

AVANTI & INDIETRO

Eighth conversation with David Rickard, born in New Zealand in 1975, but living in London.
by Raffaele Gavarro

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The eight conversation of “Avanti&Indietro” is with **David Rickard**, born in New Zealand in 1975 but for years living in London. All his work has focused on understanding the ongoing relationship between the perception of reality and what could be termed as its intrinsic nature, where and when it is possible to define it.

RG. So let’s start from reality, from our current relationship with it, made even more complex by its extension on the digital plane, to which we now recognize a similar concreteness and whose perception is more and more assimilable to that of the concrete, analogical plane. Assuming that art, like everything else, finds itself and acts in this context, what do you think are the consequences for all of us of such a complex perception? We are losing or gaining something?

DR. It certainly feels like our relationship with reality is changing more rapidly than ever. Firstly, more and more things are now being constructed within our digital environments that impact profoundly on the physical world; be that the production and movement of goods, to our healthcare, communities and also politics. However, I think that our understanding of the physical world has also undergone profound changes preceding our digital age; for example the discovery of the atomic scale and the understanding that solid matter is largely vacant space governed by intermolecular forces, or the harnessing of electromagnetic waves which simply pass through solid matter. In some ways I get the feeling that the real world appears to be dissolving around us as the virtual world becomes ever more solid. So, I agree that our perception is becoming increasingly layered and complex and I think we’re gaining many things through this process. However, despite our remarkable speed in acclimatising to new environments it sometimes feels like we’re struggling to adapt to a fluid world of information and saturation.

RG. A struggle that I do not think is exaggerated to define for survival, in which the first thing at stake, I believe, is not only, or so, an understanding of the new and articulated nature of reality, but the very essence of our identity in it. If you think about it, being ourselves indefatigable producers of reality, being the last indissoluble part of our existence, the need to understand one goes through the understanding of the other, and vice versa (the other way around). I’m reminded of your Test flights of 2009. Real experiments on gravity, on the consequences of the fall of a heavy object, whose violent (it is appropriate to say) metaphor speaks of the physical and inner gravity that conditions much of our existence.

DR. Having re-read your words a couple of times I think I'm also struggling a little with 'google translate', which seems highly appropriate in the context of our conversation on the digital age and its influence on our reality. However, I can agree with your comment that we're an inseparable part of reality and in some ways we also construct alternative realities, but I don't think we're really producers of reality, rather a small cog trying to understand the remarkable mechanism we find ourselves within. Which brings me back to the point that what we perceive is often far from reality. Like the fact we are turning with the rotation of the earth, something we weren't able to recognise until very recently within the context of human history and something still debated by flat earth societies. I find this oscillation between perception and knowledge fascinating and in some ways 'Test Flights' links to this concept nicely; not just through its gravitational impact, but also because it was an experiment without a clear outcome. The Contemporary Art Society boldly commissioned the work without a defined material or form, knowing only that the sculptures would be generated by their context, by dropping them from the heights relative to each of the Economist Towers. So yes, the work is in many ways an interesting metaphor for the conditions of our existence, that being a leap into the unknown .



Test Flights, 2009, Ceramic, Courtesy of the artist and Galleria Michela Rizzo (Photo Credits: Elisabeth Oertel (drop), Manolo Verga (installed))

RG. In this time I often ask myself what is the difference between the perception of reality, in its different analogical and digital articulations, and what its essential quality, let's say truth. Paolo Bozzi (1930-2003), an Italian psychologist among the leading scholars of Gestalt psychology, that worked and written so much on the visual perception of colors, but also on the perception of the pendulum motion as that relating to the inclined planes, is often cited as this kind of aphorism: "If there is a big black stone on an island, and all the inhabitants are convinced - with elaborate experiences and a lot of persuasion - that the stone is white, the stone remains black, and the inhabitants of the island are just as idiots. ". The phrase assumes that there is someone, inhabitant of the island or not, who knows how to indicate with absolute certainty the true color of the stone, which therefore is able to demonstrate through science, and perhaps even common sense, the truth about the color of the stone, and therefore the truth proper to reality. Speak of truth about art is not as improper as you might imagine. Theodor Adorno in his Aesthetic Theory (1970), for example, places it as a decisive element of the successful work of art "whose form springs from its content of truth.". An averment that seems to me perfect for your work, which bases on the one hand the matter and on the other the knowledge followed through the thread of science on the other.

