



tim hawkinson

intromissions

PHILIP MONK

And experience shows that there is no flux without eddy, no laminar flow which does not become turbulent. Now, and here is the crux of the matter, all times converge in this temporary knot: the drift of entropy or the irreversible thermal flow, wear and aging, the exhaustion of initial redundancy, time which turns back on feedback rings or the quasi-stability of eddies, the conservative invariance of genetic nuclei, the permanence of a form, the erratic blinking of aleatory mutations, the implacable filterings out of non-viable elements, the local flow upstream towards negentropic islands — refuse, recycling, memory, increase in complexities...What is an organism? A sheaf of times. What is a living system? A bouquet of times.

Michel Serres, "The Origin of Language: Biology, Information Theory and Thermodynamics"

Most commentators wonder at the sheer inventiveness and diversity in Tim Hawkinson's work. They attribute Yankee ingenuity and a tinkerer's sensibility to an eccentric production where Rube Goldberg meets Marcel Duchamp. Hawkinson uses unlikely waste materials unconventionally in sculptural constructions that mimic the workings of various machines and instruments or the appearance of diverse natural bodily systems. But there is nothing natural about the resulting automata, which seem instead to share with each other an arrested dysfunctionality. For example, the closed systems of *Signature* (1993), a machine for writing the artist's signature, and *Bagpipe* (1995), a giant instrument played through the air ducts of its exhibiting space, have no need of human impetus or inspiration to pursue their mournful tasks.

A cynical cybernetics is not the usual reading of the artist's works; yet at the same time, as whimsical his works might be, as intellectually seductive they present themselves, they are also more than intriguing mimicries — jokes we quickly get but which then exhaust themselves in the perpetual motion of

the sculptures' machine-like absurdity. A world is described by Hawkinson whose poetic, for want of a better word, links each sculpture to another in an elaborate and continually unfolding cosmography.

To describe this cosmography is a difficult task, however. This world does not unfold itself by revealing a rationale that can be followed along a narrative path where one tries to link the elements of a work or the thematic relations between different works into a symbolic whole. This despite the ripe symbolism of the tree that recurs in his work. But the tree has none of the trappings of elevated romantic humanism about it. His work is down-to-earth. And, having a predilection for waste materials, Hawkinson usually takes what is ready at hand for investigation and transfiguration.

His universe is thus mapped on and traced through the lowly body — which often happens to be the artist's own. The mappings that result seem to be twofold: corresponding to both the visible surfaces and the invisible depths of the body. On the one hand, its unique surface topography is charted in new and odd configurations. For instance, in the *Blindspot* series (1991–95), the artist represents all the areas of his body that he cannot directly see, with the result that the body appears as a loose rug flung from the hairline. Conversely, in *Humongolous* (1995), he depicts all his epidermis that is visible to him — the work's distortion is due to his embodied perspective.

To the breadth of these spatial representations, Hawkinson treats the body to another concept that maps it or measures its span — that of time. For a number of works, starting with *Bathtub-Generated Contour Lace* (1995) and continuing through to *Pentecost* (1999), Hawkinson had himself photographed every ten seconds in a bathtub as it slowly filled with black paint. *Drain and Plug* (1996) shows the process. Such a sectional reckoning plots the body in two-dimensional increments over time. Seen from above, this contour map tells time much like the rings of a tree. Here mapping space cannot be separated from measuring time.

Flaying the skin from its inner armature, on the other hand, opens the body's internal circuitry or structure to view. Thus we are presented with a mapping of, in the artist's words, the "'vein' and 'neuro' systems" of a junked

Hammond organ (*Organ*, 1997), the simulated x-ray of the shroud-like *Alter* (1997) or the anatomical model of a skeleton made of rawhide dog bones in *Penitent* (1994). In Hawkinson's universe, no part of the body is wasted in examination or unconsidered as a material for visualization.

Yet, we cannot so easily dichotomize surface and depth in his work, full as it is of inversions — like a glove turned inside out. While *Graph* (1999) — a self-portrait made from the imprint derived from latex pulled from the artist's body and made into paint rollers — actually maps the exterior of his body, its pink colouration makes us think that we are seeing his insides, accessed through the orifices imprinted on the surface of the paper.

