

Interview Daniel Canogar, January 2010

Cecilia Andersson: Since a few years back, your work deals with refuse and with recycling of electronic waste material. In this you are somehow digging into a 'technological collective unconscious'. How did this work come about?

Daniel Canogar: Quite by accident, I started visiting and photographing junk yards, recycling centres and city dumps, and slowly started gravitating towards E-waste. I was particularly struck by the accumulations: mountains of circuit boards, electronic cables or computer screens. I could almost feel the buzz of the information once processed by these now "dead" artefacts. I started seeing these accumulations as a new landscape, an excremental one created collectively by us all. But I was particularly struck by the abjectness of this discarded electronic material. You could see the marks of its original owners (stickers on screens, smudged keyboards), and even imagine the data bases of information still contained in the hard disks. By becoming obsolete, these artefacts become utterly human, acquiring a past life, a memory in a sense, and a death of sorts. The uncertain borders between what is alive and what is dead have always been an important part of my work.

I remember when I bought my first computer in 1987, a Mac Plus, I felt I was part of a cutting-edge technological pack. Here was a machine that promised seamless efficiency and spotless performance, a machine that made me feel powerful and promised a bright future. I still have this computer today: I was unable to throw it out once it became obsolete. I look at it and it feels so quaint. I projected so many things onto it; I wrote my first book on it. It is such an important part of my past, throwing it out would be equivalent to chucking a family photo-album. Likewise, when discovering a pile of electronic garbage, I start to imagine all the information it has processed, all the dreams and hopes and disappointments it has channelled. We are throwing out our collective history. With my art work, I try to reignite the life of these obsolete machines, and above all, try to tap into the creative potential of technologies prematurely made obsolete by accelerated economic cycles.

CA: This idea of us "throwing out our collective history", what do you see as potential problems with that? And do you have thoughts about how a collective memory may look or be shaped in the future?

DC: Having endured a few decades of accelerated information bombardment, the brain feels increasingly fatigued. I'm addicted to information, yet seem less able to retain any of it. Memory, and its loss, is becoming an increasingly important issue in my work. I am becoming acutely aware that the loss of memory signifies the disappearance of my identity: I am defined by my recollections and the wisdom accrued through past experiences. Memory tools of the present attempt to assist us in this vanishing act, yet as they become rapidly obsolete, they too become forgotten. The results of this process are troubling: collective amnesia. By throwing our history away, personal and collective, we are condemned to committing the same mistakes over and over again. Perhaps a futile effort, I strive to slow things down a little by recovering these depositories of memory, and extract some of its hidden secrets.

CA: In your installation *Scanner*, clusters of colourful cables are grouped together and light projected onto these cables sets off small sparkles. The sparkles are unpredicted in a gentle kind of way. And as we spoke about memory, what was your thinking behind this piece?

DC: Fundamentally a desire to connect our digital social networks to neural synaptic firings, two communication networks that perfectly mirror each other. In Alzheimer's disease, the hippocampus in the medial temporal lobe is the first to go, simultaneously creating memory loss and spatial disorientation. I find it fascinating how memory functions are connected to our ability to travel through the world. Several people have commented how the discarded cables of the installation are sculpturally clustered to resemble continents of an imaginary map. I very much like this reading of the piece, in which sparks of light seem to connect remote corners of the planet. Our technologies have developed a new neural system far removed from our brains.

CA: What would you consider to be sources of inspiration?

DC: All kinds of accumulations of objects and materials; overflowing dumpsters; signs of excessive consumerism; late baroque and mannerist frescos, particularly Italian and Spanish; patterns that emerge in nature with a repeating motive; images of crowds as mass ornamentation, or any representation of the individual lost in a collective mass; vintage photographs of humans interfacing absurd machines; photographs of the interior of old computers; roller coasters or any extreme amusement park rides that momentarily allow people to surrender their lives to machines; images that convey the vulnerability of the human body.

CA: You speak about surrender to machines, is the idea of surrender a feeling you in some ways try to induce in audiences of your own work? Personally I get that feeling at times as your installations are fully immersive environments. They present all I need to know at that particular moment and in that sense stimulate surrender, to just let myself go with the work.

DC: That description of your experience of my installations is definitely one of the best compliments I have ever received! Surrendering to my installations implies allowing oneself to be carried away by the implemented technology in the artwork. I am fascinated by how we allow ourselves to trust machines, considering how often machines failed us in the past. I struggle between a resistance to the dynamics of a machine, and totally letting go and wanting to utterly trust it. For example, I find nothing more soothing than falling asleep during a long flight: being able to totally disconnect while being effortlessly transported over vast expanses of land. Such trust can easily be shattered: I find nothing more disturbing and disorienting than to be woken up by sudden turbulence midflight. But to go back to my work, I do want visitors of my installations (an entirely different kind of technological artefact, but one nonetheless) to trust me, so that I can transport them to surprising places. I am increasingly interested in creating hypnotic trance-like states that induce wonderment and surprise, perhaps because I crave such meditative experiences as a refuge and respite from the overwhelming experience of quotidian reality.

CA: Your visual references clearly come alive in your work. You also mention some more visceral sources of inspiration, experiences based on a certain (modernist) perception of the individual. At a point in history when ideas of the individual are transforming, when

individuals are becoming 'dividuals' - and by that I mean increasingly divided between one screen and the other, between private and public, and between geographical locations in time and space – your work makes strong comments on this development. It makes me think that time, the passage of time, must somehow also be a source of inspiration for you. Am I wrong?

