

Levity & Gravity

*You can dance. You can make me laugh. You've got x-ray eyes.
You know how to sing. You're a diplomat. You've got it all. Everybody loves you.*

*The higher you fly, the faster you fall.
He said: Send it up. Watch it rise. See it fall.
Gravity's rainbow. Send it up. Watch it rise. See it fall. Gravity's angel*

Why these mountains? Why this sky? This long road? This ugly train?

— Laurie Anderson, Gravity's Angel (1984)

I wish to be free of the responsibility of writing about Marie-Sophie Beinke's new work in advance of knowing anything about it. We conversed over Skype last night and due to the poor internet signal our connection kept breaking and we continued calling one another back and forth to resume conversation.

This happened several times over the course of an hour and a half. We never arrived fully to discussing the work she is now making but in our intermittent contact Marie-Sophie managed to relay this information and for me this is sufficient until I encounter the work directly.

“When I was preparing for a walk from Belgium to Japan with the wish to find refuge in nature and suggest a year long performance, I thought it would be a good idea if I trained myself to carry weight because whilst I'm in good shape I am certainly not a top sportswoman. I enjoy absurdity and also physical exercise but in everything I do – I look at it from an artist's point of view. I am not preparing to run a marathon. I am not preparing to carry as much weight as I can, but I get excited about the idea of carrying and transporting weight as a performative gesture.

As a consequence I thought of an exercise that might be a good provocation as well as amusing. My interest shifted very much to performance in search for a means to experience and thematize physical and mental exhaustion. I started to go to a fruit shop (Perry Fruit, Bleekhofstraat 37, 2140 Antwerpen) around my corner. I had researched what kinds of foods would remain good over time if one were in a situation of having to stock food. I chose potatoes over other things because they have one of the longest shelf lives. That morning I went first thing to the store at nine o'clock (the opening hour of the shop) and bought a kilo of potatoes in a plastic bag and I walked for 25 kilometres. I did not set out on a march but I just did my daily schedule – doing everything on foot while carrying the plastic bag holding a kilo of potatoes in my hand. The next day I went and bought two kilos of potatoes and I balanced them in my two hands. I had so much fun. I was just walking with my two bags of potatoes, laughing inside and nobody knew what I was doing. So again the following day three kilos of potatoes and 25 kilometres just walking in Antwerp from one meeting, or errand I had to do, to another. I went to Hammam El Madina in the Bisschopstraat in Borgehout to check the opening hours in the upcoming days and to the City Hall to get a free map of Antwerp for example. I simply did everything I would normally do but with three kilos of potatoes.

I continued this endeavour until I reached five kilos. Then all of a sudden I got so busy with other things that in the morning I did not have time to go to the shop to buy six kilos of potatoes. I had the intention to go up until 12 kilos (the recommended weight for women to carry on foot for long distances) and then continue at this weight for several weeks or months until strong enough to carry a back pack of 12 kilos for the 17,000 kilometres.

During the time I walked with these potatoes I became aware of how ridiculous I felt. More I became very aware of the reality and omnipresence of food shortages worldwide and of people, who, if I told honestly what I was doing, would say: “What the fuck is she doing?” I was raised by my parents to always finish my plate and not waste food and definitely not to play with it. I also became increasingly aware and paid attention to how different people carry and transport things. In these days when I walked with my one-two-three-four-five kilos I encountered and began to look more closely at people carrying weight in their arms, with their hands, upon their shoulders, their backs, on their heads, or dragging it behind them. I began to notice how older people would sometimes have problems with carrying weight even with one hand and then those who have difficulty in walking supporting their own weight.

Somehow with my own growing disgust at walking with potatoes, I had to stop. But this performative gesture led to me become very keen to explore the idea of carrying weight or weight in general and as I am very much inclined to go to the core of a subject matter – I went on to look up what the essence of the word 'weight' means according to the Oxford English Dictionary. I am interested in precision and in being able to define very accurately a specific topic that concerns me. When I look up what something means or stands for I do not always totally understand it until I find synonyms and links to corresponding subject matters and then I continue to search until meaning opens out. I do this research in my practice as an artist when connecting threads of thoughts and words, but also as a writer I have a very fond appreciation for language and the written and spoken word. So here I am trying to arrive at the one word or action or event that goes right to the core of things, to the point from which something proceeds, emanates, originates, or develops is what concerns me.

In my research I recognise that the word that has been resonating, and perhaps had been resonating with me for several years, is gravity.

Being German, I have strong affinities with the German language and try to use German titles for my works and exhibitions. However the definition and meaning of gravity in English is so broad in contrast to the German translations, which are much more specific and focused on one singular partial meaning of gravity (for example: Schwere, Schwerkraft, Ernst, Größe, schwerwiegende Art, gravity in English includes them all.) These multiple meanings in English strike me as extremely rich in meaning and I am exploring this fecundity in my new sculptural work for the upcoming show in January.

Earlier this year I was on a mental rollercoaster. Both physically and mentally I had the sensation of carrying a lot of weight. You only get rid of that weight when you face the problems – until then you are damned like Sisyphus endlessly rolling a rock up a hill.

You are always carrying baggage somehow anyway. Think of one's upbringing, experience and education – one can never completely get rid of this baggage.

As an artist I intend to put a finger on the wound, or certainly upon the most critical spot where it hurts the most.

Death is probably the ultimate stage when one gets weightless. In meditation though one learns to be grounded and empty. For a long time already I have a thorough interest in Buddhism and its practice of meditation. I meditate regularly. In doing it daily for several months: I manage to establish a state of being profoundly grounded and focused. Next year (2023) I am visiting Buddhist monasteries in the Indian and Nepalese Himalayas and in Japan. Gravity in that sense relates to my very personal relation to the term describing heaviness as in weight, but also in terms of the gravity of a subject matter; depression, agonizing, self destructive behavior but very positively: being grounded and connected and aware through meditation.

Taking it further: politically and economically we currently experience a global crisis – the world is on fire. When watching the News or reading the newspaper, when having a walk in the street even, we are confronted with serious global issues we must address: poverty, climate change, food insecurity, refugee rights, COVID-19 just to name a few. We live in an era of polarization dividing people and countries more and more. Due to the current war(s) food chains are disrupted, heating and electricity prices went exponentially up and everyone is affected. A possible Nuclear war would literally set the world on fire.

Gravity, as in ‘something grave; a grave or serious subject, speech or remark’ is a word that describes pretty well the seriousness of the current political and economic situation right now.”

Michael Curran, December 2022