

Why Is a Raven Like a Writing Desk?

An email interview between the artist Loris Gréaud and Polly Staple, Frieze Projects Director August 2006.

Polly Staple: Tell me about the commission you are realizing for this year's Frieze Projects at Frieze Art Fair, and how it came about.

Loris Gréaud: The show is called *Why Is a Raven Like a Writing Desk*, and the title refers to an unresolved riddle from the book *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. It's an important part of that story:

‘Have you guessed the riddle yet?’ the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.

‘No, I give up,’ Alice replied. ‘What’s the answer?’

‘I haven’t the slightest idea,’ said the Hatter.

‘Nor I,’ said the March Hare.

Alice sighed wearily. ‘I think you might do something better with the time,’ she said, ‘than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers.’

Lewis Carroll never revealed the answer to the riddle, and so the question becomes a kind of shell for different fields of knowledge. There are too many answers, too many potential propositions. This story could reflect my whole project – no end, no resolution, no scale.

P.S : What is a nanosculpture?

L.G : It’s a very, very small sculpture, about 27 μm .

P.S : If the nanosculptures are not visible to the human eye, then how can you ‘see’ them?

L.G : The CNRS researchers will produce images with an electronic ‘tunnel effect’ microscope. Amazingly, they can shift perspectives, and produce images as if we were smaller than the sculptures! No more scales – Alice in Wonderland.

P.S : How do we know they are really there?

L.G : Exhibition staff will guide visitors through the exhibition. They will have reproductions of the images of the nanosculptures, and the catalogue will feature stickers of the nanosculptures, modelled after the Panini stickers of football stars we had when we were kids – which were like a miniaturization of the world. But this is a show where believing is more important than seeing – that’s always more interesting for me.

P.S : How will you be presenting the nanosculptures at the fair?

L.G : We will have title captions on wall cards, which will contain all the information about the sculpture, just like any presentation card – but they will also contain the sculpture itself, untrue the nanos are made of Epoxy photoresist. Like the nanosculptures, captions are made of Silicium and then covered with resin. This solution makes it possible to keep the exhibition space empty while also showing the sculptures in an intelligent way. Designing a pedestal for the nanosculptures would be redundant.

The presentation is part of the entire project – DGZ Research have also designed an architectural booth for the works’ display. This structure will follow the codes of gallery and museum exhibition installation, and will sit off an aisle among the regular gallery booths at the fair. The structure will be designed so it can be dismantled and reassembled for other places and exhibitions. The architecture is also designed to allow the potential for future growth, similar to how plugs are used in architecture.

P.S : Why not supply the means to see the nanosculptures – for example, with a microscope?

L.G : We're not interested in simulating a scientific experiment, or in sparking a scientific discussion. It is much more about the poetic and Conceptual potential of such a show: creating desire, making the viewer active and letting him be free to project them in his mind, to imagine them himself. The idea that the only representation of a three-dimensional sculpture is through the two-dimensional flat image of the photograph is really beautiful to me and productive for me.

P.S : How will people be 'shown' the sculptures? The gallery's invigilators – will they be scientists? Artists? Exhibition staff?

L.G : They will be exhibition staff. It's a real exhibition, with a special display, specific events, a press release, an opening, a catalogue...

P.S : How have you framed the project? What ideas were in your mind when you made it?

L.G : I always take into account the format in which I will produce a project – it's my first aesthetic thought. I love the idea of irresolution as a format, and I sensed this could be productive in the context of Frieze Art Fair. Imagine new forms taking place inside the fair in the galleries, which are all engaged in the same game: producing desire, display and forms that are commercially viable. The fair is not a regular show, it's not a gallery, nor is it a public institution – but there is a little bit of all of those bound up in the art fair scenario and its temporary exhibition space.

One of my ideas was to imagine an oxymoron, a work that can hold a thesis and its contrary both in play: one which merged Pop and Conceptual art, for example. Let's imagine a space using the idea of the 'de-materialized art object', which belongs to Conceptual art – and let's imagine this space simultaneously presenting Pop forms using a Minimalist aesthetic... An exhibition of nanosculptures came as an answer – an answer that could reveal all the questions. Nanoscales are almost nothing: while you cannot see them with the human eye, they are actually present in the space. They are real physical objects: you can walk around them, they are named, they have dimensions, they are sculptures... they do exist but there is no easily visible proof to assure you of that fact. It is a show that exists mentally.

