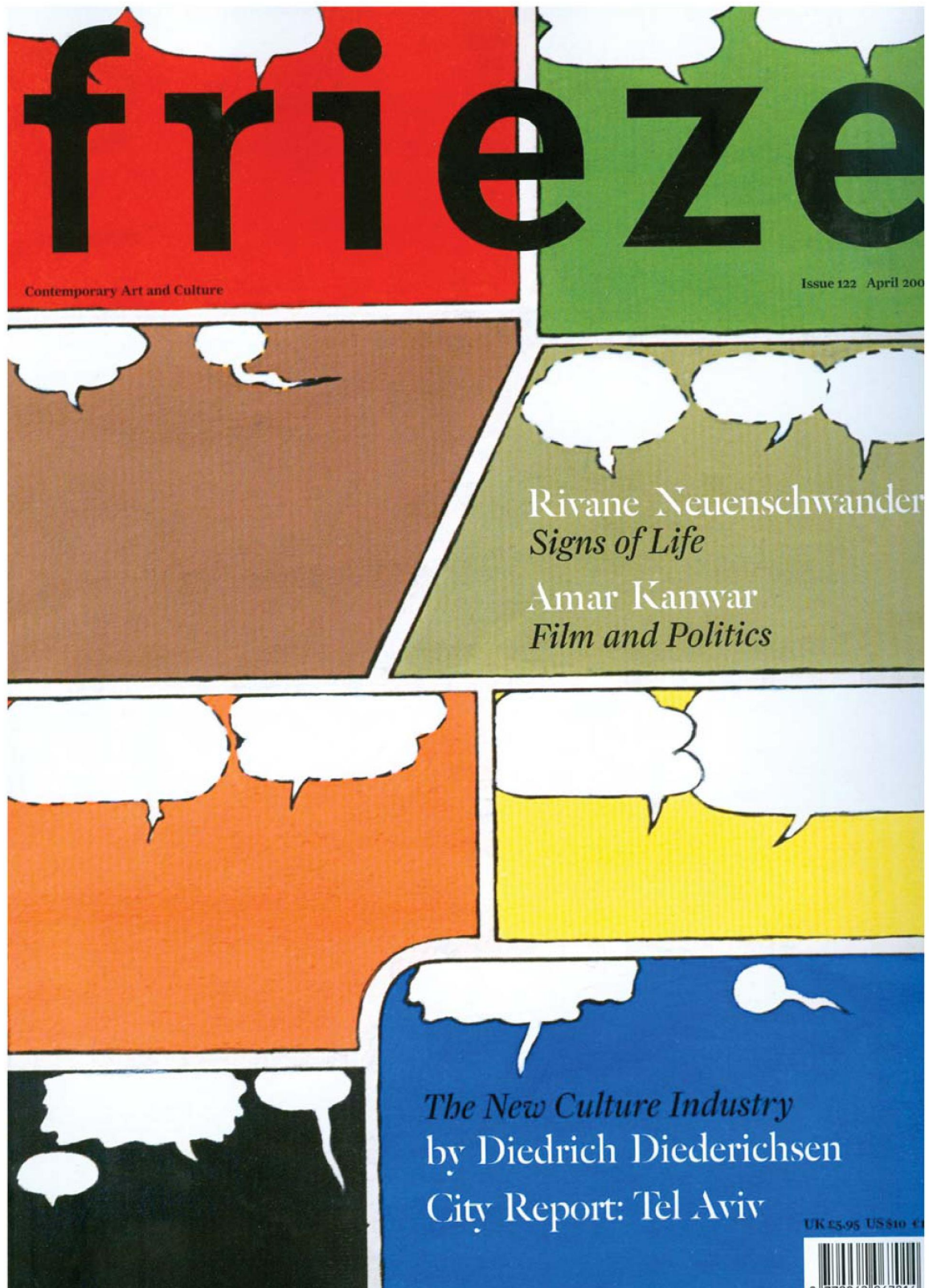


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# Signs of Life

Using materials as diverse as paper, food, fish and dust, Brazilian artist **Rivane Neuenschwander** creates works influenced by ideas of home, travel, translation and transience  
*by Sam Thorne*

