



JUAN FONTANIVE

A *Riflemaker* EXHIBITION



Fontanive with MOVEMENT #1,
installation - partial view,
Riflemaker, 2008



JUAN FONTANIVE: *An introduction*
by Robin Mann

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.

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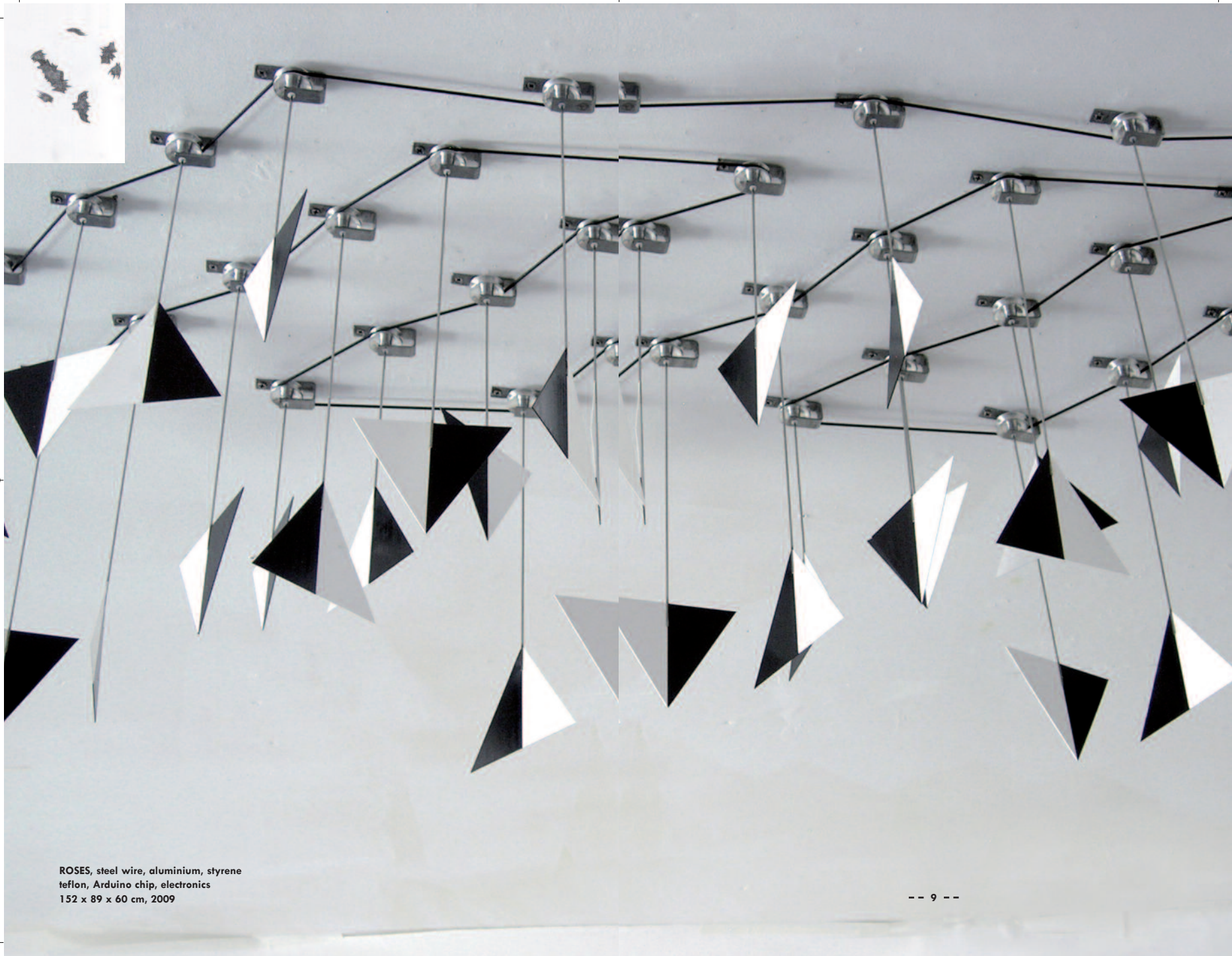


THE SHAPES ARISE
latex paint on rubber cord, ink on
aluminium, electronics
243 x 213 x 8 cm, 2009



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



NEW LINES, paper, aluminium
polycarbonate, rubber cord
steel wire, electronics
181 x 121 x 7 cm (variable), 2011

JUAN FONTANIVE: *Ghosts in the Machine*

by Gilda Williams

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.

