

Mechanism: The Voices of Time

Katherine Waugh

Now I will do nothing but listen ...

I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or following,

Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds of the day and night ...

Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself' (1855)

Now he saw the world beyond language. Was it the sphere of absolute muteness or on the contrary, the sphere of absolute language?

Pierre Klossowski (on Nietzsche's final years).¹

On encountering Andrew Kearney's **Mechanism** exhibition at the Crawford Gallery, one might be forgiven for feeling that a threshold has been crossed into a distinctly Ballardian universe. From the reflective circular 'portal' suspended in front of the building's main façade, reminiscent of the cosmic 'mandala' created by the biologist 'Whitby' in an empty swimming pool in J.G. Ballard's short story *The Voices of Time*, to the preoccupation with sound, urban ecology and architecture in his *The Sound Sweep* (with its 'sonivacs' hoovering up sounds in buildings) manifested in Kearney's sound and light installations in the gallery, a feeling of 'presentiment', that strange feeling of recognizing what has yet to come, so characteristic of JG Ballard's writing, abounds.² Kearney, like many writers as well as artists, has a particular talent for, and sensitivity towards, the scenographic. This present exhibition is the third chapter of a series begun in Paris and expanded for The Dock in Carrick-on-Shannon.

In all three iterations of **Mechanism**, culminating in the Crawford Gallery, Kearney's engagement with the theatrical turn in contemporary art can be seen as an attempt to mark the exhibition experience as a pure 'event', pulling the audience into a metaphysics of presence and immediacy, but also indicating how life itself now seems overtly theatricalised, spectacular and performative – theatrically-framed exhibitions perform a kind of self-reflexive gesture recognising the complexity of conditions of reception for any art today. Here you are, an actor on this artistic stage, in this case a 'cog' in Kearney's 'mechanism', a performer whose actions and words will filter through to the gallery space via unknown algorithms, rendering you in abstract form, haunting you with traces of your presence in the urban 'outside' captured just moments before by Kearney's strategically placed a microphone outside the gallery: a hauntology which obliterates the time needed to situate yourself in some more stratified context of memory and space – no time for a more contemplative Bachelardian poetics here as you enter a strange yet uniquely affective *mise-en-scène*. At the Crawford Kearney again expands on the central conceptual theme of **Mechanism**, creating alongside previous work new site-specific sculpture and installations. Like a conductor who makes every performance of a score unique, Kearney lights and designs each exhibition with care and precision in response to the specific building but also local urban history and ecology.

In *Future and Fictions* the artist Ayesha Hameed ponders the many ways in which contemporary art draws on science fiction to create "objects that through their own charge and materiality make transversal cuts through time and destabilize the chronotopes to which they belong. Such objects can act as portals to collapse two temporal moments together".³ Kearney's Crawford exhibition presents such portals with his unique melding of art, engineering and a poetic sensibility, ultimately producing affects that can be as moving as they are confounding (as with all good poetry). In an essay on the soundscapes of late modernity in Ballard's 1960 short story *The Sound Sweep*, Matthew Gandy writes:

"For Ballard, the sonic realm has both a temporal and spatial porosity. There is a sense that sound, like memory, cannot be completely eradicated. Yet the chaotic accumulation of sonic waste cannot be organized into a form of collective memory that is amenable to archives, monuments, or narrative accounts of historical change".⁴ In **Mechanism** the sonic is similarly a structuring as well as aesthetic guiding principle, if a complicated and complicating one, and this becomes even more significant in a Cork context, given the city's long history of experimentation in sound art.

Sounds and ghostly fragments of voices create waves of endlessly varying material, each layer seeming to add itself to the last, not erasing it, but multiplying and expanding it as if sheets of time are moving in tandem with each other. There is a strong Bergsonian inflection to Kearney's work here – time is not fixed in any linear fashion structured by a narrative impulse, but instead the listener/viewer is pulled back and forth (much like his tree) in a more complicated spatio-temporal process where sounds from the outside (which the listener feels some investment in having added to the mix) become immersed in new waves of past and present sonic and light particles – not quite identifiable affects, but more akin to what in philosophical terms are called 'percepts', or in the metaphysics of Alfred Whitehead 'prehensions'.

The gallery space feels deeply cinematic as much as theatrical – Chris Marker's *La Jetée* with its encounter between science fiction, the 'scars' of memory and post-apocalyptic engineering, and Alain Resnais's *Je t'aime Je t'aime* – also based on experiments attempting to resolve what were irresolvable tensions between memory, perception, and scientific knowledge – come most readily to mind. The high-tech light and sound installation for **Mechanism**, an impressive tunnel-like suspended structure, appears to communicate through some esoteric code – an aesthetic language of pure rhythm and light. It is framed in the manner of a Victorian curiosity, a found invention which has escaped from history or visited from the future, perhaps a time-machine, certainly a mechanism transmitting secrets, but also suggesting a material, transfigurative potential, transforming sound into light.

