Fontanive with MOVEMENT #1,
installation – partial view,
Riflemaker, 2008
Brooklyn-based Juan Fontanive's third exhibition at Riflemaker presents a series of kinetic sculptures which move in sequence using metal linkages, rubber belts, pulleys and drives. The mechanisms are choreographed as individual elements working together like components in a song – each machine having its own sound crucial to the whole group. As with all of Fontanive's work, we're invited to look and listen.

One group of works, the Cryptic Machines, use transparency and camouflage in order to blend into their environment and conceal their shape. Systems of metal wire and trains of rubber are linked to motors which drive sections of dyed metal to shift in a stop/start image-pattern.

A second set, the Point Light Machines, imitate the cognitive neuro-science of biological movement. These pieces employ subtle gestures, some inspired by canny foxes, others by shrewd reptiles. Discs and flags delineate key movements which seem to mimic the human form, though the works themselves remain allusions, never quite resolved, as if the machines have gotten the better of us, until the next rondo.

Crypsis, an ecological term used to describe the ability of an organism to avoid detection by other organisms, is most effective when the subject is still. These machines avoid predators, and our prying eyes, by either sneaking up gradually, or proudly displaying their courtly behaviour. They rotate and pulse sporadically, only to lay dormant until the next move in the continuing cycle of sights and sounds.
FOUNTAIN, acrylic on styrene
steel wire, aluminium, electronics
150 x 270 x 10 cm (variable), 2011
ROSES, steel wire, aluminium, styrene
teflon, Arduino chip, electronics
152 x 89 x 60 cm, 2009
A gallery filled with small paper discs – each about the diameter of a teacup, coloured 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 - see fig. page 2/3). 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 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 - see fig. page 20/21) is like a motorised flipbook, creating the illusion of a bird in flight by the mechanised, 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 - see opposite) rows of aluminium triangles in bright, solid colours – red, vibrant blue, yellow, white, orange, black – slowly rotate thanks to a system of steel wire and rubber cords. Their monochromatic patterns suggest the colour-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 - see opposite) 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 tyre 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 - see overleaf) 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 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 tech, of which Juan Fontanive seems 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.
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 turning 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 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 aluminium, the uneven golds and browns of worked brass: together they generate a distinctive, unadorned palette shared across Fontanive’s artworks.

In The Lakes (2006– see fig. page 24/25), 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
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.

Gilda Williams is a lecturer on the Curating MFA at Goldsmiths College, and a London correspondent for Artforum. She was a Commissioning Editor for contemporary art publishing at Phaidon Press, London, for over a decade.

Further reading:
ASKEW (after William Burroughs), clock parts, ink transfer on watercolour paper, brass, steel and electronics
15 x 15 x 10 cm, 2005

MR FRIENDLY (after William Burroughs), clock parts, lens, bicycle parts, ink transfer on watercolour paper, brass, steel and electronics
15 x 15 x 10 cm, 2005

Opposite: COLIBRI, colour pencil and graphite on paper, stainless steel, electronics
10 x 10 x 12.7 cm, 2011
QUIKNESSE, watercolour and image-transfer on Bristol card, steel, brass aluminium and electronics
10 x 10 x 9 cm, 2009
MOVEMENT #1, paper, piano-wire, nylon, brass, rubber cord and electronics
243 x 213 x 121 cm (variable), 2008
THE LAKES, oil on watercolour paper
clock parts, brass, steel, wire, motor
10 x 61 x 121 cm, 2006
Juan Fontanive (b. 1977 Cleveland, Ohio) grew up surrounded by clockwork interiors, microscopes and stereotropes due to his pathologist father's love of all things mechanical. It proved formative, and Fontanive's interest in the kinetic capacity of metal has resulted in an ongoing enquiry about the turning of alloy into a range of potentially animate compositions.

Having studied at the Royal College of Art, London, Fontanive's early works sought to combine the profound influence of his father's engineering with flipbook motion. 'I like to make films without light' he says.

In the work Quiknesse (see fig. page 20/21) rotating cogs propel sixty individual illustrations in a continuous round, stopped in their tracks only by a small metal pin – the determining feature of the artist's analog boxes. These wall-mounted mini-cinemas use an encoded series of images to animate a small humming-bird which hovers within the frame – stiffened paper brushing past the metal pin generates a sound which is uncannily close to the flapping of the birds' wings.

So the format of Cinema, specifically Suture Theory, is fundamental to much of Fontanive's output, the mechanics of film being key to our understanding of the work.

'Suture' examines how, when we watch a film, we become so utterly engrossed in what we see and hear, that we are unaware of the technicalities from which the sights and sounds are borne.

It concentrates on what accounts for the invisibility or inaudibility of the medium of films' techniques. Fontanive's bird machines trick the eye into believing a bird is flapping its wings in flight – the artist sutures us into his realm of pre-digital light-free film.

'There is no physical motion in the moving image, it is made of still frames shown in succession. So motion as a medium in animation does not actually exist. This is what interests me: the illusion. Often, my subject matter has to do with exposing this deception, while at the same time retaining the illusion intact.' Juan Fontanive.

The practice of artists creating sculpture from industrial material is not new. From 1912, Picasso extended the planar language of Cubism into three dimensions, by constructing sculptures from separate elements, instead of the time-honored system of modelling or carving.

