

Interview with Daniel Canogar, Wednesday, October 12, 2011

Nuit Blanche originated in Paris in 2001 and has developed into an annual global network of contemporary art events taking place one night of the year. This year's New York event "Into the Light" invited 69 artists to create, in the words of the organizers, "an immersive spectacle for thousands of visitors to re-imagine public space and civic life" along the waterfront of Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Another of New York City's marginal and transitional zones this industrial neighborhood bridges a history of development that is rapidly changing. Now in the eye of real estate developers, Greenpoint has traditionally served a labor economy with its port, warehouses, and long stretches of roadway that encourage transport over transformation, movement rather than contemplation. What kind of intervention gives meaning to an existing landscape without simply appropriating it, considers its features, its origins, and its purpose – in short, to recognize it for what it is rather than what we ask it to be?

To address the industrial scale of the neighborhood in relation to human involvement, I spoke with Daniel Canogar, a new media artist from Madrid and a veteran of public art interventions and installations including "Constelaciones" a permanent public art installation on new pedestrian bridges crossing the Manzanares River in Madrid and "Travesias" a LED screen 33 meters in length installed in the atrium of the Justus Lipsius building of the European Union Council both from 2010. For *Into the Light*, he adapted his work "Asalto" (Assault) (2009/11) to create a dynamic light painting whose color and composition is determined by local participants translating gesture to visual projection.

KM Daniel, as I wandered through the Greenpoint neighborhood on the evening of Nuit Blanche, many of the artistic interventions held ground as individual works grouped around a theme, *Into the Light*, but your contribution impressed me for considering the industrial scale of the neighborhood. First of all, your projection was visible from a great distance yet remained a discovery when you arrived close up. Second, the images blended with the support structure of the building almost as a collaboration. Are you familiar with Greenpoint? How was the site selected? And what particular considerations did the neighborhood present?

DC I know the neighborhood of Greenpoint fairly well having spent a fantastic summer there in 1994, exactly one block from the factory where I projected "Asalto" this October 1st. So returning was like being in old familiar territory with much of the waterfront, abandoned warehouses, and piers still the same though it is clear that my return was timely as this environment will be completely changed within a few years by real estate development. That summer my friend and colleague Paul D'Acri and I projected slides onto the warehouses from the window of our loft. Such an experience was a kind of premonition for what was to come seventeen years later in the form of "Asalto," and thinking of the neighborhood as a compelling screen to project on.

As for the site, there is a background story to it: I had originally received an invitation from Nuit Blanche Paris; they wanted a projection along the banks of the Seine. Since so

much of my work this year involved water as subject this invitation was very appealing to me, but after producing a detailed proposal the organizers realized that the Seine was not under the jurisdiction of the city but of the national ports and transportation system, which had a specific clause stating that projections were not permitted for safety reasons. It would have taken a year of paperwork to figure that one out so the proposal was canceled. Exactly a week later came the invitation from Nuit Blanche New York. Obviously, I was interested in Greenpoint as a waterfront and proposed a similar vision of people crawling out of the water – as if emerging from a primal pool – and rising onto the piers. I then wanted the same people to be seen a few blocks away scaling the side of the warehouse on Milton Street, taking over the neighborhood, as it were. Ultimately, the plan had to be scaled down to the factory building.

KM “Asalto” engages a public space but also a public audience; weather and technical issues forced you to moderate your plans Saturday evening; can you give us an idea how “Asalto” ideally unfolds? And what connotations do you have in mind with its title?

DC Ideally “Asalto” is a public participation event, with the viewers crawling across a green screen as an overhead camera films them in HD; those images are then transmitted from the camera to two computers – one to mask out the green screen, the other as a live edit to accumulate the images of bodies projected against the warehouse. The piece evolves through the evening, with the initial few “climbing” the façade gradually become a literal swarm of humanity.

It is hard to explain how exciting it is to watch the reactions as the participants observe themselves climbing this massive structure. It brings out the inner-King Kong– allowing them to acrobatically ascend to the top of the building and totally disregard the pull of gravity. That is how it should have unfolded here in Brooklyn had the weather been different, and how it did unfold beautifully the first time I created this work in Spain.

KM So it could have been called “Exaltado” (“Exalted”)...

DC (laughs) For example! though that begins to sound like a super hero...

KM So the name “Asalto”?