Above:  
*Love Lettering*  
2002  
DVD still

Opposite, top:  
*One Thousand and One Possible Nights*  
2008  
Collage on paper  
Installation view at  
Turin Triennial

Opposite:  
*Inventário das pequenas mortes (sopro)*  
(Inventory of Small Deaths [Blow])  
2009  
DVD still

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Rivane Neuenschwander's means are sometimes living and often organic, small collections of items that are more like ingredients than self-sufficient materials. Shown internationally since the mid-1990s, the Brazilian artist's considerable body of work concerns the rhythms of domesticity by taking account of the familiar, modest elements of everyday life – dust and insects, soap and water – and, more recently, larger, objects such as stepladders and wooden tables. While she knows her work might suffer from slow disintegration or sudden destruction, such outcomes are not necessarily wished for. Instead these often delicate installations depend upon random encounters: wall-mounted sheets of adhesive paper that catch stray elbows; talcum powder that sticks to shoes; pepper-encrusted paintings that make you sneeze if examined too closely.

From rain-sodden maps and sugar-coated confetti carried by ants, to diligent sketches of the Eiffel Tower made by Brazilians who have never been to Paris, paper – and its remains – appears in a surprisingly various array of forms throughout Neuenschwander's work. Shown at the 2008 Turin Triennial, *One Thousand and One Possible Nights* (2008), for example, comprises countless holes punched from a Portuguese translation of *The Arabian Nights*, circular textual fragments that are scattered in white constellations and framed in black. This is the only example of Neuenschwander directly appropriating a literary text, and it is a far from straightforward source given that the origin of these orally transmitted tales is much contested. While Antoine Galland, a French antiquarian and linguist, translated the earliest known Syrian manuscript in 1704, the stories that remain most popular in the west (for example, 'Aladdin and the

Enchanted Lamp' and 'Ali-Baba and the 40 Thieves') are now thought to be Galland's own orientalist inventions<sup>1</sup> – translated versions of these even appear in some early Arabic editions. As *One Thousand and One Possible Nights*' strewn paper discs suggest, these authorless stories seem resistant to being set down as a definitive version or an immovable text. Instead, they have been added to or forgotten by successive readers, translators and raconteurs. Of course, for Scheherazade, the storyteller in the *The Arabian Nights*, tentative fictions are irrevocably involved with the possibility of an ending; her nightly task is to improvise a tale until dawn so as to avoid death at the hands of the murderous sultan. By cutting into this fraught text and scattering its tales afresh, *One Thousand and One Possible Nights* involves itself with two themes that Neuenschwander's work returns to: the deferral of likely conclusions and the insistence on days and nights as exceptional – and possibly final – events.

As well as emphasizing the shifting formations of folk narratives, *One Thousand and One Possible Nights* was a gnomonic calendar for the triennial's opening, the 89 collages representing every day (or night) of the exhibition's three-month life span. Neuenschwander's earlier work includes several iterations of the calendar as a regulating device that aims to coordinate continuous human lives with natural cycles. In *Deadline Calendar* (2002), for example, she compiled 12 months' worth of expiry dates – small reminders snipped from food packaging – and ordered them on adhesive sheets to create a year-long calendar. For some the work may hold echoes of Lygia Pape's *Livro do tempo* (Book of Time, 1960–61), in which a year was represented by 365 painted wood blocks, though Neuenschwander shows that it is not the days that 'pass' but innumerable organic things that die. The work characterizes the calendar structure as being defined by a daily exercise in small losses, not by an overarching continuity. Rather than shopping for



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**These works are often based upon linguistic, chronological and cartographic systems that yield unexpected beauty when introduced to the dirt and surprise of life.**

and compiling hundreds of points of expiry, individual endings were completely edited out of *Inventário das pequenas mortes (sopro)* (Inventory of Small Deaths [Blow], 2000), conjuring an uncanny point of suspension in which the subject – rather than continuously dying – appeared to live well past its allotted time. Made with sometime collaborator Cao Guimarães, the looped black and white film was edited so that a large, dramatically amorphous soap bubble appears to float across different landscapes without ever bursting. At turns glassily reflective and all but invisible against the clouds, the bubble – like so many of Neuenschwander's works – is sensuously bodily (the title nods to the French euphemism for an orgasm) while remaining poised a pinprick away from disappearance.

