

**Peter Flemming: Lazymode / Lambinatronique**

*unabridged version of review from Canadian Art, Winter 2008*

Oboro presented a mix of new and older work by folk-machine artist Peter Flemming this summer; in a new turn for his practice, each piece in the show was motivated by solar power. So-called ‘relaxation oscillators’ drove mechanical movement, with energy drawn from solar panels affixed to the gallery’s ceiling windows. Ultracapacitors discharged to (slowly, occasionally, and eventually) animate the work.

In the case of a mature piece entitled *Manual*, sand was distributed in tiny piles from a hopper mounted on a rolling oblong beam; the sand formed a large spiral on the floor, which was in turn repetitively swept up by the attached mechanical broom-arm. A new piece, *Leak to Lower Lazy Levitating Load*, charged at a glacial pace, lethargically ‘getting up the gumption’ here and there to fill a barrel suspended from the ceiling. It rose and fell over a period of hours, fed by smaller bottles and tubing suspended around it in a semi-ordered tangle of nylon rope. Against the cacophony of construction-saturated Montreal streets in the summer, Flemming’s machines stood out as quiet and unassuming, pausing at length before saying anything. Their self-absorbed purpose and function as sculptures left no room to use them as machines, except perhaps for reflection on instrumentality itself. The exhibition thus spoke to how we dwell amidst machines, with each piece seeking to resolve into kôan-as-prototype.

Some seemed to ask after our delegation of physical effort to machines. The dilated tempo of each (a simple function of having to ‘store up’ power for action and execution) offered contrasting cues for a life inured to electronic devices and smoothly coordinated, petroleum-predicated workflows. Where pocket computers measure time in megahertz oscillations, these machines suggested a more biorhythmic tempo. They cut up night and day, activity and indolence, and the spectator’s attention and indifference into larger, loose blocks. This explicit ‘letting-be’ of solar power’s limited capacity also inevitably brought an ethical cast to the work, which would otherwise be driven invisibly by the hydroelectric power grid. The gerrymandered aesthetic of the show also helped to mitigate against an unthinking view of technology as sleek and mystified. All of these themes were perhaps given their most poetic touch in a new work set off in an enclosed room, entitled *Stepper Motor Choir*.

Here small panes of glass were mounted on a dozen variable-speed motors; each sat atop a cinder block, arranged in a circle around the room. They were independently controlled by solar panels, and so each ‘sang’ in its own variable key, with the drone amplified through the glass panes. Modulation and pitch of the sound in the room changed depending on one’s position, and as each motor received more or less power from the sun’s rays. The resulting effect provokes a core meditation on the power of technology: technical ingenuity shapes and controls phenomenal fields of force to useful effect through machines, and these come to organize systems upon which we rely every day. Flemming’s work invites us to derive pleasure and contemplation from standing both inside and outside of these technologies, as they enfold us into different modes of experience.

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