**Michael Candy**

***Digital Empathy Device* (2016)**

**Adventurism in the work of Michael Candy**

It looks like he’s building a bomb. His thin fingers work the cheap items he has bought in a Paris flea market – satnav, mobile phone, fishhooks, rubber tubing, lengths of wire. It is all captured on the video camera he has set up in his hotel room. In another life he could be the Manchester suicide bomber, honing the skills he learned on YouTube. Except he is doing the exact opposite. He is building a *Digital Empathy Device*. His warning is to both governments and individuals. It is about the aesthetics of trauma, and her dark handmaiden terrorism.

His target is waiting, frozen in stone, at the Place de la Republique. He travels there by public transport. But this is only the final part of a journey that began on the Gold Coast of Australia and involved 747 jets, trains, taxis, and finally a metro. He waits until the early hours of the morning. He navigates his way around groups of *gendarmes* who guard the site around the clock. Unbelievably, he manages to slip like a shadow under the radar of their three-in-the-morning tiredness and climb to the top of the statue. But not before he has positioned his video camera on a ledge to capture his actions. In the pocket of his jeans is a dirty white plastic bag. Once he has attached his *Digital Empathy Device* to the back of the statue’s head, he pulls the bag over it, as if blown there by the wind. He follows his shadow back downwards, slips through a crowd of late night revellers, and immediately boards a train for Switzerland.

I am watching all of this on a video screen in one of Melbourne’s many alternative art fairs, running over the same long weekend in 2016. This particular fair [not l fair], is in a disused industrial building at the back of Flinders Street. It is solely for (mostly young) artists who do not yet have commercial representation. For this reason, perhaps, the work is generally of a high standard, full of curiosity and adventure. Having no gallery representing you also means you have no dealers dictating what you should be making for the marketplace. On a table beneath the screen, a cast silver head with a strange mechanical apparatus attached to it, completes the artwork.

This is what happens.

When a bomb explodes in Syria, a statue in the Place de la Republique starts to weep. This sequence of events plays out like a storyboard for a yet-to-be-made thriller movie. We see a detailed map of the country. We see a red arrow flashing, signifying an explosion, possibly munitions dropped by the allied French forces. We see a bright green screen showing the floating head of a statue from the rear. A sliver of red plastic, like a single poppy in a Manet field-of-green landscape, denotes part of the empathy device clinging like a barnacle to the stone hair. Next to it, digital text reads:

* AIR RAID REPORTED ON LIVE MAP
* RSS FEED MONITOR REMOTELY ACTIVATES TEAR CROWN

A large explosion is captured in the next image, against another field of green, this time low scrub and foliage under a deep blue Mediterranean sky. More text appears, in lemon yellow:

* LIVEMAP SYRIA

CIVILIAN REPORTED FOOTAGE

21.03.16

Four months before the above date, in the words of a BBC report, “A black Volkswagen Polo pulled up outside the Bataclan concert hall at 21:40 (20:40 GMT) on Friday 13 November, and three heavily armed gunmen got out. Less than three hours later they were dead, having killed 90 people at the venue and critically injured many others. What happened in between? ‘It looked like an abattoir,’ Michael O'Connor, a 30-year-old from South Shields in north-east England who survived the attack, [told BBC Radio 5Live](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0383wgl). ‘I was wading through blood. It was a centimetre deep in places. I had to clamber over dead bodies to get out.’"

Back at [not l fair], the video has moved to a shot-from-the-street close-up of the head of a statue. The tones are sepia-hued as if shot in weak early morning light. Across the grey, yet strikingly beautiful face that has been translated from flesh and blood into stone, and now into transportable pixels, someone has painted a neat, black cross over her mouth. Let me introduce you to Madeline, the Goddess of Liberty. Around the feet of this imposing statue – I travelled there to see it myself in December 2016 and marvelled at its height – the bounty from what seemed like half of Paris’s florist shops paid tribute to the many lives lost on that dark November night – black Friday, the thirteenth.

