

GAGOSIAN



# Daide Balula

by  
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There is something surreal, odd, and perhaps even comical about Davide Balula's artworks. Their blatant simplicity betrays the fact that they are also intellectually aware and critically engaged with some of the most complex issues of our era.

The artist comes to art from a background in experimental music, but could have just as easily trained in philosophy or phenomenology or physics. He addresses the interaction between the artist, artwork, and viewer, by focusing his attention on collective experiences like concerts or city life, and the way that each audience member is an integral part of the performance. Thus his work explores the subject of *experience* itself. These experiences converge with memories to lead us toward an awareness of the truths that we somehow already know, in ways that can be quite profound. He does this while comfortably working in a wide-ranging variety of media – from performance art, to installations, or wall-works. The results are often a meaningful commentary on the key matters of existence. His art has an almost Taoist means of accomplishing its ends. By focusing on the most simple, essential subjects, and not over-thinking them, he has created profound overtures about the way we conceive of our experiences and construct our realities.

#### Fire:

Some of the artist's most iconic works address simple, elemental themes including the first human ritual: the rapid oxidation of a fuel into the exothermic chemical process of combustion. Of course, fire is an ideal formal material for him because of its resulting byproducts of heat, light, and for the way that it transforms the consumed materials. In *Speaking in Flames (The Voice of the Fire Breather)*, a 2014 performance at MoMA PS1 in New York, he translated the intonations of a fire breather into the English language. This at once emphasizes the absurdity of the action, yet also demonstrates the way that forms always communicate, despite our general inability to even fully grasp spectacular images or to put words to their alluring appeal. Moreover, Balula's interest in translation calls attention to the ways that art and all abstractions (including language itself) are an approximation of the thing they purport to convey.

Balula shows us that one role of the artist is as an interpreter of the ineffable. Of course, this often involves making compromises because of the obtuseness of shifting an idea from one form to another because of our limited human vocabulary. For him, doing so can also be part of what makes abstraction so interesting. At the same time, he calls our attention to the fact that this paradox

of abstraction also emphasizes the distance between human beings. It may often seem minuscule, but when it comes to communicating what seem to be mundane facts about our reality, it can be a nearly insurmountable chasm.

#### Memory/Time:

This translation of the abstraction of the literal is precisely what the artist emphasizes with a suite of abstract paintings that he created through simple natural processes (by burning canvases, and gathering sediments and bacteria by burying or submerging others), as well as in the way that he had these works converted into corresponding ice cream flavors produced with Michelin Award-winning chef Daniel Burns (former pastry chef of Noma in Copenhagen, now co-owner of Tørst and Luksus in Brooklyn, NY). The resulting installation at the Art Basel Parcours sector in 2015, *Painting the Roof of Your Mouth (Ice Cream)*, demonstrates that the pictures or even words like "burnt wood," "smoke," "dirt," and "river" are an approximation of the chemical compounds that our receptors interpret, and even more profoundly, that the memories these tastes evoke are entirely different from one person to the next. We each have remarkably unique perceptions of the world, and this is what makes individual subjectivity so particular.

Likewise, the artist's artworks about time, such as his *The Endless Pace (Variation for 60 Dancers)* performance for Performa's 2009 Biennial, highlight the individuality of perception. By uniting sixty unique viewpoints about the length of one second, articulated through each performer's movements as they rotate around the circle, a collective expression of something approximating a minute is built through the aggregate of these individual actions. A clock face manifests from the overhead view of the performance's documentation, with the wave-like movements continuing to tick around the "visual hour."

Similar ends are achieved by performances the artist has orchestrated via text messages sent over an extended period of time, such as "The thickness of your soles between now," then days later: "and now." They direct the audience's attention to seemingly imperceptible measurements. Works like his *Coloring the WiFi Network (2015)* use digital technology as a mediating tool that allows humans to perceive things that we cannot ordinarily perceive with our limited sensory capabilities. In this piece Balula modified WiFi routers to produce unencrypted wireless networks named after colors such as "Sunny Yellow" or "Mustard Yellow." These titles were only viewable when the audience used their device to connect to nearby networks, and the corresponding colors manifested on

Mixed Sculpture (Henry Moore, Tony Smith, Barbara Hepworth), 2016 Installation view, Art Basel Unlimited, Basel, 2016. Courtesy: the artist, galerie frank elbaz, Paris, and Georgian Gallery (p. 153, 154, 155)  
Painting the Roof of Your Mouth (Ice Cream), 2014. Photos: Raphael Fawell. Courtesy: the artist, galerie frank elbaz, Chelsea, Gallery (p. 156, 158, 161)





splash pages once the network was joined. What is emphasized in these works is how perception in the digital age has been drastically altered by our reliance on smartphones to dictate what we might otherwise trust our senses to confirm, and accordingly, how these devices provide significant compromises to the privacy of our personal information in the process.

