

## **“Maria Laet”**

By Isobel Whitelegg - research fellow, TrAIN, about the works *Untitled (Dialogue Series. Balloon and Body)*, 2007 (Camberwell College of Arts) and *Untitled (Dialogue Series. Blowing)*, 2008 (House Gallery, Camberwell) (2008)

Maria Laet's contribution to this exhibition consists of two works, each of which contains, as two component parts, drawings and photographs. The photographs indicate particular processes used to mark paper with ink; they explain, in part, how the drawings are made. Beyond the reflexive relationship of one medium to the other the photographs and drawings each point towards the collaborative circumstances of their production. As such, both photograph and drawing might be understood simply as remnant of an act performed by the artist and her collaborators, an experience from which the viewer is presently excluded. Yet this act is was itself motivated by the eventual production of a set of images, which will outlive this act, and come to stand for its duration.

In the case of *Untitled (Dialogue Series. Balloon and Body)* one of the collaborating actors was not a human body, but the 'quasi-corpus' composed by balloon, helium and string. This assembly of parts exceeds the definition of object; neither does it fit the controlled, predictable and mechanistic character suggested by the term apparatus. Encouraged by Laet's movements, the balloon drags ink across a floor gridded with tracing paper. Beside the artist's interference, this quasi-corpus is engaged in a series of physical exchanges with the space that surrounds it, the displacement of air by flotation counterpoising the pull of gravity: contained helium and collapsed string generating the potential for a particular form of mark-making. The term 'quasi-corpus', with which I describe this non-human collaborator, originated in attempts by ancient philosophers to conceive of the physicality of gods, a linguistic answer to the paradox of their presumed resemblance to us: equivalent yet not the same as a human body. In more recent memory it was a word used by Brazilian poet Ferreira Gullar to describe the Neoconcretist art work. Such works were not merely object but 'non-object'; they incorporated the subjective, by relationship to the viewer, yet were also unpredictable, and unknowable, exceeding each viewer's experience. Neoconcretist artworks, such as Lygia Clark's *Bichos*, seemed to promise

inexhaustible contingency, to constantly invite experiment; being almost a body, almost an other.

In the production of the more recent work *Untitled (Dialogue Series. Blowing)* Laet's collaborator is not quasi-corpus but close friend. Laet and her partner are held together by mutual engagement in a particular task: creating a drawing by each blowing a small pool of ink on paper. The ink, while subject to their exhalation, is at the same moment subject to other physical forces including, most evidently, evaporation and absorption. The ink quickly dries, becoming a surface image, and at the same moment this image is extended beyond a single plane as it soaks through a block of pages. The number of pages that is eventually displayed becomes a measure of the duration of this image.

The space of the page, within a grid on the floor, or piled into a notebook, is a consistent element within each of the collaborative processes described above. Each collaborative experience, therefore, integrates the means by which it will eventually be represented. As such each process anticipates, incorporates and accommodates awareness of its end. For Laet and her two others (one behind and one in front of the camera lens) each work has an experiential and participatory character. For subsequent viewers, the work comes into being here in the space of each gallery, after the event but as we are looking at it, now. Past participation in the act of physically creating this work is not privileged over the act of responding to the form it now takes. Within the expanded parameters of the work, performance and its representation are held in equivalence. The making of each work, with all the contingent elements and forces that this process contains, is transformed into a finite set of images, subtracted from this act according to the limits set by the page and view-finder. From the set of images produced, a number are selected, assembled and shown. The transformation of collaboration into image into exhibition is one of reduction, but it is also one of amplification, relying upon the particularity of each image for its affect.

In the case of the drawings within *Untitled (Dialogue Series. Balloon and Body)* Laet's manipulation of the final form of each one is not performed completely blindly, but rather from the intersection of a mobile series of glances; her attention is counterpoised, between the marks being built on the floor, anticipation of the balloon's gestures, and reciprocation with gestures of her own. The direction and

velocity of reciprocal movement between Laet, balloon, string and ink is inscribed and can be read in the density of line and mark, in the fluidity and stoppage of ink. Looking at each drawing, the viewer might discern the abstraction of a particular set of such movements, and might from this fragment also reconstruct the event of their production. The composition of each drawing pushes against its frame, each one being one part of the larger drawing that was earlier written over the floor without regard to the given edges between each page. When deducted from this grid, each drawing becomes necessarily cropped, its lines extending to the limits and amplifying the space of the page by pointing to what is (or might be imagined to be) beyond it. This affect is repeated in the cropped composition of the photographs, and it is a manner of image making that also emerges in an earlier series of drawings in graphite on paper (fig. 1) where the figures are pushed to the edges to allow a blank ground to dominate the space of the page.

The marks produced by *Untitled (Dialogue Series. Blowing)* meanwhile are held within the surface as a central pool of ink is blown from opposing edges. As if replicating the physical act of breathing, the ink creates an image by moving inward and back; following the force of exchanging exhalations, it forms trails that alternately overwrite one another and diverge. Like *Untitled (Dialogue Series. Balloon and Body)*, *Untitled (Dialogue Series. Blowing)* is a work that fits experience and its representation into an expanded field of practice. The explicit difference in this work is the physical and personal proximity of its collaborators. The intimacy of the two actors in this dialogue is inscribed in the form of the image that they produce, and it is also inscribed as a personal memory. Both their dialogue and its image however exceed and escape the moment at which they are collaboratively formed. Within the apparent plenitude of an intimate collaboration, the inevitable process of separating, remembering, sharing and re-telling a combined experience persists. Page and photograph accommodate the collaborative act's transformation in time into a changed, and changing state, as memory. This process is mirrored by the passage of their collaboratively drawn image, which seeps, absorbed and transformed, through the layers of paper in its path.