As with *One Thousand and One Possible Nights*, many of Neuenschwander's text-related works avoid mustering narratives any longer than a few words or letters at a time. In two of the artist's best-known films, both landscapes of sorts, textual fragments are randomly circulated and shuffled by small animals. The title of *Word / World* (2001)

bluntly articulates this encounter, and the six-minute Super-8 film follows an ant colony bearing each word on imprecisely hand-cut rectangles of white paper. In *Love Lettering* (2002), co-produced with Neuenschwander's brother Sérgio, fragments that seem to be taken from some kind of amorous (perhaps transcontinental) correspondence – 'you', 'Rio', 'I', 'my love' – are printed onto small banners attached to the tails of tropical fish with gentle tissue glue. While Neuenschwander often engages natural forces, her direction is subtle, always leaving a space for chance to silence intention. Over the course of the film, the fish shuffle the scattered units into conceivable sentences – 'no', 'news', 'my dear' – and transient propositions. The writer-receiver relationship is stalled at the point of continuous composition and mapped onto natural processes, although, while they appear to be randomly arranged, the fish are of course moving according to their own inscrutable patterns.

The diverse forms of Neuenschwander's work are usually based upon linguistic, chronological and cartographic systems – iconic codes such as the world map or classificatory

Above:  
Rivane Neuenschwander  
and Cao Guimarães  
*Quarta-Feira de Cinzas / Epilogue*  
(Ash Wednesday / Epilogue)  
2006  
DVD still

Opposite, top:  
*Eu desejo o seu desejo*  
(I Wish Your Wish)  
2003  
Mixed media  
Installation view

Opposite, middle:  
*Pangaea's Diaries*  
2008  
16mm film still

Opposite, below:  
*Sob Medida*  
(Custom Made)  
2002  
Adhesive vinyl  
Installation view, Museu  
de Arte da Pampulha,  
Belo Horizonte

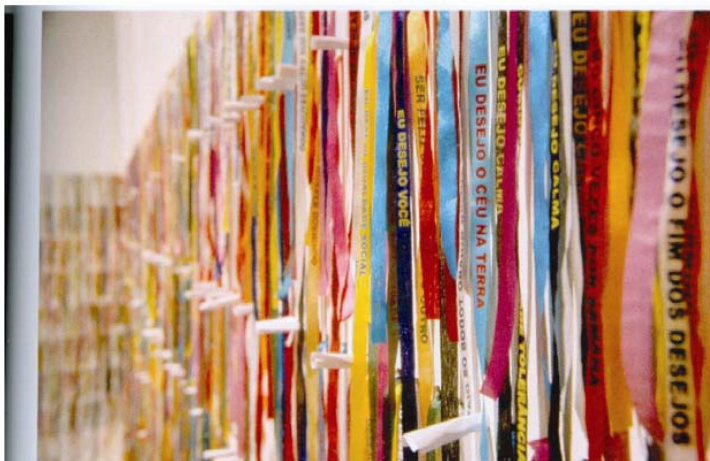
models like the alphabet – that yield unexpected beauty when introduced to the dirt and surprise of life. This strategy calls to mind a line that is stitched along the upper border of Alighiero e Boetti's tapestry *Mappa* (Map, 1972): 'mettere al mondo il mondo' (to bring the world into the world). Like Boetti, Neuenschwander returns to the standardized planimetric projection of the world, although rather than employing professional workers to chart shifting borders and governments, continental bodies are always represented by either paper or food. In *Contingent* (2008), a time-lapse film follows a single meal, as a world map – daubed in honey on blotting paper – is consumed by ants, the land masses becoming first emaciated then completely disconnected. Pitching a rational (and of course stubbornly Eurocentric) chart against an unpredictable system, Neuenschwander's dynamic territories refer back to when *terra incognita* spaces – visual representations of what is not known<sup>2</sup> – had yet to disappear from maps, when the distinction between pictorial and cartographic representation was less certain.

