

## THE WORLD IS A SCULPTURE DISREGARDING ITSELF

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This is how things start with François Daireaux: a shape, a color, a sound captures his eye or his ear along his peregrinations throughout the world, and then reappears, persisting and haunting his mind. And then these shapes/colors/sounds lay in the artists “chest of drawers<sup>1</sup>” slowly maturing, awaiting the hour of their epiphany.

The projects are numerous in Daireaux’s drawers. Everything is potentially there in an embryonic form and constantly actualized by new journeys. Several years ago, during his trip in India, puzzling piles of packaged glass bangles seen on the markets (*Bangle markets*) opened a new drawer. He landed in Firozabad, in the north of the country as he was inquiring into the provenance of this unreasonable mass of bangles. The *glass bangles*, local specialty, have been the driving force of the glass industry in Firozabad for over 600 years. Produced by millions each day, they come and go on the streets of Firozabad, methodically tucked in bunches called “toras”<sup>2</sup> and transported on “tilas”<sup>3</sup>. Stunned by the colors and the quasi-sculptural shapes of the toras, François Daireaux took some back in his luggage and kept them in a corner of his studio and his head for three years. Then one day, the drawer re-opened, and the *Firozabad* project unfolded...

### The rumor of the city

François Daireaux is the kind of artist with a sculptural practice involving photography and video. In his wanderings through cities, the artists' photographic eye scrutinizes random settings of junk or objects, found or manufactured. Often he was described as a “flâneur” guided by his incomparable visual acuity. For him, the world is a sculpture disregarding itself. In these ready-made shapes where he never intervenes, he sees “natural” sculptural objects to be revealed. As he is interested in the sounds of life, walking is for him “a propitious moment to listen to the world, to take it into consideration, transiting is one of the ways to begin to listen”<sup>4</sup>. In Firozabad, first he focused on the toras, then he was captured by the whole glass industry itself, in particular the sound matter emanating from the factories and the city. He decided to extract this matter first through images, a series of photographs, *Million Bangles*, and a film, *Firozabad*. Its soundtrack is striking on many levels. Sound comes before image in the first sequence of the film: a voice transmitted by a speaker preempts the entrance of the train in the station while the screen stays black. Then the jiggle of the coaches passing at great speed in front of the camera, intermittently revealing the name Firozabad, provide the film with tempo in tune with the city. For an hour, we observe and listen to the glass cycle, to the protagonists and the life around it. The shards shoveled by the glass “skimmers”, the *zip* noise

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<sup>1</sup> While discussing with the artist, he mentioned the genesis of an artwork as a process of slow brewing; therefore came the metaphor of the drawer enclosing the projects awaiting their activation as a thread for this text.

<sup>2</sup> Phonetic translation of the term in Hindi for the bracelets bunches.

<sup>3</sup> Phonetic translation of the term in Hindi for the specific trucks to transport the toras.

<sup>4</sup> Thierry Davila, *Marcher, créer*, Ed. du regard, Paris, 2002, p. 16.

from the cutting of a glass spring and the delicate breaking of the bangles repeat like the chorus of a song; the *tac, tac, tac* of the bracelets lined up on the metal sheet, the ovens faint heating sound, the factories clamor, the sorting, the hammering, the polishing... This handful of tasks offer a rhythm, an almost infernal pulse of sounds and images. The quiet scene of the monkeys observing a factory emptied of its clamor is disturbing as a rare moment of rest, a silent counter-point to human frenzy. The difference is often subtle whenever the factories are in ruins or in activity. Like this swing, whether a remains or an object left awaiting, in the absence of the workers, has nothing but the void in which to sway. Coming and going, from the inside to the outside of the factories, filled or empty, Firozabad illustrates the paradigm filling/emptying, characteristic of François Daireaux sculptural practice.

