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IN CONVERSATION WITH LIONEL CRUET

02 JUN 2016 BY DESPOINA TZANOU



Lionel Cruet's studio New York City.

Lionel Cruet is the artist to watch from San Juan. His Caribic origin has served as a source of inspiration for his body of work. It informs and shapes the interdisciplinary and hybrid quality of his art practice. His interest lies in issues of geopolitics, social economy and how the complexities of technology and nature affect and transform our understanding of reality.

We invited Lionel Cruet to talk about his inspiration and recent work after having completed his residency at the Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts.

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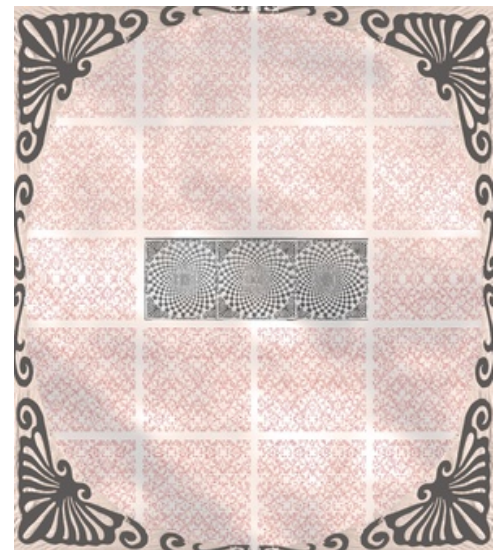


MARTINA DELLA VALLE: ONE FLOWER ONE LEAF

Martina Della Valle in collaboration with Kapwani Kiwanga and Natalie Czech present 'Flowers are Documents'. This innovative exhibition curated by Emanuele Guidi takes place in Bolzano, Italy. The exhibition showcases artist whose main interest of work is on flowers and flower arrangement

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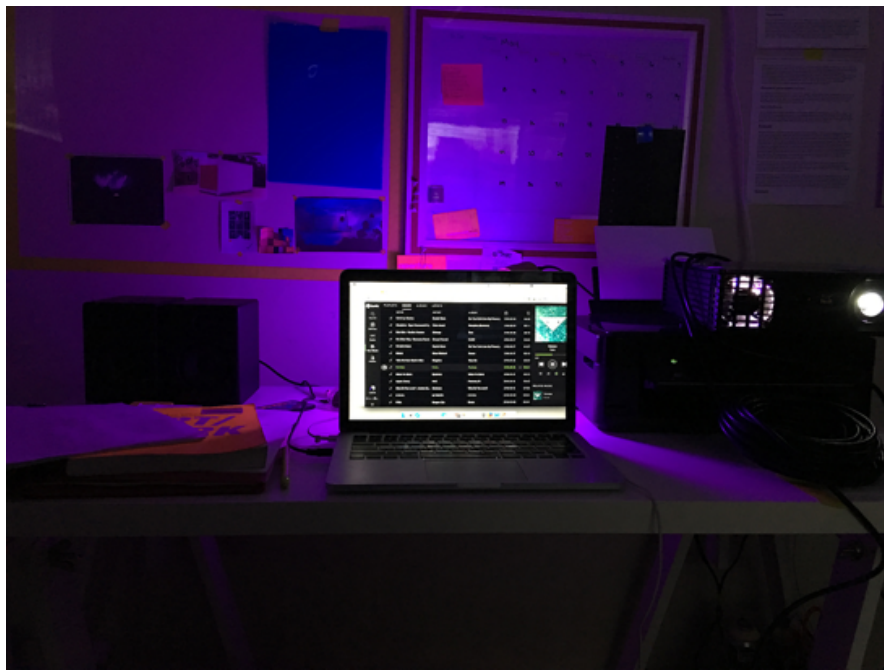


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We are thrilled to host a solo exhibition with Emily Lazerwitz this summer in London. Sign up for talks with Emily.

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Lionel Cruet's studio space during audiovisual test.

D.T. When did your interest in art begin?

L.C. Since I started having an understanding of the world. But truly it wasn't until I was in third grade in a public school in Puerto Rico where the art teacher at the time, Mayra Aguilar, was curious about the things I was doing and making. I remember she approached me and said "I need to talk to your mom, it's important"; I was super scared because it was one of my favourite classes. I thought something was wrong with my qualifications or behaviour in class. So, my mom went to the school and what my teacher wanted was to make her aware of the importance of what I was doing and to recommend me to join a series of art classes with one of the local museums associated with the University of Puerto Rico.

