

THE PURSUIT OF THE INVISIBLE: THE ART OF WILLIAM LAMSON

“I see my practice as an act of facilitation - making visible something that is already there.”

Sometimes when we look closely at an artwork it can remind us of other things. It can make us think about ourselves, and things we have done in our lives. For instance a picture of a horse can just be a picture of a horse (a portrait if you like). But a picture of a horse can also suggest something about the person who owned it (a farmer?, a jockey?, a rich person?), about nature (& the animal kingdom), about the artist who painted it, about strength and power, about wildness. It becomes more than just a picture of a horse the more we relate it to other things. Everything has a relationship to something else, a connection.

In the same way, a balloon can represent many different things. You recognise a balloon as soon as you see one. We all remember playing with balloons, the lightness and tension of the air filling and stretching the rubber. On a string (full of helium), they have a life of their own. They remind us of heads, bombs, and meteorites.

William Lamson has thought a lot about balloons.

He has played with balloons, drawn balloons, photographed balloons, and struggled with balloons. Over and over again he has been shocked by the instant a balloon bursts. (It's always a shock when a balloon bursts, even when we know it's going to happen.) He has ways to attack balloons with all manner of arsenal. Balloons are his quarries.

In **Actions**, 2007-2008, we see him perform short experiments with black balloons. He sets them up on a stage in which he is the only (human) character. He also has a range of tools including toy guns, aluminium cans, wood, firecrackers, concrete blocks, a bow (and many arrows), strips of videotape, black ink, powdered graphite and a strange horror-movie-like mask covered in pins. There's a Ned Kelly/Robot-like costume. He even uses a rubber gun, a flaccid of representation of the real thing.

“I don't want to work with real guns. I want to turn the machismo thing on its head—to shoot a balloon, there's something so nothing about that.”

Once he has figured out how he will get them, he sets up his video camera to capture what happens. Each action ends with a burst balloon. In the struggle between the artist and the object, we question his actions - why is he doing this? What is his point? In a way, he is drawing in the air, sculpting with objects. The actions become like choreography, but played over and over again into eternity.

The 33 Actions are ideas acted out by the artist in order to see if they work. He is showing us that the simplest of things can sometimes be the most challenging. These actions are like computer games and sport. Some of the actions seem like magic (a puff of smoke, balloons levitating and moving of their own accord), and others seem like a pointless exercise in futility.

In the video **Emerge**, coloured balloons appear suddenly from the depths of a body of water. They pop up and then slide along the surface, at the mercy of the will of the breeze. Slowly they are taken and ascend into the atmosphere, to the place where all lost balloons go. This event makes visible the most basic of scientific principles: that bubbles of air rise to the surface of the water. So where are these balloons coming from? What are they doing underwater? Their journey from the depths of the ocean to the heights of the sky becomes hypnotising. They illustrate the way nature can be revealed to us in unusual ways.

The balloons could be the spawn of some exotic, colourful sea creature migrating from the ocean to the sky. Maybe they are alien pods waiting on the bottom of the sea until they are called to the surface by the mother alien. Or maybe this a representation of the mind, and balloons the unexpected idea that pops into our heads. The artist has provided the characters, and nature has provided the stage.

The artist is exploring the science that others have discovered and explored before him. Scientists look closely at the world around them, asking questions, testing theories and making conclusions (much like artists). In the past it was common for people to try out experiments at home (even if you weren't a scientist). Science

Magazines would instruct people how to perform them and the theories behind them. They tested and observed the simplest of things that we now take very much for granted.

THE FORCES OF AN AIR BUBBLE. By M. G. VAN DER MENSBRUGGHE*

Address before a public meeting of the Belgian Academy of Sciences, December 14, 1895.

I now proceed to describe the career of another minute body hundreds of times lighter than a drop of water or a solid corpuscle, confining myself to the consideration of its relations with liquids and solids, and we shall find that it in no wise falls behind its rivals in activity and prowess. The marvellous little being is a simple particle of air.