### **The body at work**

With *Firozabad*, François Daireaux visually extends the work in progress of *Suite*, a non-exhaustive inventory of craft gestures from all over the world started in 2004. Here the artist widens his frame of work from fragments to the bodies in action. Yet *Firozabad*, a succession of disparate scenes like a “pièce à tiroirs” explores the same theme: the cinematics of labor. In each factory, Daireaux captures the rhythmic, even hypnotic coordination of the bodies, individual movements and the forces inhabiting them. The film is even more choreographic, the ongoing ballet of the workers captivates: the declination of shapes from recycling to liquefaction, from soft reddish substance to the final solid product, in an infinite variety of colors and forms. The life-size framing renders the completeness of the immersion of the artist amidst the workers. He drops the stillness of *Suite*, changes scale then lets himself be guided by things passing in front of him. Thus the camera slides from one subject to another, from one shape to another, scrutinizing the details, the shapes' spontaneous outcome, something not so familiar in Daireaux' practice. Body-camera or body-container, he becomes a go-between, articulating the present forces and forms. Physically experimenting reality is essential to him. The artist stays very close to the glass matter and the workers, filming the bodies and faces in close-up, most of the time facing the camera<sup>5</sup>. The filming is a single movement, grazing the bodies and the outlines of the forms.

The men's movements and faces are bodily filmed; the skin's omnipresence contributes to the sensuality, even sexuality transpiring from the images. François Daireaux multiplies shots of the workers hands maneuvering the blowpipes, the soft and loose<sup>6</sup> forms of the glass, shots of necks, nude torsos, the resting (the film is punctuated with images of lying bodies or slack hands) or even the subtle hip swigs of the workers molding the matter. Thus the artist alternates inside shots of the factories and static shots of the walls around them: where there Hindi ads in white paint promote medicine for sexual aid. Referring to the Marxist theories which consider work and procreation as two modes of the same process of

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<sup>5</sup> The use of close-up in François Daireaux' practice is rare enough to be seen here as significant. There is only one work, the video *P. Chellappan*: it presents the impassive face of a man – the posing model of the art school of Trivandrum that Daireaux filmed in a still shot of twenty-five minutes. The close-up framing copies the quickly discarded busts made by the students. He remolded them for the installation of this video.

<sup>6</sup> Referring to the “going soft” of sculpture elaborated by Maurice Fréchuret in *Le Mou et ses formes, une nouvelle histoire de la sculpture*, Ed. Jacqueline Chambon, Paris, 2004. Fréchuret refers to an art that doesn't build up, rather lets it go, hang or sink.

vital fertility, it is more the “preservation of the reproductive function”<sup>7</sup> than the sexuality that is at stake. It is striking to see that, although absent from the Firozabi factories (with a few exceptions<sup>8</sup>), the women’s body haunts the male universe pictured here, with this highly feminine accessory, the *bangles*<sup>9</sup>.

Life and glass seem to be cast in the same cycle as in Firozabad, x-rays of rib cages hanging outside a street shop are inserted by Daireaux; they inevitably evoke the structure of the toras and the transparency of glass. One says that in Firozabad, the people are so absorbed with the glass industry that they don’t breath air but glass...

### **The infinite for skyline**

*Firozabad* is a global film revealing different industrial branches of a city (glass-blown objects, *bangles*, flat long beads, brickyards, etc.) as potential developments, potential drawers to activate. One of them – the production of *bangles* – originated the series of the *imprints*, a sculptural correspondence to the film and the series of photographs. Produced during a residency at the International Center of Glass Art of Meisenthal in the Moselle region, the *imprints* are affiliated to the principle of the unfinished series characteristic of his work. “One is the first digit of the never ending number” could be a maxim by François Daireaux. 785 drinkers in *Mnogo*, 144 *Suites* have been produced so far (a number that will continue to grow along his trips), 38 busts of P. Chellappan in the eponymous artwork, 203 *Skizzes*... As of today 404 “imprints” match 404 sorts of *bangles*, manufactured in the Firozabi factories visited by the artist, indexed, with the comprehensiveness of an entomologist, measured and categorized like the variants of a species; the samples have been numbered and sorted in colors in his archives.