Such distorted images deviate from established representations of modelling and mapping insofar as they follow other, imaginatively conceived systems. The translation of a three-dimensional body to two dimensions is one of the most common. If these translation procedures reappear frequently in Hawkinson's work, it is to mock a rigid conventionality. All Hawkinson's works, perhaps, are translation systems of sorts. Not that we have to find the key to unlock the meaning for what may only be evidence of a process. What we take as a representational end-product is really a picture of a process of transformation, a communication between two different levels of organization or information. Some philosophers, such as Michel Serres, conceive of the body as a nesting of communications — a series of messages sent between different levels of organic integration. Each of Hawkinson's works is a message of this sort.

The tree is a handy model for the networks that exist in Hawkinson's work, rather than a profound symbol. Let's look at one that uses the tree explicitly as a metaphor and support: *Pentecost* refers to the incident recorded in the New Testament of the Holy Spirit descending on a gathering of apostles and speaking in tongues. Twelve humanoid figures sit on the branches of a tree made from paper and cardboard tubes, very much like a scenic tree in a stage set. The figures sit as if they inhabited the tree, or they hang from it like fruit and seem to display an easy, symbiotic relationship with it. An appendage from each of these bodies — a nose here, an elbow

there, a big toe or a penis — tap out rhythms on the truncated branches, which function like drums. These percussive rhythms, generated from Christmas carols on a computer program that the artist found and modified, resonate through the hollow tubes. Over the time that we experience this piece, they create rhythms of differing complexity.

The music that the figures individually produce, which unites them in its polyrhythm, has nothing human about it, though. At least in its original making and use, it is a spiritless mechanical rendering of clichéd tunes that are unrecognizable due to the artist's translation of the original melodies into rhythms. *Pentecost's* dumb musicality deflates the metaphor of inspired breath that invests this religious event with reverence. Despite this conclusion, it seems necessary to rescue this work from the idea that communication comes to naught, because this is not at all the spirit of the artist's work.

What is being communicated without words in *Pentecost* if not communication itself? Communication may take various forms and circuits in Hawkinson's works. The messages are not language based; his work plays with signals from the genetic realm to the cultural domain. We might follow these different pathways through the works in the exhibition, as if along the branches or roots of a tree. Here we discover the intersecting themes: the tree, with its branches metaphorically linked to networks and circuits, the blood, nerves and respiratory systems of the body, or to other electronic systems; sound, percussively or pneumatically produced without human presence, as a model of messaging; new topographical models of representation based on the body but radically transformed; and the silent measures of time, which might be calibrated according to the different spans manifested in the natural world and in the human realm, from micro to macro.

Hawkinson's works exteriorize the invisible codes and the silent communications that give form and structure to our bodies as biological entities. The spiritualizing symbolism attached to insufflation may lose value, but the connective and integrative import of communicative circuits — whether those of language, veins or nerves — gain value. Music might be made, circulated and sustained by machines, but it is nonetheless communicative. Thus, being

more than noise, it is meaningful. The language orientation of a message may humanize it but the silent communication of the code is just as much a message as its audible component is, and serves to unify our being and connect it to the life forms of the world. *Pentecost*'s messaging system is a symbol of the all-embracing connectivity of life on earth in which the human participates with the non-human, the living with the inert. As Serres writes, "a macro-molecule, or any given crystallized solid, or the system of the world, or ultimately what I call 'me' — we are all in the same boat. All dispatchers and all receivers are structured similarly."¹ Perhaps this is the spiritualism of a cybernetic age.

I am not suggesting that the tree of *Pentecost* is the central or originating metaphor for Hawkinson. There is no centre, only linkages established in every direction, as in the transversal weave of fabric. In his work, we do not seek out analogies but homologies. Images of nerves and blood vessels are mapped onto the tree, or vice versa, because they share similar communication circuits. One does not explain the other. The tree of *Pentecost* and its human "fruit" share in manifold principles. Neither takes precedence over the other. Although Hawkinson always uses his own body, the human is not necessarily the measure of all things.

