

Modern Machines

Recent Kinetic Sculpture



Alice Aycock

Greased Lightning, 1984

Steel, galvanized sheet metal, theatrical rainbow lights, incandescent light, glass, and motorized parts, 56 x 72 x 72
John Weber Gallery, New York

Checklist

All dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Alice Aycock (b. 1946)

Greased Lightning, 1984

Steel, galvanized sheet metal, theatrical rainbow lights, incandescent light, glass, and motorized parts, 56 x 72 x 72

John Weber Gallery, New York

Jonathan Borofsky (b. 1943)

**Three Chattering Men at 2,887,431, at 2,887,432, and at 2,887,435*, 1983–84

Aluminum, wood, Bondo, electric motor, and speaker, 82½ x 23 x 13 each

Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Chris Burden (b. 1946)

The Ship-O-Corks, 1983

2,700 wine-bottle corks, child's nineteenth-century shotgun, 12 dry batteries, 8 paddle wheels, bamboo, copper wire, nails, and electrical tape, 10½ x 55 x 18

Collection of John Alexander

Rodney Alan Greenblat (b. 1960)

Boat, 1981

Mixed media, 168 x 120 x 60

Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York

Perry Hoberman (b. 1954)

Arms Length, 1985

Wood, metal, plastic, and polarized light, 47 x 61 x 38

Postmasters Gallery, New York

Listening Device, 1985

Mixed media, 45 x 33 x 31

Postmasters Gallery, New York

Kristin Jones (b. 1956) and Andrew Ginzel (b. 1954)

Ad Infinitum, 1985

Water, air, glass, silk, pigment, blowers, pump, and motors: aperture, 18 x 25; interior, 70 x 72 x 31

Collection of the artists

Gary Justis (b. 1953)

Transmutation of Ideas, 1984

Motors, optics, aluminum, plastic, timers, and lights, 97 x 34 x 27

Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago

Tree of Enwreath, 1985

Motor, optics, aluminum, plastic, timers, and lights, 114 x 45 x 40

Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago

Jon Kessler (b. 1957)

Search for Tomorrow, 1983

Mixed media, 84 x 24 x 24

Collection of Perry Rubenstein

Third Floor Fountain, 1985

Mixed media, 39 x 21 x 21

Collection of Barbara Kessler

Robert Longo (b. 1953)

Body of a Comic, 1984

Steel drums, motor, and photo transparency, 120 x 114 x 48

Metro Pictures, New York

Dennis Oppenheim (b. 1938)

The Day Before Starry Night (for Vincent van Gogh), 1983

Mixed media, 40 x 40 (mounted 36 from floor)

Sander Gallery, New York

Gary Perkins (b. 1947)

The Lady from Altamira, 1985

Wire and projection apparatus, 78 x 120 x 60

Collection of the artist

Carolee Schneemann (b. 1939)

War Mop, 1983

Mixed media with TV monitor, videotape, and mop: mop, 24 x 62 x 20; TV, 12 x 18 x 10

Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York

*Displayed in Sculpture Court

Modern Machines: Recent Kinetic Sculpture

Almost as soon as I arrived in America,
I experienced the revelation that the
genius of the modern world is the machine,
and that in the machine art can discover
a living form of expression.

Francis Picabia, 1913

A few years after the French Dadaist Francis Picabia identified the machine as a source of artistic inspiration it became an icon of twentieth-century art. By 1920, the Russian Constructivist Naum Gabo created his first mechanical sculpture, *Virtual Kinetic Volume*, while in Paris the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp ceased making images of machines and began integrating actual mechanisms into his works.

Yet the meaning various artists attached to their machine works reflected an ambivalence toward technology that has continued to the present day. Dadaists termed their works “anti-machines,” which, by self-destructing when activated, glorified the irrational and subverted the materialistic values of the bourgeoisie (according to their creators). On the other hand, post-revolutionary Russia venerated the machine, in art and society, as the emblem of social progress. Other movements—Futurism, Vorticism, Surrealism, Precisionism—either shared Dada’s notion of the machine as a demonic engine of dehumanization and enslavement to an increasingly mechanized world; or followed Constructivism in making the machine a symbol of social salvation.

It was not until the 1960s, however, that artists began to explore the full potential of technological advances in their art. The effort to achieve a kinetic aesthetic and to broaden the definition of art itself led artists to reinterpret forms originally devised by earlier generations of the avant-garde: performance art, film (and, later, video), collage and found objects, including mechanical paraphernalia. Many sought to effect a union of science, technology, and art through collaboration with scientists and engineers.

This interdisciplinary approach—in which both the mechanical and more advanced technologies figured prominently—resulted in radical changes in the traditional notion of sculpture, as machines

became both “media and message.” Artists were encouraged by such “art labs” as the Centre for Advanced Study of Science in Art in London, Maurice Tuchman’s Art and Technology project for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) in New York. Many artists made their sculptures actually move, notably Claes Oldenburg (whose giant *Ice Bag* was displayed until recently at this Branch’s Sculpture Court) and Andy Warhol, whose three-dimensional printed field of daisies awash in rain prefigured works exhibited here by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, and Perry Hoberman.

