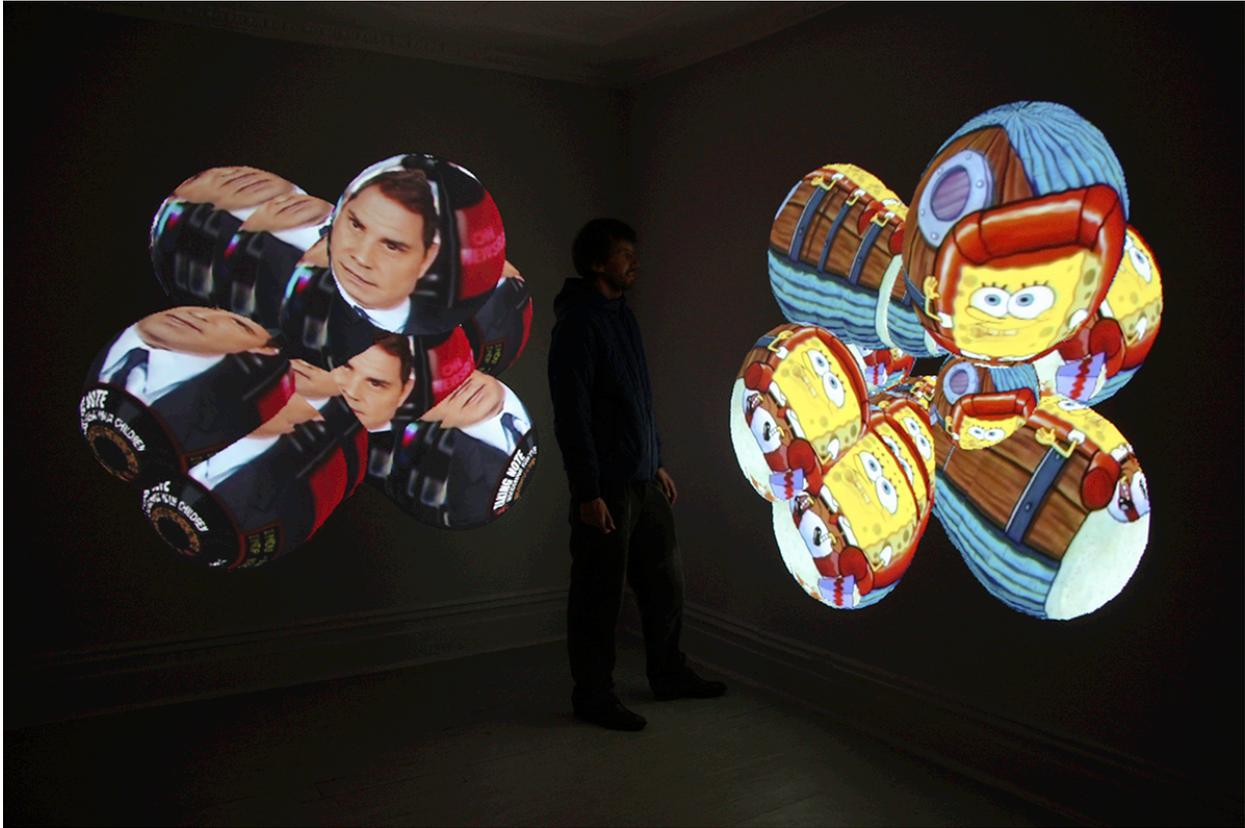


DAMN°



179 Canal TV Show, Antoine Catala

FEELINGS IN AN INTERNET SOCIETY DAMN° SITS DOWN WITH ANTOINE CATALA

CRISTINA GUADALUPE GALVÁN
July 2019

“The symbiotic machines started accumulating data on the people that used them. Heart rates, GPS coordinates, pictures, conversations, videos, sleep patterns, ingested calories, social interactions, Internet searches... desires, thoughts, and biorhythms. And the greedy utopians who wanted to better the lives of inter-connected global village inhabitants pushed the machines to collect more data every day. The machines got to know you better than anyone else, better than your parents, down to your darkest fantasies...”

