



## SUBSTANCE

GALERIE ANTOINE LEVI, PARIS

When we refer to the notion of “substance,” the image that arises is usually of an object occupying space, a thing, as contrasted with particular properties or events attached. Yet the more we consider the notion, the more it is ambiguated; complicit with metaphysics, substance is also inherently immaterial, constituting the essential nature of phenomena, an articulation of being expressed through real physical matter. Instead of being delineated as precisely physical or transcendent, it exists within its phase transitions: a malleable, viscous compound, where its contextual changes come to define its configuration—be it an existential drama or particles colliding.

Galerie Antoine Levi’s group show *Substance* in Paris [May 23–July 4, 2013] invited six artists to consider what changes take place in formal works as material supports unfold and become events in themselves. A result of intentional processes and chance events combined, the works equivocated social, procedural, and aesthetic decision with the contingent affect of materials in themselves—contingency, here, suggesting the artist’s ability to imagine the possible progression of their work, creating an amalgamation between independent thought and the reality of how the work is perceived outside of the artist’s imagination. In essence, what results is a collision between modes of production—experimental and theoretical—in which a space for complexity is created within aesthetics.

This logic of probability underwrites France Fiction’s installation: stratified layers of cast objects were positioned atop a game table, supporting four tiers of glass panel between each layer. The installation is the result of an invented game created for the show by the collective: a formalizing system, in which objects were placed according to common qualities: formal signifiers, but also internal ones. *Le Jeu de Qualités* operated as a positioning system, in which chance collided with sober reflection, transitions were mapped on the table, and out of this, events ramified. Through the encounter, the viewer was plunged into the uncertainty of the game,

whose impenetrable logic and philosophical complexity recalled Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game*. Seemingly a synthesis of the associative consciousness of the group, the game’s function was as inextricable from its mechanics as the displayed objects were from their projected realities.

The emergent event in G. Küng’s *Lake Diligence* was much more discreet, a scientific process beyond the possibility of discernment or participation. A folded plastic sheet containing a pool of black ink was suspended on the wall in an illusionistic display of silence and immobility. Yet, as the title suggested, the piece evoked a sense of silent concentration, specifically focused on the constant, imperceptible motions, persistent effort, levels of intent that the materials of Küng’s piece embodied. As the ink evaporated, it left behind spontaneous “drawings” on the plastic, playing on painterly abstraction in a way that automated—and poeticized—its own process. It is the very shape of the idea that Küng proposed, the elementariness of the work, which contextualized the subtle complexity of the exhibition itself and allowed for the tensions created.

Kilian Rütthemann’s glass slabs seemed to perpetuate this sense of anticipation by isolating a formal moment in which two substances collided to form an unknown. Glass was adhered to the wall with black acrylic glue, confusing image with material and its supports, such as the wall of the gallery or the other works reflected in the glass. The stripped-down aesthetic of the work invited the viewer into a dead-end search for content, where the eye was continuously distracted and redirected by the maze-like pattern of the glue. Like France Fiction’s philosophical arbitrage and Küng’s deferred processes, Rütthemann’s work relied on a tension between the expected and the unexpected. In *Glass Front*, the two were entangled indistinguishably, with the unity of place creating cohesion without resolution.

It could perhaps be said that the expectation of some inherent, presumed meaning stimulated a portion of the

viewer’s experience of certain works. Playing off specific processes that seemed to hinge on the intangible, such as in Küng’s *Lake Diligence*, the spatial arrangements of certain works seemed to evoke similar engagement. Sean Townley’s *Untitled (Paw)*, for example, stood facing a wall in strange proximity to Francesco Gennari’s *Autoritratto come notte*, almost as though held in waiting—for what, we can only guess. The objects struck me as contextualized by this narrative convenience, the paw obediently at the foot of the portrait, alternating between autonomy and a frustrating refusal to communicate. This refusal confronted the viewer with the immediacy of form: of the acute, unchanging angles of Townley’s sculpture or the cathartic immersion of Gennari’s *Autoritratto*, fading into pure blackness, fabric lost into other substrates. Davide Bertocchi’s work echoed a conceptualized image of what happens when two substances collide, creating a mist-enveloped object not substantiated by anything other than a conflation of pseudo-scientific experimentation and a nostalgic conscience towards objects.

Creating a disconcerting blur between narrative conscience and a dark, unseen world of material properties, the works disclosed an awareness of the possibilities of not only materials, in an overtly blasé “object-oriented” manner, but also of the tensions they create. Within the exhibition we witness the collapse of various narratives, stratified material hierarchies, as well as a sense of repetitive minimalism, which allows it to read like a Samuel Beckett play; it becomes an introverted stage using archetypal materials and processes, which lend a sense of (unfulfilled) dramatic anticipation. And at that, the incentive is similar: the exhibition cleared a site for the works to not open up a space of thought upon the contingent affect of each individual object assembled, but also creating provisions for each other’s understanding.

Beckett, when asked to clarify the mysteries of his *Waiting For Godot*, said “It’s all symbiosis. It’s symbiosis.”

—Sabrina Tarasoff

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: France Fiction, detail view of *Le Jeu des Qualités*, 2013, mixed media installation, 115 x 78 x 78 centimeters [courtesy of Galerie Antoine Levi, Paris]; Kilian Rütthemann, *Glass Front*, 2011, glass, black silicone, 160 x 100 centimeters each, edition 3/10 and 4/10 [courtesy of Galerie Antoine Levi, Paris]