Departure of All, Martin John Callanan

Callanan is intrigued by systems present in society that shape our lives yet remain largely unobserved. In a process of research he makes simple and direct requests to international organisations and authorities, including open data sources. Through collating and presenting the often excessive results his work becomes an all inclusive, all embracing reflection of the wider world. In **Departure of All**, Callanan is showing **Wars During My Lifetime**, **Grounds** and a new work titled **Departure of All**.

Departure of All is a flight departure board displaying flight information for every departure happening from all international airports around the world. The familiar wait in front of the departure board is replaced with an accelerated stream of flight departure times, given poignancy by the fact they are real flights that can be mapped to real places in real time.

In **Grounds**, a work of long term research started in 2003, Callanan seeks to negotiate permission to take a single photograph in buildings important to society but where photography is not permitted. His ongoing photographic archive currently contains about 2000 locations from across the world, a selection of which are on show

Wars During My Lifetime is a newspaper, listing every war fought during the course of the artist's life. It is an evolving work first published in 2012, the fourth issue is published on the occasion of this exhibition.

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A Map of the World, Pau Waelder

In 2012, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) registered thirty—one million aircraft departures worldwide, carrying approximately three billion passengers¹. Considering that on average more than four hundred thousand passengers are flying at any given moment², it can be estimated that 0.006% of the world's population dwells at thirty thousand feet above the ground. Of course, we are not talking about a group of half a million people who inhabit the flying island of Laputa, from Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels. This percentage refers to the temporary Laputian citizenship of every person who spends a certain amount of hours on a plane every day, month or year. Flying from one city to another is now a commonplace activity for many people in the more developed countries (MDC), a tendency that will increase as the number of holiday tourists and frequent flyers grows around 4.4% each year, doubling the current figures by 2030³. Almost two decades ago, Rem Koolhass already saw airports as the future replacements of cities, stressing the fact that they contain populations of millions and are becoming substitutes for the city itself⁴. Today, more and more of us are transitory Laputians, a condition that is clearly defined by the physical boundaries of airports and airplanes, as well as the procedures that take place inside them.

Once inside the airport, a person becomes a passenger as she proceeds through the security checkpoint: a rite of passage is performed as belt, shoes and metallic objects are removed and placed alongside other belongings on a tray to be scanned by X-Ray. The person herself is screened by a metal detector and at this point, if approved by the corresponding authority, turns into a passenger, free to roam the secure area of the terminal. What used to be waiting rooms are now full-fledged shopping malls, in which travel leaves room for leisure. The stress caused by fear of arriving late, not being able to check-in or being charged for excess baggage starts to fade, as the passenger lapses into consumerism. Among the overwhelming amount of products being offered at every inch of the terminal, only one element reminds the passenger of her purpose for being there. The departure board displays constantly updated information about the next flights leaving the airport: the time of departure, flight number, destination and boarding gate are usually shown in yellow and white characters over a black background. Passengers regularly check the panel to make sure their plane is on time and sometimes glance at other destinations, the name of a particular city probably bringing

up memories or the desire to board on a different plane. In fact, the departure board represents travel itself (be it the adventurous journey to an exotic destination or the quick business trip to another city) in the austere form of an endless list.

