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Idea Logic, or Self-made Machine Sculpture

"1973" The Changing Room, Stirling, Oct 2004

I

In the late eighteenth century in France, a father and son both named Pierre Jacquet-Droz made a series of mechanical dolls. The little human figures could perform short, repetitive actions because of intricate clockwork mechanisms hidden inside them. 'The Clerk', whose right hand grasps a quill and moves in a motion of writing, was made by the father in 1774. He is like a baby in a big curly wig, wearing adult clothes, out of which poke his hard wooden hands and face. It is said that, when he was first made, people thought him amazingly lifelike.

The existence of mechanical dolls has been used to argue that the true ambition of sculpture is to replicate life. Computers are seen as rightful descendants of the dolls, in that they are automata, albeit non-anthropomorphic, that simulate us by the artificialisation of our intelligence. Jack Burnham, author of 'Beyond Modern Sculpture', believes that assimilation into cybernetics is necessary to imitate, simulate, and finally replace the human body. He says that artists have "An unstoppable craving to wrest the secrets of natural order from God – with the unconscious aim of controlling human destiny, if not in fact becoming God itself." For him, the machine is the key to transferring power: "If it constructs our destiny, it can do no less than become the medium through which our art is realised." 1

In 1911 Marcel Duchamp realised that machines were not simply useful as technicians but could excel as authors of ideas. With this in mind he went about becoming one. Or, at least, he tried to become more like one. It is said that he was set on this course while watching a performance of Rousel's 'Impressions of Africa' in Paris. Up to this point, as a painter, Duchamp had possessed no real continuity. 'Impressions of Africa', too, is characterised by discontinuity. The scenes of the play seem to have nothing to do with each other, until a realisation is made that what links them is the repeated appearance of a series of primitive machines that, through various intricate connections, are all making "art". In describing Duchamp's readymade sculptures, the first of which was signed three years after he saw the play, Rosalind Krauss writes that "They were objects over the making of which he had had absolutely no control. Therefore, they did not appear as something coming from the matrix of his personally held ideas or emotions. Duchamp had made himself into a kind of switching mechanism." 2

What defines a sculpture that is made by a machine?

It is an object wholly disconnected from the psychological and emotional structure of the person who initiated it. Duchamp had a total disbelief in the idea that there must be an intimate, causal connection between an individual and what they make.

Why would a human being who is an artist want to be a machine?

To get rid of their 'self'. Particularly to remove their body and unconscious mind since, in doing so, their potential for error is gotten rid of, along with any primitive, destructive desires, and sexual and violent impulses. There is then no possibility of embarrassment or shame. If the art that is made is not made by them there is no chance that they may suffer for it, be humiliated by it, or be rejected or criticised as a result of it. Inventing a machine to make art is much the same as inventing an alter ego or a pseudonym.

In the 1920s, Duchamp made a series of optical machines out of spinning discs. On the discs he would write puns which, as they spun, would reveal erotic subtexts through slight phonic changes. These puns were signed not by him, but by his alter ego Rrose Selavy, a pseudonym that itself when spinning sounds like, "Eros, c'est la vie". Duchamp, however, could not be blamed for this statement about life's sexual basis and erotic meaning. Instead it was the fault of a strange woman no-one had ever heard of.

Surely the moment the unconscious self is seen, a maker has failed to operate effectively as a machine. Duchamp's sculpture-making machine probably never really worked. Or if it wasn't broken to begin with, it certainly ended up so. In securing legendary status, what Duchamp succeeded most in doing was actually strengthening the psychological and emotional value of the human being as artist.

In the 1960s, the relation of self to machine to sculpture was most obvious in the work of the Minimalists. They were attempting to eradicate the projected, private self and, therefore, any unconscious body impulse was difficult to see. Their objects were made, if not always by machines, then with machine precision. Robert Morris understood meaning as it is projected by bodies, not as it is held within them. He suggests that the meanings we make, and express through our bodies and our gestures, are fully reliant on the other human beings to whom we

make them, and on whose vision of them we depend for them to make sense.

