

Aleksandra
Mir

The
Seduction
of Galileo
Galilei

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Whitney Museum
of American Art



1. Still from documentation of *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei*, June 11, 2011. Event; Stouffville, Ontario; commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto. Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York, and Galería Joan Prats, Barcelona

In *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei*, Aleksandra Mir engages with a defining event in Western intellectual history, the Italian scientist Galileo's discovery of the law of falling bodies and his related questioning of prevailing notions of universal order. By staging her own demonstration of the laws of gravity, Mir examines how image and the recording of information intersect with history, narrative, and their interpretation.

We tend to associate history with fact, a progression of known, irrefutable events that reassuringly leads to our understanding of the present. Yet history itself is a narrative, known through a complex web of documentation, archive, image, text, material evidence, personal and collective memory, culture, and other elements. Rather than a single voice, it is a chorus of unique, intertwining stories. Multiple interpretations lead, of course, to multiple histories, and this is where it gets interesting. Mir's work often involves intervening with history to open up its stories and to create new interpretations, through orchestrating her own events and reexamining past events in ways both playful and profound.

The artist's peripatetic background has significantly shaped a practice that jumps and crosses media. Born in Poland in 1967, Mir was raised in Sweden; in 1989 she moved to New York for fifteen years, gaining dual Swedish-U.S. citizenship before spending five years in Palermo, Italy. She currently lives in London. While in New York, she studied anthropology at the New School for Social Research, and the discipline's research techniques and engagement in fieldwork underpin the way she develops and presents her subject matter. Her predilection for exploring places and cultures stems partly from her own natural ease with and interest in people. This sociability is fundamental to the generally collaborative way Mir makes art, as well as her desire to understand and transcend borders and boundaries, particularly political and social ones.

A number of the artist's projects have toyed with the nature of documentation and the archive to tease out how they create history. Some of her "documents" are self-conscious of their status as vehicles of narrative; even as they fashion a new vision of the past, in their sly awareness of their own role they lay bare the nature of that creation. Printed matter, a medium long essential to the historical record, is also one easily generated and distributed, as Mir has shown in such pieces as *Living & Loving: No. 1: The Biography of Donald Cappy* (2002), a 'zine-like tribute to the rich life experiences of an art school security guard, printed in a run of 5,000 and given away for free. In *Newsroom 1986–2000*, one of her best-known works, Mir turned a downtown New York gallery into a hub of news redistribution in 2007: the artist and a group of volunteers and helpers re-created hundreds of New York tabloid newspaper covers in black marker and exhibited the drawings by topic. The news, Mir reminds us, is but one version of history, and the flexibility of its reinterpretation as a visual and textual source of information is both undeniable and disquieting.

In other work, Mir has staged events of various types to explore more specifically how the visual artifacts of an event are easily consumed in ways that complicate and alter our understanding of the original act. Several projects have drawn from the artist's deep interest in flight and space travel, and her observation that "global events in popular culture, such as the moon landing, the development of a mass aviation culture, the future of the space program, etc., have massive influence on how we live and perceive ourselves in the world." Fascinated by how airplanes can appear to slow down, hanging in space, as they approach the runway, she found a way to stage her own plane landings with an inflatable jet (fig. 2). Its manifestation in an interminably

suspended moment of "landing" at various places across Europe was extensively documented photographically by both the artist and the public. This generation of imagery was a natural extension of the event and, at the same time, a gleeful complication of our understanding of it and what it re-creates. One can easily imagine an image of a plane landing as an iconic representation of progress and technology, but what on earth does a floating plane balloon say about the history of flight?

In *First Woman on the Moon* (figs. 3, 4), Mir created a lunar landscape on a wide beach in Holland in 1999, with the help of a volunteer team of heavy-equipment operators and local communities. Proclaiming herself a modern female astronaut exploring space through completely artificial means and almost no budget, Mir upended the scale and expense of the first moon landing with a new



2. Still from documentation of *Plane Landing in Switzerland*, July 4, 2008. Event; Flughafen Zürich; commissioned by Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris, and Kunsthaus Zürich. Collection of the artist; courtesy Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris



event “version” that — even though staged and ersatz as a lunar expedition — was no less real as an event. It playfully acknowledged the conspiracy theories that challenge the historical “fact” of the original moon landing, a questioning, in essence, of the images we associate with that achievement and which constitute much of the popular understanding of how it happened. Tellingly, *First Woman on the Moon* was filmed by television news media and even photographed with the same kind of camera (a Hasselblad) used to document the original lunar landing by American astronauts in 1969, which the artist remembers viewing on television as a toddler.

