

Toronto Sculpture Garden Regarding Douglas Buis Exhibition

Stacey Spiegel

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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TORONTO
SCULPTURE
GARDEN

Regarding DOUGLAS BUIS Exhibition

Chaotic Encounter
May 15 - July 3, 1990



Stacey Spiegel

Interview between artists Stacey Spiegel and Douglas Buis on May 1, 1990.

Stacey Spiegel : *Do you think that this piece is unusual in terms of the history of kinetic sculpture or in what people are making at this time?*

Douglas Buis : Some artists make high tech sculpture using machinery and computer technology and others address nature, using natural objects such as wood, sticks, bones. My work bridges those two concepts. I'm using technology, using machinery, although my work is very low tech.

Why are you using artifacts and tools which, even in their sophistication, are more or less a 100 years old? The wind tunnel is the Wright brothers technology, 1906.

I get a specific idea and then devise the simplest way of making it work. A strictly mechanical approach often seems the easiest way of solving the problem.

Talk about the association be-

tween the artifact and the object.

The pieces inside and the machinery are closely linked although I'm using them for entirely different reasons. When making a piece, I don't pay attention to the aesthetic properties of how the machinery will look. I work on the theory that when I solve these problems as simply as possible, the machinery will create the aesthetic I want.

I associate the form of the piece with flight, particularly as it seems to be in the shape of an early zep-

lin in the centre and a wonderful composition of fins in aluminum and holes on the exterior. There's also a pump, a transmission, parts of an old dictaphone, and some things inexplicable to me in terms of function.

You have a selection of things in your studio and you intuitively responded to the ones that you wanted in the piece?

Yes. For example, awnings that are rolled out use devices that are like arms. They have an elbow, a wrist, a shoulder and they're quite beautiful. Sometimes I wondered if their inventor was looking at the human body. In the piece, think that there's a relationship between these objects and organic



DOUGLAS BUIS

pelin. What association did you intend?

The sand does fly, but I was referring to those architectural structures in Toronto which are used for temporary shelter, like the canopies over subway entrances.

What's the intent of a mechanical device for moving earth within an encapsulating chamber?

Once I've set up the parameters of this piece, it is completely out of my control. This work is about chaos and the underlying order of chaos. Using the fans creates a randomness which I could not do myself.

Where did the objects come from? They've been collecting in my studio over a number of years. They are bits of mechanical, industrial systems that have forms related to the sand dunes. There's a water pump with a beautiful snail spiral

matter.

Is that your association when you look at these pieces in the junk yard - this reminds me of a fish skeleton, this reminds me of a snail?

Often it comes to me later. I don't question the attraction when I find them. I like using used objects because I gain the history of the object and the flavour of its use.

In this case, is it important that people recognize those references?

Not at all. I've disassembled everything so they are not recognizable as objects. I don't want people to look at something and say "transmission" and then frame it in that slot and think of it in terms of what transmissions do.

Is there a reference to the failure of modernism in these industrial objects? They seem to express a kind of entropy.

The breakdown of systems, the movement towards a greater chaos and the concept of entropy are strong notions in my work. The placement of objects in the tunnel suggests industrial skeletons or bones. One could almost look at this as an urban

archaeological display.

This piece has an electrical current running through it, with on/off positions that the viewer plays with. What's your feeling about interactive kinetics in public spaces?

While installing in the garden I've become aware of the different nature of the audience. Concern about public safety has actually formed the shape of the piece. It's difficult to do kinetics outdoors because of the stringent safety requirements but I enjoy doing it because it's not common to have public kinetic sculpture.

This work expresses visual as well as temporal rhythms.

The aluminum ribs and the objects sitting within establish a rhythm, as does the movement of the sand. In ritual, rhythm is one device which changes the state of awareness. It attracts the mind in a way that meaning in language, doesn't. It can take you into a non-verbal state of awareness where you perceive things differently. I'm not saying that these works that I do are ritual, but they do use certain elements of ritual.

How do you deal with the maintenance?

I worry an awful lot.

Let's talk about the evolution of your work and your working process. Do you do drawings, build test models?

Generally, I do very few tests and drawings although I built a non-functional maquette for this piece. I get the entire piece in one instantaneous idea and then work out the mechanical details. Many ideas come either when I'm dreaming or meditating.

Have you tested it out? Is this a prototype finished work at the same time?

I've never tested it as a completed unit, but I've made tests of different sized fans and have set up corridors of sand and objects in my studio. I can fine tune motor speeds and move the louvers to channel the air flow. I have a clear idea of the situation I want to set up but I'm quite curious as to what will happen and its effect.

We've shifted quite dramatically from Moholy-Nagy's early moving light pieces. There's been tremendous vacillation in the notion of what's kinetic and what isn't. How do you see yourself fitting between the explorer-inventor and the builder of doomsday machinery, the meta-mechanic?

The art world isn't my point of reference - I come to aesthetics differently. I was doing a piece with bicycle. They were bent at funny angles and it was quite an experience to ride them. From there I created a large, elaborate kinetic sculpture with bicycles. I problem solve to come up with new devices but I haven't invented new technology to do it.

Do you hope to communicate some understanding of techno-mechanical systems in use in this piece?

No, no. I don't want a science exhibit of how things work. I'm not showing how wind blows sand. My work deals with perception. For me, ritual doesn't reference mystical or religious ideas, but rather makes you perceive things differently. It's simply a shifting of form leading to a shifting of perception. ♦