DR. It's interesting that you turn to the dilemma of truth, as one of the works I'm developing right now is titled 'a nugget of truth mined from the emptiness of information'. It follows on from other works that consider the physical properties of materials, such as 'diminishing returns' (2017), however with this new work I'm thinking more about the relationship between truth and digital. It's made from copper, the material responsible for carrying our electricity and much of our digital information around, including this conversation. By physically mining an online image of a copper nugget, with CNC laser, a void within a sheet of copper defines the information/image and also provides waste material for reinvention of the original object as an inflated reproduction of itself . . . image, object and truth become confounded. This physical reconstruction of a material nugget from a secondhand image might link back to our 'post truth' society where reality is constructed and inflated. So, perhaps Bozzi's story about the population being convinced that the stone is white, whilst it's clearly still black, was a premonition about our current world of social media, fake news and the political ramifications.



X, 2018, C-type photographs, Courtesy of the artist, Galleria Michela Rizzo & CØPPERFIELD London

RG. Alain Badiou in his “In Search of Lost Reality” (2016) argues that reality is an imposition: “We must constantly worry about reality, obey it, we must understand that nothing can be done against reality.”. A consideration that I think can be together with that of Thomas S. Eliot that in “Burt Norton” (1935), the first of the “Four Quartets” (1943), wrote: “Mankind can not bear too much reality.”, as if that imposition of which Badiou speaks could be the cause of suffering and of a consequent need to give form to some form of unreality. The arts, in the past, have been too, and to some extent still are today. But, as you rightly say, this rather than the time of possible unrealities, appears as that of falsifications, or at best, of fictions. Me too believe that the question has become political in a preliminary way, that the problem of understanding what reality is today must be addressed in that sphere of responsibility where the manipulation, if not the determination, of reality has decisive consequences on community. Your work “X” of 2018, in this sense, seems to me to be a very explicit statement, focused on the consequences of actions that before being scientific forecasts or esoteric or religious vaticines, have a political determination.

DR. Yes, as Badiou says there’s nothing that can be done about reality, its inescapable. Yet reality is often stranger than fiction. An interesting concept that I’ve recently been discussing with a mathematician is the remarkable role of ‘imaginary numbers’, which are derived by the square root of negative one. Conceived by the Greeks, yet thought to be impossible for centuries, the acceptance of the concept of imaginary numbers later led to the creation of complex analysis which is directly applicable for many real world calculations, such as magnetism and aerodynamics. Reflecting on the work ‘X’ I’m interested in our ability to perceive reality, which is largely based on trust and truth. What we are taught in school we take for truth, but the text books only reflect the current thinking and evolve with time. The work ‘X’ references Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Greek merchant from the 6th Century who produced some of the earliest and most famous world maps. Yet, despite his own extensive travels and the majority of sailors and astronomers of the time believing that the earth was a sphere, Cosmas staunchly believed in flat earth cosmology, stating that a spherical earth is “opposed to reason and alien to our nature and condition”. Now we readily accept that the earth is a sphere, however it’s only perceived in this way through second-hand information. The work ‘X’ was made through collaboration with people in Mozambique, Western Australia, French Polynesia and Brazil, at specific locations along the same latitude that intersect through the earth to form a perfect X. With each collaborator installing a wooden stake vertically into the ground, a series of four markers were placed in the landscape. Collectively they form the ends of a very large X, which could be read as crossing out a mistake, or perhaps marking a specific location on a map, yet it’s global in scale. The work leads us back to collaboration and trust as I didn’t personally travel to the four locations, using the internet and GPS the installation and documentation of the work was undertaken by people who I’ve never personally met within places I’ve never been.

