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Random Certainty **(Originally published in *Jean-Pierre Gauthier, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2007*)** **2206 words**

It's possible to live in a very quiet world by choosing not to listen. However, if you are able to hear, then the world is rarely quiet, and never, not ever, silent. That prolixity of noise, the world's steady din, is at the heart of Jean-Pierre Gauthier's sculptural project. So too is our tendency to drown out that world. Gauthier's aural constructions are so compelling, so familiar yet so strange, because their noisemaking is so insistent on our listening to the very noises we tend to filter out in our everyday existence: they are usually too slight, too subtle, too random or too ubiquitous to catch our attention.

We are too often lulled into a virtually insensate state by the sheer volume of information we need to process in the run of a day, in self-defense we are equipped with sophisticated filters that protect us from information overload. There are several reasons for this of course, not the least to stop ourselves from going insane. If one registered the feeling of clothes against one's skin all the time, every move would send a cascade of sensory information to the brain (which of course it does), resulting in an overwhelming amount of stimuli, leaving one unable to function in the face of too much information. We edit the information from our senses all the time, we have to, but we often take it too far. Habitual responses can become ingrained, and thus invisible. It is easy to forget that the information we receive is filtered, and that much of it can be an outright invention: how often do we perceive what we expect, rather than what we have seen? Where would magicians be without that basic human frailty? Not all of us are so blinkered, some, like Gauthier, have "one, two, three, four, five, senses working overtime."¹

Gauthier is a tinkerer, an inventor with a sly sense of the absurd, and a meticulous attention to the minutiae of the everyday. His appreciation of the world is not ever passive, but rather displays an active intelligence that encompasses everything around him. His senses do indeed seem to be on overdrive – he is always paying attention. Experiencing a work by Gauthier is to be enveloped in a cascade of sensation, with sound taking centre stage. Gauthier carves space, sectioning it up, apportioning it and moving us through it using sound waves as much as he does the conduits, cords, wires and the extravagant assortment of once familiar objects that make up his "instruments." As such he is a consummate sculptor, as engaged with gravity, mass and space as any minimalist.

¹ XTC, "Senses Working Overtime," on *English Settlement*, Virgin UK, 1982. Words and music by Andy Partridge

This isn't minimalism, of course, though it shares in the certain theatricality with which Michael Fried damned that art movement.² Yet Gauthier's work is time-based, in that it unfolds over time, the experience evolving as one perceives it. But nor is Gauthier's work too easily associated with its obvious predecessors: Jean Tinguely, Gerhard Trimpin, or even, and finally, Alexander Calder. Gauthier does share concerns with Trimpin, and one cannot talk of sculpture that moves and makes noise without at least a nod to Calder. But despite an obvious debt to Tinguely, Gauthier is at base an optimist – his work is not anarchic, it skirts with chaos along the way to making new orders, a new sense out of the world.

At base, Gauthier's aesthetic parent is more likely to be John Cage than any strictly visual artist. For it is in the work of Cage, the prepared pianos, in the judicious use of silence, in Cage's insistence that the everyday sounds that surround us have the capacity to hold our interest, that chaos can be, not exactly controlled, but structured. Any noise can be music, if we pay proper attention to it. "The material of music is sound and silence," wrote Cage, "Integrating these is composing."³ Time-based art, and music is its paragon much more so than is theatre, extends the act of "presencing" so valued by modernist critics such as Fried and Clement Greenberg. Music, that most abstract of art forms, is also the one that most directly impacts on its perceivers. Music physically reverberates within our very brains; it directly envelops us, wrapping us in an invisible web of meaning. George Steiner has it this way,

The energy that is music puts us in felt relation to the energy that is life; it puts us in a relation of experienced immediacy with the abstractly and verbally inexpressible but wholly palpable, primary fact of being.⁴

Where Gauthier has gone is to look at music primarily from the standpoint of the instrument – he has reconceived sculpture as musical in that he has envisioned his sculptures as instruments, instruments that play themselves, that in manner of speaking play us (as they respond to our presence).

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I'm writing, this instant, at a cottage on a lake in rural Nova Scotia. It is, by any common definition, very quiet here. However, if I was to try and list the sounds I am currently hearing, despite the lack of din, it could run to several pages. Here's a partial attempt: the lapping of the water on the shore; the sound of a distant lawn mower; the wind in the leaves of the tree under which I am sitting (not to mention the wind in the leaves of the countless other trees around me); there is the sound of car wheels on a gravel road; of birds singing; of a red squirrel nattering; the distant voices of my children; the domestic bumps and knocks coming from the kitchen where, I know, bread is rising; there is a boat on the other side of the lake, and further off, a jet-ski,

² In *Art and Objecthood*, first published in *Artforum* in June 1967, Fried argues that modernist sensibility and theatre are at war, and that minimalism (which he insisted on calling "literalist") was inherently theatrical: "theatre is now the negation of art."

