

Steadily, Constantly, Always

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MA Project Report

MA Media Arts

2008

Introduction

For my MA project I wanted to make work that shares with the viewer what my gaze lingers at, what I see that others might miss. It is an expression of what the world looks like when viewed from inside of my head. I wanted to create a subtle and meditative piece that would encourage and reward patience and even boredom, because I enjoy having my patience rewarded (by art in gallery settings as well as by other things in other settings). I believe that art is inherently a slow discipline, which cannot be experienced or taken in hurried, and I intend my work to communicate the basic idea purported by the Slow Movement that sometimes slow is better.

The project, *Steadily, Constantly, Always*, is a triptych of short videos played on a loop. The videos are comprised of still images that slowly fade one into another, making a subtle change that is, with sufficient patience, clearly visible. The videos all depict an extreme close-up of a small mechanism – the innards of a music box – atop a scanner's glass. The video is put together from the still photographs taken during the scanning process; the images fade slowly out of each other unravelling the left-to-right path of the scanner's light. By thusly extending and slightly abstracting the 10-second scanning process, the resulting work is an ambiguous document of an event.

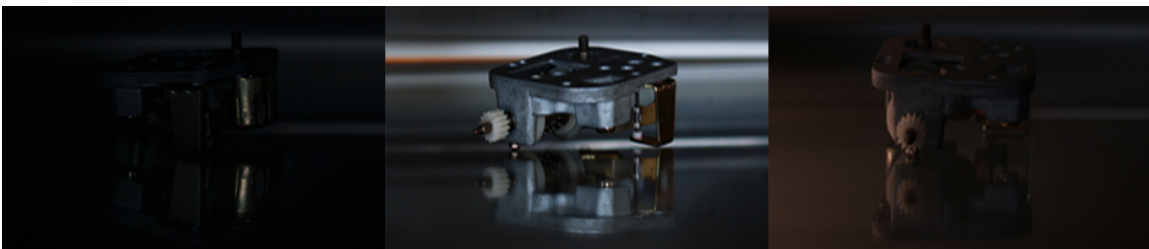


Figure 1: *Steadily Constantly Always*. Digital video, 2008. Own image.

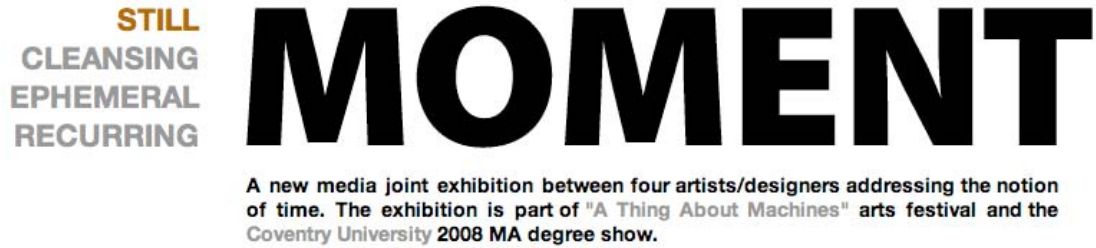


Figure 2: *Moment* exhibition website entrance, 2008. Own image.

A soundtrack of deep, undulating mechanical noise accompanies the images; the sound also travels from left to right. This added noise has a trace of something epic in it: the sound is reminiscent of the advances humanity has made through massive machinery – leading up to the current trend where the state-of-the-art is tiny. You can hear the space of the hangars that housed the miraculous megamachines that made wonderful things happen; and the emptiness of those spaces when occupied by the macromachines that continue to make wonderful things happen. The images echo this juxtaposition of scale and grandeur: the focus is on the miniscule detail of the clockwork, but all the movement during the video is in the expanding space of dark and light; in this environment the ‘mech-tech’ is macro and the ‘electro-tech’ is mega (Brummet, 1999, p.29, 57).

