

Articles

THE PLEASURES AND PAINS OF AGITATED MATTER: A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE WORK OF SUE REES

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In Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* as staged by the Theatre de Complicité, the young hero's father is a pre-war Jewish shopkeeper in provincial Poland. He impresses his son with his restless curiosity, his wonder at the world and his taste for metaphysical pronouncements. 'Too much matter, not enough form', he says, or words to that effect, when the world of objects and creatures gets out of control and demonstrates yet again its prodigious transformative energies. 'Matter', he asserts, 'is in a state of constant effervescence', and this is noisily demonstrated over and over again on stage, as a roll of cloth changes in an instant from a table cloth to a hospital bedsheet, a dining table becomes a shop counter, a book becomes a pillow and umbrellas become birds. One half of a broken dinner plate, held up like the moon in the sky, is also a young woman's soul yearning for its missing other half. The stage props are all visual puns.

Walking among Sue Rees's kinetic installations can be a bit like being in that universe, where everything is also potentially something else. How many things is a wooden rod or a hat? The viewer wanders onto a stage where objects, released from their banal functions, seem to be undergoing funny or sinister transformations, and existing in oddly animated states. But the viewer has no programme and has forgotten or has never been told what the play is supposed to be about.



Theater of Operation, 1987

Electric transformer, bronze, wires, gear motors, brass tables.

The first time I saw her work was in 1987 in a beautiful old carriage barn at Bennington College in Vermont. On a brass table various little metal objects suspended from strings, seemed to be dancing, accompanied by rather alarming electrical discharges and a somewhat comic clattering, like demented, or tortured, puppets. As so often with her work, one's first reaction is to laugh at the oddity of the animation or the wit of the visual metaphor. But one becomes aware of something more chilling; something cruel, sinister or painful maybe going on. It did not surprise me to discover, years later, that this electrical contraption is called *Theater of Operation* and that the dancing bobs were cast from melted down bullets. The title suggests that the piece stages a drama, and nudges your mind towards various possible medical-surgical or military contexts. Think of the electrical shock as ECT, or perhaps as the attempted resuscitation of a victim of cardiac arrest, or as the shocks produced during torture by electrodes attached to genitals. The motion is not a dance but a jerky convulsion, a spasm. Or rather, the moving human body, an electrically activated mechanical device is, even when it dances, rather like this combination of motorized rhythms and sparky discharges, funny, ludicrous and agonized all at the same time. The word 'galvinism' comes to mind, a word which had also fascinated Mary Shelly as she imagined her Doctor Frankenstein assembling his creature from found objects (mostly found, of course, on gibbets, in graves or on dissecting tables) and attempting to animate it with electrical shocks. Galvinism, wrote Coleridge, 'is the union of electricity and magnetism, and, by being continuous, it exhibits an image of life; - I say, an image only; it is life in death.' The most common response to Frankenstein's creature, as it comes to life in film versions of the story, is the same as that to the human body itself at times of violation or medical emergency, an embarrassed mixture of laughter and horror - the jerky choreography of the deaths of Bonny and Clyde is typically fascinating. Perhaps we could speculate that the virtual scenarios which animate at least some of Sue Rees's strange and suggestive objects and installations are like those of horror movies, in which the human body, in all its vulnerability and repulsiveness, is transformed into fantastic monsters or creatures.

Many of Sue Rees's pieces from that period, whether kinetic or not, had this same suggestiveness of an electro-mechanical world in which the human body takes its place among other things made of bits and pieces, wires and pulleys, metal oddments and recycled gadgetry or even body parts. She once incorporated a metal artificial hip joint. In that same 1987 show there were other pieces, which I have not seen since. I remember them as narrow wooden structures, some seven feet tall, leaning against the walls, as if turned away, hiding perhaps. They were made of old piano components, wires, waxed wooden strips, innards hanging out as if injured or vulnerable. The viewer's response

often starts with fascination at the sheer oddity of the assemblage. You ask what it is made of, where do the bits come from, how does it work? There is fun to be had recognizing the recycled junk-bits of old pianos, mirrors, industrial wheels and spindles. The objects always seem to be ambiguous. Are they toys or victims, are they curiosities or metaphors for unidentified horrors? Once the object has triggered the motions of the viewer's mind there is no stopping as it drifts among various virtual scenarios and plays with possible lines of suggestiveness.

The site of the work, the space created for the viewer to walk through, makes an important contribution to the imaginative response. The works mentioned above were to be seen two or three years later in an outdoor setting, lurking amongst the trees in a wood in Woodstock, Vermont, perhaps a more appropriate or imaginatively engaging setting. They could there be seen not as art works in a gallery space, mounted for the viewer's gaze, but as creatures hiding out in the woods, glimpsed by the viewer more dramatically, suggestively related to the space.