As if he had defined the infinite as his skyline, the artist processes by the proliferation and itemization of forms. The casting technique, inducing numbers and multiplication, is one of his favorite modus operandi; variation is his process. He discovered by chance a “moulothèque” in the warehouses of the International Center of Glass Art of Meisenthal; a collection of over 2500 molds from different periods, which have been used for centuries by glass blowers to produce all shapes of glass objects and were saved after most of the glass factories from the Lorraine region closed down. After many attempts at hybridization and failed grafts of two glasses from two different cultures, François Daireaux decided to re-melt each tora indexed in Firozabad in a sole mold in Meisenthal. The resulting installation of 404 imprints, *Blow Bangles*, explore the fine variation within a same blue, a same red, a same green, etc. “The thinner is the difference, almost insignificant, the more awake and sharp is the sense of the Diverse. Red or green? By no means! Red or reddish, then red and red in a unlimited divisionism”<sup>10</sup>. The resulting installation of 404 imprints, *Blow Bangles*, explores the slim variation in a same blue, a same red, a same green, etc. As the glass itself, a fluid

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<sup>7</sup> Suneet Chopra, art critic, anthropologist, specialist of the working class and friend of François Daireaux translated and analyzed the content of the messages for him.

<sup>8</sup> The few women employed in the Firozabi factories are assigned to menial work such as sweeping or sorting the shards out by hand.

<sup>9</sup> Accessory of most Indian women defined by a code of color: the *bangle* identifies the marital status of the woman (engaged, married, widowed).

<sup>10</sup> Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme, une esthétique du divers*. Ed. Fata Morgana, p. 60-61.

matter capable of changing shape infinitely, the artist underlines the potentialities of the matter, the object's or even the artwork's infinite variation possibilities.

In his exhibition *Blow Firozabad Bangles* at the gallery L'imagerie in Lannion<sup>11</sup>, François Daireaux spread the 404 imprints on the floor of the first two rooms with no hierarchy of size, shape or color. The positioning and the fragility of the matter of the installation portrayed a vulnerable landscape. The viewer was forced into a slow and cautious progression amidst the fragile imprints, obstacles to the circulation and to a proper view of the *Million Bangles* photographs<sup>12</sup> pinned onto the walls like posters. In echo to the film *Firozabad*, in the series of photographs, François Daireaux operates a constant movement back and forth between the inside and the outside, from indoors of the factories to the surrounding landscape.

The visitor's path through the imprints leads him to a black room where *Firozabad* is projected. Entering the matter is doubled with entering the cinematic. François Daireaux investigates the connection with cinema in *Blow Bangles Production*, a new display of the project at the art center La Maréchalerie in Versailles. The artist translates the polysemy of the word "production" in reference to the industry, the art world and the show business. Using a powerful profile spotlight to encircle the 404, *Blow Bangles Production* takes on the shape of a film set. The viewer is transposed as the witness of a production that became the image of itself. The soundtrack of the Film *Firozabad* is playing in the first room of the exhibition and resonates in the glass imprints before the viewer sees the film, projected in the next room. If the apparatus in Lannion is centrifugal in relation to the landscape, the installation in Versailles is more centripetal by the concentration of the 404 imprints as well as the installation *Power*, encircling the space with piled up toras of black bangles, walling up the accesses and openings of the Maréchalerie's facade. If black is the sum of all colors, it is for the Firozabis the color of power, a meaningful symbol in Versailles.

All the work of François Daireaux is crossed by the question of time and the impermanence of things, expressed in the different ways of presenting a project: recycling his own pieces or in the choice of fragile matter. The installation *Vert de terre* (2000) explored the friable and photosensitive matter of floral foam – doomed to a certain instability. Later, the series *Grisaille* (2001-2003) became the altered ground of another installation, *Entrée* (2004). The impermanence of things is the fluctuancy, the passing, the transformation, the imperceptible change or the disappearance of things. The re-melt of the Firozabi tora in a mold from Lorraine deals with incarnation and reincarnation. The term here takes a particular sense regarding the provenance of the toras if we consider the Buddhist doctrine of the metempsychosis<sup>13</sup>, which believes the body reincarnates in another body.

