Nuage Sensible

Élie Bolard

Élie Bolard is a French artist based in Brussels. His work mainly focuses on building artistic devices from dismantled trashed objects.

Élie Bolard is interested in all types of contemporary technologies. He questions with humor, ludicrousness and derision their functioning and the monopoly of knowledge that surrounds them. His master thesis is about techno-totalitarianism and technological dangers. Most of his works is presented in sculptural or installation form. He mixes clumsy bricolage and industrial language by appropriating the techniques of metal, electronics and digital fabrication. During his studies at the Villa Arson, in Nice, he set up autonomous machines creating their own atmosphere that visitors are invited to explore.

T.C. Your work displays many salvaged parts and used devices, thrown out by their previous owners. Why do you favor salvaging over building from new materials? Is it related to fighting built-in obsolescence? Does it entail more?

E.B. My sculptures are created from scrap materials, the first step of my approach being the encounter with the object. It is thanks to waste that I can create these sculptures, so it is always troublesome to look at them. But, by trying to reuse discarded technical objects, what I create constitutes a counter-proposal to planned obsolescence. It is an approach that is more poetic than simply functional: I am not just repairing objects; my installations also echo their pasts. I imagine their former owners, the gestures that were made to create or use them, and I divert and repurpose the objects, making them look more like tortured zombies than a refurbished copy.

T.C. Our research started form the observation of a tendency towards hiding of processes at work in computers and over-determination of devices and software. This actually affects our teaching, by limiting the appropriation of computer technologies students have previously experienced, and can at all experience. Cloud computing move machines and processes away from users. Your work, on the other hand, brings them closer to the audience, who can intuitively guess part of their functioning only by looking at them. Is this intentional?

E.B. Yes, it's on purpose. I am inspired by the black box—objects we use everyday; which contains all the technology and whose inner functioning is put as far away from us so we are not aware of their it, how they are made and what they are made of. My sculptures are devoid of blackboxness, everything is visible, nothing is hidden. This does not mean that, by looking at my sculptures, we understand the objects they are made of but it brings a new way of seeing at our daily life. And I like this idea of rediscovering the objects that we have in front of our eyes every day.

T.C. You describe your artistic practice as *bricolage*, as a never-ending learning process, where dismantling and rebuilding stand at the core of conception. This approach is opposed to a division between a plan, predefined and a realization, subsequent. Do you think that a practical knowledge of materials, which results in a sensitive understanding of them, is essential for artists?

E.B. I think it's necessary. If you don't have this kind of practical knowledge and you delegate the making to other people, then you can't fully grasp what you are producing. It's not necessarily that you won't be able to make a good piece of Art, but you become dependent on that other person. It doesn't only concern Art; even as a consumer, if you don't have any proximity with what you consume, at least intellectually, then that's a step further towards alienation.

T.C. You dismantle machines, then combine and transform them, repurposing them, or even removing the basic functions determined by their designers. Nevertheless, one can still recognize fridges, umbrellas and microwaves, even though they no longer cool, protect or heat. How significant are the past lives of objects in your work?

E.B. The visibility of the objects' past life is an integral part of the sculptures. It is both a formal play and a play on meanings. I think it is also what brings us closer to the objects. Most of them have a melancholic side, whether it is by their outdated appearance or by the atmosphere of the room. And because we see that they are old and dysfunctional, those devices brings us back to our condition. Those are proletarian objects, used and discarded; inverting the concept of Promethean shame. And to bring them within machinal installations tends to show our limits to salvage and give a new life to those technical objects. Cracked open and stuffed with wires, those technical object are all the more pitiful.

T.C. You mention the American philosopher Matthew B. Crawford and especially his book *Shop Class as Soulcraft, an Inquiry into the Value of Work* as fundamental influences. Your artwork, *Éloge à l'Éloge du carburateur*[1] pays a direct tribute to the book. Could you explain how Crawford's thesis impacted your work?

E.B. His work impacted me in many ways, but I will try to keep it short. First of all, I feel close to him and his story. I grew up in a small town, in close contact with the peasant and working class milieu. While I distanced myself from this environment during my studies in the big French cities, craft became a way to reconnect this manual environment in which I grew up and the "intellectual" one in which I studied. The process of disalienation, of learning "by the hand" and understanding the tools I use, have shaped

my entire artistic practice.