A vertically mounted forty-two inch LCD screen hangs on the wall of the gallery. In the form of a flight departure board, it displays information about all flights taking off from all international airports in the world, in real time. The departure time (in UTC), city of origin, code number and destination of each flight are placed in a row that moves up as a new flight is added to the list. Every five seconds, two or three rows disappear at the top of the screen as the list moves up. Several hundred people have switched off their electronic devices for take off. Thousands of others are already flying. Departure of All (2013) is an artwork by Martin John Callanan that continues the artist's exploration of the systems that shape our daily lives. The relatively simple act of catching a flight involves the coordinated work of hundreds of people in a complex system that requires the performance of specific procedures, which include (as previously described) the passenger herself. This dynamic is observed on a planetary scale and reduced to the succinct information displayed on the screen. While the origin and destination cities speak of a network of connections that reaches almost every corner of the world, the fast-paced progression of the list illustrates the excesses of a society characterized by dispersion and speed. The hypermodern society described by Gilles Lipovetsky, in which all limits are surpassed by moving faster and further away⁵, is aptly represented by this real time, worldwide departure board. Air travel reduces the world to a few nodal points, and even eliminates the notion of travel: according to Paul Virilio, when we travel we are going nowhere, rather abandoning ourselves to "the void of speed"⁶. He describes the airport as "nothing but a projector, a site of accelerated ejection"⁷ in which the individual is just a simple particle, and embarkation as "nothing but a «one-way ticket»"8. In this sense, the flight information board can be read as a symbol of the real meaning of travel, as an endless succession of departures, continuously happening in a void. At some point, origins and destinations seem to matter less, and it is the uninterrupted procession of flights that gains relevance, not a list anymore but a flow, an overwhelming flow of data.

Data is the raw material of a series of works by Martin John Callanan, in which he shapes it in formally austere but meaningful forms, their apparent simplicity hiding a complex and painstaking process that usually takes years to develop. The collected data can be presented as finite list which nevertheless generates a continuous process, as in International Directory of Fictitious Telephone Numbers (2011), a collection of several hundred thousand telephone numbers designated for use in film productions and a telephone that automatically dials the numbers in the directory at random. It can also be an unfinished list, such as the register of armed conflicts that have taken place in the world since Callanan's birth, printed in the form of a newspaper under the title Wars During My Lifetime (2012). The data can also flow endlessly on a screen in front of the viewer: just as Departure of All tracks flight departures, I Wanted to See All of the News from Today

(2007) collects the front pages of over six hundred newspapers from around the world as they are published and displays them in a continuous grid. Although **All of the News** is more visually saturated, both works suggest an overwhelming amount of information, an excess that negates the possibility of completeness implied in their titles. Callanan consciously plays with the need to exhaustively map, collect and classify the world around us, and by doing so demonstrates how this turns out to be a Sisyphean task.

Futility is an aspect of the artist's work that adds a strongly critical vein to his interpretation of each subject. Birmingham New Street Station (London) consisted of a live audio transmission of the automated Customer Information System in Birmingham's railway station, that could be heard in real time in London between 9 and 15 June, 2005. Somewhat similar to Departure of All, this transmission also resulted in providing an information that was not useful to its new audience and finally became, as Callanan describes it, "ambience" and "excess". In these works information is separated from its original location but provided in a similar way, therefore generating a contradiction that leads to question its purpose and meaning. Departure of All can be confused with the usual flight information board at any airport, but actually none of these display the departures from every airport in the world, nor update the list so rapidly. Additionally, it is not located inside a terminal but in an art gallery, which is in a sense as much a non-place as any airport. A space of transition, the gallery is a temporary location for the exhibited artworks and creates a relatively neutral environment that is similar to every other art gallery in the world. In this way, it provides an adequate context for an artwork that collects and displays the activity in hundreds of non-places. As the immense archive of photographs of the floor in over two thousand locations from the ongoing series Grounds (2003-) shows us, we increasingly experience the world as a collection of non-places that define our daily surroundings and that we also encounter when we travel. As Marc Augé points out, "supermodernity produces non-places"10: wherever we go, we transmit similar, interchangeable spaces, and in this sense it may be true that, as Paul Virilio states, we are actually going nowhere. In an age of ubiquitous information, travel is more about departing our daily routine than about seeing something new. While airports continue to replace cities, locations become less important than the act of moving to and from them. Places give way to flows: the circulation of information, goods and people shapes the human geography of our planet. In this sense, if we must learn to look at the world we live in (as suggested by Augé¹¹), an accurate map may not be found in the standard Mercator projection, but rather in the endless list of flights on a real time, worldwide departure board.