This triptych will be exhibited alongside works by some of my MA-colleagues in the Lanchester gallery, in an exhibition called *Moment*. The planning and setting up of this joint exhibition has been invaluable experience and a substantial part of the MA-project process for me. As we searched for a space, discovered a unifying theme and worked out solutions to practical problems, we’ve all found our individual works strengthened by the proximity of the other pieces. In my case, recognising the shared theme – notion of time – and our separate ‘add-ons’ to the title *Moment* (‘still’ for mine, ‘cleansing’ for Maiada Aboud’s, ‘ephemeral’ for Reza Mosavian’s and ‘recurring’ for Eivind Johansen’s, [figure 2]) definitely helped understand and focus the work better.

Moment

In my work Time is tied to Event, and Time and Event together create Moment. The event unfolds and has control over the time, so as the event is expanded and abstracted, so is time. Patrice Petro defined boredom as “time without event, when nothing happens, a seemingly endless flux without beginning or end” (p 265, 1995), and this led me to wonder, how far can you stretch an event or a moment before it becomes boredom; to reach entropy of moment where time and event are spread so thinly that they might as well not exist. On the same page Petro quotes Fredric Jameson: “Boredom is a very useful instrument with which to explore the past, and to stage a meaning between it and the present” and I wanted to use that useful instrument in my work.

Objects act as indicators of time, and the rapid development in different technologies makes machines and electronic appliances especially good as such indicators. To illustrate the idea: my generation looks to the cassette player as a nostalgic piece of technology; the one before looks to the 8-track or vinyl record, and so on all the way back to the self-playing player pianos and the first ever musical boxes. They were the first inventions that played music without a musician. They brought music to the households. Obviously the role of the music box has changed through history, and they are now commonly used as toys. I’ve had music boxes ever since I was a child (and I’ve always loved to play and interfere with the mechanism inside more than actually just winding it up and letting it play its tune); and most people are familiar with their shape and look, and can associate them with children’s toys – so in *Steadily Constantly, Always* the clockwork acts as a kind of near-nostalgic trigger (tying the notion of past to the event); as a representation of the history of machinery; and as an indicator of the small scale.

Visual Language

The initial spark that started my interest in machinery was almost accidental: I chanced by a graph in a dictionary that illustrated the workings of a diesel engine, and on a whim I decided to draw the image [figure 3]. Doing it by eye led to there being several mistakes and errors, which I did my best to cover up by altering the image to make it

appear whole. And it is impossible to see anything wrong with the finished drawing without comparing it to the source. This ambiguity of correctness interested me, because there aren't many subjects that let you get away with it: it either is a likeness or it isn't.

I slowly developed an interest in machinery as a visual language, with this kind of 'visual lying' at its core. I learnt to appreciate the inherent beauty of machines in both their form and their significance. Essentially I was taking a leaf out of the modernists' book. In *High Techne*, Rutsky quotes Matei Calinescu, who commented on the modernist machine aesthetic:

"Separated from its utilitarian goal, a machine can become an object of aesthetic contemplation, and a work of art is not downgraded when it is compared to a machine. '[Charles Baudelaire wrote] There is no chance in art as there is no chance in mechanics.'" (p 38, Rutsky 1999)