If we can place Hawkinson's depictions of the body — dissections, we should rather say — between the natural world of the tree and the artificial zone of automata, it is not to maintain a hierarchical separateness for it. By taking the body apart, he has revealed its incorporation into larger circuits existing within both natural and speculative systems. Many of Hawkinson's functional works seem to have their origins in traditional automata, those writing machines, calculators, clocks and self-playing musical instruments so popular from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. Philosophical playthings before they became the fascination of artists in the modern period, automata were speculative devices more than tools. They were used to question the relation between the human and the non-human. Since they were meant to be self-sustaining machines, Hawkinson's contribution to the idea of the automaton has been to "breathe life" into its specifically musical manifes-

tation. *Pentecost* and its prototype *Cow* (1997), with their percussive mechanics now computer-operated, mimic more traditional automata. Hawkinson's pneumatically driven automata include *Bagpipe*, *Überorgan* (2000) and *Barber* (1997); but *Tuva* (1995), a machine that hums polyphonically, is the only one that attempts to reproduce the human vocal apparatus. Oddly, this handyman automaton, made from recycled plastic bottles and other waste bits, has the less-than-majestic appearance of a respiratory support system.

In a cosmologically oriented age, the classic automaton was the clock, which served to displace the notion of the human to the inhuman span of the cosmos. Hawkinson's works vacillate between similar extremes. Whether it is the direct subject or not, and whether the mechanisms are visible or not, time has always been an issue for Hawkinson. We have already noted a clock obliquely operating in the bathtub-generated contour self-portraits. Other works more obviously function like clocks, as camouflaged as they are in appearance. Some plot time in its traditional sense, although obscurely: one of the "clocks" of *Secret Sync* (1996) tells time by the movement of two hairs on a hairbrush; others employ larger scales as recording devices, such as the cross-section of a tree in *Concentric Circle: 705-Year-Old Tree Drawing* (1989). *Spin Sink* (1995) joins micro to macro; its ever-larger gears funnel out from their motion source — a slot car motor frenetically rotating at 1400 rpm. The final gear completes one revolution in an eighty-three year life-span. A work that combines the genetic and the historical, *Stamträd (Family Tree)* (1997) charts the branchings of a theoretical family tree traced back ten generations. The usual branchings of the genealogical tree have been reshaped by means of coded popsicles sticks that mimic the cross-section of an actual tree. History is inverted here: time radiates out from the present to the past, from the individual in the centre to his progenitors.

Morphologically similar to *Stamträd*, *Shatter* (1998) is a fake shattered tempered-glass window, which is actually meticulously constructed from mirrored ribbons sandwiched between plastic sheets. In this "transcription," we see the record of a blow delivered to the centre of the "glass." However instantaneous such a chance happening might seem to be in real life, the radi-

ating patterns of its shock-waves actually grow over time. Is there a pattern guiding even such arbitrary events similar to genetic determination? Is its rationale any different from Hawkinson's seemingly absurdist charting of the rise and fall of empires modelled on the digestive system of the body in *Wall Chart of World History from Earliest Times to the Present* (1997)?

The branchings in Hawkinson's work do not function like those of a logic tree but radiate outward, gathering new references and associations in their wake. Each work multiplies themes in transversal connections, while individually instantiating a node in the network. A perfect example of this is *Shorts* (1993), which weaves a garment from the slack of an electrical extension cord deployed in the exhibition space that powers another work. The theme of the tree connects to that of the ship in *Aerial (Mobile)* (1998), television antennae rigged with sails, through the intermediary of the bemasted tree of *Das Tannenboot* (1994). Similarly, the theme of breath is amplified in the idea of the propulsive power of the wind which guides this vessel. The vessel, masted in all directions, is also invisibly navigating the airwaves with its message of circular linkages that bring us back to the situation of any possible message: "From this moment on, I do not need to know who or what the first dispatcher is: whatever it is, it is an island in an ocean of noise, just like me, no matter where I am."²

Notes

1. Michel Serres, "The Origin of Language: Biology, Information Theory and Thermodynamics," *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 82.
2. *Ibid.*