Espace Sculpture

The Technocentric Art of Robert Saucier

Athena Paradissis

Sculpture et anthropologie
Number 19, Spring 1992

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/10020ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)
Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN
0821-9222 (print)
1923-2551 (digital)

Cite this article
The Technocentric Art of Robert Saucier

Athena Paradissis

Actually I am that sort of girl, to look at. I'm good at games. I was a troop leader in the Spies. I do voluntary work three evenings a week for the Junior Anti-Sex League. Hours and hours I've spent pasting their rot all over London. I always carry one end of the banner in the processions. I always look cheerful and I never shirk anything. Always yell with the crowd, that's what I say. It's the only way to be safe.

GEORGE ORWELL, 1984


Leo Kamen Gallery, Toronto
November 30 — December 21, 1991

Orwell's 1984 envisions a world in which people are alienated from their minds, their desires, their individual selves. How one acts, how one thinks, is manipulated by the Thought Police who are, in turn, controlled by the Party. It is political fiction, divorced from reality and our society. At least, this is what we are all led to believe. We live in a country where individuals are encouraged to grow and become anything they want to be. But in today's world, if individuals can't master technology, it will dominate them. «Technology Equals Super Power Status», so goes the anthem which justifies to the American tax-payer the government spending billions of dollars on the most modern weapons. Yet, we haven't a Thought Police and we haven't an Orwellian Party. Why then, do we live in a society that is ostensibly dominated by technology? It affects the way we work and, yes, even think. Enter — Big Brother's updated replacement, The Technocrat.

Hailed at the turn of the century as a revolution which promised unprecedented progress, technology has evolved from its strict application in the factory to its growth in industry, warfare, medicine, and its invasion of the home. In today's world, technology is omnipresent; in the art of Robert Saucier, it is catalyst as well as theme.

Saucier's most recent exhibition, at the Leo Kamen Gallery,
Robert Enright, in an article entitled, The Lovely Treachery of Technology, states that «Technology is less an enemy — intrinsically corrupting — than a tool used by people and organizations already corrupted.» The observation that abuse of technology is the direct result of irresponsible technocrats is connected to Saucier's iconography. The theme is not new to his art. In an earlier piece, entitled Talons d'Achille, 1989, Saucier explores how the hurried rush in the engineering of new machinery has resulted in a backlash of failed catastrophes — Chernobyl, the Challenger disaster, Three-Mile Island... After technology has taken its toll there will be, as the Talking Heads sing, (Nothing but) Flowers.

Often, the destruction has been intentional, such as Hiroshima. Tik... tik... tik — time is also a reminder of the need to carefully think about where we, as a race, want to go. We talk of nuclear disarmament and tighter control on environmental polluters, but can we undo the damage done? Can we keep the good and obliterate the bad?

The uneasy balance created by the love/hate relationship shared by the individual and technology is extensively examined in Alvin Toffler's, Future Shock. «Change», Toffler writes, «is the process by which the future invades our lives, and it is important to look at it closely...». This, Toffler argues, should be done not from an historic perspective but from the «vantage point of the living, breathing individual who experience it.» In his book, The Third Wave, Toffler describes the process as giving «tech-

Saucier's approach.
The exact tik...tik of White Spirit is replaced by the random movement of Fool's Parade. "The random movement," explains Saucier, "neutralizes the hypnotic magnetism of White Spirit and Untitled. Programmed to a ten minute cycle, the viewer forgets the motion pattern and therefore cannot predict the next move."

Unlike White Spirit, the "guts" of the machine are conspicuously displayed in an orderly line at the bottom of the work. The message is clear: All this technology to accomplish a limited movement. Topping the work and this message is a boat which rests on a tripod. Its new, polished steel gleams invitingly, enticing the viewer forward. What a surprise to discover that it's cargo is charred wood! Useless waste, which hardly qualifies for the place of honour which, as the triumphant apex of the work, it is given. A play on priorities which compliments the play on words in the title.

The support on which the boat rests, consists of a tripod to whose underside is attached, with a wire, a steel ball. The ball moves, at times back and forth, at times in circular movements, at times softly hitting one of the metal legs of the tripod. Connected to the piece of wire, it resembles an anchor which threatens to sink the boat on top. The image of doom is reinforced by a discarded boat, constructed of wood, which lies against the bottom of one of the tripod's legs. A passage of time interlocks past and future: what this neglected, inoperative boat at the bottom is, the steel boat at the top will become.

Saucier's art reflects his view of technology. It is subjective. The tripod serves to remind us of this. Yet, as with all the other double twists of his symbols, Saucier's tripod also symbolizes the camera and the glossy pictures that appear in magazines. Photographed images of sleek looking cars, aerial shots of high-tech airplanes whose beauty negates their potential destructiveness, the space shuttle getting ready for take-off...

