

Juan Fontanive - Ghosts in the Machine

Gilda Williams

Riflemaker Gallery, London

A gallery filled with small paper discs — each about the diameter of a teacup, colored black on one side and white on the other — rotate mechanically on long thin rods in Juan Fontanive's room-sized installation, *Movement #1* (2008). The rods are suspended from steel wires attached to the ceiling by slender metal plates and a hollow brass circle. This elegant hardware threads the steel wires through a complicated, interconnected pulley system which regulates movement and keeps the discs' rotational speed in sync. The flat little circles animate the space with seemingly weightless patterns of **motion**, like vastly magnified atoms bouncing in space. Their movement is constant and synchronized; sometimes the whole group slows down or speeds up en masse, as if all dancing to the beat of the same drummer, or controlled by a single unseen puppeteer.

The wall-sculpture *Quiknesse* (2009) is like a motorized flip book, creating the illusion of a bird in flight by the mechanized, rapid rotation of successive drawings in what Fontanive has called 'films without light'. The fluttering of wings seems mimicked by the swiftly flapping pages, all accompanied by the regular shuffling sound of falling paper — a movement assisted by gravity which, paradoxically, keeps the bird forever in flight, never able to find rest and land.

In *New Lines* (2011), rows of aluminum triangles in bright, solid colors — red, vibrant blue, yellow, white, orange, black — slowly rotate thanks to a system of steel wire and rubber cords. Their monochromatic patterns suggest the color-coded distress-signal flags that are run up the mast of ailing ships, to communicate sea disasters without resorting to language: a red and yellow triangle = 'man overboard'; white on red = 'require assistance'. In this scenario, Fontanive's flag-like shapes seem to flip cheerily from one maritime catastrophe to the other.

In *Accident 1, River 2*. (2006) hand-drawn images of a cyclist in successive stages of pedalling a bike are inserted along a bicycle wheel. By spinning the wheel, the cyclist seems to pedal; the broken bike is endowed with a new and unforeseen form of movement: low-tech animated cartoon. The layer of papery spokes around the rubber tire appear like some sort of feathery headdress — as if Duchamp's first readymade had been trussed up for a fancy-dress party.

Finally, the turning metal rods of Fontanive's *Labyrinth* (2009) are painted top-half black, bottom-half white (sometimes vice versa), and have been suspended from the ceiling. With its long pending components whirring about a pulley system, *Labyrinth* recalls the space-age kinetic sculptures produced by 1960s artists like Julio Le Parc or Jesus Rafael Soto. That first generation of kinetic artists, who like Fontanive drew attention to the affinities between black-and-white sculptural abstraction and the machine aesthetic, were responding to then-new technologies of space travel and 1960s-era futurist design. Theirs' was a pre-digital age still in the thrall of analogue technology, rather than fondly nostalgic about it as we might be today.

Analogue technology, of which Juan Fontanive seems blithely enamoured, differs in part from digital in its inevitable, perhaps welcome accompaniment of white noise: the whirring of gears, the squeaks and screeches of radiowave interference, the comforting ticking of clockwork. Fontanive's moving sculptures wear their antiquated technology with pride, taking obvious delight in displaying their noisy miniature motors, or their forests of wires, pulleys, rotating devices and tensely threaded cords. In *The Lakes* (2006), the brushy image of a fish seems to swim from one flipbook-like, boxy metallic machine to the next, producing a perpetually flowing shoal of three hand-drawn mechanical fish, disappearing and reappearing in waves of paper. One is reminded of the stroboscopes and zoetropes of early cinematography, able to produce the first illusions of living movement in sequences of pictures on a turning disc or cylinder — a horse and jockey tirelessly jumping hurdle after hurdle; a couple waltzing until the end of time. Jonathan Crary has discussed the nineteenth-century's obsession with these and other experiments in vision, from dioramas to stereoscopes, all born from the strange new model of modern vision which, unlike the pre-Enlightenment, no longer involved the other senses in verifying the image before us. The earlier *camera obscura* invented in 1671, for example, wedded vision with tangibility: spectators could cross-reference visual data against their other senses, because the real scene was flattened before their very eyes. From the late eighteenth century, writes Crary, the eye is as if torn from the rest of the body and required to do all the seeing alone, without the aid of touch or sound. For Crary, the shedding of tactility (like sound) from the visual experience sets the stage for a culture of spectatorship and consumption, which privileges the eye over all the other senses.

