

# MATTIA LISTOWSKI

INTERVIEW

BY ISABELLE MOISY-COBTI (BILDUNG)

Mattia Listowski,  
Artist living in Brussels.

Hello Mattia. Can you describe yourself and tell us about your background?

I am Mattia Listowski, artist. Born in 1987 in Paris, from a Franco-Polish father and an Italian mother. Both architects, they met at the Venice School of Architecture (IUAV) during their studies (time of the La Tendenza movement, whose founders taught in this school). These origins mark me deeply. I am bilingual French Italian. I spent all my holidays as a child in the family home in the Po plain (Finale Emilia) as well as in Venice where I continue to go very regularly - my uncle and my aunt live there and work as journalists and editors from the city's cultural news magazine: they are my second parents. My paternal grandparents are Polish, born and having lived in Poland just before then during the 2nd World War. My grandmother is a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto; story which, like that of my grandfather, was never passed on to me. They arrived in France in the 1950s, themselves architects and urban planners from the Polytechnic School of Warsaw: their life was a permanent political and intellectual commitment. After wanting to practice naval architecture for a while: a form of continuity with a desire for differentiation, from the dream of an only son seeing himself as a solitary sailor, I was a student of Penninghen in graphic design and artistic direction, then of the academy Charpentier, in Paris; to close in Brussels on a year of film and video.

What is your first memory or relationship to art? How did you know that you were going to direct your career towards art?

My first memory of Art, I lived it as a child, at 8 years old, in a museum, when my parents took me to see the retrospective of Constantin Brancusi in Beaubourg in 1995, where I was fascinated by his work the Bird in space. If I was almost born with a pencil in my hand and I never stopped filling notebooks with this kind of forms, simple, synthetic, unexplained; my first creative intention, that of an adolescent escape, was that of music - the Piano -, meditative, repetitive, melodies of images of travel, movement, speed. Inspired first by Philip Glass (Metamorphosis and Glassworks), with a formation marked by the pianist Nariné Simonian around the work of Bach (Inventions and Preludes) and Czerny (Schule der Geläufigkeit - School of Velocity), then, by my own research, by Michael Nyman (revisiting Purcell in Murder in an English Garden) and John Cage (4'33" - of silence -, In a landscape) who considered that any sound can be musical if it is taken as a whole.

After studying, I first started by practicing graphic design, AD and filmmaking for a while; to devote myself progressively and entirely to my personal practice. It all clicked when I had the opportunity to create and direct a short film in traditional animation ("Rongo Rongo", frame-by-frame cartoon) for the artist Marco Nereo Rotelli during the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. At the time, the director Norman Maclaren was a great source of inspiration (the short films "Pas de deux" and "A little phantasy on a 19th century painting", transformations in movement by the graphics and light on the series of 5 paintings "Isle of the Dead" painted between 1880 and 1886 by Arnold Böcklin). My creation however truly settled into a daily practice from 2010, with the meeting of the decorator and designer Alice Roux, in life and at work, and the rental of a dedicated workshop in a former laundry in the 17th arrondissement. de Paris in 2012. Together we began a life of exchanges and creations, which also lives under the name of Alice and Mattia as an artistic duo (strongly influenced by the work of the artist Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the scenographer Bob Wilson, of Land artist Andy Goldsworthy).

Can you tell us more about your current practice? What does it consist of, the areas, skills or references it requires?

In a sense, I'm not a current artist, politically committed, my practice is more like a meditation, with the desire to take a step aside, take the time to observe my report involuntary to the history, to the past of my people and to the look towards the future, of who I am and why I am like this. I feel an absence in my work, the others are never represented. I look, alone, at the empty world. Interested in my beginnings (2008-2012) by photography as a tool for extracting emotional information, to recreate sensory experiences from scratch, like the aesthetic and physical shock experienced with the work of James Turrell (Red Shift, Scultura di Luce, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice) or by Ann Veronica Jansens — I discovered a testimonial photograph, as an experience of reality and a pretext for the attempt to create a trace, for analysis, to leave something behind. Raphaël Zarka, comparing his series of photographs "Les Formes du repos" in an interview with Christophe Gallois in 2012, speaks of a relationship with archaeology: "updating certain forms, bringing them together, studying them, contextualizing them, cross-checking information, make assumptions. » ; considering for my part the outer space as a field of exploration, sensory, perceptual, to talk about memory and memory.

Analog photography is a way for me to search, manually, for the reasons for the emergence of these images. I work with a medium format box (a Mamiya RZ67 (normally designed for working in the studio). It's a heavy device, which partly requires me to work on feet. However, I see it as a travel companion, the therefore also using freehand. The object itself, through its mechanical movements and its very present sound, possesses me. It is a physical relationship with it, and my subjects are borrowed from this particular relationship (a mythology of the photographer in the films Blow Up and Profession Reporter by Michelangelo Antonioni); like a struggle, to get something out of it: the job is to succeed in taking a photo.

