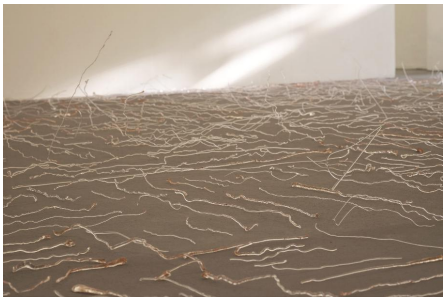
Dane Mitchell: An Aesthetic Contagion

by Marie de Brugerolle

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Dane Mitchell, *Aeromancy (Sketches of Meteorological Phenomena)*, 2014-2017. Sand, glass. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Dane Mitchell.



Dane Mitchell, *Imponderable, Antimatter*, 2018. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Dane Mitchell.



Dane Mitchell, *OTIUM #3* exhibition view, 2018. Photo: Blaise Adilon.



Dane Mitchell, *OTIUM #3* exhibition view, 2018. Photo: Blaise Adilon.



Dane Mitchell, *Weight of the World (North)*, 2015. Courtesy Beat Raeber, Galerie, Zurich. Photo: Blaise Adilon.

Visiting OTIUM #3 at the Institut d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne near Lyon, was an opportunity to discover the work of Dane Mitchell in France. The invitation to the artist was made by Nathalie Ergino, Director of the IAC and curator of the exhibition. In the context of this group show, three artists: Jean-Marie Perdix, Linda Sanchez and Dane Mitchell were invited to produce and exhibit works related to the dimensions of time and space, as part of an ongoing prospective series of exhibitions linked to *métaphysiq ues cosmomorphes*. The term, taken from Pierre Montebello's philosophical research, is associated with the Speculative Realism way of thinking. The philosopher questions "*what constitutes the*

aesthetic, political and ontological relations that allow us to reflect upon the relation of people to other beings?"[01]

The materials and processes employed by the three artists of the exhibition all deal with the transformation of substances derived from the remains of man's industrial activities. Jean-Marie Perdrix's totemic sculptures (*Pneumatocéphales*, 2004), or his school tables produced from recycled plastic by local bronze artisans in Burkina Faso (*Untitled*, 2018), as well as his free-standing sculptures made by casting smelted iron to replace and take the form of neon gas (*Untitled (URL)*, 2002), address the manufacturing process from factory to the artisan's workshop. Linda Sanchez's works deal with the motility of materials and emerge as a time-based choreography of phenomenons such as gravity. The installation *La détente II* (2018) consists of mud poured onto a large plastic surface, then vertically hung. While drying, the clay fractures and falls into pieces. From liquid to dust, the visitor bears witness to an ongoing process as in *11752 mètres et des poussières…*, 2014, a film sequence which follows a drop of water blown by the wind on a glass surface. If the phenomenology of the elements is a link between these works, each one is also anchored in its own context of modified artistic process: casting, filming and recording, splitting, reusing and expanding the concept of sculpture to polyphormic symbolisms (as in Jean-Marie Perdix's exploration of totems and remains from pre-and post-industrial societies, from Georgia to Mexico and Burkina Faso; or cross-pollinisation of genres like Sanchez' performing in a film or including the visitor as a moving element of a sculptural choreography.)



Linda Sanchez, *L'autre*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: JC Lett.



Jean-Marie Perdrix, *Sans titre (détail)*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.



Jean-Marie Perdrix, *Sans titre*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Blaise Adilon.



Linda Sanchez, *OTIUM #3* exhibition view, 2018. Photo: Blaise Adilon.



Jean-Marie Perdrix, *Pneumatocéphales (détails)*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Blaise Adilon.

It's in this context that I will discuss Dane Mitchell's work.

The works of the three artists are arranged in a clockwise direction throughout the Institut, with three rooms allocated to each artist. Entering the exhibition from the secondary entrance via the garden meant that I saw the work of Dane Mitchell first, and went anti-clockwise through the show, encountering the twin rooms in which Mitchell's *Aeromancy (Sketches of Meteorological Phenomenon)* 2014-2017 are installed. On the dark concrete floor, the artist has painted a matte rectangle, contrasting with the otherwise reflective surface, on which a multitude of small glass tubes are arranged, some of which have traces of sand still visible. The near three thousand elements, made with glass blowers for the installation, look like translucent worms or coral fragments,

organized in linear and square formations. They mimic 'petrified lightning', or fulgurites, a natural phenomenon resulting from the impact of lightning striking the ground, whereby sediments of earth and silicate melt and are vitrified as a result of the high heat.