Welcome to Antoine Catala’s world, and yours and mine sooner than we think... This is how starts his text *Hard Feelings/Cyborg Words* published on the catalogue for a show at the Fredericianum in Kassel entitled *Speculation on Anonymous Materials* (2014), and it kind of describes to the letter what it’s almost already here. He believes that the majority of the population is losing touch with their emotions. Technological advances are mediating the more and more all social exchanges, and we’ll soon may arrive to a place like in the Spike Jonze’s movie *Her* (2013), where the protagonist falls in love with Siri, basically.

Born French and US resident, he is probably one of the most interesting young artists working today. If there is an avant-garde, he is probably there. And this is not because he builds all these technological

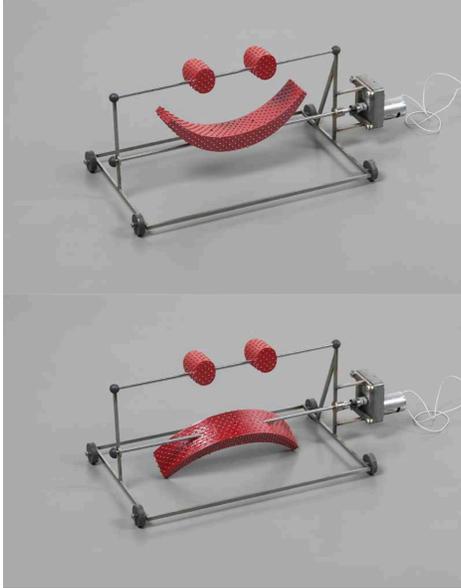
gadgets – at the core he is a Conceptual Artist – but because with them he actually reveals or plays with how they are affecting us as humans. I don't know if he would mind me saying this, but I would like to think that he may be trying to reconnect us with our humanist ideals, lost somewhere in the 20th century. As he says, “the more I do art, the more I want it to have social implication.”



Everything is Okay installation view

Moving from a television society to an Internet society is not a small matter, and he is part of that generation. His first breakthrough idea, materialized in 2 different projects, one physical and one digital -- dealt with television – distorting its image output -- and it's no surprise to see how the later work, his kinetic sculptures, deal more with our phones and the internet culture. It is as if he needed to transition himself as well. Marshall McLuhan comes to mind and his work around media. In a way Antoine's work revolves around *Understanding Media* as well, and the drastic, fast and recent changes we are witnessing and how it affects the way we feel and communicate. I believe his project at the core really deals with semiotics. As he says, “The new technologies that I use in my work give prominence to a triad which cannot be dissociated from them, namely an equivalence between object, image and word. From just one word, Google can produce millions of images. Thanks to 3D printers, we have access to files, which, in their turn, print the objects associated with that word. So, the equivalence is not essentially visual or poetic, it is blatantly material: object = image = word.”

Antoine was invited to participate in this year's Venice Biennale curated by Ralph Rugoff called *May you live in interesting times*. DAMN met him in his studio in a Jewish Hasidic neighbourhood in Brooklyn – in a very old school NY loft building -- a couple weeks before traveling to Venice to begin the install. When I arrived, the purple silicone for one of his pieces was drying on a table, under the gaze of an E.T. toy seating on a speaker, as a beautiful metaphor of this colliding worlds of emotion, technological progress and communication. I could almost hear him “phone home.”



Phantom Limb, Antoine Catala

DAMN: What are you doing in Venice?

Antoine Catala: Every artist in the Biennial is asked to do two projects, so I am doing two projects. They were coined by the curators *Proposition A* and *Propositions B*. Each proposition is in a different venue. One is in the Giardini and one in the Arsenale. In one I am doing the entrance of the Giardini and the other one is more like a little nook in the Arsenale.

I guess you know these things? The breathing panels?

D: Yes, I saw them at your show at Canal 47

AC: Yes! I have different ones. This is what the sheets are for [the one that is drying in the studio while we talk].

D: Because it's silicon they expand, no?

AC: They are airtight so they can contract too.

D: What is the idea for the piece?

AC: The piece is called "It's over". There are going to be 9 of them in a free-standing wall and at the back you have the pumps that activate each one.