DC Two years ago in Spain, I conceived of “Asalto” for Segovia’s Alcazar castle; this castle is in our collective imaginary as the archetype of all castles; it was the inspiration for Walt Disney’s castle. It has a tremendous cultural significance to Spain and captures everyone’s fantasy young and old.. I wanted to create a playful approach to history whereby there would be a collective assault on this monument – *asalto* is a military raid – on a history that doesn’t belong to the national heritage, doesn’t belong to the state but belongs to us, the people of Spain. Ultimately I wanted it be a playful engagement but also a recognition of history as a collective inheritance.

“Asalto” is related to a previous projection entitled “Clandestinos” (“Clandestine”) for Madrid, Rome, and Rio de Janeiro. In Madrid it was projected onto a triumphal arch that

served as a gateway to the 18th century city which was opened and closed daily to control entry into the city. “Clandestinos” was conceived just as a horrific event unfolded on the news in Spain: hundreds of subsaharans were desperately raiding the fences that separated Morocco from Ceuta, a Spanish military territory in Northern Africa. They were tearing up their own bodies on the barbed wire, trying to jump the fence that separated them from Spanish territory and beyond that Europe. . Most of us are so unaware of the measures that immigrants take to cross borders, but here was an incident that made a strong impression on public awareness in Spain. Such images were on my mind when I conceived of “Clandestinos.” It was the background source for “Clandestinos” that eventually fed into “Asalto.” I wanted to create a piece that both played with our fantasies of history and also made apparent the collective potential to assault the status of historical monuments or even national boundaries.

KM This presents a difficult trajectory of serious intent moving towards play and playfulness. I would like to come back to this notion but for now let’s continue with the role of the figure, the human body. Your work of the 1980s and 1990s centered on a fragmented, transparent, and shadowed body with works such as “Alien Memory” (1998) or “Bringing Down the House” (1999) revealing the body’s indexical traces rather than the human figure itself. Then in 2002 with “Leap of Faith,” there was an interesting development: the body became whole – scaling the sides of buildings, weightless or falling, or entangled in debris – both in and out of control. There seems to be a play with the human axis of vertical versus the horizontal axis of the earth. At the same time you introduce the element of abstraction.

DC There is a sense in my early work of figures being tortured by physical reality, resulting in a body that was trapped and hidden – I was very challenged by reality at that point in my life and it showed in my work. There is a transition from a hidden, partial body to a freer, untethered body as the years go by. I explore a vertical climb in the imagery, but also the potential fall – notions of Icarus and technological arrogance and the dangers of falling back to primal water are certainly present in “Asalto” as well as other works.

One of the beauties of public participation is the public’s immediate observation of the results of their labors – they think it through and come back to create a variation of their climb, whether that is falling down from the summit, or stopping mid-climb to photograph the spectators, or many other improvised moments. Participants get in touch with gravity – or its opposite as a *Peter Pan* liberation from gravity. I hadn’t really thought about horizontal-vertical notions before: you have a way of bringing out the more psychic threads in my work that I usually don’t consider.

KM What’s interesting to me with the interaction of the public is that they become the elements of the work of art itself, they are the brush and palette while the façade of the factory building is the canvas – it’s a dynamic engagement that makes this building come alive. So you have at one and the same time a degree of realism – high definition figures assaulting the cityscape, scaling the side of a building – and a degree of pattern and abstraction. This became even more pronounced when you began to play with the

color levels of the projection as the evening wore on. How and when has the body become so entwined with pattern and abstraction in your work?

DC This change from fragmentation to an integrated human form has corresponded with a move to abstraction. Abstraction was never an interest of mine until I visited Lima, Peru to participate in an exhibition. There I had the opportunity to spend an afternoon pulling out drawer after drawer of Inca textiles in the small family-owned Amaro Museum. I was just blown away by the sophistication of not only the technique but also of the representation and symbolism in relation to the weaving patterns themselves. I started connecting weaving patterns with how digital images are literally woven together on a screen – odd lines, even lines, odd lines, even lines – and how an electronic image is literally woven together.

KM This visual representation is ancient and yet relevant as technology.

DC Yet they have the same subject matter as today – war, sex, violence – the connections are exciting; they really blew me away. In the end we haven't changed as much as we think we have. References to weaving and textile patterns have gradually led me to abstraction, which totally took me by surprise. It just shows that if we really let the art process do what it is supposed to do it takes us to extremely surprising and unexpected places.

KM This takes a very interesting direction in the last year or two in your water installations considering the vortex of waste that accumulates in our oceans. You show a consistent preoccupation with detritus as change, technology as obsolescence, and even humanity as a process rendered finite due to excess. While your work emanates from a very private experience of the world, it is also politically alert. How are we to consider the threshold between the human and technology in your work? How do you see “Asalto” in terms of these issues?

