

TRACINGS, Analogies and Dissonances

Collecting is a compulsive activity; it is a way to gain control over the world and it serves as a mirror to the collector. Due to its fetishist nature, compiling a collection is a way to decontextualise objects and place them in a new configuration. A collector enjoys analogies and differences but, first and foremost, he appreciates minor differences within his field of interest. He elevates triviality into something of particular interest.

In this project, my collection concerned people's stories and thoughts about objects.

In March 2010, I have been working on a project that focuses on the interaction between men and objects. My aim was to intimately investigate the complex relation that men maintain with objects. TRACINGS is a multifaceted project: It combines conceptual and multimedia art as well as artistic action. I filmed, interviewed people and took in situ pictures at the central recycling plant in Merksem/Antwerp which resulted in various multimedia installations focussing on the intersecting trajectories of all this material in place and time. The central recycling plant in Merksem collects rejected household effects from all over the city and suburbs of Antwerp, repairs them, and subsequently redirects them to the city's network of retail second-hand stores. It is an enormous storage place operating in the margins of society and, what is more, it is a place where multiple stories intersect; stories that coincidentally landed there at a given moment. Objects move from one place to another. In this case they may move from one owner to a potential new owner, meanwhile passing through the hands of various people; people who arrived here from many different places. The central recycling plant is a melting pot of nomadic events.

1. The Project: Content and Concept

It is no documentary about a 'type of people', a 'type of workplace' or a social situation, although the central recycling plant is a special workshop for socially deprived people. As visual artist I went to the recycling plant to embark on a search for stories and images. I wanted to study the man-object relation by recording testimonies, 'following' objects and taking pictures. The closer I got to the skins of people and objects, the more intricate and disconcerting their relation turned out to be.

Different people reach totally different interpretations of objects and they express their feelings in a highly personal way.

Which remarkable life story does a specific person have, often fragile but with a strong sense of dignity and will to survive? A story that is very important to adequately understand what he or she is saying. Which suspected or imagined -- since invisible to us -- meanings may a trivial object acquire, which bears witness of humanity since it once had a place in someone's life? And which role did it play? Or do objects exist by themselves without needing the presence of human beings?

SoI was interested in the impact of contexts on semiotic processes involving objects and on the expressive capacity of objects to convey meanings.

Objects have multiple layers and they have the capacity to spark imaginative processes. Works of art are also objects. What is the difference between them?

My approach consisted in asking workers questions about themselves and asking the same questions time and again about a specific object or also about objects in general. Due to their daily dealings with objects of other people and commodities that are subject to fashions and hypes, the recycling plant's workers have become real experts. Together with them and bearing Georges Perec's stories in mind, I did not want to address 'the dumbness' (lacking essence) of objects, but I want to hover around them in a bid to elicit their possible essences and grasp these concepts in images.

Since my project has been growing organically, I was constantly compelled to make new artistic choices in reaction to situations that were not always fully under my control since I was dealing with others. So the artistic aspect evolved as the project unfolded 1) due to my action and presence in a place (the work floor) that is not the normal habitat of an artist; 2) as a result of the questions asked: no documentary or anthropological questions, but questions inspired by naïve surprise about people and things; 3) the framing of videos and photographs; 4) the editing of the video fragments and their arrangement in an installation with multiple intersecting contents that will lead to an artistic crystallization.

The content of the questions and the answers they elicited did not constitute the essence of the project, but first and foremost the interviewing process itself.

1. My disturbing presence in the plant's economic operation was an artistic action: I was in the workers' way; I forced people to stop and talk about issues devoid of any political, economic or social relevance, or to do nothing at all... so as to show the usefulness of a 'useless' artist's presence in an environment where she does not belong. My questions force both workers and future spectators to pause and interrupt the fast course of the objects. By doing this, I committed an act of resistance against forgetfulness, not only of possible former meanings of objects, but also of their poetic overtones. Poetry amidst efficiency.