- 1. ICAO Facts and Figures.
- 2. FlightAware airborne flights.
- 3. ICAO Facts and Figures, ibid.
- 4. Rem Koolhass and Bruce Mau, S,M,L,XL. Rotterdam/New York: 010 Publishers/The Monacelli Press, 1995, 1252.
- 5. Gilles Lipovestsky, Les temps hypermodernes. Barcelona, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, 2007, 9.
- 6. Paul Virilio. Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy. London-New York: Continuum, 2006, 42.
- 7. Paul Virilio. ibid. 98.
- 8. Paul Virilio, ibid. 104.
- 9. Martin John Callanan, Birmingham New Street Station (London).
- 10. Marc Augé. Non-places. Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity. London-New York: Verso, 1995, 78.
- 11. Marc Augé, ibid. 35.



An interview with Domenico Quaranta

DQ — Your work often deals with access to information. In some artworks, such as Sonification of You, I Wanted to See All the News of Today, International Directory of Fictitious Telephone Numbers and Departure of All, you make hidden flows of information visible (or, in Sonification of You, audible). In others, such as Entire Collection or Grounds, you bring to the fore limitations to our access to and use of information that is available, but protected for copyright or security reasons. In others, such as I Am Still Alive, Martin John Callanan is Okay and Location of I, you use current means of communication to deliver meaningful (your location) or trivial information about you. From information overload to censorship, how much is information important to understand contemporaneity and to find "an individual's place within systems", which is the stated subject of your research?

MJC — Some of these artworks deal with data that becomes information only through the artwork. None of us are outside systems of delivery or control. To function as a citizen in society each individual needs access to many services and commodities and will need to interact frequently with the state. Each activity we undertake requires a myriad of systems that many people ignore due to an invisible familiarity (unless something goes wrong) or a complexity that cannot be fully understood. Information is conveyed or expressed by these systems. Information is always extracted from data; therefore data can be seen as a purer form of information. In the context of art, you could consider data or information the raw material from which the artwork initially takes shape.

DQ — In artworks such as **Birmingham New Street Station** (2005) and **Departure of All** (2013) you make travel system information useless by means of displacement or excess – therefore, in a way, aestheticizing them. The first artwork is a live audio transmission of the automated Customer Information System of the train station in Birmingham to a location in London; the second is a flight departure board with worldwide coverage, displaying information for all departures happening at all international airports across the world, at an average of 58 every minute. What attracts you in travel systems and the amount of ephemeral information they produce?

MJC — In these two artworks I am interested in what the information is representing. In **Departure of All**, the 58 flights each minute represent about 400,000 people making airborne journeys in different parts of the world to different places using roughly 320 billion GB Pounds worth of aircraft. These people are making journeys for the whole range of mundane or exciting reasons people often travel. **Birmingham New Street Station** came from a similar idea by focusing on the UK's business train station. By displacing the information from the train station or airport, away from its original location and away from its intended purpose as information, it transforms into something else. By abstracting it, we can examine and think about it from a different perspective.

When looking at all this information about travel I start thinking about similar journeys I may have made, what happened to me on those journeys, where I was going and with whom. Or I think about possible journeys I am yet to make or I may never make. The people travelling on the majority of these journeys are individuals who I'll never meet or know. Places they are seeing I may never see, things happening in other places I'll never know about. The information represents a vast number of people, places, things, and events happening elsewhere. I think about possibility and potential.

DQ — Information overload is often addressed in your work. Sometimes you portray or even improve it, i.e. by creating systems that collect newspaper covers from all over the world in a single webpage, or displaying information for all flight departures happening around the world on a single screen. Sometimes you react to it, by creating powerful images such as **All the people who have ever lived, and will ever live** (the photo of a single handful of sand) or **A Planetary Order** (a Terrestrial Cloud Globe showing clouds in a single moment in time), or reducing all the infotainment you may produce via social networks to a single, simple statement such as **Martin John Callanan is Okay** or **I Am Still Alive**. Are you an info addict or an info hermit, or both?

MJC — Martin John Callanan is Okay collects all my social networking updates since 2007 into one archive. All of the updates read with the same statement "Martin John Callanan is okay". Is this any different from the majority of updates on these social services? What does it mean when a few days or weeks pass between my updates? Is the most recent update still valid? By using the same statement, it relieves me of having to think up banter, but at the same time carries useful information to people choosing to receive the updates. In a similar way Gilbert and George will eat the same meal in the same restaurant for weeks of months to remove unnecessary choice.

