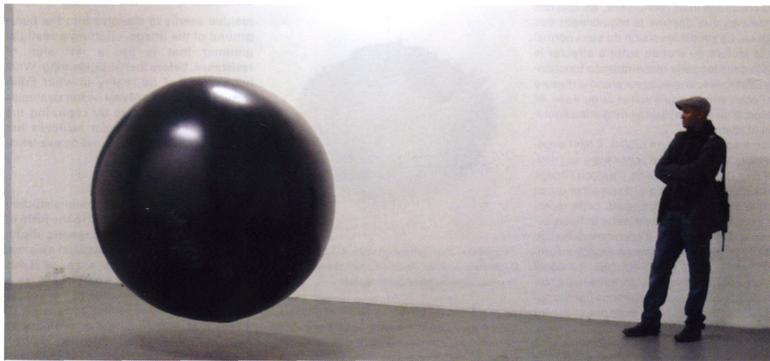


art press

Edith Dekyndt: Modest Magic Forces

By C. Penwarden (January 2010)



"Ground Control". 2008. Objet. Diamètre : 150 cm. Polypropylène, hélium, air. (Coll. Frac Lorraine et MoMA, New York)
Polypropylene, helium, air

For some twenty years now Edith Dekyndt has founded her artistic practice on the observation of measurable physical phenomena that are the result of imperceptible physical forces. Her work, which includes video installations, video and slide projections, series of photographs, drawings, sound pieces, and objects, plays on the notion of the uncanny, and constructs a world where the most nondescript everydayness may suddenly seem enchanted. A few months after *Agnosia*, her exhibition at Witte de With in Rotterdam, she will be in Belgium through January 24, where her *Ondes de Love* are at the MAC's - Grand Hornu.

Using modest, sometimes domestic materials and lo-tech devices, Edith Dekyndt is elaborating a concise visual language with which she creates images of great formal rigor that attest a subtle economy in the use of chiaroscuro and geometrical figures. She experiments with simple physical processes, of the kind that, as she puts it, are explained by "science in schools"; the kind that make things move and metamorphose. These are what she composes with. Her work shows us forms affected by their environment, by the unstable conjunction of multiple parameters, reflecting a consciously accepted element of indeterminacy. *A Is Hotter Than B* (2005), for example, is a video in which, against a white ground, ramifying volutes of black form endless variations. In a fish tank, a block of frozen black ink that is sensitive to changes in the temperature of the water is moved by discreet fingers, so that it slowly dissolves and draws at the same time. The artist may determine the parameters of the experiment, but the shifting arabesques "express themselves" without any direct intervention on her part, independently of her preferences.

Between control and letting go, each proposition in Edith Dekyndt's protean output is like a kind of filter which adopts the rigor of the Minimalist aesthetic the better to reveal antiform—that which, according to Robert Morris, cannot be anticipated and exceeds any preconceived order. Emphasizing the process of transformation more than finished form, the artist's work in a sense expresses what Morris described as the work's "refusal to continue aestheticizing form by dealing with it as a prescribed end." The artist's representations are, as she says, "neither spectacular nor consumable." Each one is, however, a structure, insofar as, to quote John Cage, "Structure without life is dead. But Life without structure is invisible."

The video *To Peel a Ball* (1998-2007) follows a minor "drama," the idea being to perform the eponymous action in order to end up with a surface that is as diaphanous as possible. A bit like a bomb, the object could explode at any moment; the performance would thus be determined by the object's reaction as well as the artist's action. A simple domestic action is enough to shift this banally everyday object from the category of inert things to that of living beings. The opalescent membrane, taken to the extreme limit of its fragility, constitutes the ultimate interface between being and non-being.

In some of the works, this exploration of extreme limits translates into the play of white on white. A white sphere as smooth and silky as a billiard ball slides slowly and silently over a surface that is just as white (*Slow Object 05*, 2004). It is in fact a bubble of air moving freely in milk, its perfect form standing out against what is around it only by virtue of the shadow and light on its surface. The manifestation is like an astonishing epiphany. Each photograph in the *Interlud* series (2001) represents a piece of translucent packaging with its consumable contents removed. The form of this residue seems to dissolve into the background of the image, emitting a vestigial glimmer that is like a last sign of resistance, before then disappearing. What habit voids of its reality is what Edith Dekyndt sets out to reveal by her strategies of representation. It is by capturing the evanescent that the artist achieves her goal of "showing the fascinating existence of things."



