

Artist Profile: Antoine Catala

Rachel Wetzler | Wed Apr 4th, 2012 10:04 a.m.



In a statement for your 2009 exhibition "TV Show" at 179 Canal, you described television as a dying medium, suggesting that the work in the show was a kind of eulogy for TV. Television is a recurring theme in your work, but you've used it in various ways, both as a material and as a subject, often taking the most familiar types of programs—the news, for instance—and altering the way we see it. What is it about television that appeals to you? Are you interested in defamiliarizing something we take for granted, forcing the viewer to reconsider its place in everyday life? Is this work reflecting a sense of nostalgia for television's past? If it's a dying medium, what do you think has replaced it?

TV is no longer the all-powerful medium it used to be. It's dead in the same way radio is dead, whereby it only occupies a peripheral position in our lives. Internet is the new place, because it encompasses words, images, videos, audio, as well as the viewer's

participation. The internet packs more information; in that sense it's more HD than TV and that's what people go for, the better, more fulfilling, more entertaining medium.

I was interested in TV broadcasts initially because I thought it was funny to bring live TV into the museum or the gallery. In my TV work I encourage the use of any entertaining program. However, screening an episode of Spongebob (a personal favorite) doesn't work the same, in an exhibition context, than say the news or any program with live content. That's because the viewer's common assumption is that if a video is shown, it must be pre-recorded. But I am not at all interested in working with pre-recorded TV shows. I want to deal with the flux of what is produced at that very moment. These are pieces that are permanently up-to-date. I think the pop paradigm has shifted. We are no longer dealing with iconic pop culture, in the sense of Warhol—who was an orthodox Christian by the way. Images have become subliminal, transient: these are the images I am interested in. [Even a pop idol like Lady Gaga, one wouldn't have a clear picture of her.]

I have no interest in nostalgia. To deal with the TV, before it completely vanishes was perfect timing, because it allowed me to treat the TV as is. Before, when video art dealt with television broadcasts, because TV was the most powerful medium around, the artwork was read as conflating with the medium. That's inherent to the position of TV in society, not the nature of the work. Now that TV is about to die, we can contemplate TV for what it is, as an incredibly crafted language. It did things that nothing else can nor will ever do again.

As for using the TV sets as a material, I do so because they are a familiar way of viewing images.

Your exhibition at 47 Canal, "I See Catastrophes Ahead," takes the form of a rebus, in which each of the five pieces in the gallery represents a part of the titular sentence. As the press release notes, "Every digitized image, sound, video, smell, taste and object is associated with [key]words. In an internet search, typing a word opens the door to an infinite universe of possibilities." The rebus is a centuries-old form of translating words into images, and yet you're employing it here to reflect the impact of recent technology—the Internet search—on the way we conceive of language. Do you see a connection between the two? There's something about a rebus that is curiously reflective of the way the Internet works: when you type the word "cat," for instance, into Google, you get a whole list of unrelated suggested search terms. Was this something that you were thinking about specifically when you made this work?

I was specifically focusing on Google Image Searches. Google Image search makes connections between images and words. A rebus operates similarly. Like you say, searching for the word cat brings up a near endless flow of images of cats. The rebus reader operates the other way; he or she sees an image and has to attach a word to it, in the process sometimes making wrong associations. The rebus reader is a bit like the Internet algorithms, attaching words to images.

The Internet, at its inception, was silent and drab; now it's an exciting place, with plenty of videos, sounds, and images. There is a tendency for the Internet to "flesh up," to develop substance on top of the underlying text backbone. Now objects are thrown in the mix. With an Internet search one can cull and print (via 3D printing) objects.

So, via an Internet search, a word can conjure up many quasi-physical or physical incarnations, be it images, sounds, videos or now objects. I was specifically interested in the triad *word – image – object* in making the works for "I See Catastrophes Ahead". Each piece in the show is an in-between stage, part image, part object, and part word.

Even though much of your work draws on the immaterial—television broadcasts, digital video, the Internet—it often takes the form of installations, sculptures, and other interventions into physical space. Moreover, when you use technology, you often call attention to it physically—I'm thinking in particular of the way that you incorporate the wires, tubes, and machines that power your 47 Canal show into the work itself; the Mac Mini that controls the projections, for instance, is encased within one of the sculptures, plainly on view. Are you actively trying to create a material experience of these things?

I guess I have a structuralist perspective: I am interested in the structure of the medium I deal with. I find the structuralist tactics visceral: it deals with embodiment of the medium. Ernie Gehr said: "*A moving picture is a real thing and as a real thing it is not imitation. It does not reflect on life, it embodies the life of the mind.*" I bring in even more physicality to an image—moving or not—to exaggerate the underlying affective relationship we have with it.

Your use of technology ranges from the highly sophisticated—for instance, you've employed technology developed recently by scientists at Carnegie Mellon in your work—to the relatively rudimentary, as in the hologram sculptures, which use light and mirrors to give the impression of an object floating in space. Are you specifically interested in merging high- and low-tech methods in your work, or do you simply use whichever techniques you think are most appropriate for individual pieces?

