

On disait que...

Nicolas Ancion en Sylvie Macias-Diaz

Let's say that ...

Nicolas Ancion and sylvie Macias Diaz

by Nicolas Ancion

I spent a great deal of my childhood browsing through toys catalogs. In the beginning of autumn, although Saint Nicolas¹ was still weeks of school ahead, the first printed folders already landed in mailboxes. Days became shorter, nights cooler, yet every Saturday morning, advertising magazines were spread on the glazed tiles of the front door.

In terms of mailboxes, we considered ourselves to be spoiled kids: there were four next to the front door of the family home. They were the evidences of the time when our building housed several tenants. It was our very own weekly miracle: the miracle of the five loaves and two fish turned into the miracle of the mail-boxes.

Four copies of the Cora folder, four advertisements for mattresses and leather sofas, four contests to win keys for a car tryouts and four beautiful Saint Nicolas catalogs. Broze, Christiansen or Sarma Star, it didn't matter: I would not miss any. I first glanced through them in the bathroom. It was a rather cold room on the landing. The window always remained open and the heating turned off, even in November. I would sit, pants on my knees to keep a little warmth, and put the glossy on my quivering thighs. I would turn the first page, skip the ones devoted to accessories, the ones to baby dolls with long hair, to ironing tables and other horribly pink Barbies before finally reaching what I was aiming at: pages filled with trains, meccanos, brick and action figures with bright boxes of garish colors. I made my way to the toys, and that's exactly where I wanted to stay.

I would not leave the toilet seat, which was now very warm, until I had went through the entire catalog. I would then take it along to my bedroom in the attic, where, lying on the bed, I would browse through the pages and photos again. This second reading was followed by

1 NB translator: equivalent of Santa Claus in Belgium and the Netherlands and Lower Rhine land (Germany)

many others. After few days, by dint of looking at the same images and the same text over and over, I knew every single box, every single picture and description by heart.

I also knew that none of these toys would arrive on the table on December 6th. It was not the point. That was not the key issue.

It was about looking at toys, not choosing one as such, in order to imagine the hours of playing that could potentially go on with it. The hours of playing probably never happened outside my head, but were as worthy as those one would spend on the carpet, assembling Lego's, setting up a electric train or Playmobil's. Or those one would spend in the attic, choosing a costume for hours in order to prepare for a game that would last only for a few minutes. It's true, when you think of it: I believe that a child spends much more time rejoicing about what he or she might do with the toy, imagining all the possibilities rather than executing them as such. The desire to posses is not the child's drive. Instead, it is the need of building up this happiness yet to come. I didn't glance through and through the glossy with the intention to asses what toy would fulfill the needs of my little existence at best. I did so in order to imagine the different lives that could start with each of these toys.

Telling myself stories. Inventing worlds. Making sense and dreams with the help of mere pieces of plastic photographed on paper (often badly printed as well).

That's how I dreamed, lying on my huge bed with my chest resting on the forearms and catalogs under my eyes. The hours passed, and in my head, I was playing. With the pirate ship, there was the sea; with the sea, the canon battles; with the canon battles, the eyes gouged out; with eyes gouged out, the blindfolds. With blindfolds come the pirate, the parrot, the treasure, the boat, ect. My thoughts were turning around in circle like racing electric cars. Then I would start over again with castles and knights. With knight comes battles, princess, trumpet, dragon, shield, sword and horse, chain mail, crown, cave, dark forest and river. River. Stone bridge and castle. Castle where the trumpet announced a tournament ... There we go again

The hours passed.

The clock was turning.

The years have passed as well.

I no longer live in the same house nor even in the same city. I have only one mailbox and, strange phenomenon, ever since I moved three times, I no longer receive these advertisements. Maybe all the mailboxes do not have the right names tagged on and they are restricted to certain doors in particular. I do not know. Anyway, I do not receive them anymore.

However, when I was introduced to Sylvie Macias-Diaz's installations, I was immediately sent back to a very familiar place. Not the one of the consumer who wants to buy, but the one of the player who dreams of inventing. The installations have triggered the same reaction to the childish adult's brain as the toys catalogs did to my little boy's head.

As for me, there is no longer a question of wearing spatial glasses or launching rockets. What is imperative is not to find a place for these things in this world, but to invent a whole world of their own.

There is an urgent need to reinvent everything.

If these are real rockets, if this phone (1960) is there, it is to enable one to exist. Someone who, through playing, through dreaming, will use the phone to call his imaginary friends, to order pizza or ice cream, to call 911 to report a bomb threat, to gossip and slander, to be silent, to whisper into the handset, to make anonymous calls, to declare his love. Someone who will set rockets attached to a tank on fire in the backyard in order to make it go across the yard at great speed or someone who will light it up underwater to see what happens.

Perhaps, on the other hand, these objects are enough by themselves and do not need anyone to

use them. Economy of effort. Just like the way my toy catalog were sufficient, just like I played for hours in my head without the advertised items as such. It is possible. I do not know. Yet I wonder.

This is all very complicated! When I was little, we managed to have fun with anything. Two sticks or a cardboard box made us happy.