Though I am here stressing one particular strand of obsession in Rees's works (versions of the body), other themes could be detected, particularly that of surveillance. She made pieces that make the viewer feel spied upon or endangered. There were pieces dating from the early 1990s which were located high up on walls, jutting out like gargoyles and with strings hanging down which enabled the viewer to open and shut what seemed to be mouths. These wooden contraptions, the 'dog' pieces, were, at one and the same time, vicious like guard dogs, ugly and ungainly like gargoyles and benign like toys or family pets. Children liked to play with them and adult viewers could mentally play with themes (guard dogs, prison camps, bodily dismemberment) which would be too frightening or unthinkable if confronted head-on (and isn't that exactly what those gargoyle monsters hidden high up on the roofs of cathedrals also do?) Of course, it may be my own cast of mind and nothing for which the artist was responsible which makes the negative connotations of such pieces come to the fore. The objects are animated as much by the viewer's response as by the pulling of strings or electrical motors.

Among other static pieces from the early 1990s I also recall the 'leeches' series at the Hood Gallery in Dartmouth, New Hampshire in 1990. They were tall (some seven feet high) constructions of wood, pigmented wax and rods. Even though they were static they were readily seen as animate, as one more version of matter's fascinating but frightening repertoire of forms, in fact as alien life forms, standing guard, vaguely hostile sentries which, having huge feet but tiny heads, seemed particularly dangerous.

Some of Sue Rees's kinetic pieces are not merely moving, they are animated life forms - they seem to have a life of their own. Their movements are suggestive of bodily movements. They seem to swell like stomachs or bladders or to pulsate and breath like lungs or to swivel and reach out like joints and limbs. Often the earlier pieces seemed charmingly dated as life forms, inspired more by the machinery of the industrial revolution than by more recent forms of animation. They belonged in the Cartesian universe of matter in motion, the whole of creation seen as one big mechanical gadget, or the anatomical drawings of Versalius in which half-flayed and half-dissected cadavers lean on spades or pose like dancers. Life is a matter of pushing and pulling, of strings, wires, rods, hydraulic systems, tubes, pulleys, levers, shuttles, belts and gears, occasionally with an additional nautical flavour with the use of hawsers and toggles and other boating tackle. It is a matter of l'homme machine, a favorite metaphor of the newly industrializing world of 150 years ago. These sculptures recycle images of the machine age and were often built for site-specific installation in abandoned nineteenth-century industrial, agricultural or religious spaces - mills, factories, warehouses, docks and wharves, chapels and barns - which are abundant in New England, spaces which are themselves now being recycled, often as art galleries. The gigantic Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Mass., where a version of the jigsaw series was assembled in 1999, was, before its reincarnation as an art space, a manufactory of electrical switch gear and other heavy duty industrial items.

In 1992 Sue Rees built a kinetic piece for a fine old stone mill building in Bennington, Vermont, which the local council had renovated and were trying to find a use for. The building is very similar to the wonderful Victorian mill buildings in Saltair, near Bradford, which had also fallen into dereliction but are now recycled as public spaces, including a large David Hockney museum. In Rees's installations, it is as if both the space and old mechanical devices have been liberated from their original prosaic functions. They now reappear animated in playful forms, geared to triggering mental images rather than production processes. In the Bennington Mill piece, a wheel slowly turned, winding in a cable which yanked a heavy weight along a yellow chalk road. The construction seems to be, like the tin man in *The Wizard of Oz*, both an animated contraption and a dream image. But this use of mechanical, industrial spaces and devices does not prettify either the spaces or the machines. This is not heritage art it keeps alive, without nostalgia, the memory of an industrial civilization which gave rise to the chilling idea of the human being as a machine. Here is another quotation from the report by James Kay Shuttleworth on the moral and physical conditions of the working people in the cotton mills in Manchester in 1832:

Whilst the engine runs the people must work - men, women, and children are yoked together with iron and steam. The animal machine - breakable in the best case, subject to a thousand sources of suffering - is chained fast to the iron machine, which knows no suffering and no weariness.

Coleridge²

The most startling of Rees's mechanical images may be *Drop Dead* (1995) which seems to stage an execution by hanging. Even *Fliers and Catchers - 2* (1993), ostensibly inspired by trapeze artists, suggests corpses swinging from the gallows.

