

Title	Experiments and Observations in Different Types of Air	Author	Natxo Checa
Date	2009	Artist	João Maria Gusmão + Pedro Paiva
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Experiments and Observations in Different Types of Air. [1]

Natxo Checa
Curator

From the phlogistic as entelechy and the presence of the transitory to a theory of exceptions

Experiments and Observations in Different Types of Air invokes three dimensions, within a regime of intention and coherence, in the filmic work of Pedro Paiva and João Maria Gusmão (JMG+PP). They are the following: the study of singular phenomena in an effort to understand the world, the preference for a scientific methodology, and the understanding of poetry as a possible means of capturing an only partially discernible world. Surprisingly, these same dimensions reflect the dilemma posed by the differing theses on the nature of oxygen formulated by Lavoisier and Joseph Priestley. It is not by coincidence that the exhibition appropriates the name of Priestley's best known scientific paper. From the pre-Socratics onward (Empedocles, Anaximander and later Aristotle), the very idea of «air» was as metaphysical as it was material, given that it associates the concept of breath with respiration and the notion that «air», as *entelechy*, animates the *fire of life*. Nevertheless, in Priestley's research we do not encounter recognition of the combustible properties of oxygen, only identified later by Lavoisier. On the contrary, there is the belief that it is the combustible materials themselves that contain an inflammable fluid, odourless and without mass – which may be understood as the *phlogistic* element, released during burning and subsequently absorbed into the surrounding environment. This element is oxygen and does not belong to matter, given its gaseous form. However, this is the thesis Lavoisier set out in opposition to alchemic traditions, whose memories JMG+PP rediscover with the objective of following in the footsteps of transmutation – while not meaning exactly the same as transitory it nevertheless does border on the concept and indeed comes very close to it.

In adopting Nature and its respective manifestations as their subject matter, the artists aggregate and propose complicated blocks of ideas and knowledge that together establish a complex *scientificificious* phantasm. We are faced with a series of fictional scripts, literary in profile, rooted in the observation of particular phenomena and the design of a particular philosophical architecture. The formulation of these systems within the artistic processes of JMG+PP contains something of the scientifically obsolete, fairly similar to the *phlogistic theory* of Priestley. We will discover that these processes compete to formulate an elaborate study that enquires into the transitory. Within these processes, the ongoing search is for clues revealing *movement*, anything that can give rise to an investigation. Thus a path is traced in which the inaugural and temporal sequence of ideas shares a theoretical co-feasibility. In other words, they form hypotheses that consider not only the foundations of but also how to develop, prove and demonstrate their postulates. The JMG+PP propositions, whether based on a certain type of empirical research or on wild speculation, emerge out of a rationalist methodology aiming to explain the exceptions to phenomena. Given the overlapping of layers (fruit of the inter-penetration of the literal and metaphorical), throughout their work they set out accounts that cannot be assumed by any established code and frequently recall a compilation of apparently unexplainable documented facts, as in *The Book of the Damned*, by Charles Fort² (1874-1932). Effectively, what we find in the work of these two artists are unconnected episodes: they show us processes that deal with anomalous events, unexpected successes, examples of emerging phenomena whether at the microscopic or at the macroscopic level and above all in terms of *phlogistic* effects. Events whose causality is invisible but which nevertheless manage to explode, driving combustion – creating meanings that are subsequently revealed as analogical, through progressions in signifiers: the eye, the egg, the moon, the sun, etc.

[1] A title drawing on the work of the British chemist, physicist and theologian Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). He carried out experiments with electricity and air and for the first time isolated oxygen in a gaseous state. We would note that our objective is to achieve an approximation of the hypothesis set out by Priestley on this intangible and weightless fluid – the *phlogistic entelechy* –, and the methodology of artists.

[2] It is odd how, in compiling unexplainable and bizarre evidence, Fort's intention was to challenge the authority of established science. This would not seem to be the objective of the artistic output from JMG+PP, nevertheless, on one point, both archaeological strategies seem to coincide: both attempt to demonstrate that a certain idea of truth may be found in the unreasonable.

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Within the contingency of the artistic means, the artists stage a strategy that brings us closer to the most minimal evidence of their thinking. How to present an operation intended to introduce the unnameable without recourse to text? How to render viewable the invention of concepts and terminologies such as *De-Paramnésia*, *Eflúvio Magnético* or *Abissologia*, since these notions relate to a pataphysical ontology in which any understanding of *being* is constantly subject to the effects of eclipse?

The work of JMG+PP always comes up against this problem, setting out to solve the *phantasm* that has been created, a *phantasm* which is essentially focused upon the concealment and the movement of phenomena. As the artists say: «Things always reveal themselves according to certain indiscernible aspects.»³ Thus, the object of their research is always slipping and therefore hinders interpretation.