Kearney has long acknowledged the intensity of his interest in architecture, but has emphasised that his work in art is not an attempt to 'translate' ideas from architecture or any other field, but instead pursues an active 'dialogue' with ideas. It is what the work *does* which interests him and here we can see why concepts and modes of practice from architecture and engineering have such force in Kearney's art, adding to his instinct to shift the boundaries as much as possible, to keep a certain vitalistic process in motion where 'inside/outside' are at all times reconfigured.

The Light engine with its cluster of rings, and the nearby silver orb rotating in circles, seem to nod to the orb in Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's painting *AL3* and his *Light Prop for an Electric stage* – a Bauhaus-inspired kinetic sculpture designed to produce light effects, shown first at an exhibition in Paris in 1930. Moholy-Nagy's union of technology and art cultivated an auratic status for the work and Kearney's practice fits comfortably into this rich tradition of Bauhaus experimentation, in which light installations are aligned with avant-garde theatrical performances.

Mechanism's silver sphere pulls us into its 'orbit'; a reflective, self-motorised Orb, devoid of human control – it conjures an extra-terrestrial being of some kind, captivating us with its hypnotic rhythm. The concept of 'celestial orbs' (and Kearney's orb certainly has an air of the celestial and otherworldly about it) has one of the richest and most complicated histories in any history of ideas – drawing as it does on a veritable trove of theories about the cosmos, the nature of matter and movement and, ultimately, our response as humans to that 'great unknown' of the Universe we find ourselves spinning in. Ideas emerging from a medieval cosmological mechanics became foundational for future conceptualising about what could be called the 'machinic', along with evolving laws of dynamics. In the fourteenth century the logician and natural philosopher Jean Buridan, Rector of Paris University, wrote "God, when He created the world, moved each of the celestial orbs as He pleased, and in moving them he impressed in them impetuses which moved them without his having to move them any more".⁵

Kearney's artistic practice seems to find its most striking affinity with the imagination of Edgard Varèse. For the Paris-born composer, sound was living matter. Varèse sought to create 'sound objects floating in space' – to spatialise sound. But it is one specific unrealised project by Varèse – *L'Astronome* – that seems to haunt **Mechanism**, and which **Mechanism** seems to dramatise so effectively (if fortuitously). Film and sound theorist Frances Dyson argues that no other work of the post-World War 1 period "addressed sound as a compositional material ...within techno-utopian and dystopian themes, more than Varèse's collaboration with Antonin Artaud in his unrealised project, *L'Astronome* begun in 1928."⁶ Varèse provided Artaud with a rough sketch of the project (an opera) in 1932 from which Artaud then wrote *There is no more Firmament*, a story in which an astronomer invents an instrument for 'celestial

telegraphy' creating instantaneous communication with the star Sirius, only to precipitate the catastrophic radiation of the earth. The similarities with J.G. Ballard's *The Voices of Time* are rich and many. Varèse, heavily influenced by Bergson's theory of matter as something always in a state of becoming, wished to join forces with Artaud and his profound challenge to representation itself in his work *The Theatre and its Double*. Artaud envisioned a theatre wherein the spectators are immersed in a light and sound environment which might produce a trance-like state and in which "the spectacle will be calculated from one end to the other like a code [...] like so many rays of light".

Kearney creates an installation in which sound matter becomes re-defined through an aesthetic and metaphysical machine that defies linguistic representational models. It is as if Kearney, in **Mechanism**, channels Varese's dream of "conjuring voices in the sky, as though magic, invisible hands turning on and off the knobs of fantastic radios, filling all space, criss-crossing, overlapping, penetrating each other, splitting up, superimposing, repulsing each other, colliding, crashing."⁷

Mechanism's eponymous central light and sound machine is a constitutive creation - always regenerating, never predetermining, constantly seeking new input – a device of a very different nature to those machines which become nihilistic through overdetermination, as with Kafka's machine in *In the Penal Colony* which breaks down under the weight of moralistic inscription and authority, with signification and representation ultimately creating their own entropic state. Yet his floundering tree, its branches brushing the surface like some mutant triffid-like calligraphic instrument which has lost its bearings, surely echoes Kafka's punitive inscription machine as it turns on itself "no longer writing, but only jabbing...the machine was obviously going to pieces, its silent working was a delusion".

Kearney's tree is no *Arte Povera* creation. Nor is it a close relative of Robert Smithson's uprooted *Upside Down tree* (1969) (hinted at in the invitation photograph by Kearney of a tree outside Limerick), or Katie Holten's *Excavated Tree* fashioned from waste cardboard, newspaper and duct tape. Kearney's tree is a proudly plasticinated form, made as it is from the most artificial material possible – black astroturf. It suggests more those mobile phone masts attempting to be tree-like to disguise their communicative intentions, here moving back and forth marking time like a metronome. But in a Cork and Irish context the very artificiality of this tree lumbering across the gallery becomes resonant in specific ways – Cork city lost 600 trees in recent storms, and trees have had a profoundly symbolic part to play in any linguistic/literary history of Ireland, central as they were to the ancient Ogham alphabet but also their presence in so much Irish poetry and folklore (one thinks of *Mad Sweeney* or *King Lowry's Ears* with the 'tree-become-harp' that transforms a whispered secret into song). In Ballard's *The Voices of Time*, plants and animals over-exposed to radioactivity are seen to develop hard exoskeletons by absorbing poisons such as lead in an effort to protect themselves. Kearney's tree becomes a ghost of a tree from the future, wherein all organic life has succumbed to the plastic scourge we are forewarned of so apocalyptically in environmental reports. What does this hollowed out tree foretell of the future of organic flows of communication, given recent research enlightening us about the vibrant underground communication systems of living trees? This excavated, non-organic, arboreal creation is a portentous tree if ever there was one.

