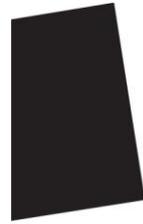


Miguel Palma: COMMA01

Essay by Sally O'Reilly



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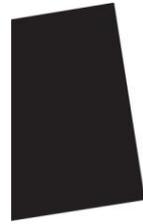
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Miguel Palma: COMMA01

Osmosis is a core biological process that appeals to those of us who enjoy embellishing language with metaphor. It is a molecular mode of passage that offers all manner of analogies for grander states of transition, from resolute decision-making to subconscious tendencies to collective social movements. We can anthropomorphise the salt as it passes from the more concentrated environment to the less, and imbue it with the faculty of desire or taste or an environmental conscience. Or perhaps osmosis mirrors our own isolationary inclinations, as the portholes of the semipermeable membrane administrate salt molecules in search of a less intense situation, or maybe it conjures the learning processes of children, where exposure alone seems to enable information to leak into their porous brains.

Beyond these animated allusions, though, we tend to take osmosis for granted, along with capillary action and all those other processes that nature effortlessly performs and which enable us to survive. Osmosis labours away ceaselessly and unspectacularly in the background, but what if it broke down and we had to synthesise it ourselves? Is it even possible to simulate a delicate yet demonstratively choosy membrane? Miguel Palma has been working with biologist Luis Cândia to develop just such apparatus and, as you stand before the tanks commissioned for Bloomberg SPACE, it is immediately evident that this is not a straightforward task. Sculpturally Palma's Osmosis resembles a baroque accumulation, counter to the conceptual sleight of hand that nature has devised. Three fish tanks, one filled with fresh water, the other salt and the third an intermediary reservoir, placed on no-nonsense tripods and bristling with pipes and pumps and gizmos, look more like badly injured victims on complex life support systems than an innate life enabler. And yet this contraption actually does work: as the water is pumped from one tank to the next the salt and fresh waters are maintained on the fly through the relentless mediation of osmosis. The two families of fish, one freshwater, the other ocean going, therefore continue to thrive in precisely the environment they need, despite technically sharing the same water. Although the water segues from a salty world to its obverse, the fish are never in danger or discomfort; and yet, for the sensitive, over-thinking human, nauseous anxiety arises from the very thought of protracted instability. While some of us thrive on eustress, or the thrill of overcoming pressurising conditions we still require periodic moments of arrival or achievement to make this bearable. The thought of perpetual change is not within even the most bustlingly industrious individual's idea of a challenge, which is perhaps why we seldom acknowledge our constant spinning in step with the planet's.

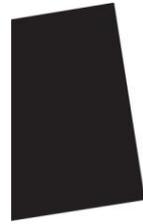


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While the stately condition of stability harks back to the era of enlightenment – when humanity was measuring, cataloguing, controlling and unifying the universe – perpetual change is more emblematic of current theoretical paradigms, which use buzzwords like ‘flux’, ‘entropy’ and ‘becoming’ to imply the impossibility of ever attaining or even glimpsing metaphysical truth. While Palma’s Osmosis employs technology that has developed from the era of objective science, it patently demonstrates the inelegant and hubristic shortfalls of such a programme. It reminds us of how, as scientific understanding progresses, it paradoxically uncovers irrationalities and anomalies that upset classical qualities such as harmony and order. And it demonstrates a fundamental aspect of cause and effect often overlooked by objective science of the past: change is relative, but it can also be subjective or entirely beyond perception. While a maelstrom of change occurs in the third tank, the fish remain oblivious to that which does not appear to directly affect them.

Technology generally requires the best solution to a problem, and provides the most economic, efficient, speedy or compact manifestation of an answer. Art neither proffers solutions nor holds much truck with efficiency, mass appeal or linear development. Palma repeatedly reinvents pre-existing phenomena with an attitude that is the technological equivalent of outsider art, with little regard for current developments in the commercial mainstream. For previous projects he has built a car from scratch, propelled a plane by way of makeshift engines, contrived a flying carpet and constructed an urban ecosystem with industrial and suburban quarters plagued by dust. He seems to parody the artist as dissembler of orthodoxy, wilfully operating in spheres where others are leagues ahead, and pricking an unquestioning trust in technology by gamely solving problems from first principles. Often his use of models and demonstrations suggests a didactic intention, although this is invariably made unstable with inherent errors, fictions or ambiguities. The ambiguity of Osmosis lies in the invisibility of the event we are required to accept as fact. We are being asked to trust the author of the situation, to assume that he acts in our best interests but, in contrast to the medical practitioner or the nuclear researcher, there is little at stake in the veracity of this project. Art is neither a matter of life and death nor truth and lies. The artist is not in the business of fulfilling expectations, and so we could be left at sea, somewhat, as to the status of the piece. We might be unsure whether it is a trickster’s feint, an eccentric conversation piece, an experimental proposition, a challenge pursued through curiosity or simply a folly.

We can be assured, however, that the apparatus is indeed working, that osmosis is being simulated in the gallery. This represents an interesting take on the tradition of literary realism. By substituting visual similitude for operational parity, Palma dismantles the classical understanding of mimetic representation; he asks why we privilege what something looks like over the function it performs. Similarly, 19th-century literature encompassed the internal psychology of a character as well as their external actions, which made novels like Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* so shocking at the time: to reveal the rationale behind transgressive behaviour was tantamount to condoning loose morals. Here the invisible workings of the world become the subject of a discipline rooted in the visual, demanding a different order of contemplation than we might ordinarily employ in a gallery. We can indulge our eyes to an extent, but our appreciation for awesome concepts is more likely to be piqued. Did you know, for instance, that a drop of water that falls as rain must wait



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another 5000 years to become a cloud again? This drop will then spend nine hours as a cloud before falling once more and waiting another 5000 years to regain a state of grace or elevation or nirvana. Did you also know that there are more molecules of water in a glass than there are glasses of water in the oceans? The apparently common or garden raindrop, then, is not only rare, but represents a mere fraction of the range of states of water.

For Palma contemplation of the minute can be profoundly allegorical in human terms too. In *Telescope* (1999), a telescope is trained on a microscope slide, twenty metres away, on which there are cancer cells stained with ink. Viewed through the telescope the cells look like immense galaxies, perhaps coming close to the scale of effect they have upon the individual that hosts them. For Palma the tiniest drip delivered by medical equipment outstrips the most magnificent magical waterfall in impact, as the promise of life trickles along its passage. Osmosis too carries allegorical weight, as two distinctly different types of fish are proven to be capable of sharing the same water, it is simply a matter of regulating its constitution to accommodate their different requirements. It's rather like a parable for liberalism: while we live in the same world, breathe the same air and drink the same water, we can remain different to one another. Equilibrium is a state of mutual vulnerability to impending external threat, maintained only through constant, and often imperceptible, effort.

Sally O'Reilly, writer