The work of this duo is inherently made up of experimental cinema, despite it still occasionally draws on sculpture, photography and other installation art devices. Nevertheless, it is broadly through filmic means, and particularly through film in slow-motion that a relationship reminiscent of the gaze is established between the ephemeral and the transitory. The visual construction of the presentations is achieved through the deployment in a circuit of various 16 mm projectors. The latent sound of these cinematic devices provides a counterbalance to the silence of the images. The attribution of a dark space *beyond-time* is identified by the deficit of light within an introspective ambience. The projections, apparently alternating, show films either in isolation or in clusters. Simple and interspersed narratives are presented as documents, unique experiments or unexplainable phenomena. In touring the exhibition, the attentive visitor is led into establishing connections and formulating ideas, reencountering meanings within the field of possibilities.

This approach, rooted in an ambience of exception, utilises snap shots as a tool for organising *movement* in an analogical judgement. Within the work of JMG+PP, this beginning where each film provokes echoes in the others has recourse to the evidence of manipulation and of the construction of *magic by empathy*. This always implies the production of an event, whether extended over the course of time or in the immediate present. By using analogical devices, the artists seek to flee the reification of image, demarcating the viewer from the phantasm that the contemporary artistic experience has acquired in exhibition venues.

Rendering the apparently obscure subject visible, unveiling «the thing», identifying the shadow, showing the positive proposition through its negative inversion, dematerialising space, the folding of time are just some of the aspects under study in the work of JMG+PP proclaiming the uniqueness of art and the world in opposition to the profusion of objects transformed into artistic merchandising.

The parallel fall and the atomic declination

As an approach to the spectrum of references of the artists in this new exhibition for the Venice Biennial, we take as our example models of understanding the world in the pre-Socratic era. We refer to the intuitive understanding of nature proposed by *atomic epicurean materialism* as an alternative to the deductive rationalism intrinsic to the arguments of the Eleatic School, later taken up by Platonism in its interpretation of the Universe.

As original philosophy, *Eleaticism* ushered in ontology identifying the question of *being* in thinking and language. In proclaiming both its unity and immutability, the *Eleatics* argued that the detectable world is apparent and access to *being* is achieved through *ideas*. For the *atomists*, the world is conceived as a great void defined by atoms and intervals. Hence, for *atomism*, it becomes clear that the duality inscribed in *Eleaticism* is immediately confronted, differing from the acceptance of its logic and its later transcendental understanding. Later, with Epicurus and Lucretius, atomism incorporated the composition of a theory that Althusser himself would term *random materialism*. According to Epicurus and Lucretius, reality is made up of invisible atoms, infinite in number that differ between each other only quantitatively in form and magnitude. So as to explain observable phenomena, everything is space occupied by infinitesimally small particles interwoven into the emptiness. *Epicureanism* steps in with the thesis that the atoms, on falling into space, experience in parallel an improbably minimal declination, a vector that establishes the causal encounter of atoms in turn resulting in material. The *clinamen*, as it is termed, should be understood as the radical emergence of every possible compound, thereby introducing, as everything depends on chance, thoughts on the exceptional.

[3] «Entropic and meteorist vision», by João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, in *Abyssology, Horizon of Events*.

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The *atomist* theory, interchanging with fluidity the transition of the *being* into things and things into *non-being*, has postulated a *theorist* model that has inspired the experimentation undertaken by JMG+PP ever since the beginning of their careers. Similar to those of the pre-Socratics, the theses of João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva deal with discrete data drawn from certain facets of metaphysics in order to approach, with the very maximum of precaution, the profundity of the real.

Based on a conditioned vision, these artists conceive what they term an «entropic vision»⁴, which inquires into the negative and into multiplicity so as to delineate the bases to their theory. This reverts back upon the distance between the being and the precipice, perceiving in the indiscernible that which «cannot be unless being thought», cautiously approaching the storm of phenomena. Thus, question is made of being always in opposition to transcendence, the lack of discernment of what cannot be discerned. As we shall discover below, they formulate a metaphysics that derisively attempts to cross over the margins of the visible.

The creative itinerary of the work of João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva

The following subjects make up the para-scientific taxonomy of JMG+PP: *DeParamnésia*, *Efflúvio Magnético* and *Abissologia*.