I have been haunted by this work, ever since seeing the final form it took at [not l fair], but especially since meeting the artist and visiting the site. Making contact was an adventure in itself. The fair had popped down as quickly as it had popped up. Initial phone calls went unanswered. A few hours after first viewing *Digital Empathy Device*, I bumped by chance – as you do in cities with multiple art fairs – into Charles and Leah Justin on the steps of the Windsor Hotel, itself hosting the main fair in town. They are the owners, they are the passion behind, the wonderful Justin Art House Museum in the Melbourne suburb of Prahran. It is one of an increasing number of private art museums in Australia – so many there is now a coffee table book about them all – the best-known of which are probably MONA (Museum of Old and New Art) in Tasmania, and White Rabbit in Sydney, specializing in contemporary Chinese art. Charles and I immediately started enthusing about what we had seen. I said I thought the most exciting work out of all five art fairs was Candy’s socio-political visual thriller. He immediately bounced back and said that “out of all the art fairs, this was the only work that we’ve bought.” We were in complete agreement. This is a very significant artwork.

So it was through the Justins, and via the organisers of the fair, that I finally tracked down the artist. I was alarmed to hear that he was about to go overseas.

We met a few days later in the basement of the city’s RACV Club, quiet enough to make a recording. He was tall and thin, with short hair under a peaked cap. He wore a maroon coloured T-shirt and jeans. I immediately thought he looked like a young mountaineer. It turned out I was correct.

“I’m leaving tomorrow for Katmandu,” he told me in his quiet and considered voice. “Not to climb this time, but to meet with the Katmandu Robotics Society. I’m doing work with them for the Katmandu Triennial.” I was intrigued. Later, I Googled the site and found that they bill themselves as “Nepal’s premier international platform for global contemporary art”. It was dedicated to the theme of The City, and curated by Belgium’s Philippe Van Cauteren.

I’d like to start by asking you where you were born, and where you grew up? Was there anything in your early life that foreshadowed your interest in mechanical inventions?

“I was born in South Africa,” Candy said, placing his mineral water on the table as I raised my glass of white wine. “I was four years old when apartheid ended. I moved to Australia with my father in 2000, when I was ten years old. When I was growing up in South Africa my Dad had a nut and bolt factory, so we had a workshop full of tools. I was always constructing things, but never sure what it would lead to.”

And then you moved to Australia?

“Yes, to the Gold Coast. Later, I studied visual arts and industrial design at Queensland University of Technology, narrowly passing my subjects. For the past few years I’ve been travelling pretty constantly without a home or a studio. I’m a nomad.”

Like a number of Adventurist artists I’ve met recently – and I’m thinking particularly of Singapore’s Robert Zhao who was first drawn to science and conservation before going to art school and founding The Institute of Critical Zoologists – Candy struggled between a commercial career in industrial and product design and a more holistic approach to environmentalism through visual art projects.

“There’s issues with the environment, there’s issues with technology based on natural phenomena, and it was like using technology as a bridging medium between sociology and natural ecology. I still really hold those values at my core, but as the years have gone on and I’ve built several works, it sort of lead to using technology *to attack itself*. In the same way as I’ve learned to build and construct and find out how things work by taking them apart, I’ve reached the point with works like *Digital Empathy Device* where I can focus on a way to deconstruct the detachment that technology has with real issues, particularly in the digital realm.”

I ask about his reception within the art world, and wonder if he is happy with the way it is categorized.

“With the machines that I build, what I do gets put - in a broadbrush sort of way –by others, into the realm of Kinetic Art, or sometimes New Media, because I make sculptures that can move, or interact, or are presented digitally. That’s perhaps too figurative or literal for me, and I just see technology as being like my paintbrush. In fact, the digital realm is something that I’m very much *against* and so my ideas often end up as physical technologies – analogue, physical, and clear.”

So did *Digital Empathy Device* grow from earlier, similar projects, or was it a one-off?

“The core concept, the physicality of that work - without the Syrian conflict, or of Paris being the target - was concocted some time before. I took part in a residency in a place called Huepetuhe, which is an illegal gold-mining town in the Amazon, in Peru. And even though I do like to challenge myself, this was the most profoundly hostile environment I’ve ever been in.”

Tell me about it, I coaxed him. What was it like?

