

Digging Deeper with Antoine Catala

BY CHRISTIAN BARCLAY FEBRUARY 25, 2015



Archeo, an outdoor group exhibition about technology and obsolescence, brings together the work of artists who employ outmoded technologies and outdated machinery as a reflection on humanity's continuous fascination and frustration with technology.

The following Q&A with artist Antoine Catala (b. 1975, France) is part of a new High Line Art series, Digging Deeper. Organized in conjunction with Archeo, Digging Deeper will offer a closer look at the exhibition's artists and work.

High Line Art: Your work often involves machines – can you talk about how you first became involved with making machines? Are you interested in mechanical machines, as well, or just electronic ones?

Antoine Catala: Kinetic art is often self-deprecating; this is a quality I enjoy in an artwork. Their movement comes from my obsession with moving images, the logic being that if a moving image is translated to a sculpture, the sculpture would have to be moving, too. The idea to first make kinetic art is influenced by my friend Dean Kenning, who regularly uses machines in his work to enact grotesque repetition. Aside from performative works, I am interested in the psycho-physical bond we, humans, forged with images and, more recently, how images and language are deeply interconnected. It goes back to early childhood – the learning of language and children's books – which is maybe why my work is childish at times.

I don't have a preference for electronic over mechanical machines, as long as it suits what I want to achieve.

HLA: For any given project, how do you choose what technology to work with? What comes first, the idea or the specific technology? What do you see as the relationship between technology as a medium and technology as a tool? Is technology an artistic medium?

AC: It varies. In one piece I used drones, which were controlled by computers, carried plastic words, and hovered in a single spot. For this piece [Logo to Me and the Others Breathing] I used this specific technology as a medium. Most of the time I have an idea or concept and explore what would translate it best. Technology is one outcome, but it is not necessarily the only one. For instance, for an upcoming project I am thinking about making a synthetic garden.



HLA: What is the relationship between machines and images in your work? You have discussed before the idea of the internet "fleshing up" with images, videos, and other interactive content – is this sculpture for you a "fleshed up" machine?

AC: For me, the moving machine is the moving image made physical. My moving machines have repetitive motions because repetition is essential to any learning process. As for "fleshing up" the internet, it can also be seen as a tension between the baroque and austerity, rather than a relationship to the body. The internet at first was just a series of words on a white page, quite austere, but now it has become more intricate, with pictures, videos and sounds – baroque.



HLA: What is the role of logos in your work?

AC: Everything is stamped with a logo now. Just about every piece of clothing has a logo. Every bit of food carries a logo – down to fruits and vegetables – and even sentences and words are copyrighted. Added to this, one side effect of the Internet 2.0 is that everyone is encouraged to be his or her own little PR agency. Every person who wants to exist online has to present themselves, talk about themselves, create a public persona of themselves. It's the individual as a little enterprise model. The next rational step is to create a logo for each individual; the step beyond that is to apply a unique logo to every moment of everybody's life.

I like logos because they are abstract corporate language disguised as an image. They go back to the blason, the tribe, the clan. Logos are deep markers of social interactions. There is an inherent contradiction in making personal logos. They take on this logic of logo proliferation, but apply it to unique individuals, which controverts the logo's original tribal quality. I relate these personal logos, in a sense, to ASMR [autonomous sensory meridian response] YouTube videos of people filming in extreme close-up the slow, obsessive unwrapping of a Kinder egg. For those who don't know about these videos, I encourage you to do a search for "ASMR Kinder egg video."

The logos I envision are animated, moving, they come out of TV culture. I see logos spinning or morphing. These are the logos I like to imagine.



HLA: Why did you choose to create a kinetic sculpture for this exhibition?

AC: Outdoors is a different world, with different rules, and it elicits different reactions from people. I had been making these breathing sculptures for a while, and people responded to them. I thought it would make for a good tactile, performative piece for the High Line's passersby.



HLA: Do you intend for your sculpture to appear as if it is a living thing, or somewhere between living and mechanical?

AC: The sculpture is its own thing, neither mechanical nor living.

HLA: Can you talk about the title of your piece, Logo to Me and the Others Breathing?

AC: Well, it's a very personal logo, as in how a doodle is very personal. It's a two-state logo (i.e. morphing like a motion graphic) about my relationship to others, whoever these others are. The title and the piece is as vague (or universal) and personal as can be.

HLA: How do you think people will react to finding a breathing sculpture on the High Line?



AC: We already know. We had initially placed the sculpture in an area with heavy foot traffic. The sculpture was protected with a rope, but people nonetheless could touch it. It took half an hour before someone poked a hole with their finger through the 1/4 inch thick, super resistant, yet flexible silicone membrane. This person applied great force to poke through the membrane. Nearly every passerby was touching the work, pinching it, punching it. It seemed that if a passerby touched the membrane, even just a little bit, they felt compelled to grapple it. It was wild, a real compliment of sorts. It got me really excited. Unfortunately we could not afford to change the membrane on a daily basis, so we had to move the piece to a more remote location, where people cannot touch it, so as to protect it. I like the new location, because the work integrates well with nature, but this experience got me dreaming of a breathing sculpture that people can physically abuse without it breaking. It would make for an excellent artwork.

Photography by Timothy Schenck