RG. The imaginary number is a truly remarkable, and impeccable way, with which mathematics demonstrates how it is possible to solve a problem that reality poses in an unresolvable way. And it does, as you well know, isolating the negative element, the minus sign, which prevents the feasibility of the square root of the number in question. The process is completed by adding to the solution of the square root of the private number of the minus sign, the letter *i*, which is precisely for imagination. It is not only the expression of a convention, but the admission of the existence of something unknown, something that is beyond reality, but which exists in the same way. That letter *i* which follows the number is the initial of the imaginary but is also, and not least, the opening of mathematics to metaphysics, the logical demonstration of its condition of intrinsicity to physics. After all, art comes to very similar conclusions, although with a logical not so linear, and especially when trying to understand, to be a part of reality, and not to be a more or less trivial representation. There is your 2011 work entitled *Exhaust*, in which you fill the aluminum air balloons that you have exhaled in twenty-four hours. Thus a tangible physical space is formed, from something immaterial by definition, the air, which is also what allows us to live. *Exhaust* seems to me to be an exemplary exemplification of this interpenetration between physics and metaphysics in the essence of life.

DR. The relationship between physics and metaphysics plays a reoccurring role in my work, with many of the projects questioning reality through the lens of perception, experience and experimentation. With '*Exhaust*', I was interested in the connection between ourselves and the physical world. Our impact on our surroundings is clearly evident when we engage with objects, however there seems to be an underlying sensation that we are 'other' to the space that surrounds us when we're not acting upon it. Therefore, by collecting my breath, I was interested in visualising the intrinsic connection and active engagement we constantly have with the space that surrounds us; our invisible imprint on our surroundings. Through the careful collection of air over a 24-hour period all of my exhaled air forms a vast volume, eventually dwarfing the body that produced it. Following '*Exhaust*' there have been a number of other works that map relationships between self and space, including the drawings '*Head, shoulders, knees and toes*' (2014), '*Hairball*' (2004-14) made from a decade of my hair and more recently '*i*' (2016). Coincidentally titled the same as the symbol for imaginary numbers, the work '*i*' is titled in reference to the identity of self and also the gramogram of 'eye', to see. Using a capsule endoscopy camera I filmed the route from my mouth to my colon, to create an internal self-portrait. Seen through a peephole mounted in the wall the work provides a window into another space of tunnels and caverns, the internal architecture of a body. A folding of space, where the self surrounds the space.



Exhaust, 2011, 24 hour performance, Courtesy of the artist, Galleria Michela Rizzo & CØPPERFIELD London (Photo Credits: Manuel Vason)



The End, 2018, Courtesy of the artist, Galleria Michela Rizzo & CØPPERFIELD London

RG. On the theories of physics and in particular of quantum mechanics, which in some ways is metaphysical, at least in part your work “The End” is founded. A book that collects both scientific and fantastic forecasts about the end of the world, listed chronologically from 635 BC up to the recent predictions of the Big Rip theory, for which the acceleration of the expansion of the universe will lead to an increase in the dark energy that in about 22 billion years will be in such quantity to destroy (ripped) all the matter it composes the universe itself. If there was a beginning there cannot be an end. At least according to logic. The narrative you make of it in the book, and in the accompanying video, is in fact devoid of drama, aware in some way of the inevitability of the process. Among the theories on the after, the most suggestive, in my opinion, is that after this general collapse we will reach a new Big Bang and everything, from matter to time and space, will resume to exist. But perhaps I consider it suggestive only because I recognize in it the known element of cyclicity.

DR. I began making the ‘The End’ early last year after the ‘Doomsday Clock’ was adjusted to two minutes to mid-night, with midnight representing man-made global catastrophe. Established by the Chicago Atomic Scientists in 1947 the Doomsday Clock is now the closest it has ever been to the end, tied with 1953 when the U.S. and the Soviet Union began testing hydrogen bombs. This proximity to potential self-destruction prompted me into researching other predictions for global catastrophe. Initially this was just a very long list of dates and facts on my studio wall which connected with some other works I was making with broken mirrors. Later on they were compiled chronologically into a book and film, with the dates and facts forming a strange continuum of endings. The past predictions didn’t materialise and perhaps the future predictions are also wrong. However, the work is more about the concept of an end. Like everything, including our own mortality, it’s clear that there’ll be an end. This fate will eventually also happen to the planet Earth, humanity and perhaps even matter itself. Following that, time also potentially ends or the whole thing ignites again, however that’s another interesting metaphysical question.

The last, but not least.

Raffaele Gavarro