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A Responsibility Towards Objects

Anya Gallaccio's exploration of the instability and transience of organic matter has produced installations of extraordinary power - and this year she has the Turner Prize nomination she deserves.

In a very fine essay in the catalogue for Anya Gallaccio's show 'Chasing Rainbows' in 1999, Ralph Rugoff suggested that the only appropriate way for a text about Gallaccio to behave would be to self-destruct after reading, like the message delivered at the start of Mission *Impossible*. The critic's text would slowly decompose, falling apart in one's hands and leaving perhaps only a few ink stains but on book to find shelf-space for and no document for the archive. After having read it, all that would be left would be no more nor less than what you could carry in your head.

Rugoff's prescription to the critic follows the logic of Anya Gallaccio's work. In some of her best-known pieces events are staged using organic substances which are then left to decay and decompose in their own, unpredictable fashion. Gerberas, roses and apples dry, dissolve and putrefy in rhythms which no one could predict with the same precision that initially quantifies them. They follow their own course of dissolution, sometimes accelerated by the addition of glass panels that one would usually associate with the preservation of an object or its display for longevity.

Gallaccio's panels do quite the opposite, choking or stifling their inhabitants, gently fostering their decay. The flowers rot and collapse, generating ooze that drips off the glass, leaving odd shadows and stains on its surface.

Where contemporary culture is forever compelled to predict decay, Anya Gallaccio isn't. Industrial farming gives us sell-by dates, physics gives us the theory of carbon dating by radioactive decay, and in the United States a farm has been built where human bodies are left to rot outdoors so as to determine with exactitude rates of organic decomposition. In contrast, the only quantification present in Gallaccio's work concerns the initial ingredients: 10,000 roses, 800 gerberas, 8386 narcissi, 1500 apples, 200 pinecones… evoking not only the lists of an artist like Ann Hamilton hut, with broader brushstroke, the gargantuan catalogues of the fairy tales and folklore of our childhoods.

These lists lyrically offset the other side to gathering and collecting, the beautiful and abject vicissitudes of decay that Gallaccio stages. Where culture tries to encompass decomposition, her work responds by showing us both the unpredictable and contingent processes at play and also the renewed potentials of material that we consume so mechanically. If the numerical figures are associated with amassing and owning, the destiny of the material dispossesses us. And if we consume without giving things a chance to rot, now they have their own platform on which to disintegrate.

This aspect of Gallaccio's work has become, rightly or wrongly, something of a trademark. Her orchestrated decompositions have often been described as explorations of ephemerality, instability and transience. Like the vanitas to he found in the religious tincture of classical art, they evoke the spectre of our own demise, like that of all organic matter. We are witness to the grubby and brilliant cycle of life and death, with its changing shapes, colours and odours. Like biographies, Gallaccio's works have two dates appended to them: the time of their birth and the time of their demise.

But these cycles of life and death are not entirely arbitrary. They have been engineered, framed by human hand. Gallaccio has made them and then let them run their course. As she says, 'I set up a situation and then try really hard not to interfere.' They have been called 'wonderfully unreliable experiments'. And they ask the question, 'What happens if you leave something?'

Waterloo, which appeared in the 1988 'Freeze' show in London, poses this question in a very particular way. It is generally described as consisting of a rectangular floor space covered in lead, yet Gallaccio included, against curatorial advice, the cast of a child's cardigan in one corner. This old intrusion is essential to the work, as Gallaccio explains, and it represented, among other things, a gesture of her artistic independence. If the rectangle evoked the copper floor pieces of Carl Andre, the cardigan was there to show everyone that 'I wasn't an artist' in the sense of someone inserted in the whole game of labels which the reference to minimalism would involve.

Waterloo, indeed, is considered by the artist as her first true work, 'the first piece of work I made', and it is significant that a key moment in her trajectory was when Richard Wentworth told her in a tutorial to throw everything she'd lone out of the window. After her anger had subsided, she says, I realised it was a generous thing to say,' and perhaps we can see here a moment of realising the idea that it was possible to lose something. Up until then, she had been working on bricks made of compressed clothing and structures formed from gluing together shells. These compressions, in contrast to the work that would follow, were 'about not losing', about making things that 'one could keep', about

holding onto things. If the impulse that created them was about letting go, as Gallaccio explains, their physical stability and the fact that they could be kept belies this.