I am obsessed with the idea of an end, and, by extension, with the idea of resolution. I think I've found a way to produce an ongoing show, through producing an architecture for the nanosculptures, which waits, so to speak, for other outlets, other sculptures and maybe other functions... I had to figure out what kind of space could show this new type of artwork. How can an audience access and experience them? How do I document them? How do you collect them? What kind of catalogue could be made for this type of show? Does an art exhibition always have to produce images?

P.S : What is a 'nano' then? What is nanotechnology?

L.G : In the past few years, the innovation in the development of nanotechnology has literally exploded. There has been incredible progress made into the small-scale synthesis of objects like nanoparticles or nanotubes, which has involved a combination of biology, chemistry and physics. The information produced is important for everything from military to medical development. The miracle that brought humanity to discover nanotechnologies is also frightening – there is a fear that we are threatening infinite individual freedom through the dispersion of particles on such a small scale ... that we are creating nano-spies that can spread invisible to the human eye.

But on the other hand, what is being developed today in the nanoworld could save humanity – in combating local and global pollution, or in halting the exhaustion of the world's natural resources. In my opinion what is really significant is the merging, or the meta-merging, of information technologies, communication technologies, biotechnologies and cognitive sciences. This notion of merging suddenly focuses different fields of knowledge on an investigation of things on a minute scale. We have no official theory 'cadre' today, and this is both exciting and scary.

P.S : How do you make a nanosculpture?

L.G : At first I had discussions with my regular collaborators, the architects and designers Damien Ziakovic and Marc Dölger (who are part of DGZ Research), and with our team we made graphic models of several possible sculptural forms for the nanosculptures. We then contacted two scientific researchers, Vincent Studer and Denis Bartelo from CNRS, and we started to imagine altogether how we could produce these nanosculptures. It has been a really prolific and productive discussion – a great way to do things!

P.S : What is CNRS, and what experience have the scientists had with nanotechnology?

L.G : According to their website, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (National Centre for Scientific Research) is a government-funded research organization, under the administrative authority of France's Ministry of Research. It was founded in 1939 by governmental decree and is the largest fundamental research organization in Europe. CNRS is involved in all scientific fields, from chemistry, nuclear and high-energy physics to humanities and social sciences.

One of the major features of the organization is that it promotes inter-disciplinarity, in order to further knowledge, economic and technological development and to solve complex societal problems. It conducts some 20 interdisciplinary programs in several fields: life and its social challenges; information, communication and knowledge; environment, energy and sustainable development; nanosciences, nanotechnologies, materials; and astroparticles.

P.S : Who are DGZ Research?

L.G : DGZ research (Dölger, Gréaud, Ziakovic) is an interdisciplinary architecture, design and art studio. We three work together with a support team, exchanging ideas and points of view. We often invite other people to come brainstorm with us. We have been working together for more than two years and have already produced several exciting projects, such as air architecture and a subliminal light box. Right now we are working on our first big architectural construction.

P.S : Do you always work collaboratively?

L.G : This is my way of working - but I never talk in terms of 'collaborations' rather much more in terms of 'discussion space' - all the shapes or images come from specific discussions with others. The process is much more important than the result – the intermediate process is always the most exciting, and resolution is always deceptive. At the same time, however, I care very much about the final form and about the life of my work beyond its first exhibition.

P.S : What other projects are you working on at the moment?

L.G : I'm also working on the multi-part and multi-venue exhibition, 'Illusion Is a Revolutionary Weapon' – a vast network of projects taking place in London, Los Angeles, Milan, New York, Tokyo and Vilnius, on public streets, in building sites and playing fields, parks and galleries, and spreading through phone lines, radio waves, television emissions, rumours and hearsay. Units of information relating to the project will cross over, run together and cancel each other out – and ultimately obscure the experience of the project.

P.S : Tell me about your interest in *Alice in Wonderland*.

L.G : I love it!

P.S : And what's this about the black champagne that you are bringing to the fair?

L.G : We (DGZ) are developing some editions of black champagne, and thought the opening of *Why Is a Raven Like a Writing Desk?* would be the right moment to drink it, no?

P.S : Finally – are the sculptures for sale?

L.G : Of course.