My mom and family helped me, although they did not clearly understand, then I started a series of art summer courses. That was the incident that really opened me into understanding techniques, concept, work in collaboration and started a kind of formal training for me to see art in a different way. Since I started being exposed at such young age, seeing art in a museum setting and being challenged to make art motivated me.

Interestingly enough, after many years, my art teacher Mayra Aguilar happened to be one of my neighbours when I moved to college in Old San Juan. We reconnected after so many years and up to today we have a strong friendship. If she wouldn't have seen the talent there and then, I might have ended up doing something else, or at least my art wouldn't have been so substantial as it is, or as it was from the very beginning. People that are involved in pedagogy are very important. That's why I am a practitioner as well; I see the importance of teaching others and seeing the talent in new generations.

D.T. What is your source of inspiration? Are there any specific themes you research through your practice?

L.C. It varies and depends on the project and the specificity of it. Most of the research for projects are initiated by questioning a situation.

I am very interested in socioeconomics. I study, read, and pull out articles related to the economy and the effects on the social realm. Also, through my artwork, I engage in concepts of geopolitical relations, positions of power and how these reflect on the natural geographical landscape and how it transforms our pre-made assumptions. When I talk about geopolitics in my work I use references that relate to constructed political limitations, and generating questions such as "what is the meaning of having maritime borders", "how you draw the line and define that the piece of ocean belongs to one country or another"?



AN EVENING WITH ITALIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

As part of the Photo London week, art:i:curate hosted a panel discussion on the Italian photography with independent curator and photo editor Giovanna Calvenzi, professor Alexandra Tommasini, photographer Martino Marangoni and collector Anna Rosa Cotroneo.

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Being in the Caribbean and exposed to the colonisation of islands and having seen the scattered arrangement of islands that belong to different countries; some islands are property of another country or their own republic even though they are only a couple of miles away from each other. These are the concepts I am interested in and connect them in my artistic practice. When I talk about socioeconomics, I attempt to create connections on the financial discrepancies that exist in the working class and how those affect our lives. These are the main themes that I relate to my work.

Currently, I am working on a series of drawings that will eventually transform into a small publication. This project concerns issues of people's struggle with the lack of a financial stability and turning these interpretations into a compendium of drawings and text.



Lionel Cruet, *Intangible Space* exterior view, 2014, audiovisual installation in storage container, 213 x 243 x 487 cm.

D.T. The relationship between the body and physical or digital space has been a constant and integral part of your practice; how does this relate to audience participation? Is the performative part something you are interested in?

L.C. The body is a medium. Especially in the arts there are a lot of theories that discuss this. When I connect the physical body to the digital and physical space, my intention is to mark the difference of both and eventually confront them. When we think about digital media information and data, it becomes a massive amount of content that we don't see, that is intangible, but is always present. This massive amount of information becomes non-information. We perceive it through television, radio, or phones and don't even understand the amount of chaos that comes towards us because it is withheld in an apparatus. If we expose it more physically, the experience changes.

The audience is a participant and part of the artwork in some cases whether they know it or not. I like to create this situation where they are invited to become a part of it. Also, this all comes as a commentary on the passive audience in the arts community, for example when they are viewing an artwork in a museum and take it as a leisure activity rather than engaging with the situation that is arising in front of them in the form of an artwork.

Teaching has made me familiar with this subject of an audience. In a classroom setting, you present a topic to the audience to initiate a discussion. It generates a lineage of thoughts and interchange of ideas that all starts with a question or concern and encourages people to create and continue a conversation.

D.T. What about the found imagery in your installations? How do you decide which images to include in your work?

L.C. I wouldn't say they are found imagery. Some of them are my sources and others are images that I have re-appropriated. I don't necessarily engage with that term, but rather appropriate the content

displayed in the media for example. For Intangible Space, because it was a participation piece, I was very specific with what kind of imagery was used for the interior space. I wanted to recreate what was the perspective, or point of view, through images of the participants. For other projects, there is always a careful selection of imagery, since my intention is to immerse the audience in a conversation. The process of selection isn't or cannot be an arbitrary one.



Lionel Cruet, Intangible Space sequence detail, 2014, audiovisual installation in storage container, 213 x 243 x 487 cm.

D.T. 'Making windows of wall' and Intangible Space create a discussion between digital and physical space; is your intention to offer an escape from the overload or point out the issue?

L.C. Not at all. I'm actually subverting it in a way. Both works are physical installations in a space that are heavy in subject matter, but through the image, there is something seducing and inviting. Once you are in this environment, there is content being arranged and displayed audio-visually. When you walk inside the installation of "Making windows on walls" what you experience is a series of vibrations, sounds, an overlap of voices from the news reporters talking about illegal maritime activity, missing people in the Caribbean sea, cross-boarders, police interventions with helicopters, etc. I appropriate these sounds and overlap them in the installation space. It looks very seducing when you see the light shining and the image of palm trees waving and dancing. I am interested in this because it opens up a discussion on this situation as it is something that continues happening. I try to use the imagery as something seducing positioned in the middle of chaos.