It comes from that exhibition I did at 47 Canal, and the idea was emojis in text messages -- how one uses emojis in text messages to sort of reassure the people that you are talking to. So emojis are there to be cute, because there can be so many miscommunications in text messages. And text it's kind of an interesting form of communication -- I am not going to go in there -- but I essentially kept the idea of reassurance and I turned it into this, which are sort of ambiguous reassuring messages. Like "Everything is OK", "Hey Relax" "Tutto va bene" but also "It's over." It's over is very ambiguous, because one way of using it, that people don't think about, it's maybe like when a mother wakes up a child, who is having nightmares and says "it's over", "it's ok", "you don't have to worry." It's this thing when something terrible was about to happen but it didn't really quite happen. I wanted these weird reassuring messages at the entrance, since they gave me that location.

D: Do the shapes correspond to a phone?

AC: Yes, initially it was set as a phone, although phones have changed ratios over time.

D: And where do you fabricate this technology?

AC: It's all done here.

D: You build the whole thing yourself?

AC: The green foam is what gets cut in the CNC router, this is all the silicone to pour the sheets and over there there's all the pumps. And for this show, we have a big control box that is going to operate the 9 pumps. Usually for shows like this I have done very complicated installs. I do kinetic works and I wanted something kind of robust for Venice, so hopefully this will work, because this is going to be open from May to December with little assistance.

D: Why you like to show the pumps?

AC: Because there's something a little scary and I quite like that it helps people understand, and there's something to the way they understand the mechanics of what is happening. They create another story. I quite like the fact that they are mechanical. So this whole thing is a mechanical apparatus, versus a thing just magical. Because if you didn't see the pumps or anything maybe it would just be.... That's why I like to show the mess.

D: And the noise.

AC: Yes, and the noise. If they were hidden inside the wall you would hear it anyway. It's like a vacuum... To find a silent one would be very hard or expensive. And I like the contrast between the message and the machines, and the reassurance and the machines. All my work ultimately is about an idea on how we implement technologies to sort of reflect the way we are. Technologies are like an extension of self or psyche. Not to show it is just to make a magical object, and I think it's nicer to make it mechanical/technological. And I really like pumps. I see it as assisted breathing, or assisted mechanism, so it feels there is a danger all the time. Like iron lungs or something like this. It's like you are helping something exist, basically. You keep it alive in a way, and there's a fragility to it. And I think that's important. I guess that everything moving has that fragility, but to expose that.

D: And the other one?

AC: The other one is something I've done but I am modifying. It's something called "The heart atrophies."

D: The Rebus! For those who don't know a "Rebus" is a puzzle in which words are represented by combinations of images and individual letters. What's the Rebus?

AC: The Heart A Trophies... I am changing this one a little bit. The idea is that the sentence of the Rebus is decomposed in different types of surroundings that people create for themselves or for other people, and each one of these things has a remnant of effects of the people that created them. One is architectural – so it's the wainscoting "The" --, the second one is advertisement – which is often loaded with emotions "Heart" --, the other one is fashion with the sweaters with "trophies" and the last one is science. This [the A he is showing me in his studio] is the science. And this is actually soft robotics adapted to this project. Soft robotics is something that people have been playing with. [He plugs the letter and it starts to move!]

D: It's really cute

AC: I still have to do a lot of figuring out... and it is kind of noisy... This is what I mean by assisted breathing. Essentially what it does is, it can bend completely vertical, but when you do this too many times, and also the pressure changes with temperature, then this is basically a very fragile balloon and it



Don't Worry (Wall), 2017, latex, wood, high density foam, pump, edition of 3 +2AP, 58 × 36 in., 147.3 × 91.4 cm

explodes. There's a number of fabrication tricks. Do we make the membranes thicker, do we change how the timing works? And I keep thinking, if it has to perform so many acrobatics for so long, it's going to keep on breaking, so I am bringing a table like this [laboratory stainless steel type] to Venice and I am just going to keep it like this. This gives more of a scientific feel to it.

D: And why repeating?

AC: It's very simple, they don't give a penny. And I knew this from the start.

D: For anything?

AC: For nothing. They don't even pay for my flight. It's pretty aggressive.