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ACCIDENT 1, RIVER 2, bicycle parts
paper, electronics
70 x 60 cm (variable), 2007



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

Opposite: **LABYRINTH**, paper, aluminium
rubber cord, steel, wire, electronics
100 x 40 cm (variable), 2008

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.

The artist's flapping hummingbirds and rushing fish are sculptural animations, or perhaps automata: machine-powered facsimiles of life. Automata were, famously, among the principal triggers of uncanny experience for Freud. The uncanny erupts in our encounter with an undecided being who occupies a state between



life and death, whether a life-like machine or a ghost. Ghosts and picture-making machines share a long history; the first magic lanterns – the first crude cinematographic technology emerging in the 1790s – featured projections of spectres and demons, phantasmagoric lightshows popular at the very same time Gothic fiction was booming. In those tales, ghosts almost always haunted enclosed spaces – from ancient castles to haunted houses, then subsequently smaller and smaller enclosures: forbidden rooms, confession-boxes, and finally machines, which always seemed supernaturally alive anyway, with their mysteriously moving parts and superhuman abilities. Like Fontanive's spectral contraptions, ordinary ghosts demand the attention of all of the senses. Ghosts are heard and felt as much as they are seen: they may appear before us, or equally they enjoy setting fires, dragging chains, rapping on tables. In many ways, Fontanive's artworks seem strangely possessed, producing curiously moving animals that are neither living nor dead, or creating ghostly systems which seem to float mid-air and follow a pace and logic of their own.

Eventually in the Gothic tale of terror the haunted enclosure became the mind itself, the locked chamber of secrets in our heads. Not long thereafter, Freud began to describe mental processes in the machine-like terms of 'defence mechanisms' and 'death drives': as if locating the malfunctioning parts of the mind-as-motor. Where automata have no secrets ('their springs and wires... accessible to all', as Mladen Dolar has written) the hardwiring of the mind is a more confounding mystery. It may seem curious that man-of-science Sigmund Freud dedicated so much attention to reflections on the uncanny; but in early Modernist thinking, when faced with uncanny experience the mind seemed to reveal itself in its true light: as a faulty machine, tripping over unresolved mechanical failures produced from the unrepaired breakdowns of the past. And there is

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.

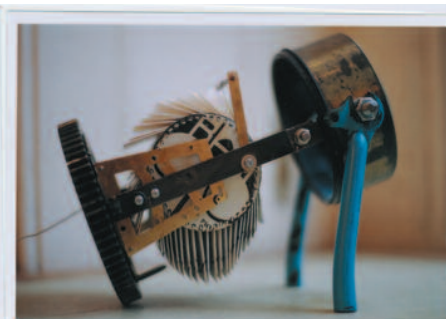
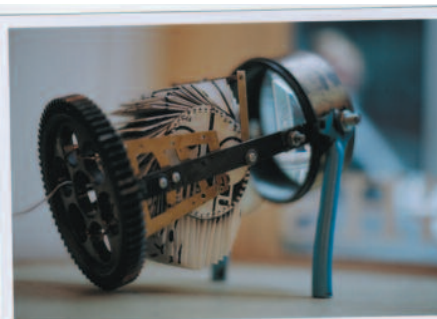
Further reading:
JONATHAN CRARY *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, 1990.
MLADEN DOLAR *La femme-machine*, New Formations 23, 1994.

