

ANTENNAE

Issue 9, Spring 2009

ISSN 1756-9575



Mechanical Animals

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BJOERN SCHUELKE AND MECHANIC DIVERSITY

Bjoern Schuelke designs objects that playfully transform live spatial energy into active responses in sculptural form. Born from a world of stuffed animals, spaceships, unusual scientific instruments and robots, some of these pieces also employ alternative energy sources— and speak powerfully to the environmental concerns of today.
Text and Questions by **Julien Salaud**

It seems that during the Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth (it happened in Australia in 2004), the viewers of the exhibition had a lot of fun with one of Bjoern Schuelke's artwork: *Nervous*. This installation was made of a group of interactive audiokinetic objects, created by the German artist between 1999 and 2003 with various materials: Theremins, amplifiers, servomotors, loudspeakers, plush, wood, Styrofoam.

How does *Nervous* work? When people moved their hands near to the orange balls constituting the installation, those machines started to shake frantically, and their Theremins generated sounds that were modified by the viewer's movements. On Bjoern Schuelke's website, videos show a group of people interacting with the small wooly machines of *Nervous*: a young man illustrates with a smile the kind of feeling this artwork can generate. Along with providing information about the artist's work the site presents questions like "Are the human emotions interfering with the emotions of *Nervous*?"

In extreme opposite to *Nervous*, is *Observer 2* (2003). This sculpture made of steel, alloy, wood, monitor, cameras, lights, motors, electronic and sensors is a silent, dominatrix, menacing artwork as it dwarfs anyone observing it. And it 'observes' us in return whilst slowly moving. This interactive video-sculpture addresses the question of our relationship with machines in an original way. Here, the entertainment value of Schuelke's work combines curiosity and attraction to the ideas of danger and threat in a machine that functions like surveillance tool. *Observer 2* is an object of mastery. His *Solar-Kinetic-*

Objects realized between 2004 and 2005 (these are made of solar cells, motors, electronic, brass and car paint). These machines subvert the idea of interaction by changing its interlocutor as the artwork moves in reaction to the sun, broadening the domain of interactivity from humans to the environment.

What is particularly fascinating in Bjoern Schuelke's work is the diversity presented by his machines, in their forms, the roles they play, the feelings they generate, and also the reflections they might stir up in the minds of who experiences them. This technologic diversity might question us in the way Patricia Piccinini's *Nests* artworks do: 'Your machines may just be what you do of it'. Thus, there is in Bjoern Schuelke's work an interesting approach to question the concepts of "artificial" and "natural", to create a tension between those two antagonisms that offers an unusual point of view. For once, the place of humans in the world is not questioned by using animals or the natural world in their fragility.

At the beginning of this year, the Belgian gallery Think21 introduced you as an artist "born from a world of spaceships, unusual scientific instruments and robots". Do you agree with their definition and if so, how did these elements come to be essential part of your practice?

I am fascinated by weird constructions, machines and forms. The science fiction genre and also the areas of engineering and science continue to inspire me. Things I create are intended to exist somewhere between



Björn Schülke

Drone #2, 2002, carbon, alloy, monitor, cameras, solar panels, motors, sensors, 14.75 x 7.25 x 2.5' / 450 x 220 x 80 cm © Björn Schülke Photo Courtesy: bitforms gallery nyc

science, technology and art. They are “inventions”, but I think that irony is good. My pieces are kind of pseudo-products that reflect our modern and technology-filled environment.

The interplay between machines and human intellectual and emotional intelligence was the theme of the ‘Sentient Cog’ a very successful exhibition held in 2002 at the 5th Gallery in Dublin. Then, The Irish Times (3rd of August, 2002) reported that “The star of the show is undoubtedly Bjoern Schuelke's Drone #2. A giant mechanical bug, it looks like a cross between a bat, a praying mantis and the superstructure of a blimp. From afar, it appears graceful and free, but once it senses someone's presence its arms begin to hover menacingly, as if they had eyes, over the viewer.” How did the idea for Drone #2 come about?

