

LAURENT DUTHION

by FLORA KATZ

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Laurent Duthion is an artist and a researcher. Since 1999, he has been exploring the limits of the sciences. Embodying perpetual force, genetic change, and the shift from one dimension to another, his works deal with forms which reflect the unknowns of our world, and speculate about its possibilities.

Balle d'ovipare (1999) is his first piece: a liquid, silicon elastomer, is injected into an egg. After peeling off its shell, a bouncing blue ball is revealed. When thrown, its bounces trace an altogether particular path. Somewhere between a rugby ball and a sphere, its oval shape means that it can be re-thrown in a motion which might be akin to that of perpetual force. A few years later, it was a paving made of retro-reflective adhesive which gave an impression of perpetual motion (*Quasitiling*, 2011). By treading on the image with our feet, hypnotic effects make us dance somewhere between the second and fifth dimension.

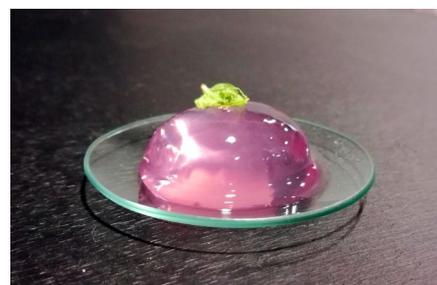
Duthion's works are not aimed at illustrating scientific research, but rather at prolonging its processes and thus experiencing what we are confronted with when we explore the limits of knowledge, and of our experiences. A doubt about reality, the expansion of our possibilities, an impression of vitality, a curiosity.

Arousing curiosity through the sharing of an easily accessible arena of experience is fundamental in his praxis. A playful atmosphere, for example, emanates from tasting sessions which he organizes in different contemporary art institutions. Described as culinary situations, colours, smells, and shapes are worked in order to present, sense and taste what seemed at the outset to be impalpable. The most recent one held in 2017, titled *Approximation sagittaire*, used a "spatial odour" detected 400 light years away from the earth, one component of which is also to be found very close to us, in raspberry and rum. In collaboration with the Chemistry IUT in Rennes, pink ravioli were developed with this common molecule and eaten during an evening--a journey into space, through taste.

"Smells escape laws"¹, said Laurent Duthion in an interview with François Quintin. Because smell is the most fleeting sense, it is a motif which runs through all his oeuvre. It is what struck him most during a trip to Antarctica in 2007. In a land almost devoid of plants, smudged with white, the intense smell of the penguins' droppings captivated Laurent Duthion. He collected the droppings, trying to capture their variations, and he did this in order to form an olfactory image of the scientific station where he stayed, Dumont d'Urville. *La forme d'une odeur* is also the title of a piece dated 2013. A 2ml microtube containing geraniol was given to visitors to the show. According to Duthion, with its rose perfume used in cosmetics, geraniol also has "stimulating" properties. It was like a small poetic tool for accompanying visitors in their artistic experience.

From smell to sound, it is circulation which is at work in *1er Transcepteur* (2011), an olfactory and musical mask which the artist produced in several variants. Its slightly coppery colour and its round forms call to mind Commedia dell'arte masks. Designed to be worn by musicians, it is on his nose that the flute player moves his fingers to create sounds with Irish overtones. With blindfolded eyes, Duthion wants to increase the attention on the circulation of the breath almost in a vacuum. A few months later, Duthion this time designed a mask completely enclosed on itself (*1er Solipse*, 2013). In the place of a flute, the nose takes on the form of an icosahedron. This solid with 20 surfaces reminded the artist both of the platonic polyhedron, a primary form, and that of numerous viruses. A double-edged work which opens up to the infinity of forms while at the same time enclosing us within ourselves, in a solipsistic experience.

It is the astonishing shift from the second to the third dimension to which Duthion gives material form with *Transsubstantiation etc.* This is a book written by the



artist, which transposes the story of the New Testament into a science-fiction world. It is no surprise that science-fiction, and more precisely what is known as hard SF, should be a major reference in Duthion's work. Many scientists in fact write hard SF stories which speculate on the basis of their own works. The writers Greg Egan and Liu Cixin are part and parcel of this world and interest him just as deeply as art history and contemporary art. It may be rare for an artist to write a book, but here we can better understand the reasons. For the form of his book is also very surprising: its rectangular shape has corners sloping towards a perspective resulting from the second dimension. In this way, the book takes the form of two lines heading towards a vanishing point, and the text inside it does the same. The most surprising thing is probably the speed at which our brain becomes accustomed to this gradient, and then forgets it and plunges into the content, just as we are probably constantly moving from one dimension to another without altogether realizing it. The slope is, incidentally, another recurrent motif in Duthion's work, from the transport crate (*Protection*, 2014) to *Parpaing-fils* (2017); our usual materials are sloping, and tip reality.

The shift from one dimension to another lies at the heart of the approach to quantum physics: how can one thing be in two different states, and at the same time? As the topic of many current discussions, quantum physics is a vast space of speculation where contingency, meaning what comes about without any laws, is an integral part. In following this research very closely, Duthion works on different forms: for example, he organized a performance titled *Je suis quantique par nature* (2017)². Slogans written with gold leaf take us by surprise with a dash of wit: "I'm here and there". "A separate whole is complete, completely whole".

This spirit of re-describing the space of contemporary art, bringing it contingency, doubt, and curiosity by way of simple and open forms, was perhaps most powerfully incarnated in the solo show which Duthion devised for the La Criée art centre in 2008. *Présence Vulturine* is an animal which moves about in space. This Ethiopian guinea-fowl, with its feathers tinged with cobalt blue, black and white, is a noiseless, raw presence. As an image of the embryonic vitality within any artistic but also scientific act, it exhausts the limits of the image and puts art into life. Duthion's thinking has nothing abstract about it. Be it scientific or intuitive, it is palpable, present, and alive. And it is this fleeting presence which he sets in motion in each one of his pieces.

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² *Je suis quantique par nature* (I am quantum by nature) was realised during Duthion's residency at Rennes IUT in 2017.