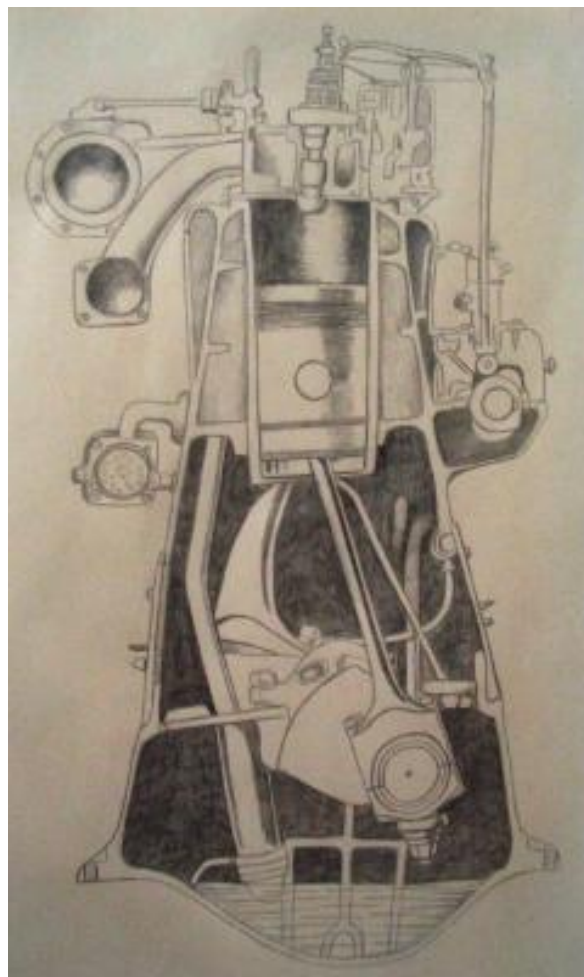


Figure 3: *Untitled*. Pencil on paper, 2006. Own image.

My work took on an added element of wanting to point out the aesthetic of the machines, to share what I see in them, what attracts me to them – but I also wanted to understand what it is about machines that is worth noticing.

As it happens, the image of the machine has proven to be an appropriate medium for almost any message. For example, I found that first diesel engine graph drawing I did to be a poignant self-portrait, having mistakes that cannot be detected on the surface, being broken on the inside. It seems to me that the machines can express the human condition better than humans do.

In order to understand the power of the visual lying in images of machines, it is worth noticing the different ways we are allowed to see machines. Part of the reason we are blind to the flaws in images of machines is because we are forbidden to see them. The mechanical parts of tools and appliances are tucked away inside neat covers and under hoods; the industrial parts of towns with their heavy machinery are usually far away from the centres in secluded areas of town, away from sight. The only reason to look at the mechanisms inside these appliances is when they are broken and in need of fixing.* This lack of seeing is interesting for me, conceptually. Their invisibility makes the machines into something “other”, something we are not familiar with, something frightening – and therefore into something fascinating. R. L. Rutsky discusses the Other in relation to technology in great depth in *High Techne* (1999).

Another way for us to see machines is in formal displays: machines in the collections of museums or other establishments (local examples would be Coventry University’s Jaguar Building and Sir Frank Whittle Building – both have a machine on display near one of their entrances – or the Techno Park that has a battered engine on display by the side of the road). These machines are purely objects for looking. And there is a difference to look at a display and to see a machine in its natural environment, in a workshop, or a construction yard, etc. It’s the same difference that exists between listening to a dialogue in a movie and listening to a conversation of two of your friends. In the case of a display, the machine is presented to you as something curious; you see

* And it seems that in our throw-away culture we are increasingly encouraged to not fix something, but buy a new one instead.

because you aren't given a choice not to. In its own environment you can ignore the machine, it is just a part of the background. In my work I want to point out that I enjoy noticing the machines. And this is why I don't make sculptures or installations – they are about display. But at the same time, I don't mean to say that everyone must notice machines around them; I mean that I do and that everyone else can too.

We are also allowed to see machines in images, and the vast majority of machine-images are photographs of parts or components taken for marketing purposes. I find those images fascinating. They often try to display the subject of the photo completely out of any kind of context – no size, purpose, or connections to other parts. They exist simply to show you what the parts look like. Ignoring the practical purpose of these images we are left with something far more interesting: an image that exists simply to show what the subject of the image looks like. An image that points out.

