Particulates

The 2017 commission by Rita McBride, Particulates, features a type of high-intensity laser that is normally reserved for industrial, military, and scientific use to harness light’s efficient capacity to articulate space. At first glance the lasers clearly define the geometry of a hyperboloid of revolution, a hyperbola rotated around a single axis. Yet the contours of this shape are dispersed by the constant motion of particulate matter—ambient dust and molecules of water circulating in the air—that becomes visible as it passes through the beams of light. There is an otherworldly quality to this animated environment; it recalls the descriptions of a wormhole—a highly theorized, little-proven shortcut through space and time—that one might find in science fiction. A perceptual shift takes place as one looks closely at the swirling particles that reflect and refract the lasers’ light. While formally the arrangement alludes to the possibility of time travel, the lasers reveal a macroscopic world of microscopic activity hidden before our eyes. However, the real and imaginative spaces conjured by Particulates remain elusive, and are protected by a series of custom carbon-fiber panels, titled Guidance “Barriers” (2017), which the artist designed to keep us at a lawful distance.

Particulates took shape after McBride visited DíaBeacon in Beacon, New York, in 2016. There she encountered Dan Flavin’s untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection) (1973) for the first time. The work, one of Flavin’s signature “barrier” sculptures, consists of serially repeating square units of green fluorescent light that diagonally bisect the gallery, hindering passage from one end to the other. While the fixtures themselves are emphatically physical, the light emanating from the fluorescent tubes envelops the surroundings and spectators in an ethereal green. Flavin described his first light-based works as “a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam,” as Carl Sagan so famously described.10 “The Earth,” he went on to say, “is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena.”11 A portrait of the solar system, this image might just as easily be a detail of Particulates; the same phenomenon on two different orders of magnitude. While we may perceive the immensity of our infinitely dense universe as sublimely abstract, we are also constantly surrounded by reminders of its tangible reality. A recent study in Geology, for example, documents the proliferation of microscopic meteorite particles, essentially extraterrestrial dust, found all over rooftops and sidewalks.12 “The invisible is real,” Walter De Maria once declared.13 Particulates suggests that we take this speculative claim seriously. If we do, maybe McBride’s circular hyperboloid really is a wrinkle in time.

Notes

3. McBride first used the shape of the hyperboloid of revolution on view in Particulates for Max West because it offered a simple engineering solution to a complex problem of scale.
7. Peabody introduces the idea that Alloway’s insights in science fiction were as much methodological as entertaining. See Peabody, “Science Fiction Art Masa,” p. 59.
9. Ibid.

Rita McBride
Particulates

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Rita McBride was born in Des Moines in 1960. She currently lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany, and Los Angeles. She received a BA from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. In 1988 she began to explore architectural and sculptural form in works ranging from small-scale objects to large-scale commissions. Her major public works include Obelisk of Tutankhamun in Cologne, Germany (2017), Bells and Whistles at the New School in New York (2014), and Mee West in Munich, Germany (2011). Among her recent solo exhibitions are Rita McBride: Explorer at Wels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels (2017–18), Rita McBride: Gesellschaft at kastnergesellschaft, Hanover, Germany, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2015–16), and Rita McBride: Public 717 at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (2014–15). In 2001 she initiated a series of genre-bending publications that often use anonymous collective writing structures. The second volume of her Ways series, Futureways (2004), explored contemporary art and science fiction, a genre that is particularly relevant to Particulates. McBride’s first project with Dia Art Foundation took the form of a performative lecture on the work of Rosemarie Trockel as part of the Artists on Artists Lecture Series in 2003. Particulates was commissioned in 2016 by Dia and completed in 2017.

selected bibliography

checklist
Particulates, 2017
Lasers, site-specific particulates, extraterrestrial dust, and water
Courtesy the artist

Guidance “Barriers” 2017
Carbon fiber
Courtesy the artist

Special thanks to Arup, New York, Cloudburst Misting Systems, Inc., Oxnard, California, CT Lasers, West Haven, Connecticut, and MEER Precision Cutting and Bending, New York, for their essential technical support.

Particulates is made possible by major support from Brenda R. Potter. Significant support is provided by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and Dia’s Director’s Council: Fady Jameel, Leslie and Mac McQuown, Hope Warschaw, and Sara and Evan Williams. Generous support is provided by Frances Bowes, Nathalie and Charles de Gunzburg, and Marissa Sackler. Additional support is provided by Karyn Kohl and Light Art Space.