The installation Intangible Space again is very seducing and represents different environments. The images are just a still of a few seconds inside and the sound piece helps you immerse in the work. I did an open call for participation where people were invited to take a quick image on their phones of the environment they see. Through their perspective, I wanted them to write a note why it is important or intriguing. All of that data was archived and then reorganised. It is an overlap of all those conversations. All these were rendered into computer software, in which an artificial voice recorder represents the images.



Lionel Cruet, a view of Making Windows on Walls, 2015, audiovisual installation.

D.T. You deal with various media in your practice; do the media or the idea serve as the starting point?

L.C. The idea comes first and is triggered by a process of research, later the mediums are finally selected and it becomes an artwork. To organise ideas I create multiple research boards of images and websites. I feel the responsibility to understand the situation that is motivating my creativity and I reanalyse it through multiple lenses until it is refined. All the data in the research boards become a non-hierarchical rhizomatic map of something that I juxtapose against other, and start finding the spark of some ideas that happen to emerge from that initial motivation to start a project.

I don't believe that an artist finds a muse and starts working, or that they wake up in the middle of the night having an idea and run to the studio. It is an extremely romantic idea but completely disassociated from the contemporary art world. Artists have so much responsibility in other areas that if their work and research isn't polished or extremely thought out, it will fall through the cracks. This is why I try to challenge myself in the process of creating.



Lionel Cruet's Research Board at The Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts.

D.T. Can you tell me a little bit about your residency at Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts?

L.C. The Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts invited me last year to their artist residency programme because they saw my artwork and interest in digital images and how I talk about the difference between photography and digital images and content.

During the residency, I started specifying issues about neoliberalism, of this ideology that refers to the political changes and austerity that happens from governmental agencies to withhold and oppress people. Through the residency, I had the time to sit down and research this heavy concept.

One of the works I developed during this is a series of digital photo compositions, 'The Shade of a Paradise', where I took a series of basic points and concepts that formed neoliberalism and juxtaposed them with situations that take place in the Caribbean; such as economic restraints and issues of immigration, domestic objects and referential materials. These compositions are constructed as if you were looking at a computer with multiple windows of content open on the screen. Today almost everyone can relate to the computer window overlay, so I tried to merge those two ideas. The compositions are supported by a background image of tropical forests. I found a specific time of the day where the position of the sun creates a dense overcast and captured that moment, that's why all the images are high contrast. 'The Shade of a Paradise' is also a tourist industry term; I actually like the reference of calling the entire Caribbean the "paradise" of tourism, with this extreme focus on the exoticism, that is completely disassociated with situations that are happening with the people living there. My intention was to uncover these issues through this artwork.



The Shade of a Paradise Installation at The Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts.

D.T. Apart from that, are you currently working on something else?

L.C. There are actually a couple of things; I am currently participating in a programme with the Bronx Museum called 'Art is in the Marketplace', and it will conclude in a biennial at the Bronx Museum in 2017.

I also received an invitation from PASEO Taos 2016 in New Mexico where I will be constructing a new version of Intangible Space: This project of the container will be showed again and I will work with communities of immigrants in this geographical area. This participation will happen in partnership with an organisation supporting this matter.

Next month, I will be participating in a group exhibition in a startup collaborative space for small businesses in Brooklyn. I am working with a curator who invited me to present work within the context of this idea of insights and entrepreneurship practices.



Research Binder at The Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts.

Lionel Cruet is a visual artist based in New York and San Juan. He holds a BA in Fine Art from La Escuela de Artes Plasticas, San Juan and MFA in Digital and Interdisciplinary Art Practice from the City College of New York (CUNY, New York, 2014). He was the recipient of the Juan Downey Audiovisual Award, Santiago (2013). He has exhibited in solo and group shows including 'Colonial Comfort', Caribbean Museum Center for the Arts (Frederiksted, 2014); 'Lionel Cruet: In Between, Real and Digital', Bronx River Art Center (New York, 2014); '11th Media Arts Biennale', National Museum of Fine Arts (Santiago, 2013); 'Sound Art Fair', Universidad del Sagrado Corazón (San Juan, 2013); 'SuperReal: Alternative Realities in Photography and Video', El Museo del Barrio New York (New York, 2013).

Collect photography and installation by Lionel Cruet.

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