Neuenschwander's work, see Szymczyk, Adam. "The sensorium of sense, the empire of the senses", in *spell. Rivane Neuenschwander* (catalogue). Frankfurt Am Main, Portikus, 2002, and Birnbaum, Daniel. "Feast for the Eyes". *Artforum*, May, 2003.

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each expressing a specific wish for the confirmation or change of something. *Eu desejo calma; I wish I could figure out what has to be done; Eu desejo a felicidade das minhas filhas; Je désire ne plus avoir de patrie; Sexo cinco vezes por semana; I wish I could say an unconditional yes; Eu desejo o céu na terra* are some of them. Following orthographic and grammatical norms in the languages in which they were written, these wishes bring the subjectivity of each person in terms understood by all who know such standards of linguistic use. But also the contents of the wishes can, the artist suggests, be appropriated by other children, women, or men, in an overlap between the socialization of the codes of interpersonal communication and the sharing of intimate desires.

This appropriation is made possible by the printing of the wishes collected onto thousands of coloured ribbons – similar to those that carry the saints' names and that are tied round the wrist to express devotion or for the hope of obtaining benefits – and through their being offered to all the people who visit the place where the work is exhibited. Spread over a large extension of the wall, the collection of ribbons-desires seems to evoke the room of ex-votos in a catholic church, although are distinct the temporalities in which these two wishing environments are structured: instead of retribution for the answer to a prayer, each of the ribbons expresses merely the wish to achieve something in an undefined future. This temporal indeterminacy also takes place in space, given that, upon choosing someone else's wish (not only its formal expression, but also what it symbolizes) and removing the corresponding ribbon from the wall, the visitor to the exhibition takes it, around his/her wrist, to a different life context. Since many visitors do the same, an almost invisible web of paths is woven from just one point, dispersing the collected desires over a broad and unbounded territory. Inversely, visitors may write their own wishes on pieces of paper and place them in the holes in the wall from which the ribbons are removed, bringing aspirations and concerns from all over and of all kinds to a single space. By permitting that one wishes someone else's wish and by incorporating the new wishes left in future assemblages of the installation, Rivane Neuenschwander thus leaves it to the visitors to complete the work, conceding to the other partial control over its meaning.⁶

Conceding to the other partial control over its meaning. As also clearly happens in *Scrabble* (moving the oranges), in a non-tangible way in *Edible alphabet* (remembering the smell and the taste of the spices), and even less evident – but equally essential, nonetheless – in *Love lettering* (activating fond memories of the past). Delegation of control has happened, in fact, ever since older works and, although at times in oblique ways, always with decisive importance in the creation of their meanings. As is the case of *Suspended landscape* [1997], formed by heads of garlic emptied of the their solid content and recomposed in their original appearance by the fragile rejoining of the bulbs' skins, which, hanging from the ceiling from slim wires and almost touching the floor, cover nothing. The perception of the work's tenuous materiality, however, is only revealed when the presence of someone walking near moves the air and the

⁶ The need for the public's participation in order for this and other works to become complete makes them close to several of the works of the Cuban artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-96), who placed, in exhibition rooms for the visitors to carry home, mounts of wrapped sweets or piles of posters with printed images and/or texts. It also brings them, by the implicit generosity, next to works by the Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija (1961), who, on one occasion, transformed the gallery into a combination of deposit and kitchen, where he prepared meals and offered them to the public.

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wires that suspend the garlic. Without this presence, there is no way of revealing what the installation is (not) made of or activating its poetic force, which is to make visible what is constructed through an operation of voiding.

Also in works consisting of the addition (and not just the removal) of matter, Rivane Neuenschwander offers room for the active presence of the public in her work. In *Walking in circles* [2000], a piece which exemplifies her intention, she stamps circles of transparent glue on the floor of exhibition rooms. As visitors walk around the room and inadvertently tread on the areas marked with the sticky substance, they leave stuck to them the inevitable dirt that – brought from elsewhere – they carry under their shoes. As a result, the circles traced on the floor gradually become visible to the human eye, filled in by different people's involuntary tread.

In *Days' work* [1998], however, the artist blends, in a more explicit way, the marks of her presence and of that of others in what she does. In two white cubic rooms built for the São Paulo Biennial, she covered walls and floors with squares of sticky paper which already contained remnants, bits and pieces dropped on the floor of her house: prosaic things such as breadcrumbs, hairs, dead insects and the tiny scraps that gradually gather on kitchen surfaces, and in the living- and bedrooms. On entering these areas marked by what is private, the many visitors to the exhibition also ended up bringing inside the signs of the public space where they had been. In this layered construction, the house and the institution virtually overlap, leaving clear the porosity that exists between what is commonly treated as distant and separate. What seems to be far off may also be close.⁷