The work recalls Robert Smithson's use of sand and glass, two forms of silicate: one stable (sand) and one in (very slow) motion (glass). Our aesthetic memory may also turn to Walter De Maria's land art installation of 400 steel poles in a grid, on a surface of one kilometre square of remote New Mexico desert (*Lightning Field*, 1977). Here, in Lyon, the effect is more of an instantaneous cast of time, fixed in a sculptural gesture, as if something from the sky, even above our stratosphere and beyond our visual perception, has fallen. The petrified aspect of these objects brings to mind the process of fossilisation, as if a sudden glaciation had frozen these little worms of light in instant poses. The grey of the floor paint, a shade often used in museology to indicate documentary objects, gives it a science laboratory quality. There is a decoy effect revealed when seeing the two rooms from another angle, like a double vision or *déj*à-*vu*.

As I passed the threshold into the next room, I saw a strange object fixed on the wall on my left. Two thin lines of brass held together by wooden clamps stand out from the white surface. In between the metal strips, a paper perfume tester sticks out horizontally. I approached to look closer and perceive the soaked surface which smells slightly like a swimming pool. In a similar way to olfactory sensations, connecting two art experiences can reactivate a deep memory, and in an involuntary act, I think about Marcel Duchamp's *Three Stoppages Etalons*, 1913; made of three pieces of string representing the standard meter unit. By dropping them to the ground randomly, Duchamp created new possible forms to the standard meter unit, thus eroding the norms (and attacking conventions, rules, institutions) in a modern sense.



Dane Mitchell, *OTIUM #3* exhibition view, 2018. Photo: Blaise Adilon.



Dane Mitchell, *Imponderable, Antimatter*, 2018. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Marie de Brugerolle.

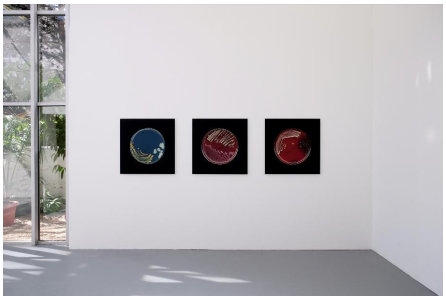
It occurs to me that the intrinsic qualities of these materials - making up the unusual device titled *Clairalience (Three Ozone Notes)* 2015 - are employed in a strange way here. Usually perfume is a pleasant smell, which can't exactly be said of bleach; and clamps are metal tools used to hold together pieces of wood. Dane Mitchell deflects our visual habits and uses contagious strategies to create a synesthetic experience. The paper tester in *Clairalience* reproduces the aroma of ozone utilising techniques of the perfume industry. Ozone is a gas which becomes liquid or solid at very low temperatures. It is the main component of the stratosphere which protects us from the sun's ultraviolet rays. According to its Greek etymology, 'ozo' means 'to exhale an odor'. Composed of three atoms, it becomes blue when liquified and red when solidified.

The recurring sense of falseness reappears when looking at the three photographic works hung on the opposite wall. Three printed images (archival inkjet print on dibond) make up the ensemble of the *Dust Archives* series. From the *Dust Archive (MoMA)*, 2007-2018, From the *Dust Archive (AGNSW)*, 2003-2018 and *Dust Archive (Stedelijk Museum)*, 2007-2018, are close ups of Petri dishes containing bacteria cultured from dust collected from various museums, that seem to contain live elements which could grow. The series' blue, red, and white backgrounds create an abstract form of painting. Again, I'm reminded of Duchamp, specifically the

photograph taken of his work by Man Ray titled *Elevage de poussière*, 1920. This close-up shot of Duchamp's *Grand Verre*, 1915, looks like an aerial photograph of an archeological site. Growing matter that the eye can't see, magnifying dirt and showing that there is life in apparently dead matter (dust/bacterias), are processes that make us think about our ways of perceiving the world. Doubt becomes a criteria to evaluate our environment, through a scientific approach: what we see may be different than what we think.



Dane Mitchell, OTIUM #3 exhibition view, 2018. Photo: Blaise Adilon.



Dane Mitchell, *From the Dust Archive (MoMA)*, 2007-2018; Mitchell, *From the Dust Archive (AGNSW)*, 2003-2018; *Dust Archive (Stedelijk Museum)*, 2007-2018. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Dane Mitchell.



Dane Mitchell, *Imponderable, Antimatter*, 2018. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Marie de Brugerolle.