If swimming pools have, in cinema, literature and popular culture, conjured a life of languorous hedonism, leisure and success from *Sunset Boulevard* and *The Great Gatsby* to *The Swimmer*, they have also suggested currents of another, more transgressive and even resistant kind, and a critique of normative values. Many gay artists have tapped into 'pool' culture in their work – from David Hockney to Elmgreen and Dragset's drained and abandoned 'Whitechapel pool' installation (2018) in the Whitechapel Gallery. The empty pool exudes a particular potency, an almost threatening aura of pleasures abandoned suddenly, denied, or even forbidden, and Ballard's fiction is replete with such pools. Kearney's swimming pool ladder, devoid of pool, takes a step further, positioning the viewer looking up from a virtual empty pool, or possibly submerged in it. As with much of his art it becomes a gesture redefining our understanding of space as it collapses yet again different temporal moments, suddenly shifting us from a nebulous future into a scarring past.

Against a glow of pink we see a line of black urns whose dense materiality asserts something incontrovertible, beyond speech. The 20 urns (created following Kearney's personal pilgrimage around

the death camps of Europe) support and accentuate each other – an ‘I’m Spartacus’ of insistent repetition that declares a silent ‘community’. One can’t help sensing the truth of the 500,000 gay men who were also killed in those camps haunting these urns. In **Mechanism** a shiver is felt on glancing back from the ladder and urns to Kearney’s tree, recalling Himmler’s declaration that the Nazis intended to “exterminate these people *root and branch* – the homosexual must be eliminated”.⁸ Here history removes us from **Mechanism’s** futurism, pulls us from the existing ‘event’ and serves to caution us against the perils of unthinking blitheness as we stumble into other ‘futures’.

Ana Verena–Nostoff responding to Adorno’s declaration that to “write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” argues this should not be read as an attempt to *silence* artistic responses but to recognize instead that “radical chasm between the signifier and signified that one neither ought nor could overcome via writing or aesthetic means”.⁹

Adorno in turn addressing the work of Paul Celan, whose work offered some of the earliest and most profound writing on the death camps, says his poems “articulate unspeakable horror by being silent... They emulate a language that lies below the helpless prattle of human beings – even below the level of organic life as such. It is the language of dead matter, of stone and stars.”¹⁰ For Celan the world had been reduced to “urns of ashes in a burned out garden” and Kearney’s urns offer us this deeply moving counterpoint, a ‘black hole’ of sorts alongside the cosmic forces of **Mechanism’s** other kinetic, aural and light installations.¹¹

The intergalactic theme of *L’Astronome*, with its inventor’s use of numerical codes to communicate with the cosmos, and the image of a possible future in J.G. Ballard’s *The Voices of Time*, find a present-day artistic expression through Kearney, in his immersive light and sound constellation created for **Mechanism**, his enigmatic cosmic orb trajecting time and space as it circles hypnotically in the gallery, and his ‘future-memory’ of what a tree might have been, and might become – a ‘radioactive fossil’ in the words of philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

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Notes

1/ Pierre Klossowski *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, (translated Daniel W Smith) Continuum 2005, P 251.

2/ J.G. Ballard *The Voices of Time and other Stories*, Berkeley Medallion, 1962.

3/ *Futures and Fictions*, Edited by Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed and Simon O’Sullivan, Repeater Books 2017 Page 9.

4/ Matthew Gandy “Strange Accumulations: Soundscapes of Late Modernity in J.G. Ballard’s “The Sound-Sweep” in *The Acoustic City*, Matthew Gandy, BJ Nilsen (eds.). Berlin : Jovis, [2014].

5/ Buridan ‘Questions on the Eight Books of the Physics of Aristotle: Book VIII Question 12’ English translation in Clagett’s 1959 *Science of Mechanics in the Middle Ages* p536.

6/ Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, Univ. of California, 2009, p334.

7/ Cited in Henry Miller, “With Edgar Varèse in the Gobi Desert,” in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (New York: New Directions, 1945), 163–78.

8/ Richard Plant *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals*, New York, Holt, 1986, p99.

9/ Ana Verena–Nostoff ‘Barbarism: Notes on the Thought of Theodore W. Adorno’, online journal [Critical Legal Thinking. Law and the Political](#):xx (2014).

10/ Steven L. Bindeman ‘Silence in Philosophy, Literature and Art’ Leiden: Brill Lodopi, 2017, Page 131.

11/ Zbigniew Herbert ‘To Ryszard Krnicki – a letter’, *Report from the Besieged City And Other Poems*. By Zbigniew Herbert. Translated by John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter. 82 pp. New York: The Ecco Press.