

Jean-Pierre Gauthier : *Turbulures/Aspirations*

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Jean-Pierre GAUTHIER: *Turbulures/Aspirations*

Gil McELROY

The thing about architecture is what we don't see—or, more accurately, what we are really never *supposed* to see. Like the human or animal body, the complexities of an architectural structure—it's proverbial blood and guts—lay hidden away behind blandly and deceptively neutral walls, ceilings and floors. It's back there where the engineering equivalent of the body's nervous, alimentary, and circulatory systems twist and turn their way through every part of a building, feeding it, draining it, keeping it functioning and alive. Sometimes an architect intends for us to see it all—the Centre Pompidou in Paris is a prime example of such an architecture, one in which structural evisceration and flaying of the body that is a building is made front and centre so that we encounter, right up front,

all the stuff that is typically hidden away. But the architectural norm is to tuck those things away out of sight, or at the very least camouflage them as best as is possible so that they blend into their background. Out of sight, out of mind.

There's something of the reverse sensibility that echoes in Montreal-based artist Jean-Pierre Gauthier's recent installation at Cambridge Galleries, *Turbulures/Aspirations*. The gallery's exhibition space was entirely given over to a single work that aesthetically drew upon some of the stuff tucked away behind the gallery walls, beneath its floor, or looped across its ceiling. Suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the gallery was a gnarled and twisted amalgam of flexible silver-coated tubing of the kind typically used for providing cooling or warming ventilation into interior spaces. Multiple sections (three, actually) of individual pieces of tubing twisted and writhed about each other in the three dimensions

provided by a suspension system comprising a network of wires wrapped about the tubing and holding it a metre or so above the gallery floor, and which ran up to attach the whole thing to the grid of the gallery's lighting system high above. The work was further umbilically connected by a series of audio cables running from miniature microphones at the open mouths of the tubes up into the grid and eventually over to an audio system where sounds picked up by the aforesaid mics underwent some alteration before being fed into a speaker system located throughout the gallery. Being hollow and unsealed at opposite ends, the tubes have a degree of responsiveness to sound (like rather musically poor variations on brass instruments of, for example, the saxophone variety) that Gauthier chose to aurally exploit. After some acoustic manipulation courtesy of a computer system, heavily modified versions of the original sounds detected by the microphones at the tube mouths recursively found their

way fed back into the acoustic environment of the gallery space.

The modification of the aural environment seemingly took a back seat to Gauthier's manipulation of the visual environment. Cambridge Gallery curator Ivan Jurakic (now departed for the University of Waterloo Art Gallery) noted that the work was “redolent” of the sets for the film *Brazil*, directed by Monty Python alumnus Terry Gilliam, and that it symbolized the tentacles of bureaucracy reaching into every aspect of human life as was so well expressed in that film. A bit of a stretch, perhaps, for there was nothing here in the gallery space onto which such a metaphor could be easily draped. The gallery space itself was mute, neutral and basically as unobtrusive as a gallery space can be, and while bureaucracy indeed existed nearby within the building, it didn't overtly feed into our seeing of the piece.

But architecture most certainly did. To enter the exhibition space it was necessary to traverse the large



Jean-Pierre GAUTHIER,
Turbulures/Aspirations, 2008.
Detail. Photo: K. Jennifer BEDFORD.



Jean-Pierre GAUTHIER,
Turbulures/Aspirations,
2008. Flexible tubing, electric
cable, audio cable, micro-
phones, speakers, digital
processor. Installation view.
Photo: K. Jennifer BEDFORD.

lobby of the building that houses both the Queen's Square site of Cambridge Galleries and the local public library. As it turns out (and whether the gallery's booking of Gauthier's work during this time period was deliberate or serendipitous I don't know) the administrative, storage and art education areas of Cambridge Galleries were in the process of undergoing a major renovation. Just beyond the comparative calmness of the exhibition space itself there was turmoil and turbulence of the architectural variety as reconstruction was underway. Gauthier's installation, then, ended up mirroring this process—intentionally or not—during which the building's networks of pipes, tubes, shafts and wiring that are usually hidden away beneath a skin of gyproc panels or above the gridded network of suspended ceilings and which are absolutely essential to its operation were exposed, however, briefly, to the light of day before

disappearing once again beneath the newly configured surfaces of painted walls and false ceilings.

In the final analysis, what Gauthier has wrought with *Turbulures/Aspirations* is, at one critically important level, very much the equivalent of a building's heating or cooling system symbolized, in this instance, by that of Cambridge Galleries. His installation, like those systems, is designed to be responsive to its environment, detecting information in the form of sound at the sculptural level of the suspended silver tubing, rerouting it to a computer-controlled audio unit, and then feeding the (manipulated) information/sound back into the gallery environment through a speaker system. So too is a building's heating or cooling unit, responding to and manipulating information provided about a specific environment by a thermostat and either turning itself on or turning itself off. It's all about feedback cycles as information about

something is processed and then recursively fed back upon itself.

And in our experience of Gauthier's work, we do just that. Recursive feedback loops aren't merely to do with, say, that nearby thermostat in the gallery that responds to the gallery environment and, say, turns on the cooling system because our very presence in the space has warmed it beyond its thermostatic parameter. We too are engaging in similar feedback loops at our physiological and psychological levels when we respond to *Turbulures/Aspirations* as an aesthetic entity. We are physiologically reactive and responsive to its physical presence—walking about it, possibly crawling beneath it to get another perspective on it, careful not to bump its components or accidentally wander into or stand up within its tangled network of tubes, wires, and cables—and psychologically reactive and responsive to its possible aesthetic meanings.

Turbulures/Aspirations reaches out into its environment to harvest what information it might obtain of it and then self-reflexively processes and regurgitates what it has acquired. In so doing, it mirrors not only the localized mechanical activities part and parcel of the architectural structure that temporarily hosts its presence, but also (and in a simplified way) the very processes of how we go about experiencing its presence ourselves. To be sure, there is no "ghost in the machine" in Jean-Pierre Gauthier's work. There is, however, a finely wrought aesthetic approximation of one.

And it is truly wonder-full. ←

Jean-Pierre Gauthier:
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