

“The poetry of the immaterial: Edith Kollath’s aerial imagination”

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Images of aerial imagination either evaporate or crystallize. We must seize them between the two poles of this constantly active ambivalence.

Gaston Bachelard<sup>1</sup>

The meandering path of a gust of air: forming rings of smoke and clouds of vapour, caressing the folds of a fabric, sliding onto sheets of paper, filling bodies with the vital force of breath and leaving them to explore other bodies and environments.

It is a poem of open possibilities, energy and ephemerality, as the one that Edith Kollath brings to life in her work.

Fascinated by the invisible and the immaterial, the artist incorporates them as structural elements of her delicate objects and installations. Her creations come to life through subtle movements and sounds, breathing in space. It is an unconstrained breath from the artwork to the people that approach it, a gentle blow towards a calm, meditative state.

Kollath has a wide fan of visual expression –from video to sculpture and installation, from abstract forms to concrete objects and human figures- always maintaining their minimalist elegance and their calm eloquence.

It’s the kind of elements that shape *BW1* (2006); in this work, the video frame offers the view of a bathtub filled with water, almost still, apart from the slightly rippling surface. As the water drains out, it uncovers a female torso that moves as she breathes. The dramatic light pointing to the lower part of her body offers a manesque revelation of

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<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard. *Air and Dreams, An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, Dallas: The Dallas Institute, 1988 (1943), p.13.

the “origin of the world”; however, the structural and conceptual centre of the composition is her gently oscillating navel, highlighting thus respiration as the most important act in the video.

Breath as a tool of harmony and a means of communication: this notion pervades in the work *In Between* (2007), a video showing a man and a woman exchanging breaths. Respiration is represented by a gust of smoke, that moves rhythmically from one mouth to another, bringing them to a state of equilibrium and happiness, as their faces reveal. To feel someone’s breath is a sign of intimacy, experienced only among people that are close to each other. However, to a certain extent, we all exchange breathing air with each other and the environment, as Luce Irigaray observes: “[breathing] signifies a sharing with the world that surrounds me and with the community that inhabits it”.<sup>2</sup>

As we move past the screen, into the space of an exhibition, the same gust of air reaches the audience. In the installation *Again, Again* (2009) a cloud of vapour becomes visible against a black background, before it disperses in the exhibition space, merging with the breaths of the visitors and becoming thus a collective visual and bodily experience. At the same time, the rings of vapour change formations and stimulate the imagination; it is a fragile, ephemeral construction that depends on chance and natural phenomena.

Chance becomes a decisive factor in *Nothing will ever be the same again* (2009). In this installation a transparent cloth is set in motion, getting lifted up in the air and then falling over and over again by means of an automatic mechanism. The repetitive, rhythmic action gives a different visual result every time. Therefore the cloth becomes a sculpture that changes and moves incessantly, taking random shapes by air and gravity. As the cloth falls and rises, the air sneaks into its folds, showing its invisible body –with an almost human-like corporeity. The cloth acquires thus a life of its own, like a dancer that leaps into the void, making a minimal impact against the hard surface of the floor. During the next fall the cloth will ‘improvise’ a new choreography, completing a different orbit through the air and landing in a different spot. Within this movement, “every breath of air is brought to life. It is a scrap of air’s flesh that had at one time been alive, an aerial fabric that will clothe a soul”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Irigaray, Luce. “From *The Forgetting of Air to To Be two*”, in: Nancy Holland; Patricia Huntington. *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, p.309.

<sup>3</sup> Bachelard 1988, p.230.

Smoother in motion and equally lyrical in tone, *Disport* (2009) invites the viewers in a pentagonal cell made of textiles that sway inwards and outwards, as the lights change from bright to dimmer. In this installation, the artist delimits a space that is open to expansion and in constant exchange with its surroundings, like a human body that breathes and moves into the open. The artwork invites the viewers to connect to their corporeity, to reach a state of enhanced awareness of one's Self and surroundings, where the perception of the artwork passes through the entire body, and not simply the eyes and the mind.

It is a balance between the visual and the corporeal. Often, these two coexist in harmony with words.