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What seems to be far off may also be close. It is possible to distinguish, in some of the works described above, two main constructive procedures in the work of Rivane Neuenschwander, both compatible to her formal education as a sculptor but, although in apparent opposition, equally submitted to her creative will and often superimposed or combined.⁸ The first such procedure is based upon operations of joining distinct materials, such as to cover, with the dust collected from home, part of the lines that mark the areas of contact between bars of coconut soap that she puts together [*Untitled*, 1999] or, as she does in another piece, to show up the thin lines that separate the floor slats on a dark floor by the meticulous insertion of powdered marble into these narrow spaces [*Untitled*, 1999]. What were nondescript monochromatic surfaces become, through these actions, constructive drawings made up of “organic lines” found in groups of bars of soap or on the floor of an exhibition room.⁹

⁷ In the piece *Piedra que cede* [1992], the Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco (1962) rolls, in various places in the city, a plasticine ball, letting all the street's impurities stick to its soft matter, in addition to permitting the moulding of its spherical shape to the obstacles and recesses it finds; meanwhile, the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs (1959) put on shoes with magnetized soles [*Zapatos magnéticos*, 1994] and walked around in the streets collecting any metallic residue he could find. Although these two works also make, as in the case of *Walking in circles* and *Day's work*, a collection of the small things in the world, they imply a higher degree of control over their outcome than that which Rivane Neuenschwander allows to herself, thus transferring to the public the responsibility for her works final form.

⁸ The artist completed a specialization in sculpture at the Royal College of Art (London) in the period 1996 - 1998.

⁹ “Organic Line” is a term associated to works made in the 1950's by the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1920-1986), who drew attention to the line created by the mere junction of two different planes. Sarmiento, Edelweiss. “Lygia Clark e o espaço concreto expressional” (interview). *Jornal do Brasil*, 2nd July 1959. Rio de Janeiro, suplemento dominical, p. 3. Republished in *Lygia Clark*. Barcelona, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1997.

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The second procedure, in its turn, has been present since older works (made between 1997 and 1998), in which various materials are subjected to processes of radical reduction or subtraction, extending – paradoxically – their expected life span as objects. Before almost dry tomato sauce on a plate, the artist scrapes away all the excess and leaves visible only scant tracks of the pulp that link the parts where, alone or in clusters, the fruit's tiny seeds linger. In another piece, she takes green leaves from a tree and cuts, with care, their delicate coverings, revealing the intricate plant structures that kept what was removed firmly in place. What was destined to be discarded (being perishable) or to be forgotten (being commonplace) thus becomes an object imbued with graphic content. If, in these pieces, Rivane Neuenschwander uses organic supports to dig up invented images that are almost maps, in *Starving letter* [2000], on the other hand, it is a large number of slugs that, placed on thin sheets of rice paper, eat these slowly and asymmetrically, leaving behind the edges of imaginary geographical maps.

The artist's interest in everything that is created and made visible by acts of suppression grew, afterwards, to also include synthetic materials. Using woven plastic fibre bags used to store food items (rice, beans, soy, flour), she erases, with solvent, all the printed references that identify both their brand and origin, leaving on view merely their pictorial or graphic elements. Lining up dozens of these modified plastic bags on the floor, she concedes, in this installation – _____ (*product of*) [2003] –, symbolic content to what was previously just a wrapping, bringing to view what the distracted eye did not see. Container and content – here as in other works – are nothing but transient states of things that can be altered.

A similar constructive expedient is used in the piece *Globes* [2003], conceived for the Venice Biennale. From the joining of almost two hundred spheres of the most varied sizes (from ping-pong balls to children's giant beach balls) and materials (plastic, leather, rubber, acrylic), the artist once more removes with solvent all written references they bear printed on their surfaces. Next, however, making the most of the balls' original colours and designs and considering different levels of resistance to interventions on their surfaces, she makes a number of interferences with sticky tapes, vinyl and even paint, suggesting associations between each of the spheres and the flag of a country.

Since the approximations between the size and the material of the balls and the countries' flags are solely defined by existing possibilities for intervention, implicit in this method there is the symbolic subversion of established economic or geopolitical hierarchies; the allusion is clear, moreover, to the existence of a much bigger world than that officially present in the Biennale, where only a third of the nations represented by the globes were also represented by their artists. Scattered randomly in the exhibition hall, the spheres could also be freely manipulated by visitors, who reinvented, almost like the slugs on the sheets of paper in *Starving letter*, the cartography of the world at whim or by the chance movement of the balls spread on the floor.

Upon *erasing* signs that the globes initially bore and then *adding*, on them, marks that they did not possess, Rivane Neuenschwander superimposes the two methods she normally uses – removal and addition –, without clinging to any rigid norm that may smother, in her work, the surprise of invention. In another piece, the artist utilizes both processes *simultaneously*, covering with paint the images of boats that were part of painted sea-views she had acquired in fairs and markets. Subtracted from one of the main elements that characterize the genre, several of these sea-views are

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then placed in line on the wall – suggestion of an artificial and fragmented horizon – and, in a symbolic and physical move, confronted with an equal number of small boats made of paper found in the streets and placed in front of the paintings. Providing evidence of the lack of something in the canvases, Rivane Neuenschwander directs the public's attention towards banal images and creates the opportunity for one to see, in this *Improper landscape* [2002], what goes unnoticed for being unexpected or for being behind the usually hurried glance cast at the world. She allows one to see at least some of the world's many details. She allows one to take a look at dust, for example.