In other works we see additional, more biological, materials, obtained from medical-surgical supplies stores, inspired by circus acts (the trapeze), prostheses or by butchers shops - catheters and other tubing, latex bladders and sheets, waxy surfaces, fabrics and liquids. Twentieth century animation is less mechanistic, more fluid and plastic and, eventually, cybernetic. In recent years Rees has employed computers in her kinetic work. If nineteenth century men and women were imagined as machines or electro-mechanical devices, their twentieth



Catchers and Fliers Part 2 at 42°55.8'N, 73°14.5'N., 1993
Wax, wood, cable, lexan tubing, chalk hardware

century descendants are more likely to figure as replicants, (as in *Blade Runner*) or androids (as in *Alien*). It is not surprising, Rees being a devotee of popular culture, to find echoes of late twentieth century iconic fantasy body images in her work. The androids in *Alien* and its sequels, when decapitated or dismembered, ooze milky liquids from surgical tubing and seem to be made not of meat, as we are, but of flaps of rubbery, slimy latex and plastic skin. This is an imagery of the body's insides which inspires hilarity and dread in equal proportions.

Liver and Lights is one work in which the body's insides are on view. It is not kinetic but an assemblage of ligaments (tensed wires, rigid rods) and weighted bladders held in tension, leaning away from the wall to which they are anchored. The piece suggests the beauty of a dancer's tensed and gravity-defying pose (it is worth remembering that much of Sue's work has been stage settings for dance performance), but also makes me think of a post-operative patient in hospital, limbs slung in harness above the bed. It is as if one of the purposes of art is to present to us, in acceptably comic form, images of what we contain but find unthinkable, the hollows and sacks, fluids and substances of our own insides.

Increasingly, as her parallel career as a designer for drama and dance theatre has progressed (in 1991 she won a prestigious Bessie award for Visual Design for a dance piece in New York City), Rees has broken with the notion of the gallery exhibition, in favour either of works which respond to the site specific character of a particular space, or which them viewers create a space or a stage through which the viewer moves. The viewer shares a space with the works and moves amongst them. In the traditional gallery exhibit, the viewer and the work exist in separate spaces, as is often signified by the boundaries of rope and the security measures which warn the viewer not to transgress into the auratic space of the highly prized (or perhaps just commercially valuable) art. Rees has worked increasingly in a different tradition, in which the viewer does not just physically mingle with the pieces but imaginatively joins with them in their world, or at least attempts to imagine what on earth this world might be. It is in other words more a matter of dream or theatre, not staring from a reverential distance but coexisting in a virtual space. Being encouraged to touch and to move, to work or play with, the pieces, is part of this experience, as is the fact that the works are often not mounted on a wall but suspended from ceilings or placed in the middle of the floor and even built sometimes so that the viewer walks through them.

The theatrical and interactive possibilities of installation will be relevant in the present show, but it is worth mentioning a different kind of shared space which Rees has created in at least two, utterly different, installations. In 1991 she spent a summer at the Triangle Workshop in Pine Plains, NY and there created an installation called *Round Flatbacks Suspended*. Then in 1992 and 1993 she worked on a collaborative AIDS memorial project at Bennington College and also produced her own installations, shown in an old warehouse space in North Bennington. In this series of works the viewer is drawn not into a theatrical space but into the solemnity of a funerary or memorial chapel. I have no idea whether Sue Rees herself sees these works as connected in this way by a common theme of the mourning of the dead (and particularly of those who have died of AIDS), but for me they are linked both by the palpable atmosphere of sadness and mourning, so much in contrast to the often playful mood of her other work, and by the allusions to the objects and signifiers of remembrance.

The Pine Plains work was assembled in a quite extraordinary space, an old feed hopper, a narrow confined space, with very dark high ceilings, and sloping, funneled floors like an inverted pyramid. To enter it was like discovering an ancient but forgotten burial chamber, a sarcophagus. The space was not for dance or drama but for meditation in the company of the dead. Rees had installed in this space what I took to be funerary objects, which hung down from the high ceiling, as if to function to some ritual purpose. There was a boat shaped, corpse-sized object, which might have been a burial ship or a mummy case, shroud-coloured outside, but richly decorated in ceremonial golds, reds and oranges inside. This was accompanied by a series of shell-like containers or, perhaps little coracles or boatlike caskets, to carry necessary precious or ceremonial items, or perhaps just valued objects belonging to the dead person.



A Game Waiting to Happen: Beginning of a Day, 1993
Wood, roses, delphiniums, snap dragons, bowls.

Little boat-like forms, this time containing flowers, reappeared in the 1993 *A Game Waiting to Happen*, placed alongside the installation called *Pawn to King Three*. The explicit allusion in both works is the game of chess, and the sense of the dead being the victims or losers in some game of numbers. The latter work consisted of one hundred square units mounted on the floor as a large checkerboard. The units carry roman numerals or other identifying marks and consist of a glass-covered photographs of flowers and fabrics or other items. The inevitable allusion is to tombstones or to memorial plaques in the courtyard of a crematorium. The overall atmosphere is again meditative and sad.