Fontanive's sculpture machines return all our senses to the viewing experience: the sound of gears and motors and machinery as they busy themselves with their perpetual labours — flipping pages, spinning discs, hoisting cords, keeping the fish swimming upstream. We hear the heavy paper as it falls in gentle rotation; the happy hum of gently agitated pulleys; or the speedy rotation of metal in *Cicada*, whose title alludes to the summery sound of tree insects, mimicked here by the machine's white noise. Alongside the unexpected inclusion of other senses, our visual experience is expanded as well: in *Quiknesse* we pay equal attention to the images animated before us as to the tightly designed, machine-like container that both holds and produces the living movement. In Fontanive's work, minutely toothed gears, clips, roughly finished brass, nuts, bolts, racks, wormwheels, pulleys and sprockets absorb as much interest — and make up the sculpture — as the floating image before us, which seems to confess with pride the machine-made nature of its movement. Fontanive takes pleasure in the ordinary colour of things, presented

without artistry: copper plates, black ink seeping into off-white drawing paper, causing a yellowy halo. Or the dull silver of aluminum, the uneven golds and browns of worked brass: together they generate a distinctive, unadorned palette shared across Fontanive's artworks.

The artist's shaky humming birds and rushing fish are sculptural animations, or perhaps automata: machine-powered facsimiles of life. Automata were, famously, among the principal triggers of uncanny experience for Freud. The uncanny erupts in our encounter with an undecided being who occupies a state between life and death, whether a life-like machine or a ghost. Ghosts and picture-making machines share a long history; the first magic lanterns — the first crude cinematographic technology emerging in the 1790s — featured projections of spectres and demons, phantasmagoric light shows popular at the very same time Gothic fiction was booming. In those tales, ghosts almost always haunted enclosed spaces — from ancient castles to haunted houses, then subsequently smaller and smaller enclosures: forbidden rooms, confession boxes, and finally machines, which always seemed supernaturally alive anyway, with their mysteriously moving parts and superhuman abilities. Like Fontanive's spectral contraptions, ordinary ghosts demand the attention of all of the senses. Ghosts are heard and felt as much as they are seen: they may appear before us, or equally they enjoy setting fires, dragging chains, rapping on tables. In many ways, Fontanive's artworks seem strangely possessed, producing curiously moving animals that are neither living nor dead, or creating ghostly systems which seem to float mid-air and follow a pace and logic of their own.

Eventually in the Gothic tale of terror the haunted enclosure became the mind itself, the locked chamber of secrets in our heads. Not long thereafter, Freud began to describe mental processes in the machine-like terms of 'defense mechanisms' and 'death drives': as if locating the malfunctioning parts of the mind-as-motor. Where automata have no secrets ('their springs and wires ... accessible to all', as Mladen Dolar has written) the hardwiring of the mind is a more confounding mystery. It may seem curious that man-of-science Sigmund Freud dedicated so much attention to reflections on the uncanny; but in early Modernist thinking, when faced with uncanny experience the mind seemed to reveal itself in its true light: as a faulty machine, tripping over unresolved mechanical failures produced from the unrepaired breakdowns of the past. And there is something uncanny about Fontanive's moving sculptures, occupying the gallery weightlessly: bringing lifeless and antiquated spare parts back to life, or presenting mysterious machines that seem hauntingly able to think and operate on their own.

Fontanive's art can seem haunted by old technologies, semi-alive with the oddly comforting sounds of moving synchronized parts, happily running in perpetuity. Nonetheless, despite the strong flavour of ghostly devices and early Modernist experimentation, the work also seems timelessly utopian in its picturing of a perfectly functioning if complex system. One might also think of Lorenzetti's *Allegories of Good Government* in looking at Fontanive's smooth operators: allegorical dream-visions of many separate elements flawlessly functioning as one. *Timelines* present a wall of twelve rotating, clock-like forms, each spinning independently as if in its own time in space yet ever-respectful of their identical neighbours. Or consider *Movement #1*, with its multitude of parts bouncing through space without ever colliding. Fontanive's is a world where things rattle and pulsate, or hover precariously before us, and yet present a contently operational, democratic little universe, able to play host to its many ghosts — magic lanterns, kinetic sculptures, cartoon animation, Freudian visions, utopian aspirations -- in quietly humming equilibrium.

Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, 1990.

Mladen Dolar, 'La femme-machine', *New Formations* 23 (1994).