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In the South Hall of the IAC, a long space that leads to the auditorium which usually marks the end of the show, there is a glass wall behind which stands a closed-off garden. A series of plastic containers installed in the middle of the room draws a barrier in front of the large windows, their ghostly white forms reflected in the glass. Inaccessible to the public, it is the first time that an artist has used the outdoor patio to install a work. Dane Mitchell's *Imponderable, Antimatter*, 2018, gives a clue and offers a

field of experience to what looks like an abandoned greenhouse. New plants added for the exhibition complement the greenish quality of the small patio. The potted palm trees and the standard corporate 'green' aesthetic, look as bizarre as the metal steam box placed on the ground. Its shape and dimensions are closer to a car battery than of a domestic air-conditioning unit. In this scorching summer, it could be interpreted as a kind of machine that cools the air down. A tube connects this rectangular object to an open jerry can filled with Homeopathic Positronium 200C, as indicated by the label. This is the common name of 'anti-matter', given to this product in 1998, based on research made in the early 20th century and later in the 1950's. The composition of anti-matter includes one atom of hydrogen, itself made up of one electron and its anti-particule (called a positron). This 'exotic' atom is called an 'onium' (which bears an uncanny connection to the exhibition series title 'otium'). The product of this collision of one particle and its contrary, moving at such a speed that it would be too fast to be seen or even imagined by us, is that this 'anti-matter' becomes somehow 'trapped' in matter. This creates gamma rays and neutrinos, elements that cannot be seen and which we can only *gue ss* the existence of because they liberate energy. Studied by the CERN, in Geneva, their weight is so low that their mass is infinitesimal and is thus barely affected by gravity.

There is a certain irony in this very high-level physics reference, in that Mitchell's installation is 'real' but could be totally fake, as no one will verify its authenticity. Again, this plays with our aesthetic memory of *Le Grand Verre*, thinking about the mechanism at stake in the work which also drives the world: erotism. On the upper panel of *Le Grand Verre*, in the domain of the "bride", there is an element made of two balls linked by a diagonal line. A spiral follows the trajectory of this metal band. It imitates exactly the sketch of the movement of atoms. This component is named *Les soigneurs de gravité* which means: the healers or tenders of gravity. Indeed, all of Duchamp's work can be read as keeping the world in movement; movement which is equivalent to life as it activates all particles. His work is an allegory to the erotism of life, the "*infra mince*" defined by him as the rustling of a woman's petticoat frills when she walks. In the context of the show, Mitchell's work can be read as a critique of the modernist architecture of glass, which divides

the world into slices of flat translucent panels, or packages an artificial garden between two pathetic walls, and which is a poor representation of Duchamp's continuous movement.

Just as Duchamp opened a contemporary way of looking at life, at a moment when most of the world didn't want to see (the great slaughter of 1917), we can wonder how Dane Mitchell's work reflects today's tendency to think about 'hyperobjects', defined by Tim Morton as a collections of ideas related to global warming.[02]

The physicist Stephen W Hawking noted: "*We now know that every particle has an antiparticle, with which it can annihilate. There could be whole antiworlds and antipeople made out of antiparticles. However, if you meet your antiself, don't shake hands! You would both vanish in a great flash of light.*"[03]



Dane Mitchell, *Clairalience (Three Ozone Notes)*, 2015. Perfume, paper, brass, 50 x 20 x 130 cm. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Dane Mitchell.



Dane Mitchell, *Weight of the World (North)*, 2015. Courtesy Beat Raeber, Galerie, Zurich. Photo: Blaise Adilon.



Dane Mitchell, *Weight of the World (North)*, 2015. Courtesy Beat Raeber, Galerie, Zurich. Photo: Dane Mitchell.

This is not a metaphor for anything else but a place divided in two parts - inside and outside - in the same way that the rooms of *Aero mancy* seem to be duplicates. The work is not metaphorical, nothing is 'like' or 'as' something else, but instead is a real attempt to fill an open space, a portion of nature, with its possible double.

