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Diane GOUGEON
The Art of RECALIBRATION

Curtis COLLINS

Over the past twenty years, Montreal artist Diane Gougeon has developed a history of recalibrating technology via works that offer subtle commentaries on the human condition. Her most recent effort on display at Joyce Yahouda Gallery in Montreal's Belgo Building this past summer was entitled *Glaçage*. The exhibition effectively tantalized viewers through the immediate seduction of noisy machinery in a cultural venue, and then required them to contemplate more profound questions of social relevance.

The two principle apparatuses of *Glaçage*, positioned on adjoining walls, included a refrigeration unit set behind a Plexiglas window with two lengths of randomly coiled tubing extending along a twenty foot span and a flip dot sign linked to a circuit board as well as a laptop computer that displayed selections of lyrics from "Que sera, sera." Such aesthetic minded manipulations of common technology seemed ideally fitted to Joyce Yahouda Gallery, which operates in a curious hybrid local between a commercial venture and a public service. Furthermore, this is an artist whose work has never commanded much market value, as Gougeon's rather limited production is primarily geared toward temporary site-oriented alterations of perception. Hence, it lacks the permanent object-based qualities that generate consumer desire.

The term *Glaçage*, or iced over in English, refers to an occurrence that is central to refrigeration, while prompting viewers to broach this artist's conceptual twists. Human efforts to preserve food via cooling systems date back to prehistoric times however, it was not until the 1930s that refrigerators became a standard household appliance in North America and Europe. The compression of Freon gas and its subsequent expansion over a network of capillary tubes that ice over, represents both an essential and banal form of technology within contemporary life. Unfortunately, the resulting release of chlorofluorocarbons from such machines into the stratosphere continues to damage the protective mantle of the oxygen allotrope ozone. In a simpler and more farcical way, society is exposing the earth to an increasingly dangerous amount of heat from the sun in order to guarantee cold beer at all times!

Ultimately, the art of Diane Gougeon attempts to reconfigure ordinary domestic and commercial equipment so that it can project glimpses into the troubling state of human affairs. At Joyce Yahouda Gallery the refrigerator's driving force or heart is isolated and exposed behind Plexiglas. Similarly, its circulatory system or arterial network is stretched along the wall for all to see. The addition of flower-like reflective decals below this tubing, illuminated by a spotlight from above, may allude to how nature creeps into the most unnatural settings. Such an understated mimicry initiates the deliberation of a skewed context. However, it is Gougeon's anthropomorphic treatment of a refrigerator that gives one greater cause to ponder our collective capability to mitigate the adverse fallout from technological progress, which now compromises the very future of human existence on earth.

The invention of flip dot signs dates to the 1970s and they were originally used in stock exchanges around the world to provide ever-changing quotes. Such boards are composed of numerous tiny octagonal metal discs on axles with solenoid switches that rotate them from black to yellow. During the 1980s and 1990s, this innovative signage technology became common in airport, train and bus terminals as well as along highways. Not unlike the environmental downside of refrigeration, flip dot signs are indicative of contemporary society's insatiable appetite for mass travel and trade. Such human endeavours and their requisite carbon dioxide emissions perpetuate the degradation of air quality and accelerate global warming. It is astounding to think of the real ecological price an individual in Canada willingly pays to consume mustard from France!

If the aforementioned refrigeration unit can be considered as the body of Gougeon's exhibition, then the various electronic components on the adjoining wall might be considered as this work's mind. As such, the laptop computer or brain sends messages through the circuit board or cerebellum, which then directs them to the flip dot sign enabling it to communicate. Investing this rather mundane assemblage of travel and trade technology with the capacity to convey complex ideas, rather than mere directions, holds it to a higher purpose. Selected lyrics from the song "Que sera, sera," published by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans in 1956, appearing on the board before viewers, represent the endgame of *Glaçage*.

Throughout the time taken to contemplate the clever shifts in perception evoked by Gougeon's art, one is constantly seduced by two very distinct sounds. The refrigerator's low hum played off against the constant clicking of flips dots produced an auditory atmosphere that suspended viewers in a corporeal space. The pseudo pounding heartbeat and simulated chattering speech of this recalibrated technology thus echoed its mechanical displacement. Eventually these subtle cues give way to a more profound meaning. A key line flipping across the signboard: "Que sera, sera – Whatever will be, will be" suggests a certain acceptance of human fate and foibles. Could it be that in spite of the artist's concern for the deteriorating state of the planet brought on by technological advancements she concedes that humanity is trapped by its very nature? Perhaps the only credible answer Diane Gougeon can offer viewers is: "The future's not ours, to see." ←

Diane Gougeon, *Glaçage*
Joyce Yahouda Gallery, Montreal
Summer 2008

Diane GOUGEON, *Glaçage*, 2008. Details. Mixed media installation. Photo: Daniel Roussel.

Curtis COLLINS is the Art Consultant for Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP Montreal and over the past six years he has guided this corporate finance law firm in building a unique collection of contemporary Canadian art. Collins holds a Ph.D. from the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University and his Curator and Director postings across Canada include the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of the South Okanagan and the Art Gallery Peterborough.