DC: As an artist in his mid-forties, the passage of time, inevitably linked to the theme of memory, is becoming a major preoccupation. And thus I understand so much better countless *Vanitas* painted throughout the history of art. At a younger age I think I didn't quite get this genre. Now I am fascinated to see how past and present artists negotiate such concerns. I totally identify with all these obsolete machines I have been working with; we are all light bulbs that shine, and then flicker off. As an artist, I question my currency: am I too becoming obsolete? What do I have to offer to the art community?

CA: Is it important for you to establish dialogue between your topic of 'investigation' (subject matter) and your artistic expression/language? If so, how do you achieve this dialogue?

DC: I don't feel these as separate spheres. The subject matter I am pulled to belongs to ongoing artistic investigations. New subject matter only brings a new angle to already existing areas of fascination. I deeply believe that each artist has a core of set obsessions he/she grapples with all his/her life. I see this when looking at my student work: it was all already there. Through the years I have fleshed the original ideas out, but the seed was already present. My artistic expression is a way of integrating "things out there in the world" to my vision. It's a filter that helps me engage with life, allows me to process the overwhelming complexity of everyday experience, and thus, helps me to get a footing on the slippery terrain we call reality.

CA: I see this as one way of constructing your own narrative, as a thread that weaves through your work creating a denser fabric, or perhaps more like an elaborate pattern, over time. This really fascinates me, the presence of an accumulative process and how that self-investigating narrative is being kept alive. I'm not sure if that's how you see it, that you hinge your dialogue with the subject matter onto some kind of narrative structure?

DC: Yes, I do feel I am weaving a denser narrative, a very personal one. And of course the self-investigating narrative is kept alive because we never quite hit the nail on the head. The art process is a phenomenal way of carrying out this investigation: it allows for contradictions, complexities, multiple perspectives so fitting to the intricacies of human nature. But the key word here is narrative. We need narratives to hold ourselves down, or else we get lost. We live in a time of shifting narratives, new ones are being mapped onto older ones, or the older ones are disappearing all together. New narratives create new identities, and I am fascinated how media, old and new, have a very crucial role in this process.

CA: Give me an example of what you call "new narratives"?

DC: I'm thinking of the kind of narratives that emerge with new mediums. *Youtube*, *Wii*, or *Grand Theft Auto*, to name three specific examples, have created fragmented, hyperlinked and layered narratives. I'm particularly fascinated by how film has a tendency to break down traditional narratives. Hollywood blockbuster films do this in a

particularly absurd way, as when a collapsing building or an exploding airplane is portrayed in utmost detail with computer graphics. We are visually engulfed by the scene, fascinated by the fully rendered cinematic catastrophe that unfolds. While this cinematic extravaganza happens, the story comes to a grinding halt. I'm very interested in the awkward transition that occurs, from a very literary storytelling narrative model to a visually haptic mode of cinematic experience. Film historian Tom Gunning called this "cinema of attractions", film as pure visual pleasure, a mode already present at the conception of the medium. New narratives allow us to adapt to changing conditions in the media landscape, and while doing so, actually change our identities.

CA: In one of your most recent works *Spin* where you mounted 100 DVDs on the wall and projected different snippets of film onto each DVD, this new narrative becomes totally obvious. It becomes a broken narrative, perhaps a generative narrative. It kind of makes me wonder if this piece will present me with a complete new story each time I am in front of it.

DC: Born in world's fairs, theme parks and popular fairgrounds, film historians have traditionally brushed cinema of attractions aside as easy spectacle for the masses seeking cheap thrills. Yet the genre of cinema of attractions is presently receiving attention as a fundamental contributor to our present visual culture. Rather than using a literary-based script to move things along, it exploits the most fundamental aspects of film: immersive experiences, aggressive montage and haptic engagement of the spectator's sensory abilities. For quite a while I have wanted to engage through my artwork with this other history of film, and *Spin* is allowing me to do so. I am discovering pulsing rhythms and patterns that emerge when fragments of hundreds of films are being simultaneously projected onto the DVDs. I am also discovering how the anti-narrative structure of the installation hides a whole other kind of narrative, one that seems more about our collective memory trying to make sense of the cacophony of thousands and thousands of films that over a century have unrolled in front of our eyes.

I am presently working on a version of *Spin* with what you call a generative narrative: the audience's presence in front of the installation will trigger different non-linear projections that constantly mutate. I am also interested in developing an interface that will allow the public to toy around with different genres, mixing animation with gore, for example, or porn with romantic comedy.

CA: I see art's potential in creating coherence, as a tool making connections, bridging gaps and acquiring information. Is this something you think about, how contexts, or coherences, are produced in the process of making your art?

DC: Above all, the art process makes me feel connected, alert and attentive to details, states that make me feel grounded and dissolve the numbing effect of senseless sensory bombardment. When I am attentive to my environment, and deeply involved in my research, blocks and obstacles disappear and these small sparks of clarity makes it all worth it.

CA: And finally, what are some of the references you embrace in your work?

DC: Film archaeology, cinema of attractions, protocinematographic spectacles, and contemporary art work that alludes to any of these historical precedents which has been so important in the birth of the modern spectator. Certainly artists like Tony Ousler,

William Kentridge, Kara Walker or Anthony McCall, are artists that I observe closely for this reason.