"Martial O" . 2007. Installation : 90 x 90 x 200 cm. Dimensions variables. Sculpture : diam. 9 cm, poussière de métal, aimants.
Metal dust, magnets

Imaginary enclaves

Many of the physical phenomena studied by the artist are transmitted in the form of waves, whether electromagnetic (light, ultraviolet, etc.) or mechanical (waves, surface seismic waves such as Love waves, etc.). Dekyndt treats these as a medium, using their invisible action to bring out the unexpected dimension of things that seem habitual or ordinary. In *Martial O* (2007), the little disc in iron filings that moves around in the middle of a big white support owes its vitality to the rotating magnet hidden behind it, on the other side of the surface. It is like a little creature with moving spines, or the moving corolla of a mineral flower.

In *Discreet Piece* (1997) we are given to observe the ballet of dust particles, albeit in a rather different mode than in Nam June Paik's famous *Zen for Film*. In the room, a camera catches the dust in the beam of its focal light, and the image is instantaneously projected onto a wall, where it looks like a sky fizzing with shooting stars. A film of soapy water formed between two hands becomes a support for iridescent effects moved by turbulence that, on this scale, suddenly looks galactic. The video stops when this "mirage," which is particularly sensitive to temperature variations, disappears (*Provisory Object 01*, 1997). Dekyndt generally favors fluid materials such as "light, water or fabrics" that, she says, "can move, be transformed or even disappear." In *One Second of Silence* (Part 01, New York, 2008) a transparent flag — as such it is "silent," without a message — raised on its pole blows in the breeze in the center of the image. An imaginary enclave opens up within the random contours of its fluctuating frame. The sky that appears in the instability of its folds does in fact seem to be streaming.

Shaken certitudes

The enigmatic *Usedom* (2007) produces a sensation of liquid radiation. The image is saturated with vertical filaments which are especially bright, and which move and undulate. By way of a discreet clue, the work bears the name of an island and one can detect, not horizontal but raised up, the sinuous curves drawn by the movement of the waves. The simple inversion of the normal direction of the reading is enough to affect the framework within which resemblance works. The viewer is destabilized and becomes aware of the gap between what he sees and what he knows, and the surprising proximity of figuration and abstraction.

In *Insomniac Dream* (2004) we get the troubling experience of the real juxtaposed with its double: on the gallery wall, we perceive the image of that wall and some of the floor below it. However, this representation, which is alternately clear and blurred, shows the camera eye struggling to adapt to the inadequate lighting. The superimposition of the copy over its model perturbs our relation to the space. "The support you had from your senses, the support your senses had from the world, the support you had from your general impression of being. These give way. A vast redistribution of the sensibility takes place [...]." These words of Henri Michaux's sum up our sensation fairly well — that is, the feeling of a hallucination induced by an optical phenomenon.

When the artist presents a lightbox like an empty advertising hoarding, she is enabling us to see our own floaters, those spots that seem to drift in front of the eye, caused by the shadow cast on the retina by vitreous debris, and which, though usually imperceptible, contaminate our perception (*Myodésopsies 06*, 2003-2009). These spots are particularly obvious when one stares at a white surface. Spectators thus experience latent subjective visual elements which are manifest only when they stop trying to get a visual hold on them.



"Usedom". 2007. Projection vidéo en boucle, 2'47". Looped video projection

Zones of influence

In *Ground Control* (2008), a matte black sphere slowly moves around a white cube. Here, our perception of the object is contaminated by the aural environment generated by *Voyager II Golden Record* (2008), a selection of "Sounds of Earth." This "floating sculpture" (as Warhol called his *Silver Clouds*) is like a planet reduced to the scale of the human body. Swollen by air and helium, it obeys the laws of weightlessness and moves unpredictably and very slowly around the space in response to "meteorological" variations in atmospheric pressure, temperature, humidity and air density, and to the drafts stirred by the movement of visitors, who in turn become aware of the object's reaction to its surroundings and the surprising presence of the forces acting on it.

With *Soleil Public* (2008) it is the beholder who becomes the reactive material. In the street of a Brussels neighborhood with a large immigrant population the artist presented a row of neon tubes behind glass giving out ultraviolet rays. Here, the fine surface between public and private space constitutes a zone of exchange that was discreetly political in that the effect or potential effect of the light on viewers made the glass surface a territorial frontier where distinctions between different skin colors were diminished.

Dekyndt's show at Mac's-Grand Hornu — and one of its featured works, as video that evokes tellurian forces in resonance with the history of this old cokeworks — is called *Les ondes de Love* [Love's waves]. Augustus Edward Love was a British geophysicist who discovered a kind of seismic wave operating on the surface of the earth, but it is the common noun that leaps out from this title, reminding us that the viewer, too, is a reactive form whose thin outer envelope is traversed by Love waves, and whose fluctuations between intelligibility and sensibility perturb its intuitions, emotions and sensations.