

RECORDING THE PRESENT

Interview carried out by Annabelle Gugnon and Juliette de Gonet

ESPACE: What exactly is your artistic agenda? And what was the idea behind the DATA space exhibition at Espace Louis Vuitton Paris?

ALICE ANDERSON: The digital revolution is probably going to turn out as decisive for the mechanisms of human memory as the invention of writing was. This revolution is a fascinating process, and I keep tabs on it by recording its objects and crystallizing its phases.

At a point in history when our planet is going virtual and memory is going digital, I feel a need to record space and objects in 3D. In artistic terms I'm particularly concerned with memorizing by creating a new physical relationship with things and space using copper wire. It's a paradox: the more my everyday existence fills up with digital data about the things around me, the greater my need to come to grips with their material, physical data. This kind of memorization is a necessity. It's my way of recording the present. I think we're living through a revolution whose extent we're not aware of yet.

For the DATA space exhibition at Espace Louis Vuitton Paris, I wanted to record the data of the venue. I started out with the measurements of certain parts of the building. A number of wooden slats from the floor were reassembled into new geometrical figures—circles—representing the diagrams of the measurements after they had been recorded with the wire in 3D ("Floor Boards Diagrams" 2015). The skylights in the rotunda were recreated in steel then weaved with copper wire ("Skylights Data" 2015) and together they form a movement. They distorted under the countless micro-tensions exerted on the steel by the wire. The elevator became a simple parallelepiped presented with its cables ("Elevator and Cables" 2015). Some of the lighting tracks form

an infinitely modular vertical ensemble (“Lighting Tracks” 2015). Lids neon tubes are linked by the tension of their interweavings (“Connexions” 2015).

All these data are recorded using copper wire woven around the objects—in the course of a “performance.” I experience my body through movement and the wire is an extension of my body. I repeat the action, but it's never the same. I push this repetition to the limit, as if it were an absolute. I should point out that the gesture with the wire is universal. Everyone is capable of doing it: of creating their own movements, inventing their own ‘choreography’ and rhythm, and stamping their identity on the chosen object or the building. As setting up relations with individuals is a core part of my art, I feel it's vital that I should invite the public to take part, not only in the performances but also, in choosing what is to be archived or not. Over the years the input from the participants and the cultures I encounter will form an archive. An archive of the world, built up out of their choices, their visions...

ESPACE: This archive is going to be a copper memory. Can you tell us how you came to choose copper as a material?

ALICE ANDERSON: Copper's unpredictable: you can never really, totally, tell what's going to happen. Often you see the underlying material move and distort under the pressure of the wire. Sometimes when I get to my studio in the morning I notice that the shape of the object has changed since the day before. In “Elevator” here at the Espace, you have the impression from a distance that it's a solid mass. But when you go closer you realize it's only wire. And this wire means you can tackle incredibly large shapes. We say “hanging by a thread” to suggest fragility, whereas in fact my thread barely visible copper wire—is incredibly strong. Strong enough to deform metal, fiberglass, and to protect stone.

There are works, too, that actually speak of the material: the “Cut-Out Pieces”. I make them by cutting up copper mesh. There are times when I want to weave and times when I want to cut up. So then I cut, I cut all day. I cut up an entire sheet, but when I put the pieces back together they automatically reconnect themselves as a sculptural shape. They re-link to the point where the shape holds together all on its own. The mesh has very sharp edges, and because I work barehanded on my sculptures I cut myself. When I've finished my hands are shredded.

I chose copper for its properties. First of all, conductivity, which enables connections. Here I'm thinking in particular of the way neurotransmitters work in the human brain. Another crucial property is luminosity: During a performance the copper gives off shiny, hypnotic reflections. The copper I use has been treated against rust, so it doesn't discolor.

Copper gives off very positive vibrations. The reason why I light my objects the way I do has nothing to do with aesthetics. I want to set up waves of luminosity that transcend color and call attention to reflection. The light is seeking for a gaze. The performance generates music: small objects give rise to very rapid movements, so when you're encircling an object with your wire, the bobbin has to be in small container—a glass, maybe, or a teapot—otherwise it jumps about, or gets away from you, or sticks, which stops the movement. As a rule the speed sends it flying and the back-and-forth gets a rhythm going. When there are several of us performing you get an amazing concert from all those bobbins, each in its own container. Actually, with small objects you hear the bobbin and with the big ones it's different, you hear the wire. The objects guide the body movements. Sometimes they take you to extremes, pushing you beyond yourself. For example, for “Ford Mustang” 2015, it was impossible to pass the bobbin directly to the person opposite; you had to throw it under the car. It was very physical. For the canoe in “Canoe” 2013 the bobbins weren't placed on the floor, and interchange between people took the place of the sounds. Viewers often speak of a dance. A dance with the invisible, because you don't see the wire immediately.

ESPACE: What brought you to this particular world?

ALICE ANDERSON: I'd been making short films for years, in connection with my research into the functioning of memory. As time went by this turned into a kind of "video diary." Then I met Marcela Iriarté, who was set designer. She was always bringing me surprising objects, and without realizing I found myself wondering about what these objects were for, and how they had evolved, and the questions they raised. Their part in the films kept expanding until they were taking over from the characters and becoming the actual subjects. Very quickly I felt a need to interact physically with these "objects-subjects", but my films offered little scope for this. I realized I was no longer interested in making images dance, and started thinking about working differently with these objects. In my studio I took them apart and put them back together again, and during one of these dismantling sessions I came across an alarm clock with a bobbin of copper wire inside it. That was the trigger. This was also when I decided to immerse myself in the memory processes that are being changed irreversibly by the digital era. Our everyday memory is being externalized, and shared, and part of it is becoming instantly collective.

