Matter is plastic in the face of mind

Sofia Hultén and James Langdon in conversation

SH
We said that we would start with our title; "Matter is plastic in the face of mind", a quote from the science fiction writer Philip K Dick. He said it in the course of a lecture, and I like how it refers in a casual way to the possibilities of objects — as if to say "I can twist the way the world is through the way I think about it." In other words, "What if" thinking, which is how Philip K Dick described science fiction. To look at the world and think "What if things happened differently? What if the laws of physics didn't apply in the ways that we normally assume?"

JL
One piece of your work in particular, *Mutual Annihilation*, has always stimulated me to think along those parallel lines. It involves a found object, a piece of furniture. Its patinated condition tells the story of every situation and every action it has been subjected to. In the work you try to rewind that story, to imagine what it once was — a process of removing those traces of use through restoration and repair, returning it to something like its original condition. But that is only half of the work; you then fast-forward the object back to the condition in which you found it, by speculatively reenacting the accidental events that might have led to the particular state you found it in. The work pays excessive attention to the incidental aspects of something. I find that proposition useful in thinking about identity, and the difficulty in precisely defining the boundaries of an object. At what point of disintegration does this object become no longer identifiably itself? You achieve this by undoing assumptions about cause and effect.

SH
Or tying causality in a knot, so that the basic question becomes "What physical effect would it have if things were done in the wrong order, or took no notice of the order in which they are normally done?" For example, in this situation where we are talking, what if I were to pour water on the table and then try to drink out of the empty glass, instead of pouring water into the glass and then drinking it. That would be a variation of the way that I normally live my life. It's a completely different thing to do something experientially than just to imagine it.

JL
There is the darkness of that ...

SH
The horror!

JL
An action like drinking water from an empty glass doesn't belong in everyday life because it has no motivation; nobody does that in that way. I might interpret it as absent-mindedness, or as part of some unknown ritual, but to accept the gesture as I think you mean it is horrifying, because without that binding of motivation — cause and effect — reality appears meaningless and random.

SH
Without causality we are loosed from our moorings, we have nowhere to hang our hats because the hook is gone, we don't know what's happening!

JL
Our perception of the bounds of everyday reality is largely automated in our brains. Cognitive neuroscience shows us that we see very selectively, filtering our sensory inputs to conform to our assumptions about the world. I suppose that is why, as you say, it is a very different proposition to do — or undo — an everyday gesture than only to imagine it. In your work it is the performance, the behaviour, however low-key, that prevents what we see from being easily assimilated into a familiar narrative.

SH
In some of my videos I am concerned to reveal a lag or a lack where things don't fit together, where the narrative doesn't join up. I am often trying to find that moment where the things I am working with do something I don't expect, where things are not going according to plan. In the video *Nonsequences IV*, a sequence of events is performed out of its usual order. I choose purposefully — paradoxically — to represent things I do without even considering them; for example, often late at night in the studio I might have a takeaway meal and eat it on my laptop because I am too lazy to move the laptop away from the table or to get a plate … Then, I thought, what if instead of the laptop being closed before I eat the curry, the laptop is open when the curry is poured in? It's about setting up a sequence of events in which my hands are tied. I have decided what to do, for good or ill, and now I just need to follow this set of rules. And so I have to pour this curry sauce onto the laptop because that is what was going to happen.

JL
You are just changing one element at a time, out of a normal sequence of events.

SH
Yes, and that's really important. It's as if there are different timelines, and the events from one timeline can be physically pushed through to coincide with events from another one and they can be somehow plaited together. It translates a situation in time, a sequence of events into a concrete, physical space.

JL
Now I realise that what produces the darkness that we spoke about is not that your actions appear meaningless, it's that our brains can't help but perceive them as deliberate. In the work you never react as if you have made a mistake, and that sends a signal; in a sense you do actually push through to that other timeline by creating the perception that you are not mistaken, but that you are acting according to some other alien reality.

SH
If our brains fail completely to grasp what is happening, if everything changes so that you are completely unmoored, then you don't care or invest in the process. If it's a complete nonsense — "There are elephants on the ceiling" — then you lose the appearance of believability. That's why I often choose to change just one thing. It's the same with situation comedy, which informs a lot of what I'm doing in my work. Usually it's a completely conventional set-up in which we are very familiar with what's around, with only one salient thing changed. If everything is changed the situation becomes wacky, which is not so much fun.

JL
So when you construct an object or scenario in your work, you're thinking about someone encountering it, about how they might decode it?

SH
Yes, whilst leaving it open. There is a spirit of nihilism in some of the works that is to do with not caring about the success of a project in terms outside of itself.

JL
You set up these cognitive dissonances precisely to be unresolvable!

SH
For a series of pieces called *Immovable Object/ Unstoppable Force* I did a telekinetic meditation according to a set of instructions I found on the internet. It's a ten-minute meditation which enables you to move large objects with your mind. The instructions are really hilarious: "Focus your mind on the object", "Focus your whole body on the object", "Feel your energy blending with the object", "Reach out with your body energy and touch the object" … and then "Try and move the object to the right and then turn it to the left". Then it says, "Please don't be concerned if you don't see a movement; it is very likely moving on a molecular level." But of course everything is moving on a molecular level anyway! So we have no way of knowing if anything is happening or not, or if we are the agent of change.

JL
That relates to the French literary figure Alfred Jarry, who in the nineteenth century invented — or discovered(?) — a new kind of science that he called "pataphysics". He proposed that the physical sciences are too preoccupied with making rules in response to observations of reality. For example, when I push this book off the table we are confident that what we see reinforces our understanding of the law of gravity and is therefore entirely predictable. But Jarry said that's not how reality is; everything that happens, every single event, is a completely unique collection of phenomena that will never be repeated. It's extremely interesting that ideas from the French literary avant-garde are now converging with advanced physics! In quantum physics we see that if you observe the world in the tiniest measure you can't at all times be certain about anything. If cause and effect do come together at some points perhaps it is just coincidence.

SH
There is a philosophical paradigm involving a belief that, given enough time, if things were aligned a certain way then, for example, I could pass my hand through this table; that there isn't actually a reason why I couldn't … If all of the molecules in this table happened to move in an organised direction away from my hand, my hand would be able to pass through it and come out the other side. It's just that, on the whole, they happen not to be organised that way!

JL
Do you think that experiencing an artwork can actually modify someone's perceptual apparatus, maybe to sensitise them to something previously alien?

SH
Yes, absolutely. I became aware of this when I was making one of my first video pieces, *Getting Rid of Stuff*. I was invited to exhibit in a project space in Berlin just before it was due to close. I decided to work with the leftover things from the previous years of exhibitions — packaging, cables, decorating materials and so on. As I had recently been making sculptures by shredding and dismantling objects, I thought that I would carry on with this and make a cloud of shredded objects, as if after an explosion, relating to the imminent dissolution of the space. Then the longer I had the stuff, the less I wanted to do that. I thought "Why put more things into the world?" At one point I found myself saying to a friend "I just want to throw everything away", and that's how the piece developed. I set out looking for ways in which the leftover objects could be disposed of in nearby streets. I found an opportune place in which to dispose of each thing, by fitting it precisely into an opening, or concealing it, or dispersing it. For a long time afterwards, I would walk around the streets of Berlin very attuned to where holes and gaps to fill could be. Making that artwork changed the way I see the world, forcing me to see and feel things differently.

This conversation took place at Le Foyer, Zurich in July 2014.