

Pedra Vão / Stone Gap
Michael Asbury, 2014

Maria Laet's work possesses a sensibility that at times might seem enigmatic. She is interested in the immediacy of materials, in their raw state, their thingness, rather than in the transformation of materials by 'the hand' of the artist. Yet these materials are not presented as 'ready-mades' in the traditional art historical sense of the term. There is an undeniable sense of detachment between the hand and the art object that arises from Laet's interest in 'accidental' drawings that are caused by nature or by specific actions. Yet, what interests the artist is not so much the denial of authorship but the affirmation of a heightened sensitivity towards the thing, the substance, the surface or the object itself. It is this sensibility that informs the form of presentation that she chooses or the situation with which the substances are interacted with.

The title of this exhibition, chosen by the artist herself, is a good place to begin exploring certain operations that the work sets in play. In Portuguese the word 'vão' has an ambivalence that in this particular case may evade even Brazilian readers. At first glance, although somewhat strangely juxtaposed with or against the word stone, the term 'vão' appears to mean a gap, a slit, a slot, a fissure, an opening, a gash. 'Vão', however, is also the present third person plural tense of the verb 'to go'. Next to the word stone it would be grammatically correct only if expressed, in the present third person singular tense, as 'vai' – the 'stone goes' (pedra vai) instead of 'stone go' (pedra vão) as in the title. 'Stone gap' therefore appears to make more grammatical sense than its other possible literal translation, 'stone go'. Despite this fact, the juxtaposition between the words 'stone' and 'gap' remains somewhat strange since no explicit meaning is elucidated beyond the words' separate individual significations. To complicate matters further, when used as an adjective, vão, possesses multiple meanings, from frivolous to vain, pointless to futile, all of which a cynic could quite easily equate with the activity of art itself. A poetic counterargument would propose that as such the single art object is thus related, even if pejoratively, to the totality of the category.

In its immediacy therefore the title presents a conjunction of antagonistic themes, related perhaps but not necessarily sequential or in a causal relationship: stone as a solid block, and gap as a corruption of that solidity. This tensile relationship between

the words that compose the title tempts me to suggest that the grammatically incorrect use of the verb 'to go' in this case might also be pertinent as a means of approaching the artist's sensibility. If 'stone', in the singular, 'go', in the plural, then singularity is fragmented and time, movement, and perhaps speed, acceleration, or its inverse, are invoked. As the singular, the self, shifts towards the plural, the other, it expands, disperses, spreads out, multiplies.

Laet responds to the materiality of things, to their form or formlessness at a particular moment in time. Stone for example stands as the 'substance stone', and is presented, as a solid lump of stone, fragments that tend towards powder, or the infinite stages in between, such as the cracking process, the slitting, the fissure. Vão therefore is not so much a splitting, a gap, within the stone but a plurality of possible movements towards or moments within distinct states.

From these simple and immediate observations we may conclude that the artist is preoccupied with flow, with time, all the while holding on to relationships of tension within such a flux: *Pedra Vão = stone go Õ stone gap*.

Laet finds poetic moments of apparent equilibrium within such flow, where the duration of flow becomes simply a question of scale and time. Perhaps this is why the actual scale of the work appears to concern the artist so much, whether as a question of display, within the presentation of the work, or as subject matter itself.

We find this interest in scale manifested in distinct manners, whether through size, weight, time or within the juxtaposition of materials with different 'speeds' of transformation such as liquids (the sea or milk) and solids (stone or sand). Yet, by establishing relationships between states of matter within distinct moments of flow, what occurs is also separation, since for objects to be in equilibrium, even if we are speaking of a single body, there must be a division of forces, there must be a separation of sorts, even if it is a purely internal tension. It is a separation that relates, that establishes, presents and internalises tension. These are not so much transitional objects but objects in transition. The sea comes, undoes, returns: *Pedra Vão = stone gap Õ stone go*.

Such an observation opens a plethora of possible metaphors, of possible 'readings' of the work which ultimately are best left to the viewer to unravel, to project, invent. The

separation caused by the work's enigmatic character, its refusal to be read in an objective or singular form, is also a means of relation, a quite intimate relation, that it invites her/him to enter. The work's own internal dynamics, its tensions, conflicts and contradictions, are in this sense mirrored in its relation with the spectator.

In this exhibition Laet presents works that approach notions of separation and relation through the very materiality of the objects or substances, in their distinct states of being, whether through their own solidity or fragility, whether through solidity as fragility. Laet's childlike amazement with the most ordinary details and behaviour of things, may lead one to wonder what is the purpose of such a task? Would this not all be in vain (em vão)? A number of reasonable answers might be suggested, but in themselves, they would one by one deny the work's poetic possibilities, which are multiple. That which is presented is more than the singular, it demands the multitude:

Pedra Õ Vão