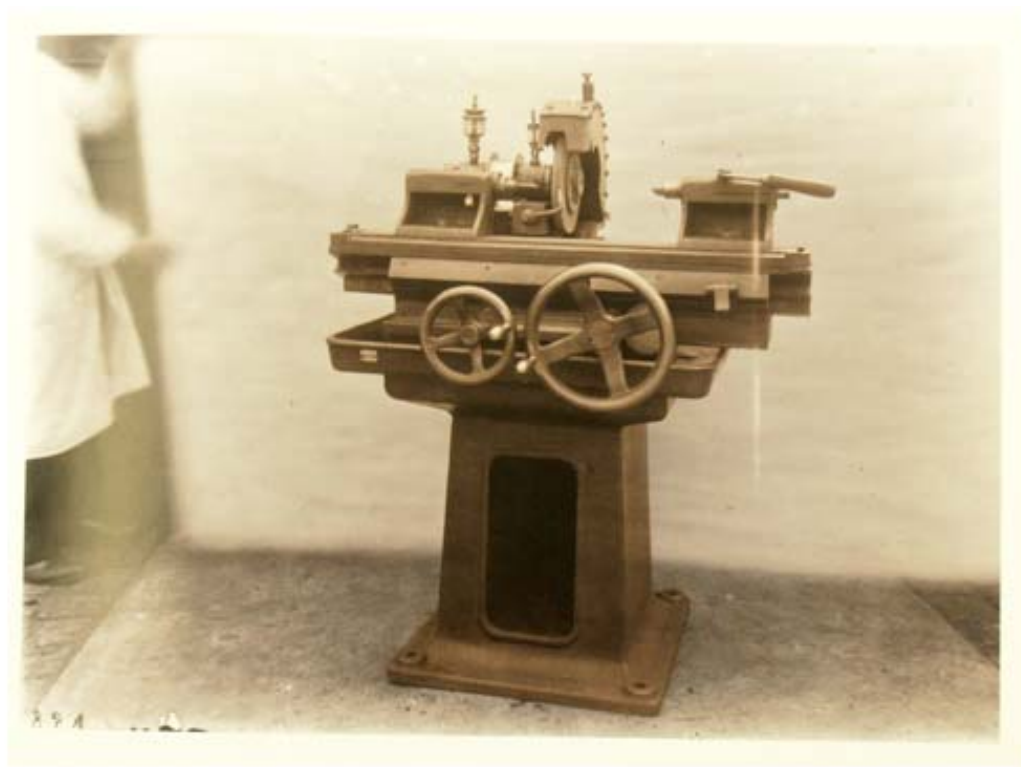


Figure 4: Thomas Ruff: *0821*. Chromogenic colour print, 2003. (In Flosdorff, 2003.)

Thomas Ruff is an artist who has directly dealt with these promotional photos. Around 2003 he got hold of an archive of glass negatives of industrial photographs from the 1930s. Originally they had been taken for Rohde & Dörrenberg, a machine and tool manufacturing company from Düsseldorf-Oberkassel, and the photographs were made for the purpose of producing a sample book with information for potential customers. Ruff scanned the images, digitally coloured the machines with industrial iron-oxide colours and made large-scale prints from them (Flosdorff, 2003, p. 7-8). Ruff unravels the original visual lying in these promotional images by going to the source and revealing the process that was used to create the images for the sample book, but he also adds his own layer of lies with the coloration process [figure 4].

Several other artists have also used mechanical imagery as their visual language (such as Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Eduardo Paolozzi), all of whom have had an impact on me.

Photographic Truth

In a way, *Steadily, Constantly, Always* is the opposite of Ruff's images: I am not actually actively lying like he is. I'm not adding anything I have not changed the images in any way, they are displayed exactly as they were captured, in the sequence they were captured. Photography has (or at least had) a reputation as the medium of truth, which is not completely unearned. In order to make a photograph you still need to point the lens at something real, so the element of truth – that is, reality – is a given. Admittedly, at the rise of Photoshop photography lost a great deal of its authenticity, but Photoshop is only another step in the editing process that is in the heart of all photography. Already the concept of pointing the camera demands the maker to make choices, leave things out, edit the context of the images. And this is what happened in *Steadily, Constantly, Always*. The images are so focused on the clockwork of the music box that there is no context. This kind of overemphasising and highlighting something that usually goes unnoticed is like the opposite of lying by omission; lying by giving too much attention to a small detail and obfuscating the big picture. It leaves the viewer questioning the background – what is happening? – but also the machine itself: why is this delicate instrument in this environment? And those are the questions I don't intend to answer. The answers don't matter, it is enough that the questions are asked.

