

**Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev: MICOL ASSAËL, Artforum, NYC, January 2004.**

Micol Assaël is devoted to rock climbing and hiking along cliffs in rugged countryside, an endeavor that demands enormous self-control, a great deal of balance, and a touch of madness. The view from above can be breathtaking: One feels as though at the edge of the world, in a dangerous zone between land and its end. Assaël – who became intrigued by mathematics, physics, and their relation to art while in high school in Rome in the mid-'90s; who, still a teenager, knocked on *arte povera* artist Jannis Kounellis's door to discuss tragedy and the notion of necessity; who later studied the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger at university; and who now, an artist in her own right, has particular enthusiasm for the work of Bruce Nauman, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Richard Serra-creates inspiring artworks that re-place the body and authentic experience at the center of artistic practice after years during which digital art and the idea of virtual reality seemed to hold the art world in thrall. Similarly, she does not typically deploy documentary video or photography in her works because of their mediated nature but rather creates environments that are truly extreme.

Last summer's Venice Biennale was famously hot and humid. Simply visiting the show felt like a test of one's endurance. But when you entered Assaël's untitled installation in "The Zone" (Massimiliano Gioni's show of young Italian artists), you felt thrilled by how utterly unbearable an environment could be. The artist built a thirteen-by-thirteen-foot room out of massive sheets of iron. The only openings were the entrance and exit. Assaël then furnished the room sparsely, with a bed, a cabinet, a table; if such items normally evoke a domestic setting, here they were found object made of iron (the kinds of things you'd more likely find in a factory). Ten electrical transformers sat on the table under a glass box, each boosting its 220 volts up to 9,000 volts and sending power surging through a maze of wires to glass bulbs underneath the furniture, making them spark. Gale-force fans blew the stultifying air around in the space-under the bed, below the table, and into the closet-which somehow had the effect of making the room even hotter. Interestingly, on a cold wind that made the place feel icy.

Assaël's installations heighten our senses while suggesting risk and resistance as interesting mental and physical loci to explore. Although her works are also truly dangerous at times, she does not really focus on danger. Rather, she explores what risk taking means, especially as it opens up insights into the psychological and philosophical area where *agency*-intentionality and the responsibility and awareness of acting (or of choosing)-meets other mental realities, such as memories and dreams, that interfere with our intentions. This sort of interference occurs, for example, when a physical stimulus causes a psychological reaction such as fear, which then modifies our bodily experience, often resulting in a loss of self-control. Assaël's world is certainly a visual one, but it is first of all tactile, atmospheric, and acoustic. In *Nydalur*, 2000, an early work that was still metaphoric, she placed transparent glass semispheres over holes in an outdoor wall to encapsulate air-in part alluding to a shelter called Nydalur in a deserted area of Iceland she had just visited. In *The Theory of Homogeneous Turbulence*, 2002, metaphor came true in a nighttime winter installation in the woods at the Villa Medici in Rome (at Chiara Parisi's invitation): Assaël hid three powerful fans behind bushes: a white rotated and flashed high in the trees while its electrical frequency was miked and amplified. With this oblique reference to Heidegger's *Holzwege* (Off the Beaten Path; 1950) and perhaps even to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Assaël wanted her audience to experience being lost in the elements, nearly out of control, in a storm.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is chief curator at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Italy, where she most recently curated a retrospective of the work of William Kentridge.