Peter Flemming

Manual

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The Koffler Gallery

Curator: Carolyn Bell Farrell

"Manual" exhibition brochure
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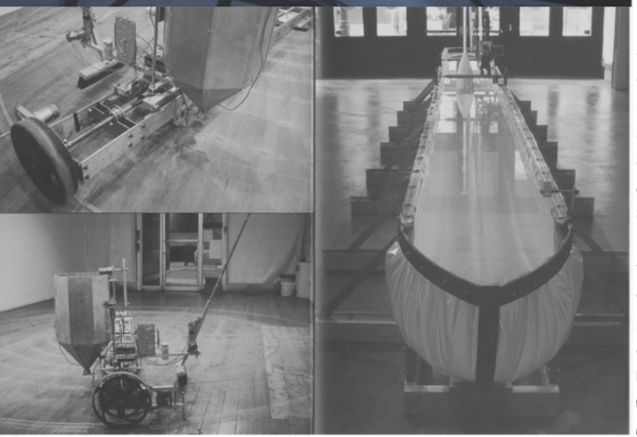
curated by Carolyn Bell Farrell
essay by Norman T. White



Our world is rife with systems: systems for ordering and remembering, systems for creating and destroying, systems for communication, transportation, entertainment, devotion... it goes on and on. Undeniably, the greatest devisor of systems is Nature, itself, forever finding new ways of creating and replicating order where there was none before.

Artists, of course, have long been fascinated by natural systems. The notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, for instance, are filled with sketches that reveal his intense preoccupation with dynamic phenomena... the way bodies work, the way rivers flow and clouds move, the way human faces change over time. Contemporary artists like Peter Flemming continue in this tradition, blending artistic and scientific curiosity. In fact, it was an innate interest in systems that led Flemming to art-making in the first place. His childhood instincts had already led him to experiment with the most adaptable and system-friendly materials that came to hand – Lego, Meccano and Tinkertoys – and it was music that provided the critical inspiration: *The first machine I ever formed a relationship with was a piano. We had a piano in the house growing up (my folks still have it) and I was fascinated by plunking around on it from a young age. Eventually this led to conservatory lessons. I hated practising scales and other people's songs, but I would spend hours just messing around making up my own stuff. Not just randomly, but based on some kind of invented pattern.*[1]

Eventually his tinkering with systems manifested itself in electronic terms: *I started playing guitar, and started collecting some guitars and amplifiers. This led to what I now think of as an early impulse towards "looking under the hood" or a physical engagement with machines: I would disassemble them, put extra strings on, repaint them and try to rebuild, modify or customise them, etc.*[2]

Flemming's choice of electronics and mechanics as experimental disciplines was fortuitous, for combined they provided him with a broad entry point into the understanding of behaviours intrinsic to systems. In particular, they led him to appreciate a fundamental principle, which is maddening to most people – the innate tendency of everything to go askew, become disorganised and fall apart. At the age of twenty-three, he undertook the building of an ambitious electro-mechanical project in homage to entropy: *It started in a very broad sense, out of just being generally astounded at how everything is constantly under repair, because it is constantly falling apart. I was thinking in very simple terms of the things that were right in front of me at the time: my living space and its tendency towards disorder, the self-knotting qualities of cables and wires, the near constant roadwork in my neighbourhood in Toronto.*[3] *[Its] initial working title was "Perpetual Mess Machine" which was meant as an antithesis to a perpetual motion machine. I discarded this title because I thought it was corny and obvious.*[4]

Nine years later, revised many times and now re-titled, Flemming's entropic masterpiece, *Manual*, is making an appearance at the Koffler Gallery. The work abounds with ironies: above all, it must celebrate entropy without unduly falling prey to it. Such is the dictate of exhibitions, where patrons and curators alike (understandably) prefer not to see "Out of Order" signs. The task might be easier if the work were intentionally self-destructive, following the precedent set in 1960 by the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely. But true entropy is better characterised as the disruption of human intention, and Flemming has chosen a more philosophical route: *... in the long term, I embrace [breakdown] as inevitable. Though this can mean pain and frustration in the short term (i.e. when something breaks in the middle of a show in Sweden and you are in Canada). This can be a good thing too: a rough and bumpy ride keeps you on your toes, which is a certain kind of awareness that I can't get from smoothness and slickness, when things go exactly as planned.*[5]

The rough and ready aspect of *Manual* is all about function. Many parts working in harmony conspire to manipulate a common push-broom using the repetitive motions of a human sweeper. The machine's task alternates between blatant anti-utility (depositing sand in piles around the gallery floor) and would-be utility (sweeping the sand back into a pile in the centre), thereby dramatically demonstrating that functionality and utility are not necessarily synonymous. Functionality here is a constant – complex mechanics running continuously – whereas utility is a widely swinging variable. That neither the "utilitarian" and "non-utilitarian" phases are executed perfectly adds to the artfulness of the work. The sand is in fact deposited in spiral precision, while the sweeping process is delightfully messy. This contradictory duality is reminiscent of the yin-yang symbol, where opposing forces, perfectly balanced, chase each other round and round, each carrying at its centre a seed of its counterpart.

Flemming created *Canoe* while taking a break from *Manual* during 2000. This work, also on exhibit at the Koffler, takes us on a somewhat different artful voyage, although its conceptual foundations are consistent with the floor-sweeping piece. Again the artist has constructed a large and complex machine in which every component contributes to the functioning of the work. Again, an objective is to animate a simple, familiar utilitarian object with a repeating and rhythmical human gesture. And again Flemming probes nuances of utility, choosing for his focus a tool that represents an ironic departure from its original survival-based usage to a predominantly recreational modern-day one: *The canoe paddle as a metaphorical device has a rich historical and contemporary presence. The canoe originated in native culture, its usage being generally practical as a means of travel and transportation. Later, the canoe was appropriated by the courier-de-bois and played an important role in the expansion of the fur trade, still as a practical technology. At the turn of the 20th century the rise of industrialism spawned various back-to-nature programs, like the scouting movement and the summer cottaging movement. The canoe took on its contemporary role as leisure craft.*[6]

Pushing this utility reversal several steps further into surrealistic portrayal, Flemming fills a canoe-like trough with water so as to provide a token pond wherein a gunnel-tracking mechanical human surrogate may paddle its way back and forth endlessly. The paddling gesture is not intended to be perfectly human-like: *I try to downplay the "anthropomorphic" part of these works in a way, though that may seem contradictory to how they appear. They are meant as highly reductive representations of certain types of repetitive gestures, rather than elaborate mimicry (i.e. why I don't have it doing a j-stroke, for example).*[7] Nevertheless, fluid dynamics insert a crucial verisimilitude in the way whirlpools are carved in the water in elegant replication of the canoeist's craft.

In both works, Peter Flemming takes a wide-angle look at interacting social and physical systems. His artistic response depends upon an alternative literacy in which articulating mechanical and electronic components replace nouns, verbs and adjectives. This strategy allows him to characterise in fresh ways the cross-currents running through and between natural phenomena and human culture, and to liberate us, at least temporarily, from conventional preoccupations with utility.

Norman T. White