DC Each project I undertake is a working through of aesthetic, technological, and social ideas that then serve as a conduit of larger issues beyond my immediate thought or control. But certainly the human-technology threshold is related to ideas of waste and also a kind of disillusionment over my original excitement about technology. Technology has become junk to me, but as such I feel a great deal of empathy for leftover, abandoned electronic junk. Such detritus becomes a mirror of ourselves – circuits, cables, and hard drives mimic our tissues, nervous systems, brains, etc. – but above all, these technologies die, just as we do. In its obsolescence, technology becomes utterly human. We all have a date of expiration sealed into the very heart of our existence. I no longer feel assaulted by technology but feel we share the same life and death paradox.

KM Paradigms of biological systems are reflected in our technological paradigms, complete with the notion of obsolescence.

DC: We have studied the human form carefully since the Renaissance and we echo that in our artifacts, which are nothing but psychic projections and physical manifestations of our anxieties and fears...it's the idea of the ghost in the machine: these artifacts are haunted with our demons..., and dreams..., it's not all negative!

KM How do these ideas play out on the topography of Greenpoint?

DC Clearly the presentation of "Asalto" changes from its original setting on a castle. Here is a wasteland, an industrial past that will be exchanged for upscale condos... I spoke with quite a few spectators on the evening of Nuit Blanche who were from the area and felt very emotional about the changes in the neighborhood and were themselves thinking about reclaiming these industrial structures as worth keeping. So, yes, there is a sense of collective action and awareness that the piece reflects and encourages.

KM The timing of this event with the Occupy Wall Street movement declares the utopian hopefulness that a collective can claim its right to public space. There is also the dystopian acknowledgement that public space is being cordoned off and controlled and usurped for the purposes of capital. I thought a progressive collective movement could not happen in the U.S. but here it is!

DC I wish I had had the time to visit Liberty Park; it is greatly inspired by the Spanish movement of May 15th, which in turn was modeled on Arab Spring and Tahrir Square in Cairo. I followed the Spanish occupation movement very carefully because it manifested a tremendous need for public space as an arena for authentic political dialogue, something that has almost been eradicated in our present privatized urban landscapes. If "Asalto/Spain" recognizes public reclamation of history then "Asalto/New York" emphasizes the reclamation of urban topography for the public.

Let me add something here in relation to abstraction that we discussed earlier. As the night wore on my engineer and I played with new features of the live video-editing program we were using and turned the very realistic projections of bodies into patterns of colored forms. At one point towards the end of the evening the yellow and red palette used to silhouette the bodies made the building appear to be on fire. (Many warehouses burnt down in Greenpoint some years back, and some neighbors suspect the hand of an arsonist). What initially seemed like aesthetic patterning actually resonated deeply with a recent dramatic event in the neighborhood. One of the themes explored in the recent Istanbul Biennial was how surface aesthetics can contain profound social and political content. I like this as a model to work with – just as the ancient textiles displayed in their patterns the very real occurrences of war – a retinal, playful seduction followed by the discovery of significant content.

KM And now we can return to Winnicott's "potential space" as the space of play, a space to work out the widely disparate experiences of, on the one hand, the feeling of omnipotence (the superhero assaulting the building) and, on the other hand, "having a sense of being a mere speck in a universe" (the consequence of being a human being in

the face of technology) – it seems to me that your effort to break the almost mechanical production of planning and negotiations that goes into the production of public art with a willingness to open into the public sphere a place of play and experimentation is one of the few means that we have of re-establishing human presence against a backdrop of controlled behavior, be it censorship, institutional compliance, or the weakening of civil rights, for example.

While your work is clearly motivated from personal experience, you make the work not for yourself but for others. What would you hope or expect your participants and viewers to add or take from this reciprocal experience?

DC Primarily inspiration – whether in teaching, writing, or creating aesthetic work – I try to give others the opportunity to not only be inspired by my work but also realize the creative potential in themselves. So I would hope that participants can add or take their own sense of inspiration, potential, and being able to project themselves onto their immediate neighborhood rather than being kidnapped by their own technological bubble. I'd like them to feel implicated in a larger environment in a playful, potential, and creative way. If I can even get close to that, it would be phenomenal. I'd love that! [smiles]

KM That's beautiful. That's a beautiful response. [laughs]

DC [laughs]