*Thinking I'd last forever* (2008) is built upon this fragile balance. The artwork consists of antique editions of classical books, that are allowed to "breathe" through the installation of microprocessors in their interior; hence, apart from an individual appearance and content, each book is granted with its individual breathing rhythm, raising slowly its cover and opening the pages as if someone was browsing through them. At a time when printed books have begun to become obsolete, Edith Kollath manages to give a new life to old editions, by combining the classical format of the book with contemporary technology. These books, after having "absorbed" the breaths of the numerous readers that have browsed through them throughout their existence, now return those breaths to the visitors of the installation; with their gentle movement, they tempt a new generation of readers to discover the knowledge and imagination that is hidden within those pages, which is still relevant and open to discussion, despite the fact that it took its final form a long time ago.

And what happens before this "final form"? How about the creative process and all the prior shapes that an idea takes before becoming final? Crumpled papers on the floor, taking random morphs by the hand that has discarded them, meant to be eventually thrown away. Not in *Sigh* (2011), an installation where crumpled black papers become plasticised into permanent sculptures, elevated to the status of art. As their elegant shape is projected against the white exhibition space, the work becomes a collaborative action between a spontaneous gesture and a conscious preservation.

*If it were a piece of paper* (2011) is shaped by the same forces; a crumpled silk paper floats in space above a mirror surface, like a cloud reflecting itself on water. The defiance of the laws of physics stimulates a feeling of curiosity and playfulness to the visitors, who are challenged to see if they can blow it away. At the same time, this denial of gravity,

the constant postponement of a pending fall, creates a field of energy between the paper and its reflection.

A conservation of energy, a state of inertia and a rhythmic motion: *Pendulum Lucidum* (2011) is a reconstruction of Newton's cradle with light bulbs, shaped by multiple forces. There are two different oscillations taking place in the pendulum, the gentle change from brightness to darkness, as the bulbs light up and down slowly, and the swaying of the bulbs, that needs to be set in motion by an exterior agent. Thus, the artwork becomes the meeting point between an interior rhythm and an interaction with the environment.

Similarly, *Trying to expand the potential of love I can give* (2011) is built on this meeting point, where fleeting reflections, waves of light and an engulfing darkness interact. In this installation, a set of semi-transparent mirrors are propped on a piece of wood, sheltering a light bulb that stands behind them. As the light becomes dimmer and brighter, it creates multiple reflections between the mirrors; at the same time, the somehow diffracted reflection of the observer disappears or becomes clearer, as the intensity of light fades in and out. It is a reflection that dissolves to reveal what lays behind, just like visual appearances often hide a psychological depth that needs to be discovered behind the face. This way, the mirrors become the limit where the exhibition space blends with the infinite, and appearances disintegrate to reveal the invisible.

In a way, Edith Kollath appears to be giving birth to forms that acquire a life of their own, growing into space; this is seen in *Ligeia* (2010), a fragile construction of wire and ribbon, that appears to be floating into its surroundings like a water creature, and her *Tape* series (2010-11), where the transparent tape lines seem to be dancing in the dark background, against some unfelt undercurrent that scatters them and puts them again in order. Her abstract *Lines and Space* (2009) drawings display the same desire to move, as they crawl and spread in the deep space of the black paper. In *Untitled (Tape I and Tape II)* (2011) the tape lines are put in order, one behind the other, to hold the words of a poem; the words of the poem seem to be breathed out randomly, yet through repetition and difference they are weaved into a visual and literary meaningful structure, that provides insight on the work of Kollath, as a connective thread that brings together gusts of air, changes of matter and oscillations of light and darkness. In fact, the artist's consistency in using fine winding lines, transparencies and dark spaces creates a unity within the corpus of her work, despite the diversity of media that she employs.

Edith Kollath's "aerial imagination" creates ethereal visions that are rooted into immateriality and ephemerality and flow outwards to reach the viewers' bodies. It is a

work meant to be lived with all the senses, which stays in memory, despite its transience. As the visitors are being introduced into a world of calm movements and repetitive sounds, rhythmic breaths and soft lights, they discover an unknown path towards intellectual nourishment, collective communication and interior balance.

Thus, Edith Kollath's art finds the way to extend beyond the walls of the exhibition space: it becomes a lasting experience, one that you will carry with you for a long time.

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