Dan Graham says that my show at 47 Canal is a bit like going back to being a 12 year old who builds his own radios sets. I use technology that is familiar to people: I used CRT TV when it was the most popular, flat screen now, because they are the most familiar ways of showing images. For my show at 47 Canal, I use cutting edge technology of different eras: holograms of the Victorian times, nano projectors and arduinos, for instance, of today.

You have degrees in both mathematics and visual art. Does your background in mathematics inform your work as an artist? If so, how?

Mathematics is a language, a unique one.



Age:

37

Location:

NYC

How long have you been working creatively with technology? How did you start?

My mother says that because I was a premature baby, the doctors put me in an incubator. When the incubator broke, I fixed it.

Describe your experience with the tools you use. How did you start using them?

Where did you go to school? What did you study?

I studied Mathematics in France, then Sound Art and then Fine Arts in the UK. In art school, I set for myself the goal of using new “techniques” for each project I would make. I feel I still operate with the same motto.

What traditional media do you use, if any? Do you think your work with traditional media relates to your work with technology?

My work deals mostly with our relationship to technology, or more specifically to images and the machines that produce them. That's because it's an environment we create for ourselves and that in turn we (as humans) respond to. This relationship is one of the vehicles for our mutations.

As for my practice, I am after results. I would use anything as long it produces what I am after. I used drawings for my show at 179 Canal. Drawing is still a great place to explore.

Are you involved in other creative or social activities (i.e. music, writing, activism, community organizing)?

I have curated exhibitions. I am not as good a writer as I would like to be, but I still intend to write: to write about my work and the work of the people I know or that interest me. That's because artists have a privileged position to discuss their peers' works. I think artists should make use of this position to defend not only their personal voice, but also of the one of their peers. It's all about bonding and bonding makes for better art works.

What do you do for a living or what occupations have you held previously? Do you think this work relates to your art practice in a significant way?

I run a one-person company called "Bonjour Computer, LLC". I help people with their computers; or rather I help them in dealing with their frustration with technology. It's akin to being a pet psychologist. It fits my practice and offers the double advantage of a decent pay as well as flexible hours. [Plus, most of my clients come to my exhibitions.]

Who are your key artistic influences?

I have diverse influences, starting from dialogues with people around me. Each piece I make is informed by several people or works. For my last show at 47 Canal I was thinking of American "Pictures Generation" artists (Matt Mullican, John Miller), Belgium surrealism (Marcel Broodthaers, Magritte), as well as Google Image Searches and rebuses.

For me, Mullican deals with a collective unconscious, a residual of collective pop culture lodged in his subconscious, that, via a system of personal symbolism, he merges with a collective unconscious. Broodthaers and Magritte brought the “word” to surrealism. Both these sources are, at least for me, a more abstract form of surrealism and share similarities. I thought the two could be bridged.

Have you collaborated with anyone in the art community on a project? With whom, and on what?

I like collaborations and exchanges. For instance, I have been interested for a while in Christophe Hanna / LA REDACTION’s book [Valérie par Valérie](#). Hanna is an incredible writer; sadly his work has not been translated to English yet. Hanna’s book deals with the constant fabrication of a public identity—it’s more a document than a narrative. In an (maybe failed) attempt to assimilate the book, I gave a conference at the New Museum as part of the New Silent series organized by Rhizome, about the construct of my own public identity. For the project I enlisted Philipp Furtenbach, a founding member of [AO&](#), a collective of itinerant chefs, whose focus is on the social fabric of small communities. With Philipp we set a regimen of stringent meetings and questions, that he asked me every week (“How do you picture yourself in the future?” was one of these questions for instance). The meetings and questions were directly derived from Hanna’s book. I met with Philipp on a weekly basis for 7 or 8 months. The questions served as the basis of the reflection for the conference.

Do you actively study art history?

I develop specific interest for certain artists and I would read about them. I have a focused interest. There is so much information out there, that I find it distracting.

Do you read art criticism, philosophy, or critical theory? If so, which authors inspire you?

I recently read some Willem Flusser; I enjoyed it. Also Paul Ryan, *Cybernetics of the Sacred*, is an amazing read. It’s one thing I struggle with being in New York, finding time to read. I’d like to read more science fiction. My friend Josh Kline has good recommendations.

Are there any issues around the production of, or the display/exhibition of new media art that you are concerned about?

My nature is to be carefree. With time and experience I am starting to realize that new media work or at least mine is based on illusion and that strict display conditions have to be respected for the work to function. For instance, the room needs to be lit a certain way, the sound be set at a certain volume or the video be projected a certain size. If the conditions are not met, my work does not function. It's pretty basic stuff, but people still do not know how to deal with technological works. So I am learning how to be more specific and direct when I install shows. I do not deal with the archival aspect of my work yet.