How many times have we heard this cliché? It is impossible to count. It is impossible to answer without sinking ourselves in nostalgic idiocy because we too have played with the cardboard box of our 12 batteries-toys, with the bubble-wrap that was around our very first computer, with the polystyrene chips. We even played with the string around the envelope itself or the empty rolls of paper towels. Fortunately, the work of Sylvie Macias-Diaz reconciles everybody by reminding one that the weapons, radar, jump-balls and jump ropes are also cardboard boxes and pieces of plastic (our very own timber).

Plastic! What a nice invention! Molded on the other side of the world in all shapes, it has become the raw and only material (with stickers and electronics) of almost all children's games. A machine gun? It's plastic. A stethoscope, it is plastic. A microwave oven, coffee machine, a mobile phone, it is plastic, again and again. The child lives in a world of plastic. How sad, thinks the adult who dreams of the wooden sticks from his childhood. He then returns to the office, types on his plastic keyboard, calls with his plastic mobile phone, uses his plastic photocopy machine and drinks his coffee in a plastic cup.

We get the world that we deserve.

Is the grown-up's world as artificial as the child's? Or just as real, just as malleable?

Transformable at will? All these common accessories, from the cup of coffee to eyeglass frames are just toys because they are made of plastic too. Who invented the rules of this big game in which they operate? Is there a child making up stories for himself, stuck somewhere in a cold bathroom, looking at the pages of the huge catalog in which we are debating? Or are we just toys without story?

Sylvie Macias-Diaz's toys are not cast in China. They are not covered with stickers, or stuffed with batteries that wear out too quickly. They are made from parts of the most common plastic objects and cardboard: caps, lids, forks for French fries, tubes. Doesn't it simply mean that our world, this huge catalog that we constantly browse through, is nothing but raw material for recycling? The basic material for a different use of things and their meaning?

Just like the edge of the sink in my room that became a cliff or a space station. Just like the brown blanket of my bed that became a desert where my toys got lost before dying of thirst, which then became an emperor cloak as soon as I put it on my shoulders. It was nothing but a brown blanket in the eyes of those who did not understand the game, in the eyes of those who remained outside, stuck to the usual meaning of things and their conventional use.

Isn't it normal for an adult, after all, to limit himself to the conventional use of things and objects? To integrate once and for all how the world works and to comply without questioning nor trying to shake things up? An adult knows the meaning of things thanks to his experience. He understands them. Shouldn't he rather apply this knowledge to invent different uses?

Different uses? One might protest and declare that these are just toys and that there is no point to this anyway.

Exactly.

Exactly, what could be more useful to the mind than an object that seems to be useless? What could be more useful than an object whose meaning has yet to build?

Take the phone (1930) for example. This object will not be used to make calls, one may thing. Magritte would have painted "This is not a phone". Indeed, one would not be able to call on the network that we know, with its minutes paid at high-price, where answering machines are triggered at the other end of lines. No, this very phone is a toy. It is just good to pretend. To simulate. To play. It will not be limited to its role as phone, it will play them all.

Let's assume that it was a phone, that my phone exploded, that there were microfilms hidden inside; let's assume that I was a they said I was driving a tank, that my tank was running over your feet, that I phoned the driver of your tank; let's assume that your tank was a phone, that the world was full of tanks, that we didn't live in a world of plastic; let's assume that objects had names and forms, that we understood what things are used for; let's say that what we call hangman was nothing but a game for children, a pun; Let's say that we did not hang kids, that we did not hang band-aids, that we did not stick toothpicks in people's heads; Let's say that all this was for fun: guns, arrows, fighter aircraft and tanks, religion and sex. All these could be reduced without any difficulty to plastic toys in cardboard boxes. Let's say that the world around us was a kid's game. Yet, not a TV game or video game. Rather, let's say that the world around us was something with wheels on, a gadget for kids, just good enough to be shown in toys catalogs that we receive in our mailboxes.

Let's assume all the aforementioned. At once and without breathing while running down the streets.

The first to touch the pole wins. The first one who closes his eyes and runs into the wall will have a headache.

We said all that, but we no longer believe in it.

Too late. For, after playing, we know that this is only plastic and cardboard, without danger.

We can do exactly what we want. Freely.

The only danger is to not take the game seriously.

The game is precisely the place where we question ourselves. Where we test. Where we assess. By offering the possibility to test the world, to examine its material (isn't it made of plastic and cardboard as well?), its representation (what kind of image of our civilization do we provide children with by offering them weapons and miniature tanks?) and the way it works (a phone is useless if it is not connected to other telephones?). It is an invitation for every single adult to go back to the child we were for a bit. An invitation to look at the world as if we could invent all its rules, to reduce it to plastic, cardboard, to soften it, to take distance from it, and at the same time, grasp it with both hands and put it in play.

And we put ourselves in play at the same time.

Giving a sex-shaped construction toy to a child, suspending a hangman to a chandelier in a child's bedroom, trapping one's fingers in the turbines to feel the pain, being locked in the cellar with a box of rockets.

Or anything else that has yet to be imagined.

The world has grown since the time I locked myself in the toilets with the catalog on my thighs. I do not have four mailboxes anymore, I no longer daydream for hours from a few photos. Everything is faster, everything is important.

But the secret prevails. The mystery of the world. Behind its glossy appearance and its beautiful colored boxes, the universe around us is provided without instructions.

Do not forget that.

Nicolas Ancion, Madrid, November 2001
DWB

Translated from French by Henri J Sandront