There was another important step, too: my first solo exhibition, at the Freud Museum in London. The curator, Joanna Walker had invited me to show objects from my films. I worked on them from 2010 onwards, and the exhibition took place early in 2011. During the preparations we were visiting the museum and discovered a room that was going to be restored. Inside was Anna Freud's loom. I thought the room was magnificent, and I was so taken by the loom that all I could see was the threads, the lines, the grid, the geometry. Instantly everything I'd done so far became mere juvenilia. I remember going back to my studio in a troubled state, unable to get that loom out of my head. Instinctively I grabbed a bobbin of copper wire and without nostalgia or whatsoever I began to wind it around my video camera. I see now that that was when I developed my own weaving technique, with its repetitious movements. For the Freud Museum I used these movements on a grand scale and the result was "Housebound"

2011, a sculpture created through incredible performances. There were several of us, climbing onto the roof and back down again with the building's volumes dictating our movements.

When I began, there in the studio, the first item to be "recorded" was my video camera. I spent an entire day winding wire around it, and didn't even notice the time passing. Repetition takes time into another dimension. In the evening I left the camera there, and when I went back the next morning it looked to me as if it had been "mummified." That was my first reaction, but you could also have said "woven". Then I set about making other objects: practically everything in my studio went the same way. I called this body of work Weaving In The Studio. It was a very satisfying task for me, as if I'd achieved something I absolutely had to do. Later I moved on to larger-scale pieces, among them a dismantled door whose manual code panels interested me. I asked some friends to help me; they came for a weekend and I saw the exceptional solidarity engendered by the process. The energy of their bodies around the door made me realize how powerful movement is. It occurred to me later that this get-together was like a ceremony, a sharing an exchange and a special kind of fraternal relations that art engenders.

ESPACE: Do you keep all these woven objects in your studio?

ALICE ANDERSON: Right now my studio looks like a cave. It's packed with stuff. There are also a whole lot of works at the Wellcome Collection in London, whose curator, Kate Forde, had invited me to present my first objects and to elaborate a exceptional project with the public for my solo exhibition Memory Movement, Memory Objects in 2015. I keep these works arranged on shelves. I also keep the names of my collaborators, of the people who donated the original items, and of collectors who had brought object along to be mummified. Right from the start they all know that their names will always be associated with the artwork. But only if they want that: - there are some who prefer to remain anonymous.

These are the traces of an act, of a movement that has its own meaning for each person. Everything is the same color, and you've got a grouping that speaks of a particular moment or period, which the participants, donors, and collectors have decided to "flag, to mark"

The performances are open to all. It's important to experiment, and this is why I founded the Traveling Studio, a mobile space aimed at setting up connections between different cultures and communities. Each of these woven objects is a ritual object; the relevance of the object lies in the fact of being charged with meaning. We're creating an archive of objects in the hope that one day, it will be of use to somebody, that it will serve as a reference point. Above all, though, it's an archive of gestures and moments in time.

ESPACE: For you gesture is paramount. It implies drawing, choreography, and sound as well. One has the impression of a total gesture...

ALICE ANDERSON: The Saatchi Gallery was preparing a sculpture exhibition and they commissioned a project from me. At the time I was thinking about preserving geometrical shapes, and I wove a sphere that I titled "181 Kilometers" 2015. The sphere is one of the most difficult shapes of all. I created a two-meter volume and walked 181 kilometers around it: at the start I walked, I circled, I got giddy, but after an hour or two my body adapted and I found myself lost in thought. This sculpture really interested me because it wasn't just my hands moving around the object, but my whole body. I would stop at night, but hardly at all during the day. If you take a break, the body adopts a different rhythm. Strength and endurance are what counts. At the beginning of a performance you've always got something else on your mind—a phone call to make, something like that—but after a few hours the repetition of the gesture takes over and everyday stuff loses its grip on you. Getting something done in the present moment—those are the priorities. There's an exhilarating sense of disconnection.

Copper sends out very positive vibrations through its properties—and its color, which suggests the strange intensity of fire. When you're doing a performance there's no fatigue; on the contrary, you discover a strength deep inside yourself. In the same way that iPads and other screens give off a light that stimulates the brain, the gleam of copper triggers energy. Energy is also what the performances are about. It all starts with direct contact with the floor. I almost always perform barefoot. When I invite the public to take part, there are people who don't want to go barefoot; I respect their wishes, but when they try it they're always convinced and don't want to put their shoes back on. These performances are rituals fueled by exchange and a common goal. Form is the origin of movement. Just as when I'm drawing with copper wire, it's the sheet of paper on the floor that dictates the result. There's an immediacy that generates meaning.

ESPACE: Is there a connection between these objects and Marcel Duchamp's readymades?

ALICE ANDERSON: Obviously the everyday object has a tradition all its own in the history of contemporary art. In this respect Duchamp is the founding father—in the sense of the infrathin, that imperceptible dimension of things that combines the sensory and the intellectual. I wove a window (“Sash Window”, 2013) which recently set me thinking about Duchamp's “Fresh Window” (1920/1964). I've established a typology for my “mummified” objects: Woven Objects; Movement Objects; and Architectures for the performances that take a place as their subject. There are also Abstract Objects, Recognizable Objects whose shapes you can identify immediately, and Distorted Objects which have been deformed by tension. Not to mention the Endless Objects, whose shape is constantly changing, and the Lost Objects, so called because they're in an in-between state: this is when someone comes to the studio, starts weaving an object, and expressly asks that no one else be allowed to continue the piece in their absence. If that person doesn't come back, the object is lost. It's left hanging between two worlds. So the task is to transfer this world of ours into a memory where it can exist for all eternity.