2. The project was like a journey, a long trajectory during which I collected answers and stories. After I got to know the workers, I began to record their personal histories since these were bound to impart colour to the objects. Then followed a rather chaotic, erratic and unpretentious though insistent quest for answers and opinions by consistently asking the same questions and exploring the boundaries of the interviewees' individual reasoning power. The building acquired the aspect of a railway station, a place where numerous people and even more objects move around and temporarily halt on their way to a new destination; a place that is a good metaphor of our way of 'being' and our 'reality'. A reality, though, that will never be totally subservient and that we will never fully understand, let alone or control.

Due to my endless wanderings, the building seemed ever more gigantic; I incessantly found new doors, staircases and long corridors with yet another door at the end. The objects' trajectories (from their former to their new owner) structured my wanderings through this labyrinth and the series of identical questions gave me something to hold on to.

I asked questions such as: Does an object live? Does matter live? When does an object die? Does an object have a soul? Does matter have a soul? These questions about life and soul gave rise to other questions: Does an object have power? Does it have an emotional impact? Does it talk? Does it evoke things? Does it exist by itself, without the intervention of human beings, or is its existence exclusively due to the meaning(s our intellect, memories, or associations bestow on it? Did concepts exist before humanity first conceived them? When an object disappears, will its concept disappear with it? Does it have an impact on our 'being'? Does an object's matter have intrinsic power? Is the thought of an object more real than its materiality? What is the difference with a work of art?

What is more important or authentic: the objects' pure materiality, their surface or mere visibility, their functionality or the abysmal depth of phantasies, emotional associations, memories, philosophical reflections -- the monster of their existence?

When an object was inspected so as to determine its economic value, which is an important activity in the recycling business, I looked at its possible meanings from different angles, but I always ended up facing the recalcitrant externality of the thing that is unable to say anything audible.

3. I worked without film crew, slowly and all by myself using a photo camera, a small video camera and a micro. Thanks to this approach, I could lower the threshold for workers and reach more intimacy. Although film is an important medium in this project, the emphasis was not on filmic technicalities but on the concept. The concept is not socially motivated: It is about people and their comments about objects, but it does not want to prove or denounce anything and it has no explicit aim. Appealing images are created thanks to the painter's eye and the framing. Since I do not give an overall view of the workplace, the spectator will feel rather disoriented and focus all his or her attention on the object and the people's comments.

4. The questions elicited many answers. This multiplicity will be presented in a comprehensive installation that will juxtapose the different stories and allow them to interconnect. This approach allows me to present the multiple contents in different configurations and to investigate the impact of the presentational context on the spectator's perception. The show will be a collection of similarities and dissonances; it will not be univocal or narrative. The interactions between the different video displays will deepen the essence of the project, namely the intersecting trajectories (of objects and people).

3. Accompanying Publication: The Relation between Art and Science

My project introduces an artistic aspect into the already existing social concept of the recycling plant's operation. Although the project is not about a social topic, it has an interesting anthropological slant. I could also have asked my questions to people in completely different contexts. The project therefore acquires a fairly important philosophical relevance. Moreover, working with human beings has psychological consequences. Since the project, apart from its artistic essence, involves so many other domains -- philosophy, anthropology, psychology, etc. -- with which I wanted it to enter into a dialogue so as to be able to clearly delineate my own artistic domain, I invited a number of experts to contribute

to it. These meta-level reflections add another interpretational layer to the project and provide it with a foundation on which the artistic interventions take place. Within the context of the project, these reflections move in a reversed direction: They are imported from the outside. As an artist, however, I ask different questions than they do and this turned my project into an interesting research object for them.

These discussions lead to a number of texts that will be included, along with some of the photos I made, in a publication accompanying the exhibition.

The experts are:

Philosopher Dieter Roelstraete, curator M hka and MCA Chicago

Philosopher Christophe Van Eecke, who writes about film, art and the philosophy of viewing.

Anthropologist Rik Pinxten, professor at the University of Ghent and president of CICI (Centre for Intercultural Communication and Interaction)

Psychologist Ellen Reymers, director of the Antwerp-based Interaction Academy.