At an early phase in their careers, Paiva and Gusmão staged a cycle of three exhibitions, entitled *DeParamnésia*⁵. Dedicated to psychiatry, this term aims to characterise certain neurological dysfunctions and contemplates facets of abnormal psychic states which when experienced, induce a dual state of reality in the subject, as if their very mental integrity was in flux. We refer to such episodes commonly known as *déjà vu* or *déjà vécu*. This unique experience of mental confusion, of false recognition, is portrayed by Henri Bergson not as an *already seen* – a virtual construction of a past, something that was already there – but as a sudden shift overshadowed by that false memory – conversing in a new, never before seen moment in a purely virtual happening:

«While attending a performance or participating in a conversation, all of a sudden, you are convinced that you have already seen what can be seen, have already heard what you are hearing, the sentences they are speaking have already been spoken – that you had already been there, in the same place, in the same conditions, feeling, understanding, thinking and wanting the same things – indeed, that you are reliving in the finest possible detail some moments from a past life. Sometimes the illusion is so complete that throughout its duration, as long as it lasts, you believe in it to the extent of predicting what will happen [...] It is not unusual, therefore, to perceive the outer world through some unique aspect, as if dreaming. To become unfamiliar to yourself, to the point of opening up and witnessing as a mere spectator everything that is said and done. This final illusion, taken to an extreme becomes “depersonalisation”. This is not inherently bound up with false recognition even if it is connected to it.»

Paramnesia consists of an experience that may be compared to the notion of an unaligned event or even as a dilution of the assertive experience of seeing. Throughout the preparations for this project, JMG+PP carried out studies on perception, re-articulating the illusionist feeling of a *false recognition* with the rupture and discontinuity of space. They were seeking a spatial representation of exception. And so they set about building scenarios made up of compositions involving various devices and installations within which the skewing of perception, parallax and the mirror game call into question the integrity of our viewing conditions. In these exhibitions, the works were committed to effects producing a certain cognitive disruption, using means such as holography, dark-cameras, the theatricality of incongruous scenarios, the surprise disappearance of objects, the reflection of image, stereoscopic vision or even the simple curve of a flame suspended in a candlestick.

As from 2004, they embarked on a wide-ranging project entitled *Magnetic Effluvium*, a name taken from the book *The Man Who Laughs*, by Victor Hugo, detailing the occurrence of a strange storm of black snow out at sea. In this literary episode, there is a fantastic range appropriated by the artists dealing with a situation which, according to the theory of physical phenomena, cannot be explained. This meteorological anomaly, due to the analytical difficulties posed, recognises a lack of congruence. We are faced with a totally uncharacteristic event in terms of movement and the fusion of wind and waves that renders any description impossible. Let us see how Victor Hugo explains it: «The sea is magnetic as much as it is aquatic: an ocean of unknown forces floats in the ocean of the waves [...], the sea is an ebb and flow of fluid, as

[4] *Ibidem*.

[5] Cycle of exhibitions presented between 2001-2002, in the Terceiras do Marquês, a Zé dos Bois Gallery residential project.

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much as a flux and reflux of liquid. It is, perhaps, complicated by attractions even more than by hurricanes [...] He who is ignorant of electric law is ignorant of hydraulic law; for the one intermixes with the other. Indeed, there is no study more difficult nor more obscure; it verges on empiricism.»⁶
 We thus encounter an epistemological prohibition – what type of magnetic influence causes this indiscernible phenomenon that merges sea and wind into chaos? What causes what? There is also a second, existential prohibition – that entails the impossibility of any human being witnessing such an event without going down with their ship.

In 2006, JMG+PP embarked on a new project entitled *Abissologia*. This term was found in the book *A Night of Serious Drinking*, a satirical novel with metaphysical undertones written by the poet René Daumal, referring to a fictional science that studies the abyss. The development of this study by the artists bestows a structure or model with which they attempt to articulate what may generically be termed an experiment on the least visible part of bodies – that which almost cannot be seen – the indiscernible. In the works belonging to this cluster, we frequently find descriptions of the bodies' *own shadow* or infinitesimal movements in flows of water. In the text by JMG+PP «On entropic vision and Meteorism», we read about the abyssological interest in the uncertain and the unknown: «The greatest aporia is the nature of an oil, a hydraulic secret, simultaneously cavernous and submerged, the mystery as a liquid sculpture of its own shadows. We then understand aporia as the irresolute hesitation that suspends judgement of the false and the true, and meteor through this great source, the source of all things, the obscure.»

We present below a dialogue with one of the leading scholars of abyssological practices:

«Victor: *There's no doubt about it, only Abyssology can describe the movement of unconnected events. We are talking: about déjà vu, about parallax, synchronism and also about the miracle...*

Octave: *But the Miracle certainly does not belong to this field of research. We both know that the Miracle has a metaphysical causality.*

Victor: *Dear Octave, the Abyssologists think very little about the invisible. They have a very contrary idea about transparent things: it makes them confused to think their very own home is always in collision with aerial entities, whether they are themselves God, very large and encountered everywhere, or ghosts of the past. For them, nothing of the transcendent is hidden in the shadow of objects, it is but less light. A darkness producing the indiscernible in the eye.*

Octave: *And is not that indiscernible the proof of the transcendental.*

Victor: *Yes, for some, it would seem to be so. For others, it is the most material of the phenomena.»⁷*

It now becomes clear that the actual intention of JMG+PP is to produce something bordering on *revolutionary science*. Not in any sense that the artists have a definitive word to state on the truth but because they try essentially to respond to the unstable and exactly that which escapes from the definitive. Given this, the question of identity is necessarily approached in a fleeting fashion.

