

Peter Flemming: *ends and means*

After languishing for decades in the basements of experimental art schools and on the fringes of cyberpunk culture, mechanized kinetic sculpture-robotic art has suddenly burst into the mainstream. Now exploited on network television in shows like "Junkyard Wars" and "Robot Wars" for its funky, handmade directness, the roboteer's aesthetic is one of bricolage and improvisation, a kind of parasitical gloss on the technological infrastructure that defines life in late capitalist societies. There is a direct relationship of the mechanical improviser to his or her sources of supply - junkyards, discarded machines, surplus electronic components. As the rust belt's industrial plant falls apart or moves to Mexico, scavengers and reverse engineers thrive.

Yet it's not accurate to say that kinetic art is new. Kinetic art, the art of mechanical movement, is as old as the idea that a machine might be something more than a producer of wealth. Taking mechanization to its logical conclusion, the early 20th Century European avant-gardes developed the discipline of kinetic sculpture into a metaphorical language referencing alienation and ideas of social change. In Canada, an important school of electronic, kinetic and robotic artists has developed since the 1960's in the Toronto area. Under the tutelage of Ontario College of Art and Design instructors Doug Back and Norman White, an intriguing centre of artistic expertise has grown up to take advantage of Southern Ontario's concentration of industry and technology.

The frank and unadorned use of salvaged industrial materials, clever custom electronics and a preoccupation with the relationship between technique and subjectivity characterize the work of the milieu which provided Peter Flemming's formation in art. For both the independent experimenter, and for the robotic artist, the whole point of making machines yourself is that a process of direct construction and prototyping short-circuits the abstract rationality of mechanical engineering and the bureaucratic hierarchies of industrial fabrication. For artists in particular, this not just about saving money, its about negotiating a balance between instrumentality and phenomenological engagement. In the best examples of mechanized art, the adaptation of industrial techniques and processes to 'non-productive' ends serves to make an important point: just because an end is not conventionally 'rational', does not mean it is without purpose.

Peter Flemming's purpose, in my view, is to hold up the most characteristic property of the machine, repetitive motion, as a phenomenon to be contemplated. The quality of motion in his machines - machines that don't do anything in the conventional sense - is at the core of his work as an artist. The arms, levers and wheels of Flemming's machines describe movement in space, over time: duration and repetition set up a perceptual field where a slight variation in the turning of a wheel may have profound aesthetic ramifications. Abstract references to work, labour, and the absent human body abound in Flemming's work: machines re-imagined as vehicles for thinking about our place in the world

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