Dylan Sheridan - *Vexations*

Could they not smell smoke? Those chained and huddled in Plato's Cave, tricked by the play of shadows, misled in their understanding of reality. Surely *somebody* could smell smoke.

There is always danger in trying to take an allegory too literally, but this risk also brings the possibility of reward. To reorient the senses, tilt things a little, or pivot on an alternate axis can offer new perspectives. This is precisely the experience of Dylan Sheridan's *Vexations*, an automated composition for the scaled-up model of Plato's Cave: the black-box theatre. This space of theatrical artifice is a fitting context for Sheridan's machinic score, rendered in code and performed by an assortment of motors, switches, sensors, levers and household appliances. The work appears an elaborate Rube Goldberg machine, drawing comparison with Heiner Goebbels remarkable composition for five pianos (and no humans), *Sifter's Dinge*. However, while the human body of a performer is missing from both works, *Vexations* focuses quite specifically on this missing body as it explores the quotidian actions of any given morning: alarm clocks, waking, breakfast and ablutions, and reorients us toward them.

As a roll of toilet paper unfurls, raised well above the floor, it creates a slender ribbon of white. We see the minute vibrations of the electric motor sending quivers down the hanging tissue, causing it to flicker strangely as it catches the light. We hear breakfast, as a plate suspended vertically is scratched by a fork, dangling from above, a motorised arm scraping the tines across the ceramic surface. Eating is suggested without food, or a mouth to eat it: an approximation of human activity, emptied of function. Similarly, the toilet paper is unfurled, and quivers, but remain *motion-less*. The logic of *Vexations* subverts the usual preoccupation of a Rube Goldberg machine, which is built around the overcomplicated and indirect performance of a simple task. Without a human protagonist, *Vexations* cannot properly perform the tasks it evokes, and instead evokes the missing figure through gesture and resonance. In doing so, the work winds its way toward a paradox of aesthetic experience, as Immanuel Kant has it, of purposiveness without purpose.

Much like Kris Verdonck's unnerving machinic sculptures, *Vexations* takes an uncanny turn as a pile of crockery is assaulted by an automated hammer. Smashing indeterminately, it generates a rhythm out of kilter with what would feel a 'sweet hit', and instead builds toward an affective synchronicity between the brittle, sharp noise of shattering plates and the blind, unsatisfying strikes of the hammer. Everything seems to land unevenly, off centre. This play with unstable rhythm continues, reaching toward the governance of time itself, drawing our focus to a series of clocks. At one point, we are drawn to a great pile of clocks, a huddle of timepieces, glowing with light, seemingly in response to the call of ticking as it is amplified. The ticks and tocks layer; the light flickers across and over this mass and it begins to look and sound biological, organic. As if time was dividing, multiplying, breathing, fermenting, or even decomposing.

Keeping time, and the experience of this time would seem a central occupation for any composer, but Sheridan here is exploring the organisation of time not just for the audience, but also the machine: conducted through circuits and processor cycles, measured out in milliseconds. And this shared-time organises and connects our sensory experience in *Vexations*, just as the *viewing* and *listening* to the work are intrinsically linked. The lighting design draws our eye across the stage, guiding us through its processes, but also creating

dissonances. What we hear does not always directly connect with what we see; it generates sensations that take overcomplicated and indirect paths.

The nature of sensation and perception takes new relief, as it becomes clear that this automated assemblage is also sensing: a cybernetic system with outputs *and* inputs. It builds to a dramatic culmination as a mechanical finger depresses the button on a toaster, and a slice of bread descends into the machine. Eventually, faint wisps of smoke begin to rise. We watch them as rise, and thicken, drifting toward a smelling machine. It doesn't take long for the smoke detector to pick it up. The shrill alarm goes off, puncturing the moment, and breaking the illusion. For all the pleasure of *Vexations* (and there are many) it stages some uncomfortable aspects of the relationship between humans and machines most notably our inter-dependencies. It is this final moment that recalls Plato's cave, and the shape it might take today. Perhaps it would look like an internet of things, built from the deluge of data we create every day, collected by machines that sense not just our every waking moment, but our sleeping ones as well.

Surely *someone* can smell smoke.

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