In Europe, and in the West in general, the concept of gardens and most of their basic structures, are based on an ancient book from the 15th century. *Hypnerautomachia Poliphili*, or the *Dream of Poliphilus* inspired many modern artists, such as Duchamp, Roussel, Mallarmé, but also Donald Judd. What would the anti-West garden be? A desert, a polluted sea full of plastic islands? What would our antipeople be? Where? Somewhere, beyond the sea, above the skies

Maybe the first room of Mitchell's work, which for me was the last, with its unique work, *Weight of the World (North)*, 2015, could provide an answer : our antipeople are those walking on their heads, in the Southern hemisphere...It looks like an old instrument, blue, rusty and upside down, standing alone in the centre of the room. The mass being weighed by the scales is everything which is under my feet, maybe up to the centre of the world, maybe to New Zealand, where Dane Mitchell is from and where people walk upside down? Of course, I think of Piero Manzoni's *Base of the World, Tribute to Galileo*, 1961 which turned the entire world into a sculpture. Maybe the object of this century could be the scales?

As we know since Lucretius, the world is constantly falling, but luckily atoms and things don't fall 'straight', so they are able to meet and create stuff, like matter. This sideway step is called the Clinamen, and it is thanks to its nonlinear trajectory that the world happened. Like the fragments of dust spread after the Big Bang, 13, 7 billions years ago, we humans are beings in motion, passing from one state to another: fusion, evaporation, sublimation.

By contagion of analogy, Dane Mitchell's objects are decoys because they mimic the things in nature that themselves imitate nature, such as camouflage. This is also the case in another of Mitchell's works, *Stealth Transmission Tower 1*, 2017, which is not in this show but is a precursor to his project for the New Zealand pavilion at the next Venice Biennial in 2019. The work references the industrially manufactured metal pine trees used to camouflage mobile phone transmitting antennas, similar to our fake chimneys on French rooftops. While we are aware of the high level of danger

of these things, like exposing people to cancer, it is short-term financial viability that prevails.

Dane Mitchell's works are unstable forms that work with the potential of porous edges; between inside and outside, artefacts and found objects; driving us to change our ways of perceiving. *The Homeopathic Positronium* spread in the atmosphere, the modified weather, the Ozone's perfume invading our nasal memory, the dirty dust from museums or the fake knots of instantaneous lightning, look like readymades, serial minimal installations or post-Arte Povera sculptures. Decoys or props, they are never one thing for one concept, but play with the idea of falseness and polymorphism. They are clues which indicate other possible states and dimensions, beyond our human perception. The work presented investigates different systems of measure and of belief, and the corruption of their margins. Gravity is turned upside down and each work seems to have a flipside or act as an instrument to put us in a state of doubt, asking: "Did I see an artwork?"

Walking anti-clockwise to the entry of the show, I wonder, while taking a last glance over my shoulder, what would the flavour of an artwork be, today?

Footnotes

01. "En quoi consistent les rapports esthétiques, politiques, ontologiques qui nous permettent de penser la relation de l'homme aux autres êtres ?" Pierre Montebello is Professor of philosophy at the University of Toulouse, Le Mirrail. His book *Métaphysiques cosmomorphes - La fin du monde humain*, published in by Les presses du réel, Dijon, France, 2015, can be related to the works of Bruno Latour, Quentin Meillasoux, Isabelle Stengers...amongst others from the Speculative Realism.

02. Tim Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 2013.

03. Stephen W Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 1988.



Dane Mitchell's practice is concerned with the physical properties of the intangible and visible manifestations of other dimensions. His work teases out the potential for objects and ideas to appear and disappear. His practice evokes a connection between the sensual and the conscious. It speculates on what is material and explores systems of knowledge or belief and people's experiences of them.

Dane's exhibition history dates back to 1999; since 2008 alone he has held 30 solo exhibitions and in the same period participated in more than 50 group exhibitions. He has presented solo exhibitions both nationally and internationally in Germany, France, Brazil, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Australia, United States and New Zealand. He has also participated in a number of biennales, including Biennale of Sydney 2016, Australia; Gwangju Biennale 2012, South Korea; Liverpool Biennial 2012, United Kingdom; Singapore Biennale 2011; Ljubljana Biennale 2011, Slovenia; Busan Biennale 2010, South Korea and the Tarrawara Biennial 2008, Australia.



Marie de Brugerolle is an art historian, critic and curator (Hors Limites, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Bruce Nauman, Moma, New York, and Gravity, Allen Ruppersberg, Magasin, Grenoble, Guy de Cointet, Mamco, Geneva and Tate Modern, London, John Baldessari, Larry Bell, Carré d'art, Nîmes, Not to Play with Dead Things, Villa Arson, Nice, Yvonne De Carlo, MUSAC, León, etc.). Her texts have been published in numerous catalogues and magazines (*Art Press*, *Semaines*, *20/27*, *Artforum*...). She is a professor at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, France.

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