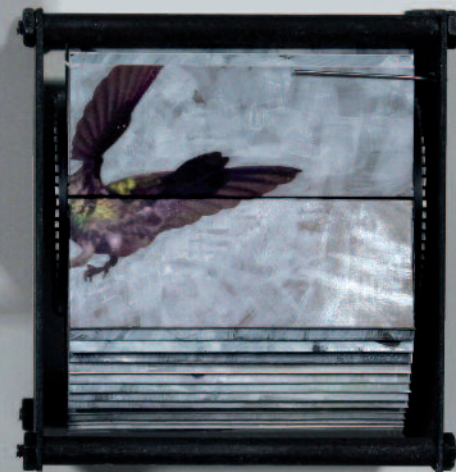


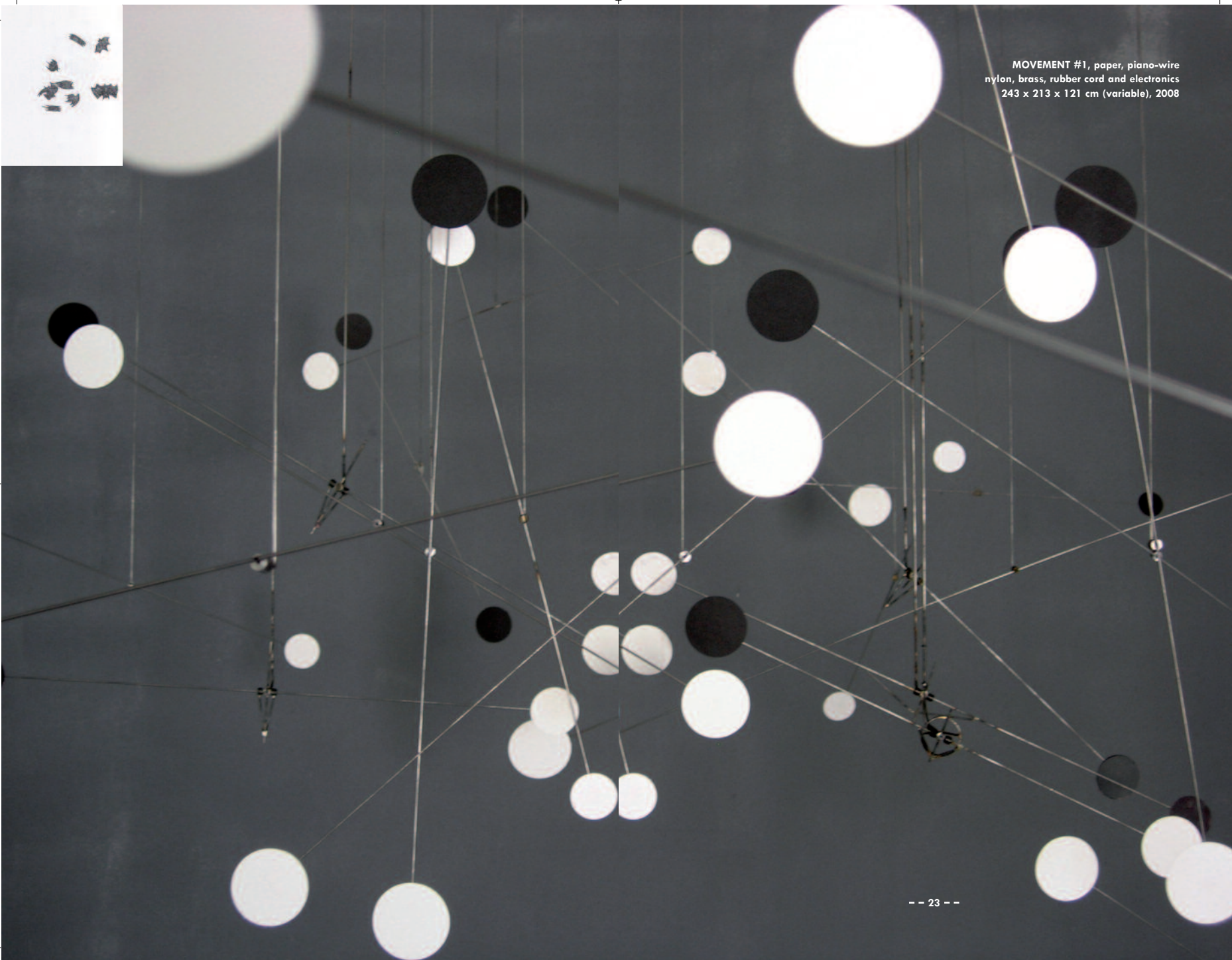
ASKEW (after William Burroughs), clock parts, ink transfer on watercolour paper
brass, steel and electronics
15 x 15 x 10 cm, 2005

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







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: *See-Sounds*
by Robin Mann

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.