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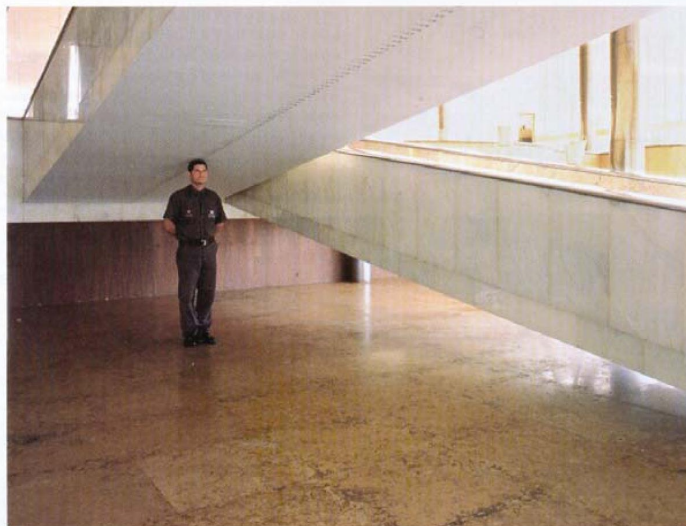
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For *Carta faminta* (Starving Letter, 2000), Neuenschwander placed partially covered sheets of rice paper in a box of hungry Swedish slugs for a period of a week; the nibbled remains resemble the jagged outlines of continents on a map. In Portuguese, 'carta' means a written letter as well as a cartographic chart, and these letter-sized sheets – a size that Neuenschwander often returns to – retain a double-sense of intimate correspondence and codified public information. Rather than achieving recognizable form through random reduction, *Pangaea's Diaries* (2008), shown at the 2008 Carnegie International, is a microcosmic account of massive shift: a stop-motion projection of ants shuffling a beef carpaccio around a white oval plate, glimpses of a world map occasionally caught amidst the flux. The vertiginous compression through which a 250 million-year-old supercontinent is collapsed into a two-minute projection is matched by the title, which refers to both the vast land mass that preceded the separation of the continents and the three-month period that the work's painstaking frame-by-frame production required. Time spent simply

living – or perhaps just eating carpaccio at a restaurant – is casually placed alongside the rhythms of vast geological processes, as though the significances of both weren't so far apart.

Much writing on Neuenschwander's work stresses a linear account of post-Tropicalia Brazilian art – running from Hélio Oiticica through to Cildo Meireles – at the expense of recognizing either a mutating scene of differentiated communities or an international influence. It is perhaps less important that Neuenschwander was born in Belo Horizonte, the same city as Lygia Clark, than the fact that she – along with Beatriz Milhazes, Ernesto Neto and Renata Lucas – belongs to the first wave of Brazilian artists who exhibited internationally at the same time they started to show in Brazil. Embedded in social habits and cultural representation, particular sense memories are an important element of Neuenschwander's work, from the black pepper-encrusted *Still-Life Calendar* (2002) to the spices ordered into 26 Agnes Martin-like grids in *Eatable Alphabet* (2001). But what happens when specific associations are lost and meanings don't migrate? As works circulate through biennials, related publications, private collections and online, they inevitably address different audiences and cities, calling into question not only art's intelligibility but also its sensory impact. The connection between language and eating in Neuenschwander's work has been well documented, but if her practice understands reading as a form of eating (and vice-versa),<sup>3</sup> it is less engaged with the familiar discourse of cannibalism in Brazilian modernism than with transactions between different grammars and culinary traditions. *Gastronomic Translations* (2003), for example, tests how much is lost in transit and what is gained. A scrawled shopping list written in English but found in Frankfurt was sent to two chefs in São Paulo, each of whom created two very different meals comprising different dishes and influences. (One crossed-out scribble on the list left a characteristic space for improvisation.) A list addressed to oneself is found in another country, turned into an order on

