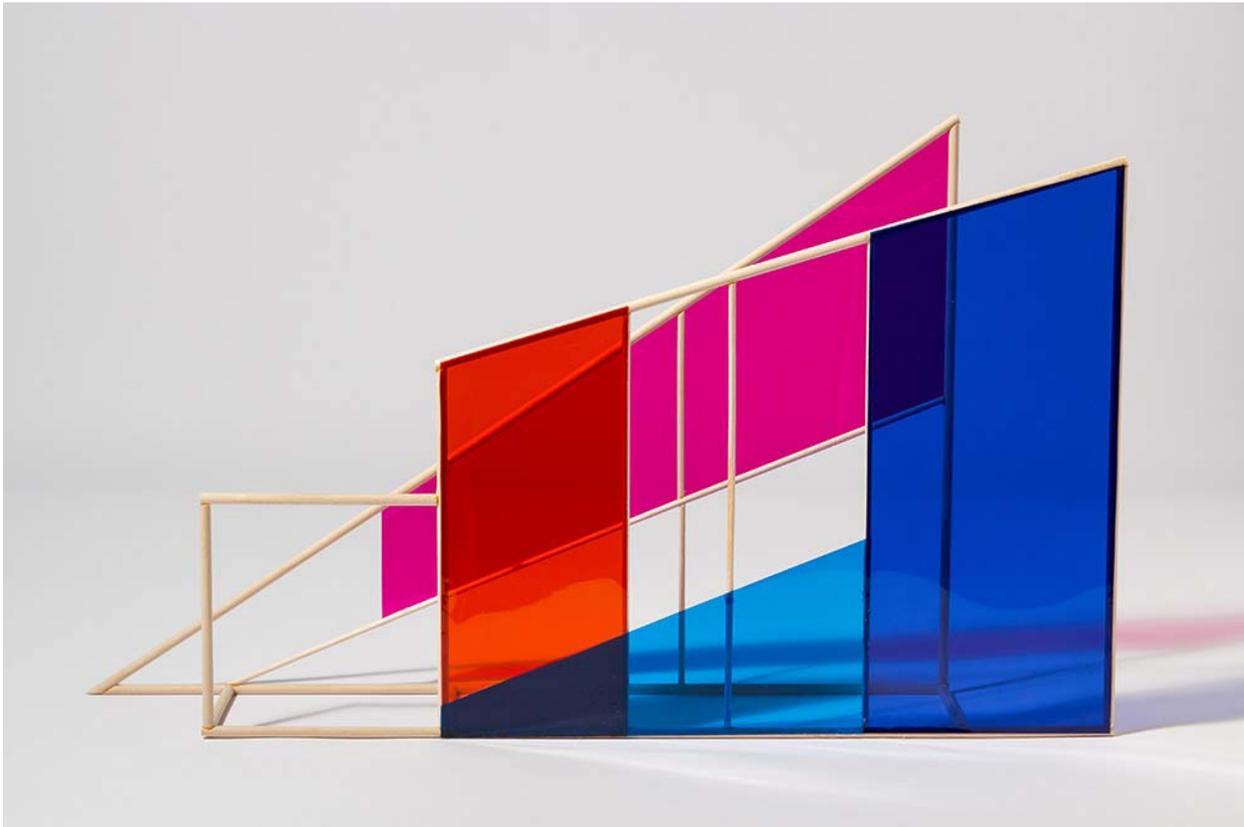


RICHARD IBGHY & MARILOU LEMMENS | DRAWING RAINBOWS IN UNEQUAL AIR
By ARYEN HOEKSTRA



Richard Ibhgy & Marilou Lemmens, *Trickle-Down Theory of Growth and Development* (2016), wood and colored gel, 10.5 x 18 x 3.5 inches

The graphs and diagrams quoted by Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens in their exhibition *Drawing Rainbows In Unequal Air* engage with data as a processed image of social and economic relations. By processed I'm here referring to the sorting and scrutinizing of originally collected raw data; the condensing of abstract events and correlations into legible visuals that can quickly and clearly be read. Data visualization models universalize these abstractions in part so that non-experts can make future decisions based upon this collected information, regardless of a lack of knowledge or resources that would otherwise be necessary to interpret and understand these in their pure statistical forms. This allows administrators, investors, managers, politicians, etc. ... to analyze and reason as though wholly informed. In this processual operation, outliers are identified and removed while individuals are reduced to categories and quantities. The result is that the gulf between the human actors generating this data in the physical world and their numerically visualized representations is obscured, and their potential to be *otherwise* is hidden behind a series of coloured bars and points of intersection. If however, it is possible to reassert this contingency within the medium of data visualizations, we can instead look at these models as the landscape architect James Corner does mapping, as something that is, "not prescriptive, but infinitely promising."^[1]

Ibhgy & Lemmens' exhibition at YYZ Artists' Outlet does just this, as their models reintroduce the conditional nature of these data points by revealing the hand of their makers in each sculptural assemblage. Rather than present these graphical representations concerning inequality as fixed diagrams, they are built as contingent propositions that, 'are this way, but could be otherwise.' Composed of wood, string, ink, and coloured gels these small sculptures are expertly precise, yet their evident hand-making leaves them purposefully suspicious. Each model, or cluster of models, rests upon a simply constructed desk labelled with a hand-lettered title card. Like each model, the written cards not only acknowledge the labour of their

creation, but also that this labour is an active form of constructing ideas and relations. Despite this straightforward labour, their building refuses to distract from the content represented in each model, which includes data drawn from a wide range of disciplines, economics and sociology, as well as management and gender studies. What is reflected is a spectrum of statistics that point to an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity, as it is increasingly consolidated within the hands of a few.

