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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN: ART

ANTOINE CATALA

The New York-based French artist, who studied mathematics, updates Wittgenstein's language games for the digital age with this enthralling rebus of a show. Each work represents a syllable of the phrase "I See Catastrophes Ahead." Materials range from simple holograms (a rotating cartoon "cat") to an interface created by scientists at Carnegie Mellon (a latex panel that alternates between a concave letter "A" and a convex shape that replicates a photograph of the back of a "head"). Catala's sculptures offer more than a cumulative "aha" moment—they're a sophisticated commentary on the information overload of the digital age. Through March 25.

Through March 25

47 CANAL

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Antoine Catala: 'I See Catastrophes Ahead'

By KEN JOHNSON

47 Canal

47 Canal Street, Lower East Side Through March 25

An apt slogan for Antoine Catala's amusingly inventive, computer-controlled installation would be "Only connect." It consists of five conceptually and electrically linked parts. In a low vitrine resembling an illuminated aquarium, the holographlike image of an orange model car hovers in space before a wide photograph of piled ice cubes.

Moving clockwise you come to a framed, Pop-style image of a spiral playground slide printed on a latex membrane. A vacuum pump sucks the membrane against the underlying concave forms of three trophies, which become visible as ghostly forms.

Next, another vitrine displays the plastic body of a cat, whose detached, flattened, holograph-like head rotates in space above. Intermittently you hear the startlingly realistic sound of a cat's meow. Then comes a transparent plastic three-dimensional shape of a man's unclothed pelvis and buttocks, enclosing a digital processor that controls all the installation's electronics.

Finally, a panel alternately displays the photographic image of the back of a woman's head and the letter "a" formed by latex vacuumed against an embossing of that character.

Besides cables and tubes, what connects these various constructions is a rebus of images that decodes as “I see catastrophes ahead.” This puzzle is more clever than profound, although reasons for thinking it meaningful might be conceived. What is most impressive is Mr. Catala’s ingenious and poetic play with diverse image-making technologies. He is a dream-machine maker with a bright future.

NINA CULOTTA

Antoine Catala: “I See Catastrophes Ahead”

by ninaculotta

I SEE CATASTROPHES AHEAD

Antoine Catala: "I See Catastrophes Ahead" at 47 Canal. February 22 - March 25, 2012.

Entering Antoine Catala’s show inside 47 Canal’s second floor space at first feels like entering the hospital room of a slowly dying patient: a distinctly Darth Vader-ish *hiss, hiss* of air being sucked in and out of some mechanized pump sounds from some dim corner; a disk drive spins furiously; the blinds are drawn. You almost expect to walk into the middle of the room to turn and see an unfortunate scene involving a bed outfitted with an iron lung, or strung up with IVs, one of those heart rate screens and a lot of incomprehensible machinery. Catala, after all, is foreseeing some catastrophe — but what you see in the room is not this at all.

Five sculptures line the space. A hologram of a cat with its cartoonish head spinning, detached, atop its shoulders reveals itself to be a confusing compilation of ceramics, television monitor, two-way mirror and lighting effects. It’s impossibly flat and voluminous, both an image and an object, but completely neither. Across the room, another hologram shows a glowing sports car spinning over an un-melting backdrop of ice cubes. What is being projected onto what plane, and what occupies three-dimensional space, is remarkably unclear.

Another work hangs on the wall: at first it’s a photo of a slide, then it’s a photo of a slide with the outlines of trophies engraved into it. The hose of a vacuum protrudes from the bottom of the stretcher, sucking air out of the space in between the surface of the photo and the embossed trophy-shapes below it. Again, the division

between the two optical spaces is confused, and it takes a moment to resolve the elements of the piece, mentally packing them back into their respective dimensions.

The vacuum makes a loud vibrating sound. Wires spill and run over the floor, connecting each sculpture to its counterparts. A Mac Mini whirs from inside a clear plastic mannequin's ass, the kind you see modelling swim shorts outside Chinatown bodegas in the summertime. The hologram cat occasionally gives out a loud *mew*.

The most interesting work in the show, by far, is also the source of the Darth Vader-ish assisted breathing sound that consumes the ambiance of the room. Here a tiny projector faces a small, freestanding screen hooked up to a mess of wires, equipment and metal supports. The projection on the screen shifts back and forth between a photograph of the back of a woman's head and a bright orange letter 'a', engraved into the surface behind the screen. The images fade in and out to the tempo of the machine's inhalations, becoming the engraved 'a', and exhalations, transforming into the head. It is only after a moment that you realize that the breathing sound is the sound of air being pushed into and out of the screen, causing it to expand and contract like the chest of some animated, heaving creature. The effect is uncanny. In it Cronenberg's *Videodrome* meets a kindergartner's pictogram: a, head, a, head. *I see catastrophes ahead*.

'I See Catastrophes Ahead' is part tongue-in-cheek visual pun and part sincere probing at the paradigms informed by digital technology. On the one hand, Catala proposes that these technologies are breaking down an understood relationship between words, images, and the material world, increasing the fluidity with which a word invokes an image or an object, or vice versa. He proposes a re-structuring of language into keywords, terms classifiable by computers and resulting in an infinite variety of definitions in the form of search results: 'In an internet search, typing a word opens the [door] to an infinite universe of stories, pictures, sounds or videos,' the press release reads.