My subjects, I call them events. They have their share of the ephemeral. They are often brief; either because they are moving and I am not moving; or because I'm the one moving, I can't stop, and they are static relative to me. However, my feeling is a permanence; a moment of eternal encounter. A very long moment, sometimes, for an architecture that is eroding, a very brief moment, like a passing bird. At random from a landscape, from two paths that intersect. As Marc Feustel of photographer Toshio Shibata says in "L'borrowing a landscape": his images are not photographs of the landscape, but images made from the landscape -. My photography is therefore basically only a pretext to illustrate forms that could be realized otherwise.

And for sculpting?

In my relationship to volume, to sculpture, I see a meeting - semantic - between Nature and Culture. As J.W. von Goethe says in The Metamorphosis of Plants: "All these forms resemble each other and none to another is alike; And that is why their chorus suggests to our minds a secret law. My work testifies to the fact that I try to realize what I see, and this in my photography, my drawing, my sculpture, my music. By the system put in place, this work gives the impression of a precise goal. I vaguely know what I would like to achieve. I'm aiming for something. But I also go there and at the same time without thinking. It is an instinctive, almost mechanical gesture. There is no metaphysical or philosophical intention there - on passage, elevation, death, etc. -: that is part of it, of course, but it is not my subject; I try to reproduce something that touches me (an unconscious link with my story), I want to reproduce it with my tools to know a little better what I feel and where it can come from.

Because of this struggle that I have with the tools, with the material, the subject of what I reproduce ultimately no longer matters much, neither the content nor the form. That counts in itself, but what counts for me is to put the thing in place, to succeed in doing it. The apparent form and its core, its meaning, are the same thing. It's a way to write a memory (as anyone would do by telling the story of their trip with their own means). We are all artists in this respect. Wanting to fix these moments in space, misunderstood, is a way of writing something so that it does not disappear, without knowing why, but to be able to continue to think about it. Pierre Soulages says: it's what I do that teaches me what I'm looking for. Through these impressions, I give permanence to my own existence. My difficulty is not to report a reality, but simply to make, to transform the material according to an abstract, sensory perception. My spaces and forms always float in a larger space, seeming unfinished or suggesting a path, a direction. It is actually my result, my end, and therefore the need to manufacture it. There is nothing more. It is a finished result, but there is misunderstanding, because for me it is only a starter. Giacometti interviewed in 1963, said: I continue because I know that I don't know, that I still don't understand.

Molding as a practice of sculpture is first of all an attempt to freeze the form of this "event" by enclosing it in a "box" - this ephemeral mold -, in order to then give it his subject. Like partitioning this meeting space between me and the event, to better circumscribe it, and wait. Hoping to find and feel the initial emotion again by opening the mold. With a vague idea of what I want to obtain, I work directly on the form in volume from the negative, matter of the void, of the space between me and the object in the making. Concrete, this crumbly stone, ephemeral compared to granite or marble, is for me the observation and admission of a failure, and in itself justifies the need for eternal renewal. I think I know what I'm looking for by learning with each sculpture a little more about my experience and my feelings, but with each new form I notice that I hadn't understood anything about the previous one, that this one enriches me, and that so I have to continue to try to find out more. Each sculpture is made independently using a unique and destructive formwork, which gives each piece its unique character: "every time, start all over again". And the more I advance in what I do, the more it is identical; the more I realize that I know nothing more about myself and what I see, the more I need to work to try despite everything to achieve something.

Barely created, any sculpture is already almost a ruin. By its form, by its material. It is the past of the idea, overtaken by the present of the realization, and projected into the future of the next piece. I am in the presence of something, an origin and a story, which slips away under my feet. This impulsive frenzy to create is the understood desire to transform, to leave something real, tangible, eternal. Stop at all costs an inexorable disappearance, it being understood the own will of each one not to be completely erased.

Do you also draw? What place does it have in your practice? What does it represent?

My drawing is the silent expression of my memory, a frenetic search for the extraction of the invisible into new forms, real, photographic and sculptures, which would teach me something, anything, as long as it enrich me. This drawing of an object is like a musical score (Tim Ingold, *A Brief History of Lines*, p. 20): study and writing of thought on paper, a mentalized space that can be interpreted in three dimensions by an "event material, a photographed reality, a petrified sculpture.

Can you say that there is a form of commitment in your work?

Man has no figurative representation in my work, but it is intended for him: he can speak of his trace, of gentle transformation, of erosion and of passing time. Perhaps I want to testify to a world, the landscape, the architecture, the relationship of Man to his own nature (him, and the other). In these moments of intense pressures and transformations, social, economic, ecological, I seek, patiently, for a long time, a field allowing to welcome a new encounter with nature, without opposition, without inner conflict.

My work questions me, it creates in me a state of latency, a space where I see a man walking and feel his own time passing. Staircase, door, window, wall, column, arch, to walk there is a poetic movement: a slip into a gap, a meeting of shadow and light, material and immaterial, full and empty. A rite of passage evoking an opening between a lost, forgotten or absent past, and a window towards another, different, new future. This imperfection I assume as a resistance, trying to accept despite all the time that passes.