In Russia, Vladimir Tatlin, from 1914 onwards, made structures from industrial components including metal and glass. When in 1921, Tatlin and others put on the seminal Spring Exhibition of Obmokhu (see above) – the Constructivists had arrived.
sculptures displayed a strong commitment to the materials and forms of contemporary technology. If Constructivism was seen to have connotations of engineering and technological progress, it was characterised by economy of materials; precision; clarity of organization; and the absence of decorative or superfluous elements. Whilst Fontanive’s work is certainly considered in its aesthetic, the rigidity of its system and preconceived workings lend itself ostensibly, to the early Constructivists. Movement #1 with its ceiling-mounted protrusions, remind us of these early Russian pioneers, and their ever-increasing love of: the machine.

One of the most important features of Constructivism is that it can be reduced down into component sections. It is to be viewed as a whole, which can be analysed, broken down/taken apart and put back together again. Fontanive’s machines travel with him from New York, packaged in kit form. He carefully reconstructs segments of metal, pre-programmed motors and exquisitely archaic cam systems – once assembled he sets the whole piece in motion with the viewers’ eyes and ears as partners.

In Movement #1 (2008) Fontanive mounted forty hand-made pulleys on Riflemaker’s Georgian ceiling. A snake of black rubber wound its way in and out of linkages, generating tension one from the other, which created the movement of the hanging metal propellers beneath. The result a gyratory barn dance – intermittent clicks from t-shaped piano-wire, fashioned in the studio, animated in the gallery.

Consider also Jean Tinguely’s Homage to New York, 1960 (see opposite), the kinetic master’s self-destroying servo-mechanism, which crashed and banged in willful autonomy. The victim of its own demise, this ramshackle sculpture was not to leave New York. It was mobilised with a finite life limited to less than half an hour, after which the public was invited to take home the remnants of the burnt out edifice.

Rather than being direct representations of a machine itself, Fontanive’s work lies deeper within nature than in the manmade machine – animals and humans are the inspiration behind his new works, which examine the primal state within ourselves in order to perceive its and our own complexities. Fontanive’s practice is a display of survival of the fittest. Through themes of Crypsis, sequence and repetition the artist invites us to observe his machines and the soundtrack they create.

Further reading:
Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars. Yale University Press, 1994
opposite:

TRYING TO CREATE THE NOSTALGIC FEELINGS I WILL HAVE IN THE FUTURE ABOUT THE PRESENT MOMENT, solvent transfer on watercolour paper, vinyl records, motor and electronics

15 x 10 cm, 2005
REHEARSAL (detail) paper, piano-wire, steel, brass, electronics
70 x 30 x 25 cm, 2008
REHEARSAL, paper, piano-wire, steel, brass, electronics
70 x 30 x 25 cm, 2008
VIOLETEAR, acrylic on paper, stainless steel electronics
10 x 10 x 12.7 cm
2011

JACK THE RIPPER, clock parts, bicycle parts, ink transfer on watercolour paper brass, steel and electronics, 2005
NEW LINES, paper, aluminium, polycarbonate, rubber cord, steel wire, electronics
181 x 121 x 7 cm (variable), 2011

Opposite: STRANGER THAN PARADISE
dyed plywood, ball bearings
410 x 60 x 60 cm (variable), 2010
See-Sounds, curated by Robin Mann
Produced by Virginia Damtsa and Tot Taylor
Book edited by Robin Mann
Photographs of Juan Fontanive by Julian Balme
Design by Julian Balme at Vegas Design
Special thanks to Dawn Fahy

OTHER RIFLEMAKER PUBLICATIONS
ANALOG edited by Tot Taylor, 2011
JAIME GILI The Lakes texts by Alan Powers, Hannia Gomez, Iain Carson, edited by Robin Mann, 2011
JOSEPHINE KING Life So Far text by Adrian Dannatt, Josephine King, 2010
LEAH GORDON The Invisibles text by Simryn Gill, 2010
STUART PEARSON WRIGHT I Remember You text by Adam Foulds, Deborah Warner, David Thewlis and Keira Knightley, 2010
ALICE ANDERSON’S Time Reversal text by Marina Warner, Maud Jacquin and Louise Gray, 2010
ARTISTS ANONYMOUS Lucifer over London text by JJ Charlesworth, 2009
ANYA NIELI Porcelain, 2009
JOSÉ-MARÍA CANO La Tauromaquia text by A. L. Kennedy, 2009
LIBANE LUN Stardust, 2008
CHOSIL KI Living With Andis co-published with Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2007
JAMIE SHOVLIN Lustfaust text by Jamie Shovlin, 2006
GAVIN TURK Me As Him text by Tot Taylor, 2007
RIFLEMAKER BECOMES INDICA by Tot Taylor, with contributions from Barry Miles & John Dunbar, 2006
WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS The Unseen Art of William S. Burroughs with text by Stephen Lowe and James Graeber, 2006
JAMIE SHOVLIN Fantoma Modern Masters text by Martin Holman, 2005
CHRISTOPHER BUCKLOW If This Be Not I by Christopher Bucklow, 2004
MARÍA MARÍCZ Playroom reproduction of the artist’s sketchbook, 2004
JAMIE SHOVLIN Naomi V. Jalish 2004

www.riflemaker.org

Published in an edition of 1000 copies