**Misdirection:**

The work submitted on the occasion of his nomination for the 2015 Prix Marcel Duchamp at FIAC in Paris, *La main dans le texte (Pick-pocket)*, consisted of a large number of unique tokens made from Limoges porcelain, which were deposited into the pockets and bags of fair-goers by professional pickpockets. The work evoked the global commercial context of the Parisian art fair setting, where American tourists have long been told to remain vigilant of the city's ubiquitous petty thieves. However, the piece was also a significant inversion of the traditional modes of experiencing a work of art. To this end, audiences could do very little to actually perceive the magic of the work (aside from intentionally trying to appear distracted), because the pickpockets chose their subjects with a different set of objectives than an artist or curator would. In this way, the reach of the artwork far exceeded the object hanging on the wall. Audience members had their personal space violated by an artwork that they might have never actually seen because of the fair's overwhelming nature.

Indeed, this potential for not-knowing is an integral part of the piece's brilliance. Certainly quite a number of the people who found these tokens in their pockets might never have seen Balula's work and were probably quite confused about the porcelain keepsake they eventually discovered. What's more, they all now also have a confusing reminder of the unspoken and often unapparent rules of engagement of daily life in public space: the individual is vulnerable to exchanges of all kinds because of society's complicated networks of human interaction. Some of these may be more dastardly, as embodied by the current pervasiveness of surveillance as well as the traces that we leave (such as fingerprints and DNA, but also more abstract digital footprints), but the piece also has more benevolent interpretations too. The artist has embedded in the work the idea that there is now a group of people who most certainly don't know each other, but are all linked together as participants selected to be part of the artwork. This is not particularly different from the way all of the audience members at a concert share a bond of individual collectivity and collective individuality. Perhaps even more poetically, the smile of a passing stranger can









La main dans la main (Proposed), 2015. Photo: Raphael Faell. Courtesy: the artist (pp. 165-168, opposite page)

remain imprinted in your memory years after the fleeting momentary exchange, and even the subtlest transaction with an artwork or idea leaves its trace in ways that we cannot even fully know.

Nothing:

In *Mimed Sculptures* (2016), exhibited as part of the Unlimited section of Art Basel in Switzerland, the physical form of the object is no longer present. Instead, a group of mime artists dressed in white wearing fuchsia colored gloves traced the forms of historical sculptures, helping viewers momentarily perceive large works by Louise Bourgeois, Alberto Giacometti, Barbara Hepworth, and others. These icons of modern sculpture are abstracted to invisibility, but Balula also wryly cuts through the Post-war debates about how their subjects relate to them. He addressed the opposing theories of Herbert Read, who lauded Henry Moore for the way he created works that emphasize touch and ought to be held or rubbed, and Clement Greenberg, who celebrated David Smith for insisting in the optical dimension in his work, especially the pieces made via assemblage. The artist short-circuits their dispute by removing both the optical and the physical attributes completely. In their absence all that remains is the experience of the mime artists' memory of the works and our own experience as it is re-created. Thus, the piece is entirely a projection and perception of emptiness, or, entirely subjectivity without the object.

The questions that Balula is asking in his work about the ways that we create and define reality are more important than ever. Technological mediation has significantly impacted the way we experience and document art in our current digital age, essentially also short-circuiting Read and Greenberg's debate. The artist demonstrates that art has a communicative nature. Specifically, it is a system of expression in which information is exchanged from a transmitter through a signal and ideally reaches a receptive destination. This insists that the artist, artwork, and audience are of equal importance and equally active in the equation. But Balula's goal is toward dialogue, rather than monologue. His work can elicit a feeling as if a total stranger (even one from ages ago) has connected to reach out their hand to meet yours. In the case of Balula's work, this hand might be covered in a fuchsia colored glove demarcating the form of a sculptural masterpiece, or could even be the swift, nimble hand of a pickpocket, effortlessly leaving you with something special you didn't even know you were trying to grasp.