

STUDIO VISIT: DAVID DOUARD

Language as virus and failing machines

Text by Robert Barry
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A punctured airbag hangs deflated and forlorn – removed from the car that once housed it – pinned to the wall in a side room of David Douard’s studio. Like most of the materials the artist uses, the airbag was found lying in the streets that surround his studio in Aubervilliers, on the outskirts of Paris. This object is not – or not yet – considered by Douard to be a work, or even part of one. ‘One day,’ he says, ‘maybe.’ Until then, the airbag simply hangs there, over his shoulder, as he gets on with other things. But, for Douard, it has come to represent an idea that is central to the exhibition, at Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris this autumn, which I find him in the midst of preparing for. Entitled ‘Bat-Breath. Battery’, the show offers mute testament to a life emerging from otherwise exhausted technologies.

It may not look much like one right now but, within a few weeks, this room in Aubervilliers will become a radio studio, broadcasting to the gallery across town a lone female voice, which will sing monotone lines composed from poems sourced on the internet and cut into semantic fragments. Douard has been making use of this kind of material, posted anonymously as scrolling text videos on YouTube or in forums such as Deep Underground Poetry, since his 2012 solo show ‘Innerspace’ at Bétonsalon, an art and research space at Université Paris Diderot. For each show, he finds different means of giving material form to these disembodied words, orchestrating a scenario for which Thomas Pynchon, in his 2013 novel *Bleeding Edge*, coined the phrase ‘virtuality creep’: the seepage of online fauna into the offline world. The words are moulded in plaster or aluminium, projected onto what the artist describes as a ‘fountain of saliva’, or sung over the airwaves: ‘The medium changes,’ Douard tells me, ‘but the idea stays the same.’ Influenced by William Burroughs’s ‘cut up’ technique, showcased in his *Nova Trilogy* (1961–64), the artist seeks to ‘contaminate the exhibition space’ with a volatile language virus.

Douard has lived in Aubervilliers for some ten years now. As we walk the short distance from his house to the studio, he points out a small domestic workshop where a man of Chinese descent tailors suits, and a warehouse where a group of ageing communists regularly convene. Part of the graffiti scene as a teenager, Douard has long taken the local streets as a natural starting point for his work. But today, he says: ‘Nobody expresses anything in the street now. Everything happens on the internet. That’s the place you have to understand.’

The particular warehouse Douard currently works in was found for him a year and a half ago by his gallery, Chantal Crousel. It’s big but spartan, still looking more suited to its former purpose as an automobile repair shop than the production of fine art. The floor is currently striated by a huge metal frame, which was the reason Douard chose such a large space. Formerly a support structure for a set of street-market stalls, this frame is soon to become the foundation for a series of bulbous aluminium staffs, each wrapped in exposed electrical wires with a current passing through them. Douard will use this piece to transform the exhibition space into a battery, in a use of electromagnetic energy as artistic material that brings his work close to that of American conceptualists such as Walter De Maria (*Lightning Field*, 1977) or Robert Barry (*Electromagnetic Energy Field*, 1968). But, as Douard himself says, there’s a paradox: ‘I’m very influenced by conceptual art, but I’m quite expressive. I even cast my own aluminium in the garden here!’ There is scant evidence of American minimalism’s clean lines and airy purity in the piled-up profusion of rough-hewn elements found in a Douard object.

‘I come from a generation that is used to going to a museum and seeing a machine not working,’ Douard tells me, referring to the growing ubiquity of media art, kinetic art and video art in major institutional retrospectives where, due to the sheer volume of pieces, it becomes almost inevitable that, at any given time, at least one or two works won’t be operating properly. But Douard sees in such curatorial headaches a possibility ‘to represent something beyond the composition itself: nothingness, obsolescence, the passing of time. I’m always thinking about that when I produce electric works or use media: they might work or they might not. It’s still the same idea.’

Fidgety and intense, Douard conjures up a strange imaginative world in which inert materials are imbued with secret inner lives and made the agents of some obscure, silent resistance. By contrast, people are apt to become things, entangled in the work on display by the simple act of sitting down on one of the items of furniture that Douard frequently installs within his sculptures and which he encourages people to use – although his chairs do not offer you a better view of

the work so much as entangle you in it. For the 2012 Bétonsalon show, an old brown sofa left its occupants facing a plain white wall. ‘I try to use the display as if it were a street, a social place,’ he explains. ‘There’s no distance from the work. The public have to go in and taste it for themselves.’

David Douard is an artist based in Aubervilliers, France. This year, his work was on show at Union Pacific, London, UK, and his solo exhibition at Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France, opened in September. His work is included in the group show ‘Co-Workers. Le réseau comme artiste’ (Co-Workers. The Net as Artist) at Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris from 9 October to 31 January 2016.

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