Physical and non psychic<sup>14</sup>, this form of reincarnation would transmit to the new body the elements of the former body. Thus it formulates the question of memory, recurrent idea in the work of the artist, here mostly the tension between the past and future of the form.

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<sup>11</sup> *Blow Firozabad Bangles*, Galerie L'Imagerie, Lannion, March 31<sup>st</sup> to June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> *Million bangles, Firozabad*, 2012. 43 lambda prints, 78 x 93 cm each.

<sup>13</sup> The difference between the metempsychosis and the metempsychosis distinguish Buddhist and Hinduist dogmas. Hinduism believes in metempsychosis, migration of the soul from one body to another whereas Buddhism believes in the passage of one body to another.

<sup>14</sup> As opposed to the metempsychosis.

## **From local to global**

By re-melting the tora, François Daireaux inverts the manufacturing process of the bracelets to recompact the matter. The imprint deals with the notion of absence, the loss of the original state, with ambiguity: each impress possesses a visible and a hidden face like a sort of “double-bottom drawer”. Taking the aspect of a design object, the imprint carries in itself the trace of its vanishing matter – the tora’s melting and the glass blowing into a mold, the string included – as an autonomous form, while the conglomerated bangles are still discernable, like fossilized into a new objet, cast in the process.

The fusion of a product into another or a matter in the receptacle of another is extremely violent in the squandering of necessary energy. The sixty-four minutes of film emphasize the different steps, the meticulous gestures and the numerous hours of work to produce a tora. This violence carries the political dimension of the project. In Firozabad, when he films the workers crouched in front of the “mills of necessity”<sup>15</sup>, with their rudimentary tools fetching the glass by hand or inhaling the smoke of the plastic treads they find and burn, François Daireaux shows the harsh working conditions, the gap between a worker’s lifestyle and the public for this objects “manufactured by hand” in the primary sense. It’s in the sculptural extension of the 404 imprints that François Daireaux moves his political reflection a step further. There is no specific message but a stress on the creative process itself. The artist used the usual commercial channels making the series and became an actor of globalization (more than half of the production of Firozabad goes abroad), buying from the Firozabi sellers over many months to progressively fill a container to be sent to Meisenthal. The secular local craft, processes of which he had scrutinized for months, becomes a deterritorialized object relocalized in France. Daireaux reenacts the exchanging process of migration and networks, as economics and culture are intricately as part of the globalization process. Globalization has something to do with the origin of the glass industry in Firozabad, glass objects imported by successive invaders of India were then recycled by the Firozabis for the fabrication of bracelets. Daireaux explores the contradiction between local and global. But here he underlines the tension between the physically local and the locality in the filtering of the craft of one city through the mold from another as a direct confrontation with the effects of globalism: on one hand the glass of a local industry produced in enormous quantities in the full circle of the global market; on the other hand the glass from a local industry just managing amidst a national industrial crisis, the surviving glass industries in France being constantly challenged by foreign competition, especially the Indian.

The production of the 404 imprints involves a pure sculptural process, governed by the same rules as sculpture, transforming, altering matter (an entire production in this case) to gave it another shape, but what is interesting here is its global scale.

## **Project of multiple drawers**

« *Blow Firozabad Bangles* », a project of multiple drawers, must be looked at with a magnifying glass because it is thicker and more complex that it appears: the notions

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<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Condition de l’homme moderne*, Ed. Calmann-Lévy, Paris, p. 155.

conveyed, the different plastic developments (photographic, cinematographical and sculptural) but also because the seductive aspect (the hypnotic chromatic and cinematic ballet of the film or the beauty of the 404 imprints spread of colors, shapes and brightness in space), conceals a political reflection on the world and the effects of globalization. A magnifying glass also because it carries all the different aspects of the former works of François Daireaux – the persistent sediment of the drawers – and may reveal potential works to come. The long rods of golden glass like wisps of straw could be a clue...