

On maintaining focus



Visual artist Laëtitia Badaut Haussmann discusses why deep research is so important, and how laserlike focus is crucial to making good work.

September 14, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3207 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Design](#), [Production](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#).

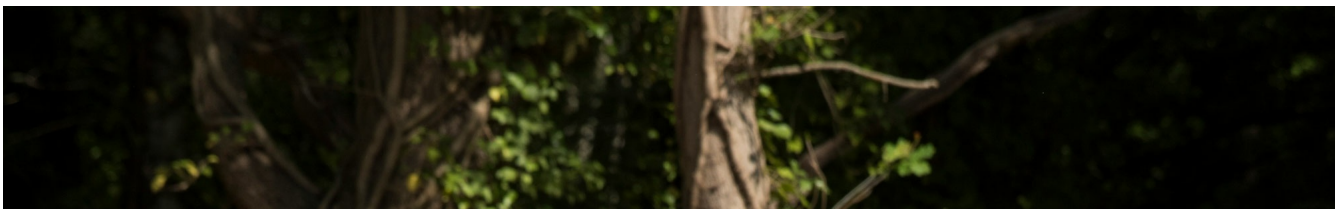
I first knew about your work via a friend who's an interior designer. He showed me a picture of one of your pieces—made from metal and velvet—and was like, "Why I can't I just find actual furniture that looks like this?"

That makes me very happy. The piece you're referencing is something I did a few years ago that was playing with these very binary elements, one of which is a metallic structure and the other is a very long and soft cushion in two colors, green and blue, that I dyed specifically. The title, *L'amour est plus froid que la mort*, comes from a Fassbinder movie, *Love is Colder Than Death*. Fassbinder has been a very important influence in my practice.

I made these pieces that looked somewhat like very long, big sofas. It's a structure that takes up over six meters on the floor, with these very long cushions. I kind of think of them like convertible sculptures, so I've also been cutting them up and changing them. It's always interesting to see where the work is leading you. This sort of work began after I read Jean Genet's *Querelle de Brest*, which is what Fassbinder actually adapted into his last movie. At the time I was prepping a show in Brest, which is a city quite far away in France. In Genet's text there is really only one important female character and she is talking about the relationship between these two brothers. It's all about these questions around desire and mourning and death. She uses this metaphor about these two people made of damaged velvet being put together. In the beginning, I had this desire to express in some material and visual form the feeling behind that. This is how that one idea eventually became those pieces.



Gogoplex, year: 2017, material: resin, acrylic painting, diameter 60 cm. Production : Lab'bel. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris





Dernier été, year: 2017. material: Twenty one inflatables and plastics balloons, 51cm diameter each. Production: Lab'bel. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris

Your work often comments not only on design—the way we consider physical spaces—but it also plays around with objects we think of as being utilitarian. Did you study architecture and design? They seem to inform your work.

No, I didn't. I studied fine art in a French school near Paris which was somewhat transversal—meaning I wasn't working in only sculpture or painting or performance; instead, everything was in contact. This school is known for its conceptual and transdisciplinary approach rather than being craft and medium exclusive. It was built after 1968 and the mobilization in Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. My school was part of the urbanist plan of Ville Nouvelle in the suburb of Paris, in the town of Cergy Pontoise. Some people say that Cergy is ygreç ('i grec', in "verlan" which is a kind of slang in French). I was basically taking classes and studying whatever was interesting to me. I was able to observe and study a large field of preferences and then somehow articulate all of it together.

I think my interest in design came after my attraction to architecture, which involved a kind of materialist approach. My attention to that world was really brought about by my concerns in history and by the situation, the history and context, of the structures. It's basically like an onion, where you are peeling away these layers. At the end, I now realize that this path and cross-research lead me to the body and the viewer; different types of bodies raise different social and political concerns. I'm interested in the way institutions take care of the bodies of the viewer in certain ways and the relation to power which is brought about by the question of design. So this is something I'm exploring little by little in each step of my research.

You've done a lot of site-specific work, paying attention to the context of the building and the history of the place. Is that your preferred way of working? Is the ideal to be able to immerse yourself in the place and develop work based specifically on that location?

Quite, yes. Ultimately, I'm not very much of a studio person. Even though I'm spending lots of time in my studio, I'm usually there doing preparation, research, or administrative work. I'm very interested and involved in doing immersive, deep research—it's clear that my research method is different to an academic one—and the most exciting moments for me are usually the times that I can spend in libraries or actually interacting with the exhibition space that I'm invited to work with. I would like to think of my work as being almost like a kind of haute couture—in a non-realistic way, it's just an image. I say that because I have a very slow pace of working and I love to be really focused and to be able to dedicate my intention and the quality of my answer to one very specific thing. I want the quality of the work to match the quality of the dialogue I have with the curator and the creative team. It'll have an effect on the public, on its perception of the work, of the proposition. Certain things move so quickly—there is so much speed involved in so much art and production—but instead, I want to be as specific and as rigorous as possible. I'm always trying to be as careful and precise and laser-focused on one thing as I can be.