³ John Cage, "Forerunners of Modern Music," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, Cambridge, 1966, p. 62

⁴ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Chicago, 1989, p. 196

though thankfully only one; ten metres away a robin has alighted on a branch and I heard its wings as it flew by. I could continue in this vein interminably, of course. Listening is a way of focusing. It's as if the more that I listen, the more that there is to hear. That's not exactly correct though. I am always hearing, just as I am always smelling, touching, seeing and even tasting, but too often I ignore what I am sensing. Remember – attention follows intention. In English the distinction between looking and seeing is clear, as is that between hearing and listening. When we talk of touch, smell and taste it gets more difficult: savouring rather than merely tasting perhaps serves. But not well, and I'm at a loss for a word that intensifies smelling or touching. I guess that is, in part, because so many of us spend so much time trying not to do those three things.

The arts, of course, strive to evoke responses beyond the merely habitual, to wake up our slumbering senses in order to, perhaps, convey a deeper, richer experience. In the end, we're asked to pay attention, as simple as that may sound. Simplicity, of course, is much more complex than we think.

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Jean-Pierre Gauthier is not content to let sleeping senses lie. His sound sculptures create synaesthetic experiences, environments really, where the act of “paying attention” is constantly replayed by his mechanical stand-ins for our own wandering perceptions.

In a work such as *Échotriste* springs on rotating mirrors create a high-pitched sound that is amplified by small pick-up microphones and projected into the space of the work. The mirrors, located low to the floor, spin at what seems like random, until the perceptive viewer realizes that the movements are choreographed to their own – the piece is tracking their movements through the space and is responding to them. The sound of the work is structured, but is constrained by chance and our intentions – the viewer/listener has the opportunity to “play” the work, to subtly change their own experience of it. The more people in the room, the more seemingly chaotic the sound of the work becomes.

It is a fundamental principle of particle physics that the act of observation changes the object observed. That uncertainty principle is also central to Gauthier's sculpture, quite simply, one is never sure what they are going to do next, and often, by our very presence, we are the spark that causes some change in the work.

I call Gauthier's work sculpture, though they equally could be described as installations, because I see them as part of a long sculptural conversation. For at base, these objects are about space and time, gravity and mass. These sculptures occupy what Rosalind Krauss described as an “expanded field,” one that includes time as well as space, sound as well as sight.

I wrote above that Gauthier's sculptures mimic the act of perception, they *notice* things, most notably us, and the sculptures, in their own technical and mechanical manners, pay attention to the world, perceive it, and then process it in an internally logically way. In *The Race*, the outcome is never predetermined. Every race –

every time the piece is turned on the race begins again – has a new winner. Factors such as when the motion sensors are tripped, how often that happens, and a certain built-in penchant for randomness that is Gauthier’s mischievous trademark, ensure that any of the five tape measures in the running could “win” at any given time. That refusal of pre-determination adds a chaotic element to Gauthier’s work, despite its overarching sense of order. Every creative act is a setting into play a certain order, an idea about the world that manifests itself as *organized* material. Yet chaos always lurks at the edges of any human endeavour, where there is something there is always the possibility of nothing. The trick is to recognize the abyss without falling into it.

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The act of making anything is fundamentally one steeped in hope and of optimism. The enduring, oft-times despairing question of modern times – Why is there something rather than nothing? – can only be answered with things. “No ideas but in things,” declared William Carlos Williams, arguing for the centrality of the corporeal in human activity. Well, recent history has taught us the horrors that can be enacted in the name of ideas and systems. Living too much in our heads, forgetting the reality of others, leads to concentration camps. It is in the unknown *terra nullius* of the mind that monsters are created.

The modernist project spans some three hundred years, from the rationalism of Descartes to the killing fields of the Somme, to the numbing barbarity of the *Shoah*. After the Holocaust the natural response was to recoil from the sense of certainty and progress that was modernism, and our dazed and confused efforts at salvaging something from the wreckage of the certainties of Western culture has created various post-Modernisms, various and sundry theories, and much too much information. It seems like our culture has been ending for 100 years. Perhaps we’re beginning to begin? And will we find the seeds of that beginning in what now seems chaotic and meaningless? One has to hope so.

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Everything in an installation such as *Anima* or *Rut* is intentional – the look is necessary to create the sound, the sound is determined by the materials, the lines of conduit, cord and other elements are determined for practical as well as aesthetic purposes. These objects are integrated in a highly complex way – Gauthier creates worlds, internally consistent, following rules and laws determined by physics and thus perceptible, but also worlds that let in glimpses of mystery and chaos, worlds that we can’t always control. These worlds can fail, can disappoint, but can also open up the possibility of grace. These sounds are ordered, despite their built-in generators of random effects. Randomness does not preclude order of course. In fashioning a world, chaos is

prime material. Always, even in the most controlled environment, the kind that Gauthier would never fashion, chaos may seep in at the seams. “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”⁵

In relation to his work Gauthier is a *demiurge*, the initiator of a series of events, but not an omnipotent creator. That’s a much more honest position to occupy, frankly, initiating being both more complex and simpler than creation. It’s more like the condition of being human, in the end, and that goes back to an earlier insight about his work. These objects, in their not-quite random play of motion and sound, re-present to us the very act of paying attention – and they re-pay attention as well. These works are impossible to take for granted. If you engage with them they will, after a fashion, observe you. And, once observed, you too will be changed.

⁵ Leonard Cohen, from Anthem, on the album The Future, released by Sony Canada, 1992