

STILETTOS AND HIGH HEELS

Phoebe d'Heurle

ON LIZZI BOUGATSOS

unstuck (2021)

December 20, 2021



Lizzi Bougatsos, *unstuck*, still image from video, 2021.

Image description: Lo-fi image of a women with dark hair whose body is in a contoured shape with her hand extended.

BIG WINDOW

The last sculpture I saw by Lizzi Bougatsos no longer exists; a giant three-foot ashtray and cigarette carved out of ice, propped above an abundance of handmade ceramic vessels, and rigged with microphones. As the ice melted, the cigarette puddled, slowly filling the many small bowls on the floor while mikes amplified the sound of each drop of water hitting the smooth ceramic surfaces calling attention to molecular evolution. The sculpture was a band in and of itself, performing metamorphosis to the rhythm of transformation, to the movement of ice becoming water, to the conversion of solid to liquid. And when I think of it, what Bougatsos captured in this piece was the fundamental essence of transference and the ceaselessness of existence.

The carved ice and visual and acoustic spaces underscore transformation making fleeting moments linger. Nothing ends in Bougatsos' world, states are altered, and genres and mediums are obscured—their rigidity overlooked for the sake of material alteration. The care for the abode of intermediacy creates a spiritual aura. Pierced by sound, the space surrounding the sculpture bows to its impermanence creating a twisted room of prayer. I think of the intangibility of acoustic waves, its travel from one space to another; and perhaps its inherent motion and intangibility is why so much of Bougatsos' output has been sound. I first heard Bougatsos perform over ten years ago, in the undulating dream-state tracks of Gang Gang Dance. And if sound is the rubric, performance is the method.

There is a consistent sense of eeriness to Bougatsos' work, and the recurring impression of experiencing something familiar for the first time. Part of that feeling comes from the directness of her approach, the materials she works with are unmediated until moved, essential building blocks that over time accumulate meaning through their reappearance. The many ways that Bougatsos reuses ideas, redeploys narratives, and recycles materials doesn't conform to a result oriented standard. Bougatsos' work is defiantly opposed to a fixed result; her world is revised, always beginning again.

In the video piece, Unstuck (2021), Bougatsos meditates on matter invisible to the naked eye. Air is at the forefront, and, again, sound. A handheld camera begins pointed upward at the sky, its rocking undulations shift in and out of synchrony with a murmuring soundtrack. The music is made with a shruti, an instrument that creates sound by pushing air through tuned metal reeds causing them to vibrate and produce acoustic waves. It's not often I think about the distance between something being said and something being heard, but here, the space between movement become a subject. The image is lo-fi, and blurry particles of dust float

next to the lens gyrating in the rhythmic wavering of the camera. Through motion, each particle animates the invisible pathway of sound itself.

The montage continues, the camera shifts, still showing a sky-blue frame, but now the swirling dust has become Bougatsos herself. Her undulations and dark hair re-animate inanimate particles of dust, disrupting stagnation; her choreographed movements exaggerate and compress the visual depth of the image. Unstuck is predicated on the transitory, through the movement of participle and body it expresses the ephemeral: it becomes a meditation on the fleeting, on everything that's there but we can't see.

So much of what Bougatsos produces points to shifting essences, the cyclical sensation of something being here one minute, and gone the next. Explorations of temporality surface in yet another medium—photography. Her ongoing series of 35mm snapshots taken over the years on the road and in the day to day reveal an unending kinetic energy. Miscellaneous objects are positioned on a table or shuffled around the floor, they are of course fixed in place, recorded in the filmic emulsion; and yet they vibrate. And the truth is, these photographs are sexy, everything Bougatsos produces is sexy, imbued with a haphazard and underground aesthetic of the just almost but not quite vulgar. This flirtation is a fundamental glue that permeates all her performances, undermining any reading of her work that seeks to simplify, or look away.

Unstuck is spellbinding. It's as if Bougatsos has changed air into water, her body swimming through space, her movements oscillating in the rise and fall of an invisible tide. Just as her photographic subject defy stagnation, she resists enclosure; her field becomes an ambiguous frame and a container collapsing figure and ground. The camera captures particles large and small creating boundless galactic space and the simultaneous illusions of proximity and impermanent distances. Unstuck finds its force in motion. The tension between regulated environments and a surrender to the elements unites this moving image just as it does her melting cigarettes. Bougatsos trades in harmonic tensions and unexpected elements.