Authorship

In *Steadily, Constantly, Always* there are four machines involved: the music box mechanism, the scanner, the camera and the monitor (representing the computer*). Overall the work is completely machine-mediated. The music box provides the aesthetics, the scanner provides the event, the camera provides the seeing and recording of the event and the computer provides the finished video, both by compiling it and by displaying it. The artist's hand is hopefully not detectable: my wish is for the work to have authorship of itself – mainly because I am unable to lay claim to it. It isn't my work, although I made it.

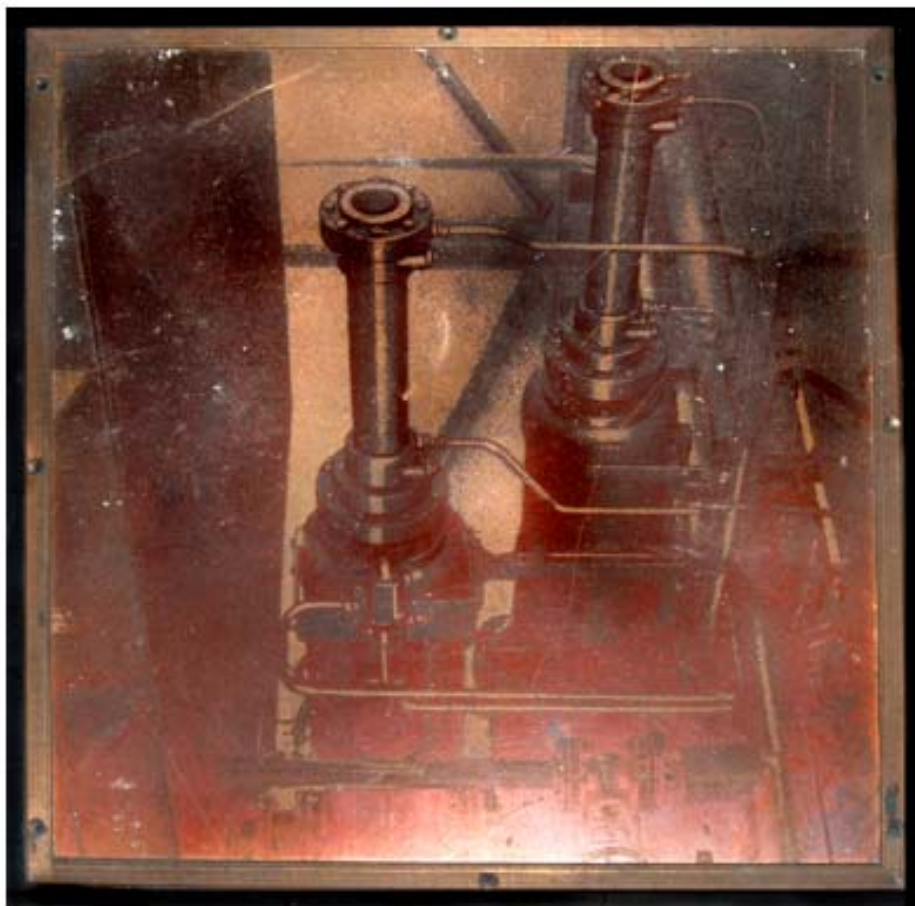


Figure 5. *The Most Beautiful Image I have Ever Seen.*

Digital photograph, 2007. Own image

* Although I don't consider the computer to be a machine. "The first computers were machines. Punch cards, vacuum tubes, and big rooms filled with wires. They could do math at high speed, count things, and sort records, but that was about all. A long way from modern computers, eh? That's because today, computers aren't machines, they are magic. A modern computer is a magic box filled with ceremonial components that traps in a little evil spirit who is forced to work for you." (Paige, 2001)

I've experienced this kind of "making not-my-work" once before this project. That time it was a photograph of an old, scratchy photographic printing plate, which had an image of some kind of piping [figure 5]. I took the photo in the typography workshop one evening, when no one else was around. And when I saw the image on the camera's LCD screen, my heart stopped. It was – and still is – *the Most Beautiful Image I Have Ever Seen*. But I wasn't able to lay claim to it. It wasn't my work, I just happened to be there.