Into the workings of this reassembled sculpture making machine, in the late 1960s, crept another combination of unconscious mind and body. Again, coincidentally, these belonged to a woman. This time of her own making. Eva Hesse cannot, however, be held singularly responsible for the beginnings of a new breakdown. And it would be wrong to describe the unconscious mind, as it encompasses the irrational, destructive and chaotic, as exclusively female. After all Robert Smithson was equally to blame and is often seen as the absolute personification of grit in the machine. By the end of the 1970s “rather surprising things” had come to be called sculpture: “Narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert.” 3

II

The control that Alex Frost exerts over his sculpture betrays a desire to be machine-like as a maker. There are templates or patterns or plans to follow. His work is modular. Things are built up from a number of similar elements. There is repetition. The materials are tools. There is structure then surface. He builds then decorates. What emerges is a whole made up of smaller parts. As a sculpture-making machine, though, Alex Frost is not just broken. He has gone past that stage. The machine is now dismantled, its component parts divided up and laid out on the floor.

Last year, Alex watched an Oskar Schlemmer video. At the beginning of one particular theatre piece, the screen is black and all that can be seen are white lines. These become what looks like a moving sculpture, making and unmaking itself. Long, thin strips of wood, painted white against a black background, become one geometric, angular construction, then separate before becoming another. This process looks like an organic thing forming itself: very slightly unsure and shuddery. The bits of wood are actually strapped to the joints of a man, who is in a black room, with his body and face completely covered. As much as this moving person tries to control and streamline himself, he is still a person and so isn’t really that smooth.

In preparation for his video, ‘Orion’, Alex sewed himself a black suit and attached tiny light bulbs to various parts of it. It, therefore, takes a long time to notice him, or to see the shape of his body on screen. At first there are only moving lights. Then there is almost the outline of a figure. And then there he is, not in a studio but out on a street, in a city, merging with the street lamps and the reflections and the headlights. It is night-time, so it is dark apart from all these tiny pools of light. Alex is walking towards the camera. There is the possibility of seeing him, but also of not.

‘And So It Goes/We Are Numbers’ in its very first incarnation (it has been reshown in different sizes and configurations), is a structural tangle, like DNA, or the roots of a plant or a tree, or round Lego, or the sprawling entangled legs of a dead spider. Like limbs and joints, elbows and knees and hips, all in a fankle, intertwined. How did it get itself into such a state? The sculpture is at alternate points touching the floor and hovering very slightly, from a few inches to a few feet, above it. At only one point does a stray, high and thin, crooked loop jut above the rest. This is a phallic object. It could just as easily be a vertical sculpture, its parts put together in a straight line to shoot up straight into the air. It is a long thin tube of a shape tied in a knot. Alex bought lengths of cardboard tubing and sawed them into bits. He inlaid joints (just smaller, narrower bits of tubing) into the holes at the end of each, so that one would click into another with as much precision as possible. He then painted them with colours that are quite dark and tonal. Nothing too bright, nothing too pastel, like the colours of boys' clothes: dark brown, cream, blue, purple, fawn, beige, rust, grey, red. Slipped over each section of tubing, on top of the paint, are pairs of American Tan and Charcoal tights. They serve to reinforce the sculpture’s limblike quality, as well as its sexuality. Somehow there is the idea of a child clinging to its mum's legs.

This sculpture has two titles that have become joined together as one. The first part, ‘And So It Goes’ sounds resigned, maybe even melancholic. Like laying down to an inevitability. At the same time it contains a knowledge and an understanding of how or the way things work. Such discoveries or realisations, like understanding biology, disease, how we are made, and what happens to us, are not always pleasant. The words sound philosophical and gentle but, at the same time, lent a different tone, they are frustrated and angry. Depending on mood, this title could either be a shrugging of the shoulders or a banging down of the fist. The second part of the title, ‘We Are Numbers’ is more unforgiving. It is not open. There are no alternatives. We Are Numbers. It is compartmentalised, closed off. Stucturalised. Architecturalised. Despite its rational nature, this sculpture retains the niggle of questions, and therefore the problems of flesh and thought.