I then discovered authors such as Matthew B. Crawford, Ivan Illich or Arthur Lochmann who made me think about the importance of understanding and reappropriating our tools. And that's also why I got into designing machine. I discovered programming and numerically controlled machines because I wanted to know how and what my daily life was made of, and to be able to make all these objects companions rather than enemies.

T.C. You talk about letting the machines live once started, as autonomous, almost alive objects, independent from your maker's will. Until which point do you program their behavior? What part of undecided do you leave to your machines and why? What makes this indeterminacy interesting to you?

E.B. I program the microcontrollers of my machines and then they "stupidly" execute everything I tell them. I oppose the strict and flawless code to the twisted and clumsy tinkering. It's primarily a way to be surprised by the machine: the head thinks everything is fine while the hand does everything wrong. There is therefore a dissonance. Moreover, I add randomness to the code. So this whole game of "done wrong/done right" creates an unpredictable animal with a will of its own. There is a very attractive aspect for me too to be able to find myself as a spectator of my own creation. I don't know if it gives me more distance and criticism, but it's very satisfying to give life to this kind of beast. Then, through the imbalances of assembly or the overuse of technique, many pieces die, once the process is complete. The assembled pieces return to their original condition as a corpse.

T.C. Are your machines beautiful?
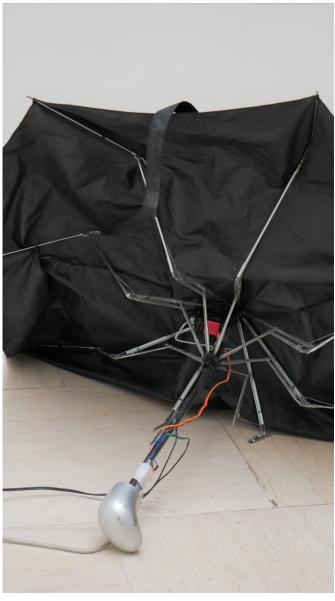
E.B. It is a difficult question because of the word beautiful, of what it refers to in the history of art and of its changing definition over time and according to who speaks… But one could find certain aspects beautiful: for these machines, I am inspired by a certain do-it-yourself tradition which gave Assemblage. I am a great admirer of the work of Kurt Schwitters. That's where my interest in art started: assembling things together according to their form, their utility, their color … or to the chance of the day's picking. In my machines, all these aspects are found within games of threads, of found pieces which are associated with others according to a certain physical criterion. And some machines produce movements that call for contemplation. I give

birth to a movement from the machines—which we always want to be faster—that will make the viewer wait. I don't know if one can speak of "beauty" for my machines, but in any case I try to give a sensitive and attractive character to some of them, while others will be rather coarse and repulsive.

[1] Translator's note: In French, the book *Shop Class as Soulcraft* is titled *Éloge du Carburateur*, literally "Praise for the Carburettor". The artwork title is *Éloge à l'Éloge du carburateur* which means "Praise for the Praise of Carburettor".

Back from the Wind, Umbrella, electronics, 2020
An umbrella damaged by a storm is kept alive by
an electronic prothesis. Trembling, it crawls.

Mall Wandering, Cart, parts of electric scooter,
metal, plastic, 2021. A cart wanders alone and
restlessly in a closed space. Whenever it trips
over an obstacle, it rolls back and takes another
direction.

Fountain, Fridge, micro-wave, pump, silicon, water, 2018. A fridge turned into a tank distributes water to a column of three piled up microwaves. High class status than that of "fountain" for these salvaged devices.

Éloge à l'éloge du carburateur, Cart, parts of electric scooter, metal, plastic, 2020. A plaster moulded head is gradually eaten away by waste oil.

Further readings

Crawford, Matthew B. 2009. *Shop class as soulcraft: an inquiry into the value of work*. New York: Penguin Press. (OCLC: 708740113)

Forster, E. M. 1909. The Machine Stops. *The Oxford and Cambridge Review*. Advanced online publication. Retrieved from http://www.totalboox.com/book/id-2696338958287286081 (OCLC: 969070232)