In Drone pieces and the Observer pieces I am pursuing a social exploration of how we, as humans, truly react to surveillance technology. Is this technology protecting us?

Might it be a menace- continuously recording out fears of autocratic device? Drone #2 is, in some ways, my snarky answer to the military defense industry. Are we not vulnerable still, even when we possess the latest tools? I like it when viewers project an artificial intelligence onto my pieces and perceive them to be something between creature and robot.

How did you become interested in robotics and more especially in robotics involving sounds and video?

The area of Robotics is not exactly my main focus- but generally I do enjoy kinetic stuff and materials – like noisy machines that create interesting patterns and rhythm. There is also the connection between electronic music and technology. For me, aesthetic choices are more about the interplay between movement and form (or sound). Traditional sculpture that has a flavor for machines is more descriptive of what I do- rather than genius electrical programming. My works don't have to



Björn Schülke

Nervous, 1999-2006, theremin, amplifier, servomotor, loudspeaker, plush, wood, 10 in / 25.4 cm © Björn Schülke Phot
Courtesy: bitforms gallery nyc

be artificially intelligent. It is more interesting when viewers *imagine* that the object is artificially intelligent – even when behind the surface, a simple analog sensor controls the piece.

Interactivity plays a pivotal role in a number of your works. Some of your creations are armed with tiny cameras and stare back at the viewers, quietly recording. They also feature motion sensors that allow the robots to identify and take aim at humans in the room, displaying their target on small built-in screens.

Most of my works are reactive, not interactive. Interactivity is one of the most overrated terms in new media art. When a spectator projects a kind of artificial intelligence on the works and believes that my sculptures possess their own behavior – this is actually a misunderstanding or perhaps a “faked” interactivity.

Nervous and Dynamic Capacities are an interactive audio-kinetic object with a bright, orange and fluffy hemisphere. When approached, it become nervous, start to beep and move frantically. A certain creative playfulness and sense of entertainment are very present in some of your artworks. Why?

I like when viewers have fun. Nervous and Dynamic Capacities both use the Theremin, which is the world's first electronic music instrument invented by Lev Sergeivich Termen around 1919 in Russia. This instrument is wonderful interface between humans and machines. The zany perky quality it lends to my sculptures enables spectators to become actors or catalysts.

What are your environmental concerns and how are these addressed through your creations?



Björn Schülke

Observer #2, 2003, steel, alloy, wood, monitors, cameras, lights, motors, electronics, sensors, 9.5' / 2.9 m high, 10' / 3 m diameter © Björn Schülke Photo Courtesy: bitforms gallery nyc

I am working often with epoxy, fiberglass, car paint. These are toxic materials! I think that it is great to see the possibilities of renewable energy like solar power. Perhaps some of my works open the eyes of some to electric alternatives, but I don't really see myself as a "green artist" exactly.

Where and/or when do animals and robotic creations overlap?

I don't see a real overlapping between these two. If a bird will question us in future on how to use our technology for a relaxing flight – then we can be proud and then talk about animals and robotic creations overlapping. Generally, we adapt structures and design from the nature for the sake of efficiency or bionic affectation. For example some of the studies in wing structure for new airplanes incorporate wing morphology in birds.

Which artists have more informed your practice?

Tingely, Panamarenko, Calder...

Are you a fan of sci-fi as a genre?

There are a couple of science fiction films that continue to inspire me: *Star Trek* – the earlier films, *Raumpatrouille Orion*- a very curious 1960 German black and white TV series, *2001* – the faux-realism in Kubrick's film set amazes me

Bjoern Schuelke lives and works in Cologne. His work has been exhibited internationally.

For more information about the artist, please visit <http://www.schuelke.org>

Bjoern Schuelke was interview by Antennae in winter 2008 © Antennae