Alex borrowed a machine from a ceramicist to make a sculpture: a long, thin pump-action tube that clay is put in and pushed out to make the ‘sausages’ used in coil pots. He made a metal stencil of the outline of Robert Indiana’s ‘Love’ motif and attached that to the machine, thereby defining the outside edge of any object that passed through it. The resulting sculpture has knot-like qualities. There is no doubt that it also creates both phallic and fecal associations.

Alex has also made a contemporary ceramic vase, sleek and well finished, from a life-size template of the profile of his face. The vase is on a basic plinth hidden within which is an electric motor making it spin imperceptibly slowly. An undercurrent of movement that is sensed rather than definitely seen is usually thought to be

subliminally sexual. The top of Tatlin's proposed tower, the 'Monument to the Third International', was designed to rotate at the rate of one revolution per day. Tatlin believed that technology should be placed visibly at the service of ideology through which history might be shaped.

'Everyday' is made up of three waist-high interlocking walls. Exactly like a barbecue, except there is nothing cooking on top. In fact there is no top. It is made from bricks that are actually blocks of wood, wrapped with redrawn, printed (not perfectly, by a process of single colour offset lithograph) and painted copies of Ryvita packaging. The bricks are stuck together with grab and fill adhesive that is the same colour as cement. It oozes out a bit between the layers. 'Everyday' is placed in front of a corner. Just enough room is left to see behind it, or look at the back of it. The relation of the body to it is that it can be semi-entered. From the front there is a space to stand and it is about the right height to be able to operate on its top. It is the height of cooking, of cleaning surfaces, of caring for a child. Every day there is women's work. What was women's work in the 1970s is no longer necessarily women's work today. At least it's not supposed to be. However, the barbecue remains the only place in some family units where a man will cook.

The first in Alex's recent series of pixelated drawings was a self portrait. It is from a photograph of him when he was 27. He is wearing a vest on holiday in France. He looks quite sure of himself, smug yet expressionless, eyes looking straight into the camera. His features are relaxed. He looks like he's had time to organise them that way. He probably thinks that's how they look best. His lips are full, pouted even. His posture is straight. His whole body is centred, right in the middle of the frame. His shoulders travel equal distances until they are cut off by the edges of the paper. His chin is slightly up. It almost looks like he took the photo of himself. He looks alive, and yet this is a pencil drawing made up, basically, of squares. Inside the squares of graph paper there are cartwheel shapes, equal signs, minus signs, star shapes, full stops and colons. Some boxes are more full than others. Each square contains more or less information to, in the end, become a tonal drawing. Surely this is absolutely as much control as it is possible to exert over a drawing. Alex chooses a photograph, scans it into his computer, uses a programme to break it down into squares of information, then takes that pattern and transposes it onto graph paper. Recently he has begun to screenprint squares of his own design onto very large sheets. But even then the process is machine-like. He uses computer software to create new patterns that best suit his purposes.

Amongst the newer drawings in this series is one of the very edge of his head that includes, as far as features are concerned, only an ear. There is another drawing of slides of previous work lying on a table in his studio, one of a spillage, and one of flowers of the type that would appear in both photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe and paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe. It would, at times, seem that Alex is disappearing. He certainly tries to get rid of himself. Sometimes he tries very hard. It should be obvious by now though that he will never succeed. And that's really just as well. Is he truly nostalgic for a machine that is intact and running smoothly? Or does he actually prefer it now, dismantled and in bits? After all, the continuity that Alex Frost possesses as a sculptor emanates from a fragmented self. And he uses as many different parts of that as he can find. It is therefore the case that standing too close to his work makes it difficult to see. On walking away there should appear something that, at the very least, relates to a human being: automated certainly, but no doubt juddery too.

Footnotes

1.As quoted in Rosalind E. Krauss, Passages in Modern Sculpture, The Viking Press, Canada, 1977. P. 210

2.Op. Cit., p. 72.

3.Rosalind E. Krauss, Sculpture in the Expanded Field, October 8 (Spring 1979), p. 31