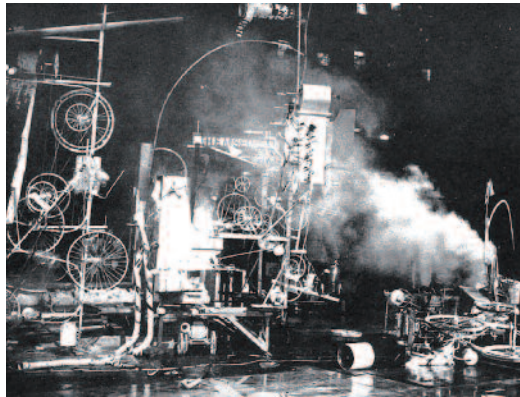


It concentrates on what accounts for the *invisibility* or *inaudibility* of the medium of films' techniques. Fontanive's bird machines trick the eye into believing a bird is flapping its wings in flight – the artist sutures us into his realm of pre-digital light-free film.

'*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. The



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 re-constructs 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.

Opposite: **JEAN TINGUELY**
Homage to New York (1960)

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.

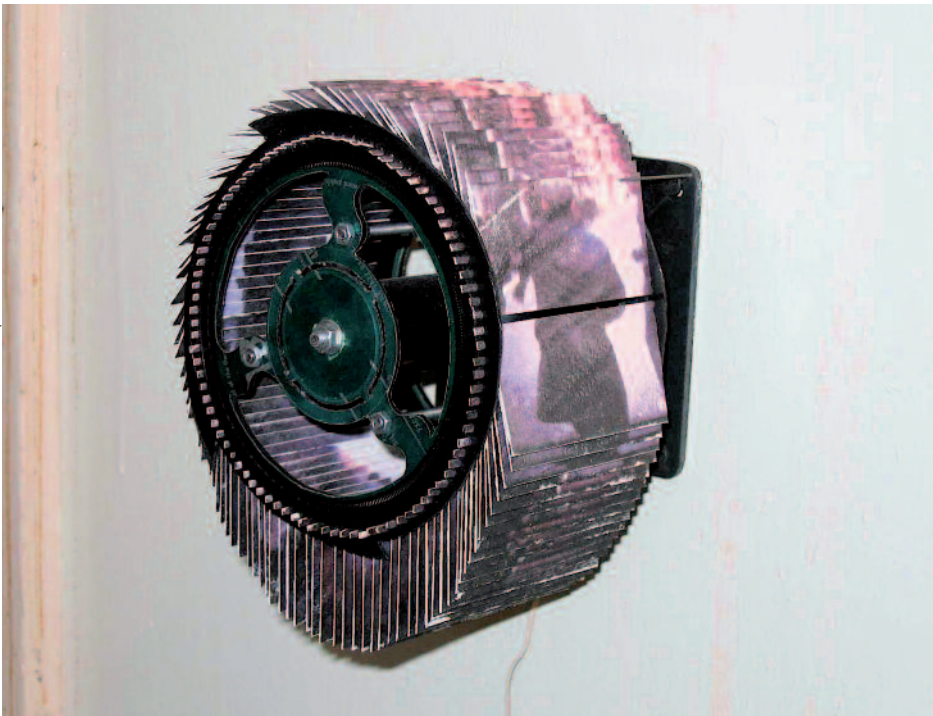
Consider also Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, 1960 (see opposite), the kinetic master's self-destroying servo-mechanism, which crashed and banged in willful autonomy. The victim of its own demise, this ramshackle sculpture was not to leave New York. It was mobilised with a finite life limited to 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 Cypsis, 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

Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology. Ed. Gregory Battcock, University of California Press, 1995