The subsequent work, in contrast, explores at all levels the theme of not keeping, of seeing what happens if something is left. Which is not simply to assume that it will return 'to nature'. In a work like *tense* (1990), for example, oranges are left to rot in a rectangular floor space, reminiscent of the spatial parameters celebrated by much minimalist art. The familiar object, the orange, is first situated in this unfamiliar space and then left to decompose, and yet, as Gallaccio points out, in its decay it becomes more of an 'orange' since it smells more orangey, in the same way that her chocolate works become more 'chocolatey' as they age. Curiously, it becomes more of a concept the more it disappears as a recognised object, in a gesture that revives all the debates about essential qualities that once so fascinated the philosophers.

Forest Floor confounds simple oppositions in a similar way. An 8 square metre floral carpet is neatly laid down in a blue-bell wood, with trees carefully accommodated as in any proper carpet-laying. This strange intrusion of a manufactured object associated with interiors looks marvellously and bizarrely at home on the forest floor. It reminds us of the manufactured, carefully cultivated concept of the forest itself, as well as our preconceptions about country outings, equally manufactured and conditioned. As Gallaccio says, despite our expectations, contemporary countryside dwellers aren't really too keen on going for walks and their habitat is no doubt just as artificial as everyone else's.

Although the artist had hoped to watch the carpet fabric decay and fade into the forest floor, culture played a cruel trick on her when it turned out that the carpet was synthetic and so refused to decompose. Just as Gallaccio has said 'I don't do nature,' here nature (or culture) replied, 'I don't do Anya.'

In another forest-based piece, pinecones were gathered and cast in bronze, then scattered in their original woodland location. Where other artists often investigate the resonances and properties of used and found objects, Gallaccio creates her own found objects, remainders and waste products that are the results of her own deliberate experiments and interventions. Rotten apples fall from a bronze tree onto a gallery floor, globs of wax spill over Plexiglas rings and blood drips through salt. Leftovers are given a new dignity in her work: rather than being equated with waste and hence removed from view, they are made to generate new spaces, new surfaces.

This creation of surfaces is a central preoccupation in Gallaccio's work. When she threads hundreds of gerberas to make a chain in a piece like *head over heals (1995),* she creates a

surface through cutting and dividing the space of the gallery. The chain is an act of inscription, like a 'drawing in space'. In her wonderful piece *keep off the grass* (1997) shown at the Serpentine Gallery in London she sowed vegetable and flower seeds in the scars left on the gallery lawn by previous sculpture, and in *Glaschu* (1999) she planted seedlings in grooves cut into the concrete floor of a Glasgow law court to a carpet design contemporary with the building's construction.

Where we would associate a carpet with what covers up cracks, here the cracks constitute the carpet and invert the relations between what's covered and what covers. The floral patterns emerge in exactly the places where we would expect weeds to sprout up, to generate a gorgeous tension between what's inside and outside a given space. *repens* (2000) extends this motif, with the interior pattern of a carpet formed from wild flowers and weeds in the grounds of a country house. In each of these works, cutting into a space creates a new surface.

These new surfaces can either follow the contours of an earlier surface, as with the use of chocolate paint, or radically break with them, as with the gerhera and glass pieces. Gallaccio has described some of her flower works as 'paintings in space', and her choice of titles like red on green echoes this with their reference to Rothko. It is difficult, in fact, to avoid thinking of this latter artist when looking at the chocolate coatings Gallaccio has produced in different contexts. Their uneven and patchy surfaces are reminiscent of colour field painting, and the rough mixtures of opacity and transparency created by the chocolate bring to mind the ghostly quality of the paint in Rothko's later works.

Never one to neglect a remainder, Gallaccio has worked not only with chocolate but with the foil wrappers of chocolate bars that most of us discard without a thought. In *chrematis* (1994), she used this gold foil to paper over the broken surface of a disused swimming pool in Tijuana. Like chocolate itself, the gold had painterly qualities, evoking among other things the use of gold leaf in pre- and early Renaissance painting, where it would often be used in combination with standard paints and precious stones to produce effects of light. Once again, she created a new surface from the holes in an old one.

These artistic acts are reparative. Gallaccio had initially intended to mend the swimming pool after its destruction by an earthquake. In the end, she worked not only with gold foil to cover the fractured points of the surface, but also with flowering pulmeria, which she planted in gashes left by the quake. Gallaccio has spoken of what she calls a 'responsibility towards objects', and it is no accident, perhaps, that in the Serpentine piece, her flowers and plants burgeon in the places left as scars. As in *chrematis*, she generates surfaces from wounds to the previous surface. She makes things grow in the places they have been damaged.

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