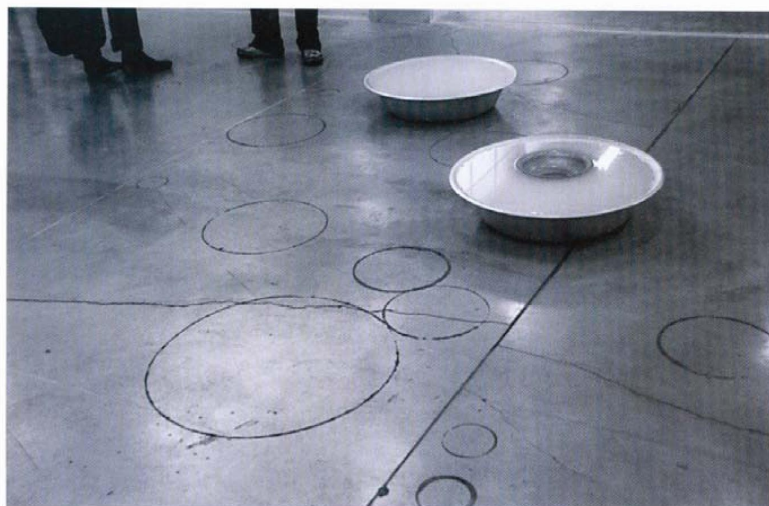


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a distant continent and eaten in a different language; first intentions are forgotten and an unexpected feast is the result.

In her essay 'Speech Acts' (2000), Lisette Lagnado describes Neuenschwander's work with a lovely phrase: 'slowness improvised'.<sup>4</sup> In musical terms, improvisation typically refers to a system in which the technical problems of composition are dealt with during the actual performance, but how can one improvise *slowness*, an attitude that doesn't bend to impatient expectation? While there is little music of the traditional kind in Neuenschwander's films – the closest is a samba rhythm assembled from dropped matchsticks in *Quarta-Feira de Cinzas / Epilogue* (Ash Wednesday / Epilogue, 2006), recorded by occasional collaborators Brazilian musicians, O Grivo – there are plenty of small sounds in her installations. Many of these water-based works function like simple chronometers, beating out time in small droplets that land in startlingly percussive aluminium basins (a recurrent formal element that, in a characteristic distillation of scale, are often titled 'continents'). *Chove*

### Many of the water-based works function like simple chronometers, beating out time in droplets that land in startlingly percussive aluminium basins.

*Chuva* (Rain Rains, 2002), shown at the Museu de Arte da Pampulha in Belo Horizonte, comprised 25 aluminium buckets strung above head-height and each pierced with a small hole at its base so that water dripped from one level to another over a four-hour period. Needing regular attention, like an old clock, this cycle in turn regulated the movement of the museum assistant charged with keeping *Chove Chuva* alive, with keeping the rain raining. As well as requiring the care of the sheltering structure of the institution, Neuenschwander charges viewers with a certain responsibility to the work and to each other. Visitors were welcome to take what they wanted from *Eu desejo o seu desejo* (I Wish Your Wish, 2003) which comprised hundreds of coloured ribbons printed with dozens of people's wishes, inserted into rows of holes drilled into several walls. As with a work such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres' 'Untitled' (Placebo – Landscape – for Roni) (1993), there is a possibility that the viewer will take everything that is offered; as with every freedom, there is also a corresponding responsibility.

Dripping water became a tropical storm in *Suspension Point*, Neuenschwander's 2008 installation at South London Gallery, for which the Victorian exhibition hall's false ceiling was removed and an elevated wooden platform was built so as to divide it horizontally into two opposing environments. Much bigger than her usual interventions, the platform was supported by heavy wooden struts while a recording of torrential rain (made with O Grivo) created a positively dank-feeling lower level. In the light-suffused upstairs section the storm's source was revealed as being a single drip falling into a mic'ed-up aluminium basin (*Lá fora está chovendo*, It's Raining Out There, 2008).

Dividing this upper level into two again was a horizontal line of drilled holes circling the space, the sawdust from which was economically sculpted into a miniature mountain range. Placed close by an aluminium basin inlaid into the wooden floor, the pared back arrangement conjured a dramatic ankle-height landscape.