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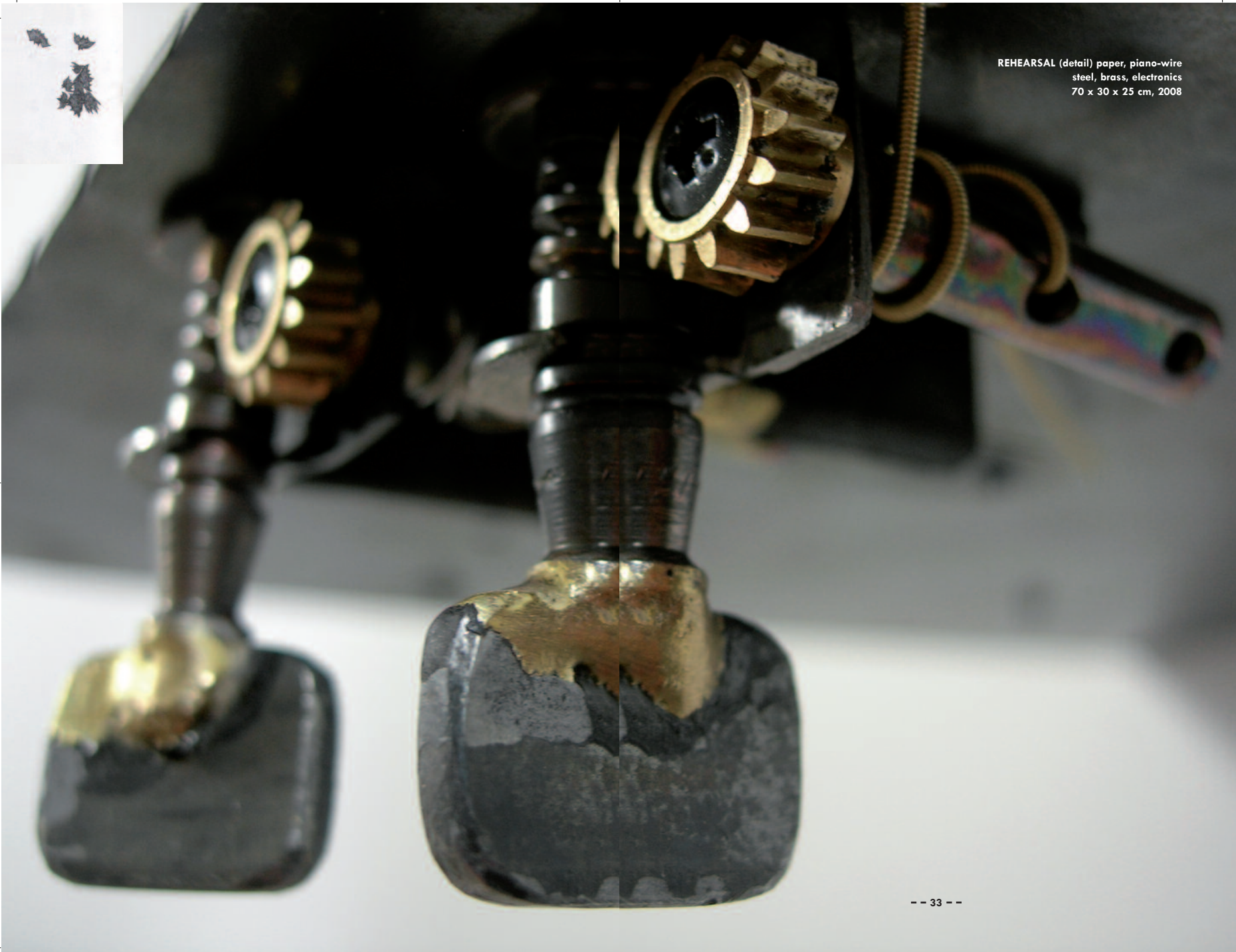


STUDIO VIEW, acrylic on styrene, steel wire, aluminium, electronics
150 x 270 x 10 cm (variable), 2011