The Him + Maisons Françaises, une collection n°159 (poster), year: 2017. material: plants, sand, two lamps Toio., Designer Castiglioni, Publisher Flos, 1962, various dimensions, poster. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris. Co-production: Lab'bel & Galerie Allen. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris



L'Amour est plus froid que la mort IV. year: 2017. material: Steel, skai, polystyrene, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris

When you're working on these large-scale, site-specific pieces, is a lot of the work just coming up with proposals and applying for residencies and grants and things like that? And given the fact that your work varies so wildly from piece to piece in terms of materials and format, does that make it harder for people to get a handle on what you and your work are all about?

Indeed, I think it's challenging. It's challenging because my work is viewed in very different contexts. I am willing to work within these different elements and parameters. I want it to be challenging and difficult to identify as my work at first look. I'm also using many different materials and working in different forms. Sometimes I'm just using text, sometimes I'm going to make a sculpture, or a stool; sometimes I will need to build something. There are so many ways to try and express something, and to react to something. So the thing I find so far is that I have an open vocabulary, it's more like something that's very shifting and very fluid and always trying to adjust and to adapt. I think that's the way I interact with things and my working method is a reflection of my psychological behavior.

The most difficult thing, the part that asks the most of the work and of my concentration, is just figuring out how I'm going to adjust to any new situation, and figuring out the answer that makes the most sense. It's like every time I take on a new project or get invited to do something, I need to develop an entirely new framework and approach.

As for the grant applications and stuff, I don't really apply for too much. When I do, it's for a very specific project. Regarding the residencies, they are a big issue for me being an artist, busy, in love, a mother and an instructor. The personal and professional is all tied together. Obviously, I can't and don't want to always go away for two, three, or six months. Women artists who are also mothers don't apply as much for long residencies, nor do artists who are working to make a living and to sustain their practice outside of the market. It can be both problematic and revolting.

I crave things like residencies though. It's a very precious moment, allowing a different relation to oneself, time, conscience, habits, creative process, imagination, localization, and so on. Last year, I went to Malta and we decided to split the one month residency into two periods of 10 to 12 days. It was great and it should be more often considered as a possibility. Institutions and structures that propose residencies should definitely reconsider the question of timing and partition.

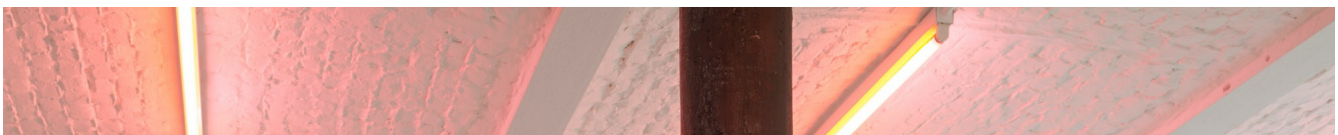
The creative schedule for certain kinds of working artists can be complicated. You might be working on pieces for a show that is two years from now, or maybe you literally don't know where you'll be or what you'll be working on a few months from now. How is that part of it for you? Do you just surrender to the flow of this process and wait and see where it takes you?

Yes and no, but I love how a long view and improvised, last-minute decisions can integrate together. I have a couple of big projects for late 2019 and I'm applying for some grants that might be good for specifically this type of project. So for this I'm feeling so peaceful and grateful because I know that I have this window of time and this situation ahead of me which is very clear. For instance, at Musée de Rochechouart, the building—a castle—is astonishing and the collection there is very interesting. So it will be, again, a very site-specific proposition. At the Beeler Gallery, there's an amazing library and the space is super engaging, plus I love the curators at both sites, they are brilliant and generous people. These kinds of situations are very precious because the time allows you to go really deep into your research.

Sometimes the more difficult thing is that you get so many little invitations, little projects, and little solicitations, which are also very important and interesting, but which can be distracting. Sometimes you are invited to do something one year in advance, but sometimes it's just two months, or a few weeks even. That short time period doesn't allow you to do as much research, so maybe the work is more repetitive, or more of an experiment or a draft. That can be good, too. I think often things need to be imagined in an emergency. Urgency is very important. A deadline.



DB/S 8, year: 2016, material: Wood, tiles, 400 x 105 x 270cm. With *Forms*, 1960 by George Kennethson And *Ornamental mask*, 1912 (posthumous cast) by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska ; *Kettles's Yard* collection, Cambridge. Production : Hepworth Wakefield, UK. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris.





L'Amour est plus froid que la mort III . year: 2016. material: Velvet, polystyrene, steel, plexiglas. Dimension: around 600 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris

Are you someone who always needs to be working on something? Do you ever have time where you're like, "I have this window of time where I don't have any projects, I could just go travel and not think about making anything."