In unveiling the constant contradictions between being and non-being, the own and non-own, the imaginary of JMG+PP leads to the establishment of a corporeal relationship with the imagination, interconnecting these two dimensions in a cycle of material mutations. In their films, the human unconscious is channelled towards accepting that the absolute is extemporaneous and that this is diluted in the multiplicity of the world. That is, that the *I* assumes a greatly reduced scale in the importance of things: not because it is crushed by the absolute but because the margins as far as which one can organise the *logos* fall far beyond any such certainty.

We also encounter this dissociation of identity in the Gurdjieff's diagnosis:

«You always forget yourselves, never remember your very self. You do not feel... are not aware... In yourselves, *you observe yourself*, or better still, *talk to yourself, think about yourself, laugh with yourself...* Man, as we know him, the machine man, the man that cannot do, the man with whom and through whom *everything happens*, cannot acquire a permanent and unique *self*. His own *self* changes as rapidly as his thoughts, his feelings, his moods and a profound error is made whenever he is considered as one and only one person. In reality, he is always a different person, never is what he was moments before... Man does not possess a permanent and immutable *self*... Man does not have an individual *self*. In its place, there are hundreds and thousands of small *selves*...»

[6] «Superhuman Laws», in *The Man Who Laughs*, by Victor Hugo (Book II, Chap. I).

[7] «Abyssologist Dialogues. Notes», by João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, 2006.

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It should also be recalled that JMG+PP have taken up Pessoa's «recreative metaphysics»,⁸ as may be demonstrated by an excerpt from the text «What is a Thing (or what is a stone)?»:

«In truth, Pessoa create an individual religion for each heteronym;⁹ in the words of Campos:

“Each one of us should have our own metaphysics as each one of us is each one of us.” Ricardo Reis calls this mentality “recreative metaphysics”. According to Pessoa: “The mystery of being is non-revelatory and hence man can only fabricate fictions, metaphors, tell stories to remotely capture any possible spark of this unattainable sun.” “Recreative metaphysics” emerges as an individual “theorist idea set” whereby the metaphysical laws are tested out by their own poetry. The construction of a poetic theory of the world is a rehearsal of an explanation of existence.»¹⁰

Thus, for each heteronym Fernando Pessoa invented a personal *religion* specifically attributing each with a particular metaphysics. In Alberto Caeiro, we immediately find: «Things do not have meaning; they have existence. / Things are the only hidden sense of things.»¹¹ In Campos, we learn that what is important is the movement of modern life, its machines, the speed of its devices while in Reis what matter are our memories of a neoclassical golden age. Heteronomy thereby processes the non-definition of the improper. It takes as its poetic subject that which existentially may be understood as decisive for the existential disquiet of each heteronym. Subsequently, in accordance with this strategy, the artists create fictions and metaphors consistent with the metaphysical prohibitions on the world.

In Pessoa's heteronymous strategy, there is something which, subtly, cannot be taken seriously in more general terms. We see that Pessoa sets up the heteronyms against the order of established truths. We may say that, finding within the heteronymous field such disparate metaphysical opportunities, Pessoa, as a philosopher, is an imposter with various *selves*. This tragic dissolution of identity brings with it a comic side of great potential, given how it ironically breaks up the extent to which ideologies seek to dominate life. We may recall Rimbaud affirming in his *A Season in Hell*: «Life is a farce to be lived by all.» Or the aphorism from Émile Cioran: «It is because we are all imposters that we endure each other.»

Through their films and experiments, João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva also invoke this hypothesis of other metaphysical abysms with a very special sense of humour. Recognising the failure of approximations to the real, they unpeel scientific absurdities to trace new laws in poetry. An adventure in «pataphysics» that presents what may be considered the greatest of all failures: the failure of the ego and its imprisonment, the impossibility of direct access to truth and a mocking and hallucinatory search, whose end is perceptibly unreachable.

[8] Part of the literary universe created by Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), prominent within which are writings under the heteronyms Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis.

[9] Pessoa's heteronyms are poetic figures which take shape over the course of the author's work to create unique characters within their own universes, setting out their own doubts and stating their own respective points of view.

[10] «What is a Thing (or what is a stone)?», by João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, 2007.

[11] Poem XXXIX, «The Keeper of Sheep», by Alberto Caeiro.