Several photographers have felt this way too. Paul Strand is quoted to have replied to the question of how he chooses what to photograph with: "I don't. They choose me"; Henri Cartier-Bresson is cited saying that "it's the photo that takes you; one must not take photos" and Diane Arbus has said "I don't press the shutter. The image does" (p.213 Dyer, 2005). It was such a relief for me to find out that other photographers have the need to discredit themselves from the work; that I'm not making it up; that I'm not possessed by some unheard of force.

In retrospect I can appreciate the slight irony in this experience: alike Marcel Duchamp* I strived to get rid of the artist's hand, but I approached it from a Free Culturist/ postmodern point of view, claiming that it isn't me who makes the work, it is the culture I live in; but this was a bit contrived, even immature notion to have, with its faux-subversiveness. Instead of making my work and being a 'voice' for the culture or society I belong to, I ended up making work that I didn't recognise as mine (because it really was society's?) – and I got sore about it. I was finally what I had asked for – a tool or a medium in the hands of something else, something beyond me – and I hated it. That was difficult for me to get over, but I did eventually, and in retrospect the whole thing is amusing. But I got what I strived for: the work doesn't look like it was made by me.

* With whom I feel some kind of kindred spirit; I keep finding references to him in my work, which are put there sometimes unconsciously, sometimes not.

There is a statement in *The Ongoing Moment* that I can strongly relate to. As Dyer discusses the Polaroid pictures Walker Evans took late in his career, he quotes the photographer, and I really share the sentiment:

And yet these pictures... are as evidently Evans's as any he made. Because they could, ostensibly, have been taken by anyone, the fact that they were taken by him becomes all-important. 'It's as though there's a wonderful secret in a certain place and I can capture it,' he said. "Only I, at this moment, can capture it, and only this moment and only me." (p.244-5, Dyer, 2005)

This 'non-authorship' has allowed me to be indifferent about the work, and thus be a lot braver and more relaxed in regards to it. During the making of this piece I haven't felt the need to drive it to a certain direction, I've actually felt that it has guided itself, and I trust that to be the best way for any work to develop: naturally and unforced. And to my delight, I don't have that strangling possessive feeling about the work: my Free Culturist side can have a small personal victory because of that.

As a drawback, this indifference to the work has made it increasingly difficult for me to finish the authoring process in terms of finalised method of display. I struggled to decide what form it would take in an exhibition setting: screens or projections, one image or several? How structural or ephemeral should its presence be? Most of the answers to these questions were compromises between artistic vision and the demands of reality, but overall I am satisfied with the outcome.

Another thing that I found challenging was the way I made this work, as it was such a complete opposite to how I usually work. In the past years my creative process has been meticulous and slow, but this project worked quickly: the photography for each video took only a few seconds to shoot, and most of the time spent on the project was taken by post-production and final presentation – both of which involved a lot of problem-solving. The speed was a concern for me because working slowly has always given me time to mull out the meaning and rationale behind the work, and in the early stages of *Steadily, Constantly, Always* I feared that because of the speed I wouldn't have the time to let my thoughts about it mature enough. Fortunately I was able to look back on the process and reflect on it, even though I wasn't able to reflect during it. And this kind of 'in the moment/after the moment' –mode of thinking actually supported the eventual 'meaning' of the work and tied well into the theme of the Moment-exhibition.

Post Script

During the year of studying for the MA my work shifted and changed in terms of meaning, context, process and medium. I found myself asking a lot of questions: some stupid, some serious, some impossible, and some fanciful and completely pointless. I learned about my practice, I grew to understand it and the reasons why I do what I do better. I should also hope that as a result I make better work now too.

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