

Interview with Aoife van Linden Tol Conducted by Scarlet Bochan 2005

Scarlet Bochan: What are the similarities and differences between the work you produce using explosives and the other work you do?

Aoife van Linden Tol: Well, the similarities lie in the source of the work. Most of my work is inspired by science, especially cosmology, and raw data. I am interested in how we measure things in the universe. There are similarities between *Spectra* and *One 12,875,000th of a Second*. With *Spectra* I used Infrared absorption spectra graphs for various types of alcohols. I painted sheet steel with acrylic and scraped the paint off from one end to the other mimicking the way in which these graphs are produced from the machine. With *One 12,875,000th of a Second* each sheet of paper measures the fragment of time in the title. How can we measure things we can't see? Once we have what exactly we discover from these measurements? Is there something more we can discover besides raw facts? Something indescribable, indefinable, emotional perhaps? These questions follow me no matter what materials or tools I work with. I am also concerned with the nature of matter. This leads me to work with various types of matter and materials. Of course this will lead to visually diverse work but the core inspiration and my working process are the same. The differences are harder to make sense of. My photography based work can be very different.

SB: But what particular 'elements of life' to you consider the explosions to recreate in an artistic form?

AV: I don't think they recreate any elements of life at all, I don't think that art works in that way. I am always weary of any artwork claiming to "recreate" anything. But anyway I think the effects and evidence of any explosion express the power involved in the act. This translates very strongly visually and creates an immediate emotional response. There is a certain amount of shock, fear, relief, awe, but there is also a sense of inevitability, destiny or fate. They are so powerful, so unstoppable that there is this feeling of acceptance.

SB: I like the way you talk about the 'natural instinct to compare oneself physically to the wound the object has received' I like this because it is a trait that art, science and history always use, seeing other materials as ways of better understanding themselves. Have you ever thought of challenging this impulse?

AV: No! This is defiantly one of the ways of “seeing” or working that I love. It feels completely natural for me to think in this way. I made the mistake of trying challenging the way I work before for a project in Art school. I tried to go against my natural feelings and aesthetic purely for the sake of the project. I wanted to make myself feel uncomfortable and work outside my comfort zone so to speak. And although I succeeded in my aim, I think I made the worst work of my entire period at art collage. I hated it and smashed it up after a week or so.

SB: Have you ever contacted or thought about contacting industries who need to manufacture their product to counter any sorts of explosion (deliberate or accidental)? I’m thinking of architectural firms, especially those commissioned to design large offices in the city, and may need to use bullet proof glass or various materials aimed at countering terrorism. Or even those ‘explosions’ that fall into a greyer area (car crashes, train crashes). I would be interested what these sort of professionals have to say about the subject in a general way or about what you think of their work/predicaments...

AV: No, I have never thought of contacting anyone in those fields. I guess I feel quite removed from that industrialness. I am not sure what relevance this kind of investigation would have on my current theme work, but it is interesting. I can’t escape subjects of war, terrorism and death. I mean explosives are not seen as tools in the same way a cameras, paint brushes, chisels or clay are. Not that I want to escape these associations either. The history and development of explosives has played a huge part in the development of the world today. If you can call it development, that is.

What I think of their work predicaments? Mmm...of course man chooses how he uses his tools. So then man must respond to this. Bullet proof glass is one thing, one response to a particular “problem” but how do you protect a building from a plane?

I mean, it is amazing how we have inventions for absolutely everything. From the complex like epoxy resins, eye scanning equipment, heat proof fabrics used in spaceships, satellite observation equipment. But we still have the simple things, hammer and nails, cups, knives, socks. Things you can hardly believe we still need in this day and age. (Will there be an age where we don’t need these things? Will it be in our lifetime?)

But things are not always used as they are meant to be. We can still kill some one with a hammer. Such a simple tool.

What is even scarier is when the intention, an object has been designed for, is outside the realms of understanding. When some one can design a mine that can be dropped from a plane but is so small and light that it won’t go off until a small child

picks it up. It will be a small child that picks it up because it brightly coloured and has been designed to look exactly like a little squeazy, squeaky toy.

Could we have imagined this would be a reality? And if we choose to utilise atomic energy? What is the design response to that?

I guess my interest goes beyond explosives and anti-terrorist design. I am fascinated by our ability to create endless variations of matter for every possible reason conceivable. Natural or “unnatural” it’s all made form the building blocks available to us.

SB: What does it mean to you to be an artist? What type of responsibilities and roles do you see the term as having?

AV: I think the term “artist” has many responsibilities placed on it that are not necessarily justified. A responsibility to please others for one. On the other hand artists have continually defined their own responsibilities according to their particular school of thought. Art is a language, a way of communicating. To be an artist is to talk another language. Others then observe and learn your language. In this way the spectrum of what art is broadens. Some artists make it their responsibility to broaden this spectrum and challenge its borders as much as possible. To me it about realizing my particular vocabulary with the world. I think it is the same for most artists.