Thus the confusion between 'slide' and 'trophy', 'car' and 'ice', 'a' and 'head', 'cat', 'ass'. *Icee catasstrophies a head* – sound familiar? The ultimate arbitrariness

of these signs, and of their ultimate prophecy, reflects the breakdown in language ushered in, at least in part, by the Internet's tendency to form links and associations between disparate and arbitrary subjects. The computer's [limited understanding of human syntax](#) has provoked a concerted effort on the part of those invested in online visibility and mobility to make our language comprehensible to machines through the classification of language and images alike into keywords and hashtags. Signification functions via a fluid system of associations determined by links, search results, and popularity.

All this confusion in the works between three-dimensional space and the screen brings the point home: the paradigms that inform the space of the Internet don't stop at the edge of a touchscreen or in the faltering of a WiFi connection. The systems that organize the space of the web spill out and into the fabric of our daily lives, our conversations, conventions and memories. Connections and associations attain a vital importance to productivity. Visibility trumps comprehensibility: *I speak, therefore I am*. Maybe a catastrophe in communication can be seen, after all?

openings

At 47 Canal, Antoine Catala Looks at the Meaning of ‘Catastrophes’

By Michael H. Miller 2/23 2:35pm



Antoine Catala's first show at the gallery 47 Canal is called "I See Catastrophes Ahead." It has one of those press releases that made us feel like we had to figure out what the hell was going on. The text would be staggeringly bleak, if not for the fact that certain words—instead of being written out—are illustrated with kitschy clip art that looks like it came straight out of Windows 95. Earlier this week, we stopped by the gallery and saw Mr. Catala, who presided over a messy room in the midst of installation, with wires and flat-screen televisions and mirrors strewn about the room.

"The whole show is a walk-in rebus," he said in a thick French accent. "Every object in the show is

an element of the sentence, 'I See Catastrophes Ahead.' For instance: if you take 'catastrophes,' you get a cat, an ass and some trophies. So that's the cat," he said, pointing to a corner where the red plastic mold of a cat's body, missing the head, sat inside a frame, the top of which was a flat-screen television whose screen was facing a mirror. He turned the TV on and the spinning head of a cat projected atop the body. The way the mirrors were situated made the whole figure look like it was floating in space.

"It's basically the most antiquated way of doing holograms," Mr. Catala said. "A haunted house type thing." He turned to a work table and produced a clear plastic mold of a lower torso. "This is the ass," he said, taking the two pieces and closing them around a Mac mini, which is loaded with projections for other works in the show.

In another corner was a projector on a custom-built stand facing what looked like a small

rectangular canvas with the image of the back of someone's head printed on it. It was all rigged up with a complex series of wiring. Mr. Catala flipped a switch and the contraption began making a noise like a respirator. It turns out the canvas was a sheet of latex stretched over an airtight chamber—which was shaped like a lowercase “a”—and the machine was sucking air in and out of it. The flow of air produced two different impressions in the latex alternately: first the “a,” then the bulging of the back of the head.

“A-head,” Mr. Catala said with a smile.

The idea for the machine comes from Chris Harrison, a scientist from Carnegie Mellon who works with pneumatic tactile technology, and whose work Mr. Catala has been studying. This same process was used to produce images of trophies onto another latex canvas on the other side of the room. A hologram similar to the cat showed a car spinning on a close-up image of ice—an icy road. So: Icy cat ass trophies a head.

Mr. Catala, who had his first solo show in New York at 179 Canal, the former space of the proprietors of 47 Canal, studied mathematics at school in France before moving on to a fine arts degree in London. While a student, he got some attention for organizing a show at the local Burger King where he'd sometimes go to eat.

“There were posters of artists on the walls,” he said, “Like cheap Ikea posters with plastic frames. And I had the thought one day, if I'm here in 50 years, will the posters will be updated? And will the people doing art then be happy to be on posters in the Burger King? So I contacted Burger King and asked them to do an exhibition where I replaced the posters of Klimt and Matisse and Picasso with contemporary artists.”

The show was two doors down from Whitechapel Art Gallery and it became a hit. People would stop by the Burger King on the way there and see the show while the people who came to eat Whoppers didn't really know what was going on.

“At one point,” Mr. Catala said, “There was an exhibition of Gilbert and George at Serpentine Gallery, and a whole bus of Japanese art students stopped at Serpentine and were then on their way to Whitechapel. But they were too early. Whitechapel was sealed shut. But the clerk at Serpentine had told them, ‘If you have time to kill, I really recommend you go check out this show in the Burger King.’ So a whole bus of Japanese art students stopped into the Burger King and the teacher started to give a lecture on contemporary art. The franchise owner happened to be sitting in the Burger King when he saw this happening, and he stood up and gave this whole speech about how Burger King is a sponsor of the arts.”

“I like changing the context of things,” he added.