

The Funambulist

architectural narratives

TOPIE IMPITOYABLE /// Ethics of the Viscous Body (Munari, McLean & Faustino)

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Bruno Munari (1944) / Bruce McLean (1971) / Didier Faustino (2009)

My friend [Alexandre Pachiaudi](#) recently made me remember two works of **Bruno Munari** and **Bruce McLean**, respectively entitled *Seeking comfort in an uncomfortable armchair* (1944) and *Plinths I* (1971) that display similar situations in which their bodies were interacting with a chair-like object in positions that are uncommon to the usual practice of this same object. For the sake of this article, I am adding to this short inventory of similar body exercises, two works by **Didier Fiuza Faustino**: [Opus Incertum](#) (2009) and [Auto Satisfaction](#) (with students in Georgia State University, 2009).

These three works have all in common that they seem to consider the body as a sort of viscous matter that can embody various configurations in relation to the object on which this matter is falling. Viscous is a key word here as fluid would consider the body as a surface rather than a flesh assemblage. It seems that the body does not have any mechanical function that can negotiate with gravity but rather, it is a sort of viscous corpse that interacts with the volume of the object, yet cannot separate its parts one from another.

Introduced as such, one may not think that such operation of the body is something that could be considered as a manifesto of any kind. Embodying a “viscous corpse” is not exactly what one might look up to. As a matter of fact, we all have experienced a situation in which our body was continuously trying to find a comfortable position without ever finding it. If you tried to sleep on a rock, you know what I am talking

about. There is however something in these situation that brings our body back to the most primal negotiation with its material environment. Most mammal animals — understood here as non-humans — do not design and construct objects that can serve their comfort, and they are therefore experiencing this situation on a daily basis. Observe a dog trying to find the appropriate territory to rest, for example. There is an intuitive effort to understand how to dispose of its material parts with the material environment.

Comfort is a state for which the presence of the material environment disappears. The paroxysm of comfort probably lies in the state of free falling. This state is the one that Faustino is trying to triggers with *Opus Incertum*, which makes this work different in essence from the others presented here. There is however a fundamental problem with the ethics of comfort. It is easy to understand that the very idea of comfort is, by definition, not compatible with the political struggle — look at the Palestinian bourgeoisie to have an idea of it — but there is also a materialist philosophical problem linked to it. If the ethics of a materialist philosophy — like the Spinozist one — considers all act that makes our body (i.e. ourselves) in a ‘harmonious’ relation to its material environment, the negation of the latter constitutes a sort of counter-manifesto of this ethics. On the contrary, the “viscous corpse” that I was evoking above is a position — or rather a quasi-infinite set of positions — that continuously negotiate with this enviroing matter, and therefore with the world in general. Let us consider one more time the definition of life as the “set of functions that resists death,” (Xavier Bichat, 1800), and its corollary conclusion that death being a process always in progress, all of our acts are either decelerating or accelerating this process (see [recent article](#)). Life being characterized by a series of material exchanges (let us remember that 98% of our body’s matter is renewed every year) between the consistent assemblage of the body and its environment, we can then state the hypothesis that comfort, in its disconnection to the material environment, contributes to the acceleration of the death process.

There is an interesting chronology in the three examples that I chose for this argument. Munari uses his body to subvert the (apparently unsuccessful) essential goal of his chair, McLean uses cubes in a similar assignment but the abstraction of the object makes it less ‘intentioned’ and more abstract than the chair. Faustino goes one step further with *Auto Satisfaction* as he composes a sort of objectal landscape that does not correspond anymore to an archetype, yet brings a complexity that the cubes did not. This chronology is therefore an invitation, not only to subvert the various normalized archetype that continuously surrounds us, but further, to design objects and architectures that do not carry in themselves a presupposed functional position of the body, but encourage the latter to acquire the degree of viscous body as a materialist ethics.