In recent years Sue Rees's installations have become more playful. Child-friendly harnesses, hats, umbrellas and moving frames have replaced the old mechanical devices (though some of the objects are still animated by electrical motors). The present show promises to continue this tendency. This is perhaps a milder, less frightening world, though it is still possible



Pawn to King Three, 1992
Perspex, colour photographs
(with *Creaking Shutters 1*, 1996, in the background).

to detect a current of fear and sadness running through these colourful objects. How are we to think about these hats and pots and umbrellas? What might be going on in this space? If you were dreaming this, what would the dream be about? Does the show give us some pieces of a jigsaw (as the title suggests) and asks us to provide the missing pieces ourselves? Are we to fit the pieces together so that we get the picture? I cannot answer these questions. I can only record my own personal responses to preliminary drawings, to slides and videos of earlier versions of these installations, and wait to see if these impressions are confirmed in the Stanley Picker Gallery. Others may find it more exciting to follow a quite different path through these spaces. In any event, we may have to keep in mind that there may be no single coherent story containing all these pieces and their various connotations, but, as with a dream, just many different points of departure for our imagination. For me, the installations bent my mind to two main themes, those of eating and water.

The rhythms are no longer industrial or robotic but rather submarine and intestinal. Some of the pieces are biomorphic (or biorhythmic), suggesting the bodily organs of a great beast. There is a huge blue heart-like organ, surrounded by its associated tubes and vessels and a great red clot. There is a stomach-like object in semi-transparent yellow latex containing the undigested remnants of a meal. Lung-like objects breathe, and many nets and other containers with their colourful contents move in slow biorhythms, like the swimming and swaying of sea creatures. Eating is, of course, suggested by the dangling wooden utensils attached to sacks or nets, that may be either shopping bags or stomachs (or, indeed, trawling nets). The viewer's position, looking up and around at the suspended objects, being in amongst this whole beating, pulsating, breathing assembly, strengthens the impression of being, like Pinocchio (another animated object), in the belly of a whale. In the Mass MOCA, the objects were suspended from old timber rafters that, in the video version, could make one think either of the insides of an abdomen or the ribs of a wrecked hulk or of the wooden timbers of an old church roof seen from far below, a line of impressions to which I will return.

Another line of associations is triggered by the gently bobbing hats, moving up and down as on the swell of the sea, which at Kingston are viewed either from above on the balcony or from below, in the body of the gallery. If they are indeed riding on the ocean, then the viewer from below is under water. This impression is strongly and comically confirmed by the sight of a latex net covered with roses and swimming above our heads, like a bather in a floral swimsuit. Umbrellas, and also the dangling utensils now seen differently, might suggest the pulsating movements of jelly fish or other submarine creatures or the opening and closing of gills. The point is not so much to arrive at a

definitive view as to the nature of these life-forms and organs and movements, as to allow the mind to play with the themes which they evoke.

Other items suggest a more architectural line of thought, and there is a general hint that the spaces of the gallery might be viewed as like a church with its organ pipes and music, chapels and liturgical texts, though it might also be a kitchen with running water and pots and pans. Again, it may well be as a result of my own obsessions rather than the artist's intentions is responsible that the waterworks and the table provoke the idea that a meal is in progress. The opening and closing books are among the object which strangely have a life of their own and allude to missing people. Who inhabits this space, eats this meal, reads these books, takes part in the conversation at this table? Others may prefer an alternative route through these imaginative spaces, a different way of assembling the puzzle. Perhaps the appropriate metaphor is not so much eating as 'food for thought'.

In one way or another Sue Rees has returned again and again to the idea of the human body as a system of animated matter, a vulnerable container, subject to random interference, threatened by violent dismemberment and accidental spillage of its insides. The installations, like the viewers, are subject to both pleasurable and painful agitation. The body has its origins in a chance collision and its ending in some unforeseen mechanical hitch. In the meanwhile it makes its progress through the world, subject to all sorts of currents, rhythms and energies over which it has little control. Life is a combination of improvisation and accident, of fun and horror, of making images and making up stories. Art is making things which help us to make up ourselves.



Landscape of Jigsaws to be Formed: Section IV: Depositories of Deeds, 1999
Electrical motors, motion detectors, string, pulleys, netting, roses,
plastic tubing, wooden implements, glass bottles, umbrella, fabric.

NOTES:

¹This passage from Coleridge's *Table Talk* (1835) is quoted in Humphrey Jennings' *Pandemonium: The Coming of the Machine Age as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, Macmillan, London, 1995, p.181. This is a book to which Sue Rees herself likes to refer in her notes on her own work

²*Ibid.*, p.185.