The tripod, the steel ball, the boat, appear again in Untitled. In this installation, the tripod supports an L-shaped steel bar. On the top end of the bar, there is a boat; on the bottom end there is a piece of wood chiseled into the shape of an arrow. At the centre of the work, the steel ball — connected to the tripod with a wire — circles around and around — this time without noise. Again, as with Fool's Parade, the guts of the mechanization are visible.
The arrow represents a historic passage of time. Created by prehistoric man as a tool to kill animals for food and clothing, the arrow developed into a weapon with which to fight the neighboring tribe. In turn, the arrow was used to kill another human being, evolving into the more sophisticated weapons of mass destruction with which we threaten ourselves... And that's the whole point, isn't it? We, those of us in charge of technology, have accomplished astronomical advances and yet we haven't progressed much beyond our predecessors. The prehistoric arrow on one side, the battleship of today on the other; the shiny steel boat with the burnt cargo on top, the discarded wreck at the bottom; the arrow was used to kill another human being, evolving into the more sophisticated weapon with which to fight the neighboring tribe. In a poem written in 1935, F.R. Scott describes the relationship between technology and the individual:

Our huge steel mills
Operating at 25% of capacity
Are the last word in organization.

... There is not one unnecessary worker
In these textile plants
That require a 75% tariff protection.
And when our closed shoe-factories re-open
They will produce more footwear than we can possibly buy.

Written during the height of the depression, Scott's poem expresses the helpless frustration encountered at the seeming domination of technology. Is it any different today? In the height of a recession which has witnessed the demise of such mega-institutions as Lavalin and the laying-off of 74,000 General Motors employees, governments and corporations continue to pour billions into technology. Who has the most and newest warfare? Who has the most efficient speed in production?... and the race is on!

Unlike the other two works in the show, Untitled makes no noise, thus contradicting the norm that a motor is heard but not seen. This is an intended silence that allows the viewer to absorb the mystery of the piece. The boat, tilted at a right angle, seems as if about to capsize — an illusion which the moving steel ball helps to create. Around and around, the steel ball's circular motion has a hypnotic effect which recalls the deadly whirlpool which sucks in and then swallows. Hypnosis — implying an unconscious state of being which renders the individual susceptible to the blind obedience of external commands. This hypnotic effect is used as a metaphor in Saucier's art to demonstrate how society appears to be mesmerized by the out-of-control technocrat, and thus fails to respond.

Saucier, by incorporating random movement with timed movement, does not allow the viewer to sleep through his work; his boats don't sink. In White Spirit, the boat continues, echoing the determination of the little cabooses that could.

Technology is not the enemy. Its abuse is. As complicated and intricate as the work of Robert Saucier may be, it remains simple. War is peace... Freedom is slavery... Ignorance is strength. Does it make any sense? Of course not. Power is war... Technology is God... Individuals can be replaced. Does this make any sense? One hopes not.


Les œuvres de Robert Saucier, en opposant divers symboles, stimulent et provoquent le spectateur. Sa plus récente exposition à la Galerie Leo Kamen de Toronto, donnait à voir trois installations réalisées en 1991 : White Spirit, Fool's Parade et Untitled. White Spirit se compose d'un cuirassé, articulé mécaniquement pour pivoter lentement sur lui-même. Il est surmonté d'une tour de forage d'où s'échappent trois flammes. À l'intérieur de la tour, une tête fœtale se déplace de bas en haut. Trois cônes métalliques sont installés en périphérie. Chacun d'eux illustre en gros plan le sommet d'une tour de forage, une structure qui ressemble à un phare du début du siècle. Symbole d'espoir, d'amour de la nature, la feuille représente aussi la destruction et la pollution. L'eau, pour sa part, symbolise le renouvellement de la vie, le purgatoire et la vie, en même temps qu'elle est associée à l'incendie, au déluge et à toute la technologie hydro-électrique qui affecte l'environnement.

S'agit-il d'un luxueux paquebot ou d'un monstre détruit dans l'histoire de l'humanité?... L'art de Saucier, toutefois, n'est pas une condamnation de la technologie. Il reconnaît qu'elle est, à bien des égards, profitable dans la vie quotidienne, mais il signale son utilisation excessive. Fool's Parade et Untitled étaient leur mécanismes internes, les mettant à nu. Dans Fool's Parade, les symboles sont clairs : toute cette sophistication de la technologie pour accomplir un mouvement si simple qu'il ressemble à un phare du début du siècle. Symbole de l'espoir, de la destruction et de la pollution. L'eau, pour sa part, symbolise le renouvellement de la vie, le purgatoire et la vie, en même temps qu'elle est associée à l'incendie, au déluge et à toute la technologie hydro-électrique qui affecte l'environnement.

Robert Saucier, Untitled. 1991. Detail. Metal, tripod, motors, electrical and mechanical devices, slate. 152 x 160 x 160 cm; the boat measures 119 cm.