The title of the South London Gallery exhibition recalled her 1997 work *Suspended Landscape*, which was shown at Stephen Friedman Gallery while Neuenschwander was still completing her MFA at London's Royal College. Dozens of hollowed-out garlic husks were hung by thread from the ceiling, each dangling approximately one centimetre from the black floor. The work's material slightness asked for careful movement, and the husks were only revealed as husks when a viewer's passing caused them to sway. In *Untitled*, at the same gallery two years later, Neuenschwander brushed talcum powder into the cracks of the black parquet floor to trace out a grid of intersecting rectangles, a hitherto overlooked pattern. *Untitled* took place below the surface of the ground while *Suspended Landscape* hovered tentatively above it, considering the space either side of the ground on a miniature level without ever interfering with the surface.

It feels odd to refer to Neuenschwander's work as site-specific (though in a strict sense it often is); rather, it should be said that she charts the topography of the exhibition space's physical quirks. Produced for the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, *Ici là-bas aqui acolá* (Here Over There Here Over There, 2002) comprised, in part, a temporary metal staircase that led up to a solitary view of the Eiffel Tower across the Seine – Neuenschwander had noticed that there was a single unfrosted pane in the institution's high row of windows. *Sob Medida* (Custom Made, 2002) put the neglected spaces of the Oscar Niemeyer-designed Museu de Arte da Pampulha to practical use, drawing a height measure below the access ramps that lead to the mezzanine so that one's head level was placed against the underside of the ramp – human scale was tested against that of the museum and shown to be its measure. All of these works insist on the viewer's position and capabilities within the institution, though *Ponto de Vista* (Point of View, 2002), shown at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, was most prescriptive in the perspective it required. A liquid plastic cut-out silhouette of the adjacent cathedral was stuck to a window in the gallery to give the effect of the other building having disappeared – though only from a certain point within the institution. Such works literalize the truism that the museum gives the visitor the chance to develop a new viewpoint onto the world beyond, while teasing that this view may be only partial.

The implication of imprecise territorial boundaries – between the home and institution, rational classifications and chaotic natural forces – governs much of Neuenschwander's approach to the exhibition space. The punning English translation of *O Trabalho dos dias* (Days' Work, 1998), for example, posited a link between homely activity and artistic practice, as Neuenschwander gathered the dust and small food scraps from her London residence onto squares of adhesive tape, using them to plaster the walls



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and floors of two white cubicles at the 24th São Paulo Biennial. (Note that the English translation is 'Days' Work' rather than 'Day's Work'; time itself is getting its hands dirty here, its toll on the body and the home being measured via the sum total of dust.) Over the course of the exhibition, the traces of the artist's home gradually blended with the tiny remnants of the biennial crowds. In many of Neuenschwander's works the gallery retains a minute record of every visit, each viewer making the tiniest of additions or subtractions. The floor-piece *Walking in Circles* (2000), for instance, comprising thin rings of stamped adhesive that darken with the footsteps of each new visitor, was brought into visibility over the course of the show. Neuenschwander orders daily occurrences into small signs of life, bringing carefully assembled environments into being by engaging small communities of helpers, participants and players. If endings are emphasized, it is only to make apparent the lives contained within the slow business of disappearance.

Sam Thorne is editor of [frieze.com](http://frieze.com).

- 1 Marina Warner, 'Travelling Text', *London Review of Books*, vol. 30 no. 24, 18 December 2008, p.15
- 2 Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2006, p.163
- 3 Daniel Birmbaum, 'Feast for the Eyes', *Artforum*, May 2003 pp. 142-46
- 4 Lisette Lagnado, 'Speech Acts', *Rivane Neuenschwander*, London, Sao Paulo, Dublin, 2000 p.52

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**Above:**  
*Choe Cbucá*  
(Rain Rains)  
2002  
Aluminium, steel thread,  
ladder and water  
Installation view, Museu  
de Arte da Pampulha,  
Belo Horizonte

**Right:**  
*Ici là-bas aqui acolá*  
(Here Over There Here  
Over There)  
2002  
Drawings on paper, steel  
staircase, window  
Installation view

**Opposite, top:**  
*Walking in Circles /*  
*Continent*  
2000  
Glue, dirt, aluminium,  
water and coconut soap  
Dimensions variable

**Opposite, bottom:**  
*Suspension Point*  
2006  
Mixed media  
Installation views,  
South London Gallery