This interweaving of personal, collective, and cultural history came together again this June at a racetrack in Stouffville, Ontario, in *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei*, commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto. In that exhibition’s brochure, Mercer Union curator Sarah Robayo Sheridan explains:

3, 4. Stills from documentation of *First Woman on the Moon*, August 28, 1999. Event; Wijk Aan Zee, the Netherlands; commissioned by Casco, Utrecht, the Netherlands. Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York, and Galería Joan Prats, Barcelona



5. Still from documentation of *Gravity*, September 9–13, 2006. Event; The Roundhouse, London; commissioned by The Arts Catalyst, London. Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York, and Galería Joan Prats, Barcelona

At the beginning of the 17th century, Galileo's research came into conflict with the prevailing Aristotelian view of the earth as the centre of the universe, also the defining position of the Catholic Church at that time. Galileo's adherence to the Copernican view that the earth orbits around the sun resulted in a charge of heresy in 1633 (for the Catholic Church to officially accept the earth's rotation would take until 1992 when Pope John Paul II officially conceded it). While his scientific pursuits put him at odds with the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church, Galileo was himself a devout Catholic who conformed to the patriarchal cultural imperatives of the church, including the confinement of both his illegitimate daughters to a convent. While the eldest daughter Sister Maria Celeste held a close relationship with her father, serving his penance for him when he was charged of heresy, his second daughter remains a silent figure, leaving an emotional void open for speculation. The sentence that Galileo endured for his role as the "father of modern science" was house arrest, ironically a form of imprisonment similar to that which he imposed upon his daughters. In this gap between his public performance of fatherhood versus his private, Mir proposes her own liaison with Galileo. A corrupting femme fatale, she solicits an intellectual affair with a man almost four centuries her senior in order to explore, exploit and liberate the void inherent in the telling of the myth.

According to an apocryphal tale, Galileo made his discovery of the Law of Falling Bodies by dropping objects of differing mass off the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Mir takes inspiration from this legend, proposing a rendezvous in a gravel lot adjacent to a racetrack,



6, 7. Stills from documentation of *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei*, June 11, 2011. Event; Stouffville, Ontario; commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto. Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York, and Galería Joan Prats, Barcelona



where she performs a gravitational feat of her own — the stacking of a single column of automotive tires that rise precariously to the heavens. Though the column may reach the height of the famed Tower of Pisa, Mir is more concerned with space of play that opens when failure is a permissible outcome. This impetus represents an inversion of the normal parameters and aims of construction. Though Mir relies on the highly skilled labour of the crane operator — his theoretical knowledge of physics and in-the-field experience of hoisting objects into space — her thrill is the tipping point between the expected results and the limits of control. For example, wind, the shape of the tires, the energy of the crew to gather the tires, all these determine at what point the construction will spill over. The impulse to stack is a primordial one, visible in the play of children handling building blocks, but also apparent in the most elaborate ancient architectural wonders. Mir's experiment is experiment for experiment's sake and in *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei* she indulges the delight of failure, making the tower topple over and over again, for the sheer joy of watching the fall.



Mir oversaw the staging of the tire tower as well as its documentation in the video on view at the Whitney, which she edited for presentation as one form of record. As the happening unfolds, we see that the actual stacking of the tires, a rather simple affair, is the focus of a complex set of activities involving dozens of people and massive pieces of equipment. Mir's framing of this event in terms of Galileo, science, and religion intersects with art historical reference points and other iconic narratives (the Greek myth of Sisyphus, in particular, comes to mind).

8, 9. Stills from documentation of *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei*, June 11, 2011. Event; Stouffville, Ontario; commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto. Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York, and Galería Joan Prats, Barcelona

Much here is about limitation – in this case, imposed by gravity – and our desire and ability to transcend it. Mir's rocket-like assemblage *Gravity* (2006; fig. 5), created from found materials and dismantled three days later, addressed similar issues in a more symbolic manner. In *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei*, as we see the tires being stacked by the team of the serendipitously named Modern Cranes, we can draw art historical lineages from Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1938; invoked directly in one passage of the film by stacked coffee creamers) to Marcel Duchamp's found objects, Robert Smithson's Land art, and the serial, repetitive forms of Minimalism.

Reaching the sky may not be easy to achieve with stacked tires, but the limitations of gravity are overcome in both science and religion through their mutual interest in inhabiting the sky. In the collages also on view, from her 2008–09 series *The Dream and the Promise*, Mir combines Catholic iconography with space imagery, and we realize how cosmology is significantly shared by both traditions. Her investigation of complex intersections among diverse stories, social groups, cultures, and objects embraces the ways in which meaning in narratives shifts and changes, sometimes in unexpected and delightful ways. This is beautifully demonstrated at the end of the video, when the crane operators string and lift together on one gracefully undulating strand the tires that gravity had kept apart.

— Carter E. Foster, Curator



10, 11. Stills from documentation of *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei*, June 11, 2011. Event; Stouffville, Ontario; commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto. Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York, and Galería Joan Prats, Barcelona



12. From *The Dream and the Promise*, 2009. Collage on board with gold-leaf frame, 15 15/16 x 11 13/16 in. (40.5 x 30 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Galería Joan Prats, Barcelona



13. From *The Dream and the Promise*, 2009. Collage on board with gold-leaf frame, 17 1/2 x 12 3/8 in. (44.5 x 31.5 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York



14. From *The Dream and the Promise*, 2009. Collage on board with gold-leaf frame, 16 5/16 x 11 13/16 in. (41.5 x 30 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York



15. From *The Dream and the Promise*, 2009. Collage on board with gold-leaf frame, 18 1/8 x 13 3/8 in. (46 x 34 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York



16. From *The Dream and the Promise*, 2009. Collage on board with gold-leaf frame, 16 15/16 x 13 in. (43 x 33 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York



17. From *The Dream and the Promise*, 2009. Collage on board with gold-leaf frame, 23 13/16 x 17 1/8 in. (59 x 43.5 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Galería Joan Prats, Barcelona

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