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



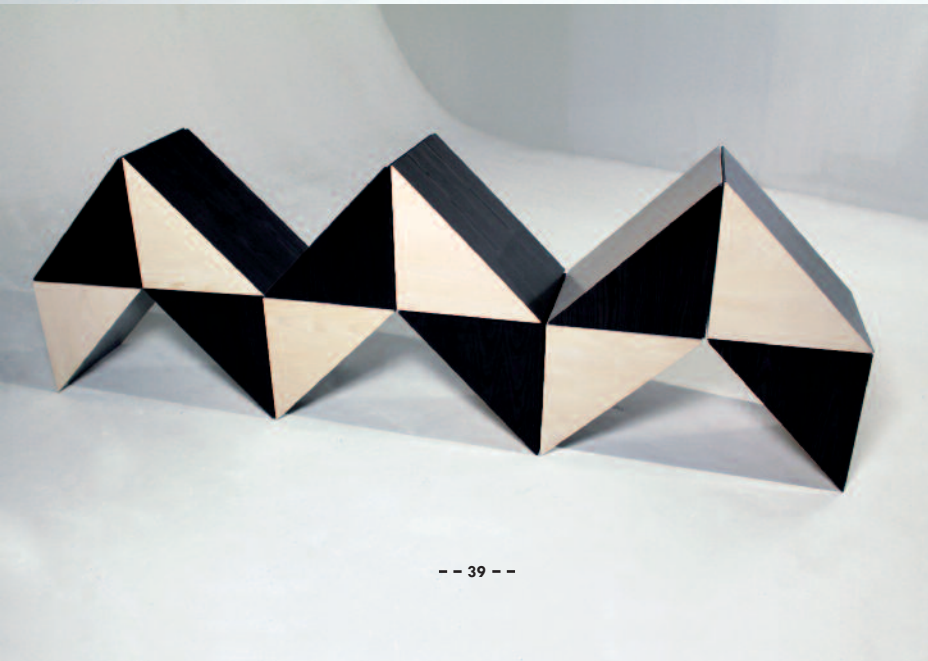
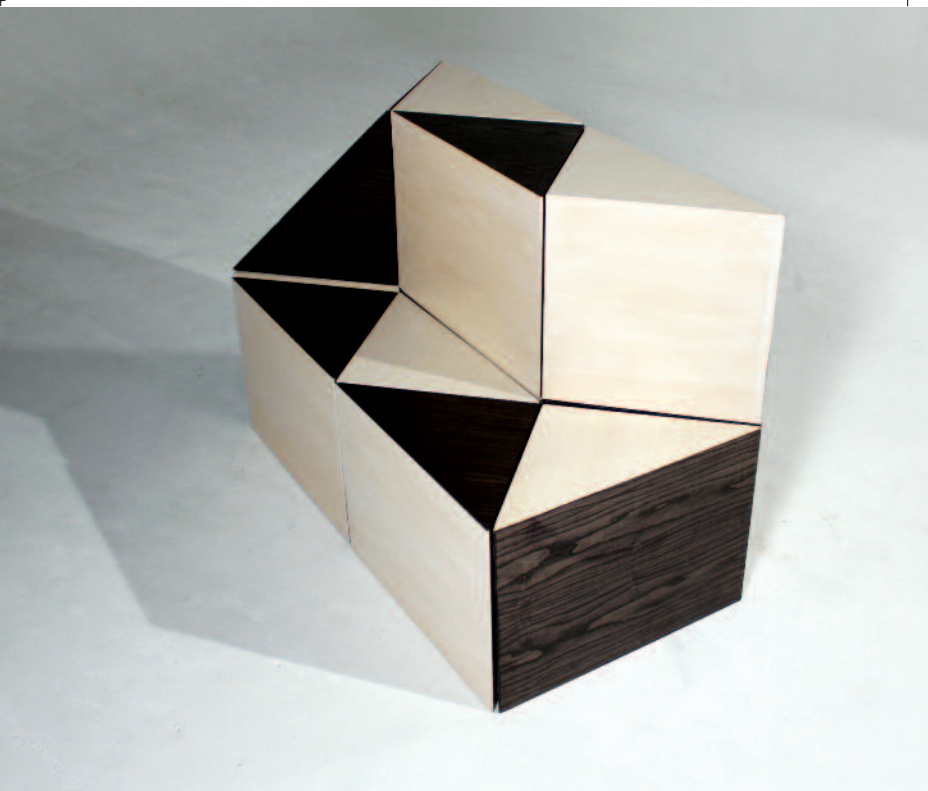
JACK THE RIPPER, clock parts, bicycle
parts, ink transfer on watercolour paper
brass, steel and electronics, 2005





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





expanding
linkage

See-Sounds, curated by Robin Mann
Produced by Virginia Damsa 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

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