“There were parts of town that were no-go areas. Really dangerous. There was child labour, and prostitution. It was Wild West in the most real sense. One of the main environmental issues in the area is related to the activity of artisanal mining – small-scale and sometimes individual operations. But they use heavy machinery and have excavated this riverbed that’s about the size of greater Sydney. You can see it from space. The amount of land and jungle that’s been devoured by these miners is horrible. One of the main environmental issues, which I discussed with a scientist just outside town, comes from the mercury vapour that is burnt off from the gold amalgam during the mining process. Mercury is causing the most fundamental damage in that area, stopping future regrowth of the jungle. The poison will be there for a very long time. So to build a work in that sort of circumstance, I couldn’t be upfront about what I was doing.

I had to present something that could be viewed as perhaps not being what it seems. I came up with a mechanical device that mounted to the back of a golden statue of a miner. It was the only sculpture that was in the centre of town. It was a grotesquely masculine figure of a miner. I designed a very mechanical gearbox that was fitted to its back and would raise and lower a pair of wings behind the statue. And the wings were lit by very powerful mercury vapour lamps. They rose and fell as the mercury rose and fell. But to the local townsfolk it just looked like an angel. They didn’t see the politics of it.”

Was this the first time, I asked, that you had worked with a public statue? And my mind flashed back exactly thirty years to San Marco in Venice where I found Krzystof Wodiczko, the Canadian representative at the 1986 Venice Biennale, setting up banks of 35mm projectors to display images relating to terrorism and tourism on the facades of bell towers and churches. A few months before, as part of an ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts) commission, he had projected a cruise missile on Nelson’s Column and a swastika on to the architrave of South Africa House. The police quickly brought that glorious intervention to an end. How I would love to bring these two artists together. More than generation apart, yet totally in synch with each other’s times.

“It was the first time I’d made this sort of intervention,” Candy interrupted my reverie, “with a public ornament that is already there. It’s almost like you want to make the work outside the gallery, but when it’s on the corner of the street there’s really no framework for viewing it. It’s on an artwork, so it’s already framed by what that statute represents. The gearbox I used was made from about 80 kilograms of steel . It was so heavy, and we had to transport it all the way from Lima. It was pretty intense.” And did you have to get permission to do that? **“**Yes, from the Mayor, who was also the head mafia guy, as there’s no real laws in the town. It was insane. But it got me thinking about the crying Mary, and wondering how I could try and make a statue cry? And then the idea began to develop. Soon after, I was invited to take part in a digital art prize in Paris, in May 2016. Leading up to that prize I was involved in another show in Perth, Western Australia. And it was about terrorist technologies and the misuse of technology. I pitched this idea and they said yes, go ahead. So I built a model of it, which was the chrome head and the router that triggers it. And I set that up and made sure

everything worked. Then I went to Paris and rebuilt it in my hotel room, only using materials I found over there…”

A few moths later, I saw Candy’s Katmandu work at BUS Projects, one of Melbourne’s many ARIs (artist-run-initiatives). Strange mechanical creatures raced across the rugged, Nepalese landscape that sheaths the roof of the world. The colours were intense, against the blueness of a sky you felt you could reach up and touch. The movement of the creatures was robotic, insect-like, frenetic. And then I met him some weeks later at the *vernissage* of Digital Art at the Justin Art House Museum, where *Digital Empathy Device* was shown as part of a large and rigorously curated group exhibition called *Digital: The World of Alternative Realities*. It attracted a lot of attention. As did Candy, who was wearing what looked like a floral dress and a very long blonde wig (although this may have been his real hair, previously stowed under his cap). I asked him about what was appearing next on his nomadic horizon?

“In the short term, I’m going to be working on a farm up in Queensland, driving a tractor and trying to raise some money for a residency I’m planning in Greece. It’s part of The Forum of Sensory Motion.”

And sure enough, the first thing I received was a photograph of Candy sitting on a tractor, dressed as a farmhand this time – his third radical change of appearance in the short time that I’d known him. And then came the email:

“I’m on the mining island of Serifos, in Greece. I’m experimenting with turning raw iron ore into batteries to power cryptocurrency mining. I’m trying to educate myself in electrochemistry in the hope of creating a battery out of raw minerals and the salt-rich water here. It’s still very much in development. It also involves drone surveys, 3D printing, and collaborative video work.”

A few minutes later another email arrives, no text this time. Just a screen-filling photo of Candy standing on the edge of a rock against an azure sky, intelligent eyewear on his head, mountaineering boots, and a high-tech drone control in his hands. The adventure continues…

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