Although this particle and its companions wholly escape our vision, they are diffused everywhere around us, and even penetrate our organism to such an extent that without a multitude of them playing a definite part within our body we could not breathe or live for an instant. We cannot isolate these particles. Of air, and could not see them if we did, but we can isolate masses of them by various methods and distinguish them very clearly.

Of course we cannot see air, but only what it does to things. A balloon allows us to isolate a pocket of air and observe its travels. The artist is making the air visible and moving it around like a toy. But we know that balloons will float higher and higher until the atmosphere squeezes them until they pop – you can't trap the air forever.

The threat of bursting is always around when a balloon is blown up. In **Vital Capacity** the artist's head appears sticking up through the base of a box. He is wearing a strange see-through mask that is covered in pins. A black balloon floats swiftly down towards the artist's dangerously masked face. He begins blowing the balloon away from him so it doesn't end up touching the pins. But of course the balloon wants to keep going down, gravity drawing it to the bottom of the frame. A second appears and the artist begins to frantically blow both of the balloons away from his face. But we know that ultimately the artist will struggle and falter and the dead rubber of the burst balloons will soon litter the bottom of the frame. Like the myth of Sisyphus (a Roman King whose punishment was to roll a large boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, and repeat this throughout eternity) Lamson is locked into this futile game, unable to stop to even catch his breath.

Vital Capacity refers to the maximum amount of air that a person can expel from their lungs after first filling their lungs to the maximum extent. If we watch closely enough we can observe how many times the artist fills up his lungs to avoid the inevitable explosion of the balloons in his face. He pants and grunts and we know he is struggling with the challenge he has set himself. Like a Space Invaders game, he knows he has to work harder to avoid the GAME OVER. But of course this is always how it ends, over and over and over again.

Tundra presents sets of balloons (one at the top, one at the bottom) sliding across the horizon-line of a cold and barren landscape. Like the scrolling cursor on a YouTube clip, or like a dial on an old-fashioned radio, they move slowly and calmly across the screen. They get smaller as they move further away, like inky black stripes on a clean white page.

Levitation Exercise is a different exploration of air. From a darkened scene appears a glowing white ball that descends from the sky. The closer it gets to the bottom of the frame we realise we are viewing a field at night. The image is fuzzy and insects shine for a millisecond in the blackness. Out of the darkness appears a white suited figure (the artist) running through the field to break the arc of the ball's descent and propelling it back in the air. This action is repeated, and the ball (and the artist) reduces in size, move further away from the viewer. Slowly the ball and the artist are so small that the velvet fuzziness of the night consumes them, and we are left with the darkness we began with. The strange glow of the ball and the whiteness of the artist's suit add an air of mystery, like secret experiments performed in the night. Lamson has inverted the myth of Atlas, who instead of holding up the earth, has been given the task of keeping the moon in the sky.

Hunt & Gather features two screens that present two aspects of one story. In one we see the artist on a bike with a ladder attached to it. He is riding through streets, briskly whilst the background whizzes past. On the other screen the artist stops below some power-lines with a pair of shoes looped over the line. The artist assembles his ladder, climbs it and with a bow and arrow shoots the shoes down. He slowly removes his own shoes and trades them for the shoes he has gained from the lines. He ties the laces of his own shoes, and throws them up

onto the lines above, replacing the pair he has acquired.

In many large cities you will often see these random gestures. There are many different meanings for this in different cultures around the world. The first thing you may think when you see this is How did they get up there? and Why would someone do that? In Brooklyn, where the artist lives, this is a common sight. Over and over again, he finds shoes hanging like lifeless things from the sky. Each time he swaps the shoes on his feet for the shoes he has gathered. His actions are like a game – an endless exchange, a gesture, linking one thing to another. He walks in another's shoes, and gives his own to whomever may find them.

William Lamson uses his body and objects to explore the way we interact with the world. He uses simple actions to make us aware of how the struggle for dominance can often be futile and one-sided. He makes us aware of the beauty in the simple things that ordinarily we pay no mind.

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