SB: How responsive are you to people’s perceptions of your work? What are the types of comments you remember most?

AV: I remember that one woman said that when she wanted to cry. Another that the image looked exactly how she felt at curtain moments in her life. They both loved the work. This was wonderful for me.

SB: How important is feedback from both those familiar with art history and those who are not? Do you notice any stark differences from each group’s feedback?

AV: Feedback from anyone is important to me, to a degree. I do like to find out what people think about it and how it makes them feel. As my work seems to be quite masculine and my name is a bit confusing to read I sometimes talk to people about the work on show without telling them who I am. Then I can find out what they really think which is great. Most people are far too polite and diplomatic to say what they really think to the artist. I am lucky that the responses I get are very positive but I am fully aware that some people will not understand or feel an affinity to it. Those with no art history background often immediately tell me how the work makes them feel. Those with an art history background immediately ask me to talk about my work. Sometimes people think they know so much, but they still need to assess my

answers before they decide what they think about the work.

SB: How important are notions of travel, landscape, and home to you? I ask because you travel on a fairly regular basis and spent the first few years of your life in Ireland. Has this, particularly, influenced you in any ways?

AV: Travel, landscape and home are all very important to me. I was born in Ireland and our family moved to London when I was five years old. I don't really feel as though I belong to any country. This could be because I have mixed nationality parents (Irish/Dutch) who both live abroad. But I think it is quite a common feeling people living in London have. I have traveled to many places and have always been surprised at how at home I feel. I am not sure if I could put a finger on how this may have influenced me. Perhaps in relation to a feeling of "oneness" as in Taoist, Buddhist or scientific theory.

I remember traveling across the states from NY to Sun City, California. The journey took three days and nights of constant travel, hopping from one bus to another. I read a bit but that always makes me feel a bit sick when in a coach. So mostly I looked out at the changing landscape and watched time passing. I didn't feel like I was traveling across a land as much as I felt like I was being carried through time. I have never felt the total awareness of time as I did on that trip. I suppose experiences like that are what inspire me to look at the journey within a work of art and try to delve into its world.

SB: You traveled to Thailand at the beginning of the year to work and to source paper. How do you feel about the artistic community there? How do you feel that East/West collaborations benefit each party?

I think it influenced me greatly in a few ways. I met some young artists who like me had finished art school just a few years before and were busy working away. They had hardly any money and lived in tiny apartments, as well as having to deal with social pressure to get proper jobs in order to get married etc. They were not only determined but conscientious, natural. At the time I had not made any work for a while and was trapped in a job and general life situation where making my art seemed impossible to me. It opened my eyes being there, I realized I was full of shit and if I really wanted it I had much more opportunity than these guys. So when I got back to London I changed my life. I decided that unless I had begged, stolen and borrowed and literally given everything up in order to do my art I could never really tell myself I had tried.

I visited Chang Mai University as well as several artist studios and a print and pottery studio. The artist community I visited were so interested in each other's work and philosophy. I was surprised at how serious the young artists are about what they do. They are very sincere and not pretentious at all.

I think collaboration between any groups found on different parts of the planet are good but I don't have anywhere near enough experience to comment on a general East/West level.

S.B. What is it you want people to notice about your work with explosives when they see all of the various materials you have used for this vein of work? I, for instance, was struck by how much some of the work in the smaller white books reminded me of Victorian lace. Really beautiful and delicate but old and damaged too. I think I said this to you at the time but am not sure you agreed/saw it as relevant? It made me become quite interested in how you assume people see you and your work. The gulf between what you think they see and think of your work and what you wish they'd pick up on (if you feel that way about it in any way?)

AV: I think you are right, I am always happy when people find their own way of relating to a work regardless my own intentions or ideas/concepts. Just as artists have their own language of expression, the viewer has their own language of observation. Everybody's relationship with the world is different, and so they might have/make a clear relationship with the work in a way that would just never have occurred to me or that seems insignificant to me. But often then, later on, I think about it and start to see why they have made the connection. Actually it teaches me a little about that person. The things that are important to them and the way their mind works and how they make connections. Listening to what people think about art often reveals more about them than it does the work/artist. The artist often thinks of themselves as the giver (of beauty, concept, joy, ideas, etc) But you can lead a horse to water...people will always, indeed, can only see it through their own eyes. It would be silly to wish for every one to see my work the way I do. That would be so boring too.

I do remember you making that comment, and you are right. At the time I didn't quite get it, although now I quote you all the time when speaking about that work.

SB How and what do you see your work evolving into in the future?

AV: I can see my interest in other peoples responses growing so perhaps I will find ways of involving people in some work. I will probably use explosive for quite sometime as they haven't stopped speaking to me yet and I have many, many leads to follow, so to speak, that are still in my head. I am also inspired by classical and renaissance art and I think this will start to show more clearly at some point. Perhaps through my photography. I think I definitely have different methods and styles of working that I haven't explored as thoroughly as my explosive work. Just as I am unhappy if I don't make art, I would also be unhappy if these other facets of are not realized.