I would love to just go away and relax, but I don't know if it's that I don't have time, or I'm so scared by the void that I'm not opening up any time to allow for it. I love being in my studio. When I don't go to my studio for one week, I miss it. I think I just love what I'm doing so much, I don't feel like I need a break from it. As an artist you never stop anyway, wherever you are. Also, because of the nature of the work, there's always something ongoing, in your brain, in your mail, in your eyes, so I don't manage to disconnect very much. Maybe that is a shame, I don't know. Maybe it's a blessing. Anyway, this is my thing. I'm kind of constantly focused in a way. So basically, I'm not so available to go on a trip or to be totally free-minded because I'm always thinking of this thing I didn't solve yet or some idea that I'm trying to build up properly or see my way into. I like to travel for a reason—often professionally—and then I can get lost during the trip, but first I need the reason.

By the time in your process when you get to the point of building something—constructing the physical object—do you find that most of your thinking about it is essentially done? Do things change much after that?

Yes, it does, the thinking, the understanding, but not necessarily the physical work itself. The only space where it changes a lot is when I'm working on the early stages of image making. For example, I'm often doing these silk posters, which are basically like silk scarves, that are also unique posters for the exhibition. It's usually for an exhibition that I am in or sometimes an artist or a curator will ask me to make them for another show or something. The graphics and image manipulation for doing something like that actually takes me lots and lots of time, even if I have the clarity of what image I'm going to use and everything. It's always evolving. When I'm working on a large metallic structure for instance, the plans have already been made. I've already been working with advanced 3D models, so by the time it's being made everything has already been worked out. It's the smaller projects that can often strangely end up taking a lot of my time, because when it's smaller I get deeper into the detail.





L'Amour est plus froid que la mort II. year: 2015. material: Velvet, polystyrene, steel, plexiglas. Dimension: around 600 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris



Scenius + Silkposter tesmainsdansmes chaussures. year: 2017 material: Patroclo [Gae Aulenti], 1975 / 1999, ed. Artemide + silk print, production : La Galerie, Noisy le Sec, FR & Cnap. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris

When you're working on a project and it feels like it's not working, or when you feel stuck, do you have certain tricks or things that you do to get out of that mindset?

Music. And I just keep working. I'm working a lot [laughs]. I try sometimes to take a step back, but the way I work is so organic that it's hard to pinpoint those kinds of moments. I know that I can't control everything, so usually it is just a matter of stepping back, or trying to understand how I might have solved problems on a similar project. I think it's important to try and understand the way things happen in order to learn from it all. Having said that, I am just about to order Oblique Strategies by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt.

Do you have any advice for emerging artists? Or things that you wish you had known when you were starting out?

Sure. I am teaching at Parsons New School in Paris and it's always very positive and very interesting to be in dialogue with young people who are training to be artists, fashion designers, and professionals in the creative field. I can only speak from my own experience, of course, but it often feels weird to try and tell someone else how to be an artist. No one can tell you how. I just say that you have to think of what you do as important and take it seriously. It is a commitment that requires lots and lots of work, but it should be work that you love. You should not underestimate the amount of work involved and you should pay attention and focus on your feelings and try to be as confident as you can be. Also, from a material perspective, what it means to try and be a professional artist in New York is different than talking about the situation in London, Paris, Geneva, Dakar, Istanbul, or Beijing.

In London there is a big exhibition show at the end of the year where important gallery directors are coming to see the students' final show. In Paris there isn't such a strong connection between the schools and the galleries and I have no idea about New York. There are many Swiss grants. In Belgium there is an income guarantee by the state if you can prove the regularity of your artistic practice.

I think the most important thing is to be absolutely focused, and to read and nourish yourself as much as possible. And not to let yourself be too swayed or distracted. For example, I love Instagram. It can be super inspiring, but mostly it's mentally polluting. It's very important just to make sure that my antennae is right, to be aware of what things are a good influence and who or what is positive to my imagination and my mental health. We have to think about things in the long-term as well, don't we? Even if you don't uncover what you originally set out to find, or even if you don't get any feedback on something for years, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't have done the work. Just be clear about your intentions and try to develop tools that can help carry you the full distance. Being an artist is a long journey.



L'amour est plus froid que la mort VII. year: 2018. material: Skaï, laminated metal, polystyrene. Production : Beeler Gallery, Columbus, USA. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris



L'amour est plus froid que la mort VII . year: 2018. material: Skaï, laminated metal, polystyrene. Production : Beeler Gallery, Columbus, USA. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris

Laëtitia Badaut Haussmann recommends:

[Three Guineas](#) (1938) by Virginia Woolf

[Lectures in America](#) (1935) by Gertrude Stein

[Caliban and the Witch](#) (2004) by Silvia Federici

[The Wretched of the Screen](#) (2012) by Hito Steyerl

[Even the Dead rise up](#)(2014) by Francis Mckee

[Essays in the Art of Writing](#) (1905) by Robert Louis Stevenson

[War and Peace](#) (1893) by Leo Tolstoy

Name

Laëtitia Badaut Haussmann

Vocation

Visual artist







Photo credit: William Simon