Dennis Oppenheim and Alice Aycock are perhaps the two artists most closely associated with what Donald Kuspit has referred to as “the fine art/technology continuum.” In 1979, when they each created their first mechanized sculptures, both were established artists working in a variety of non-traditional media. The machine provided them with a metaphor through which to express various responses to the human condition. Oppenheim, though witty and playful, often creates works which are tinged with danger: machines that shoot fireworks and self-destruct. *The Day Before Starry Night (for Vincent van Gogh)* evokes the anxiety of the creative process. One of a series of “tremor” works, the piece trembles when activated, a wry interpretation of van Gogh’s emotional state immediately prior to the creation of his masterpiece. Much of Aycock’s sculpture refers to a “mindless force which I think of as a whirling that moves through the universe, almost like a vortex.” The imagery of alchemy, Catholicism, and ancient rituals and mysteries, central to her work, associates technology with magic and mysticism. This chaotic power, both creative and destructive, inspired her series of spinning blade machines. *Greased Lightning*, a more benign evocation of the same theme, is composed of three spinning vortexes representing dreidels, the tops used in the Hebrew game of chance. As in the game, four Hebrew letters are painted on each of the vortexes. On the surface of the base a double pointed arrow aligns with a letter when a player stops the vortex from spinning. If properly operated, the vortexes stop when the arrows point to the proper sequence of letters, spelling the phrase “A Great Miracle Happened Here.” But as Aycock explains, the miracle is impene-

trable, and the chances of winning are nearly impossible. As with the forces of nature, the more we seek to control them, the more uncontrollable they are.

Like Aycock and Oppenheim, Carolee Schneemann has worked in a variety of media since the 1960s. For her first kinetic piece in 1959, she attached a painting to a wheel, and has since fabricated mechanized works in conjunction with paintings, films, videos, and performances. Although Schneemann is associated primarily with controversial themes—sexuality, politics, feminism—she too is inspired by past cultures and the chaotic, primordial forces which they sought to control. This interest in ancient history, particularly her research on goddess-sites in the Middle East, led her to Lebanon, and its ongoing war. *War Mop* expresses her reaction to the relentless destruction there and represents “the inexorable indefatigability of the war machine once it gets going.” On the video-monitor scenes of the ravaged country are intercut with her own paintings and tourist-board slides of points of interest, contrasting ancient ruins with contemporary ones. The mop continuously beats against the monitor and symbolizes “what women have ended up with after technological ravaging.”

Chris Burden’s war machines also address man’s inability to cope with advanced technology, or as he states, “man’s genius at making something that explodes better.” Incorporating Lincoln Logs, Tinker Toys, and Lego blocks, his series entitled *Cost Effective Micro-Weaponry* is playful in appearance. *The Ship-O-Corks*, composed of a child’s nineteenth-century shotgun mounted atop a raft of 2,700 corks, is propelled by battery-charged paddle wheels. But like Oppenheim’s fireworks machines, Burden’s artillery, when activated, becomes dangerous, and in true Dada tradition often self-destructs. This element of risk, which informed the artist’s performances of the 1970s when his own body was used as a target for violence—shooting, crucifixion, electrocution—is central to Burden’s oeuvre.

Childhood imagery continues to intrigue a younger generation of artists. Rodney Alan Greenblat’s *Boat* is modeled after a kiddie ride, while Jon Kessler’s *Third Floor Fountain* relies on the principles of a shadow box and is composed of miniature toys and objects

installed in a Chinese restaurant water fountain. Gary Justis and Perry Hoberman, using optical and electronic equipment, draw inspiration from robots and 3-D movies, respectively. Justis’ childhood training in the shop of his father, an inventor, laid the groundwork for his series of *Hyperfunctional Icons*. Deceptively robotic, *Transmutation of Ideas* performs no utilitarian function. Rather, it mimics the human thought process: when the motor/heart transmits power/emotions to the prism/brain, lights flash and the jaw makes clacking sounds as it hits the facial plane. While Justis is heavily influenced by Duchamp, Hoberman expresses post-modernist concerns with symbols, language, and sociological issues. His stereoscopic wall reliefs evoke the imagery of B-movies and similarly must be viewed through 3-D glasses. These constructions also present perceptual paradoxes—illusions of movement created through technical means.

The machine and its post-industrial successors—lasers, computers, and fiber optics—continue to provide artists with the “living form of expression” Picabia prophesied in an eclectic mix of styles and media. The symbolic effect of these “hi-tech” works, however, maintains the tradition of the machine in art. Through the playful treatment of the utilitarian, the distortion of physical properties, and the juxtaposition of moving parts exposed or hidden, the power of human ingenuity is at certain times reaffirmed and, at others, viewed with suspicion. Whatever its form, at present or in the future, the machine has become a central feature of twentieth-century art.

S U S A N L U B O W S K Y

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