I Am Still Alive borrows On Kawara's famous phrase and further delegates the conveyance to a program automatically delivering the information to each new device within range. A number of my artworks position Martin John Callanan as a protagonist. A protagonist without an overt personality or one existing only in

name. Therefore, it is not about Martin John Callanan as an individual. The role of the protagonist is to allow another individual a point at which to adopt that position, in much the same way as reading a story. This is a way to allow others to consider the systems, to adopt or occupy my position.

Currently there is a lot of discussion about information overload, and this reminds me of a story told by Richard Hamblyn, set in the mid-ninetieth century when Robert FitzRoy established the Meteorological Office with a network of several hundred observers around the country feeding daily data back to London. After a few months the office ran out of physical space and could not process the data in a timely manner. They had to suspend the observations until a system and tools could be set up to manage and make use of the hundreds of daily reports. Today processes for the collection of weather data are fully automated – from collection to their presentation, from street level sensors spread through-out cities to orbiting satellites relaying their data back to ground feeding automatically into predictive models.

DQ — Many of your artworks can often be described as a subtle critique of contemporary descriptive systems, from scientific language to other scientific data, from audio or video documentation to high-resolution photography, from list and catalogues to databases. Yet, this critique is performed in an affirmative way, by adopting these systems with an apparent faith in their descriptive potential. For example, **Nephology** records clouds observed from August 24, 2009 to April 15, 2010, using the definitions of the International Cloud Atlas. Reading the list, I can see that on April 3, 2010 at 7:29, you saw a cirrostratus nebulous, but I can't visualize it, neither imagine what you felt watching the sky. **The Fundamental Units** is a series of images printed at the human size of 1.2 by 1.2 meters, and taken using an infinite focus 3D optical microscope, of the lowest denomination coins from the world's currencies; but from them we can't get anything of the economic system of which they are "the fundamental units". Do you agree with this interpretation? Can we extend it to **Departure of All**?

MJC—It makes sense to assume established systems provide useful information, otherwise natural selection shows a different system would exist. I use the systems as they are, or alter and experiment with them in ways to try and understand them from different vantage points. The artwork may allow a different understanding about the world.

As an example, the systems of economics, or the models on which decisions concerning economics are made, to the average citizen, seem to have gone wrong. Or perhaps they are too complex to have been modeled effectively. It is probably time to start afresh by reconsidering the basic purpose of money. With the **Fundamental Units**, I don't presume to state an answer to the problem. Rather, let's think about it.

Domenico Quaranta is an art critic and curator. His work focuses on the impact of the current techno-social developments on the arts. He regularly writes for Flash Art and Artpulse. He contributed to a number of publications and edited and wrote various books, most recently "Beyond New Media Art" (2013). As a curator, he organized various shows, including "Holy Fire. Art of the Digital Age" (Bruxelles 2008, with Y. Bernard), "Playlist" (Gijon 2009 and Bruxelles 2010) and "Collect the WWWorld. The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age" (Brescia 2011; Basel and New York, 2012).

Pau Waelder is an independent art critic and curator, researcher in new media art. His recent projects include the exhibitions Extimacy. Art, intimacy and technology (Es Baluard Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2011), Colmena (Pilar and Joan Miró Foundation, 2010), FLOW (CCA, 2008) and Metapaisatges (Pilar and Joan Miró Foundation, 2007). He has published articles and essays in publications, among which the contemporary art magazines ETC Magazine (Canada), art.es (Spain) and a:minima (Spain), as well as the peerreviewed journals Leonardo (US), M/C Journal (Australia) and Artnodes (Spain), among others. He is currently the editor of the Media Art section at art.es magazine, editor and writer at the blog Arte y Cultura Digital from the UOC and writer at the website VIDA Art and Artificial Life from Fundación Telefónica. He also regularly writes texts for books on contemporary art and digital culture.







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