

# Everything that Rises – Balloonfest '86

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On September 27<sup>th</sup> 1986, thousands of school-aged children gathered in Cleveland's Public Square to inflate balloons. Balloonfest '86 was the United Way's failed attempt to claim the Guinness World Record for most balloons released at a time, a title won by the Disney Corporation for a balloon launch at the Disneyland Resort just 9 months prior.

News footage from the day of the event depicts the students lined up at 'inflating stations', pumping balloons with helium, tying them off with blistered and bandaged hands, and releasing them into a mob of colorful orbs

We're figuring they'll do about two-to-three balloons a minute... Each kid will do maybe 700 balloons in the day. We're figuring the whole operation will take less than 6 hours.

▲ Treb Heinig, professional balloon artist.



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held in place above their heads by a giant net.

The cloud of color that grew over Cleveland on this fateful morning has a beauty that verges on the grotesque. It reads both as unified object and as an aggregation of particles, unsettling in its flickering between strange singularity and legible assemblage. The balloons and their standard-issue colors (the reddest reds and the yellowest yellows), lend this floating foreign thing an unsettling intimacy – we have all blown up, held, batted, and popped a balloon, but never before or since has this many balloons been together in one place. In their inscrutable mass, these friendly objects become alien.

The clump of balloons (cluster, cloud, puff... – precisely that kind of shape that resists definition) shifts, grows and deforms. It is amorphous and yet viscerally present and physical, casting a muted, rubbery shade over the scene. The helium-filled orbs push

at the net, stretching its chords into a sinewy diagram of structural forces – logical, rational control expressed under the pressure of indeterminately bouncing free radicals.

The counterposed forces, barely stable in their opposition, undulating freely, perverts all notions of how we expect a big, man-made thing to act. The clump is both an image of control, of our capacity to impose order on senselessly active inanimate objects; and one of rebellion, of inert matter's deeply unknowable desires and movements. Divergent qualities, mutually constituted. Without the balloons, the net would fall into a pile of senseless rope on the ground. Without the net, the balloons would disperse into discrete particles, each floating off to an individual fate. This cloud proffers a formalism of disorder. It understands the messy empirical realities that bolster diagrammatic clarity.



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Footage of the event shows the release as slow and quiet. The balloons softly fold out of the net as the cloud expands into the air, colonizing the free space above Cleveland. For a brief moment, as the cloud mushrooms out, the balloon's are discernible. But almost immediately, they become irreducible. The swarm has no end. Their individual object-ness now opaque, the balloons have sublimated from discrete man made products to an atmospheric condition. Only then does the soft terror of these dumb, floating orbs become clear. The air is filled with stuff, and there is a storm coming.

Originally planned for 1 o'clock in the afternoon, the balloons were released at 11:30 AM in an attempt to stave off the potentially dangerous effects of releasing 1.5 million balloons into a thunderstorm. However, the pressure of the oncoming weather quickly drove the dispersed balloons back towards the city and into Lake Erie. Hundreds of boaters were caught in a slurry of deflated rubber that clogged motors and made the water unnavigable. When their boat capsized against a rocky pier two fishermen died. The coast guard had trouble recovering stranded boaters from the lake because, in the word of a coastguardsman, "it's hard to tell the difference between a man in a life jacket and a balloon". The rescue efforts, combined with the damage of several minor car crashes and the clean-up of the balloons cost the city of Cleveland over \$5 Million, around three times what the United Way had raised for the event.

Contained, the balloons yielded a joy-filled tension, beautiful in the tenuous control human engineering had wrought upon them. When free and autonomous, qualities we always already knew were intrinsic to these inert bodies, the balloons possessed a disquieting agency to go where they please. It is this slow turn from delight to catastrophe that is at the core of the spectacle. Looking back, the premature release feels inevitable – weather aside, who could contain themselves in the face of so much percolating potential energy?



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The form itself begs to sublimate, to violate its imposed stasis. This was hardly an event for the crowd; this was the crowd.

\*A version of this essay previously appeared in PLAT 8.0 Simplicity.

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