Paradoxically, Elie Ayache theorises a similar form of writing taking place where much of this wealth is syphoned from, by stock traders on the market floor. Ayache proposes that the market should not be considered as being founded upon probabilistic theories, but rather upon the notion of contingency. He argues in *The Blank Swan: The End of Probability* that despite the countless researchers and PhDs providing traders with quantitative analysis of asset and derivative values,^[2] because they are traded in variance of their theoretical value, that their true value is in fact written on the market floor beyond any probabilistic modelling. Or rather, a probabilistic model is needed, but the trader must then exceed that medium, which is the market. He offers as a literary example, Borges' character Pierre Menard who spends the last 20 years of his life writing two chapters of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, word for word and line for line. Borges is convincing in his description of Menard as not simply producing a translation of or copying Cervantes, but rather that he has created a wholly new and original work, which is of course neither really new nor original. Though the story of *Don Quixote* is already known to Menard, as told by Borges his is still an act of creation. Ayache asks where the creativity lies in this authorship and answers back that, like the trader, it is in the *writing* where this act takes place. Specifically, Menard does not copy what he has read from Cervantes nor does he invent something new, but it is through the medium of writing that he is able to produce a materially new work. In the case of Menard this *writing* as the medium of creation is revealed through the actual writing of two chapters of *Don Quixote*. Ayache's trader *writes* on the market floor with each exchange. Both exceed the probabilistic tools they employ, Cervantes' original and the derivatives' theoretical exchange value, and find themselves in the middle of an event, outside of any spatial or temporal location, of which they themselves have authored.

There is a similar writing that takes place behind and through the graphs and diagrams found in *Drawing Rainbows In Unequal Air*. First there are of course the human authors that are obscured by the general field of data visualization as described in the opening paragraph; individuals reduced to statistics, but that once acted and were recorded, though they could have acted otherwise. Second, that in the repetition of these models, Ibhgy & Lemmens are writing new data visualizations, though they already exist, and that their wood and string sculptures go beyond the probabilistic tools (the cited graphs and diagrams) they employ. It is only through this evident making that these models are exceeded. Take for example the three-dimensional modelling of *Top Marginal Tax Rates across Europe, English Speaking Countries and Japan (1970-2010)*, constructed of coloured string and supported by a wooden armature. Though each statistical notation is carefully knotted and pulled to represent a specific marginal tax as it descends toward $(x, 0)$, their crafting ultimately capitulates and the ends of each string are left unclipped so that they pool on the tabletop.

Further, not only is statistical accuracy compromised in these models, but so too is time. Graphs and diagrams typically exist within Cartesian coordinates and find plottable demarcations distributed evenly across the x - and y -axes (and in 3-d models the z -axis as well). The x -axis commonly reflects the passage of time. Again this is undermined in *Drawing Rainbows In Unequal Air*, as the passage of time is not regimented and fixed, but rather these composed models subvert a standard chronology. The typically regimented and dispassionate time of the diagram is reanimated so that the clock might move in multiple directions. In *Income Inequality in Emerging Countries (1910-2010)*, which is too composed of wood and coloured string, the number of subjects represented is exceedingly complex. This complexity begs for the legibility of a systematized conception of time, yet the deliberate imprecision of using string to fix string in place renders the accuracy of this temporality unreliable, and so time exits and the recorded actors are freed to move either forward or back.

Drawing Rainbows In Unequal Air attempts to wrest power away from its contemporary consolidation. Further, it seeks to return this agency to those that are obscured by the machinations of world finance or that have been erased by it altogether. The exhibition asks, if diagrams can create forms of thought, how might they otherwise be written? Ibhgy & Lemmens reintroduce the hand as a tool to write a contingent

relation that might yield alternative futures, but in doing so they also acknowledge the hands and bodies and relations of those that are not represented. As this system continues to break down the opportunity then arises to act, or not to act, or to rewrite our current condition as something yet unknown.

This text by Aryen Hoekstra was published alongside Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens' *Drawing Rainbows In Unequal Air* exhibition at YYZ, Toronto, in 2016.

^[1] J. Corner "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention", in D. Cosgrove (ed.) *Mappings* (London: Reaktion, 1999) 213-53: 214

^[2] Of which a universal agreement about their theoretical valuation can typically be found.