Generelle Clint Wilson

Clint Wilson's Generelle Morphologie

In *Generelle Morphologie*, Clint Wilson makes dead birds dance a mechanical waltz and the effect is at once absurd and hauntingly beautiful, ridiculous and sublime. Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer finds 13 wind generating machines, placed on 13 tripods, with 13 small warblers suspended above the machines by a network of guy wires. The installation is clean and orderly, meticulously plotted along the lines of an invisible grid, suggesting the rational and controlled space of a scientific laboratory. As the viewer moves through the space, the scene is brought to life by randomly activated sensors. The wind machines do their work, the birds begin to spin, and the room is filled with the digitally processed sounds of pond life and a male voice humming Waltzing Matilda.

Since the mid-1990s, Clint Wilson has been creating site-specific installations that explore what he describes as "the complex interdependent relationship between how we see the world and how we use it." *Generelle Morphologie* belongs to this body of work, in which visual and verbal texts drawn from the life sciences (human biology, zoology, botany) are appropriated, reconfigured and placed within the fictional framework of 'dumb' laboratories or installations reminiscent of natural history museums and their predecessor, the cabinet of curiosities. At first sight, Wilson's installations gesture towards lofty biological or technological investigations. The viewer is momentarily seduced by the cool, clinical aesthetic of large Pyrex vessels (*Science Stories*, 1998), glass lenses and petri dishes (*Lumen and Family Tree*, 1996-97), and translucent latex sacs randomly inflating and deflating (... *but the clouds*, 1999), but the playful irony of these bioapperatii becomes apparent upon closer inspection.

These are simulated environments that point to their own artificiality, to the mechanisms of their own construction – materials that initially seem hi-tech reveal themselves as lo-tech, the stuff of high school science fairs and hobby kits tinkered with in the garage. When the illusion wears off, the viewer is meant to recognize that the source of these pseudo-scientific wind machines, vessels and wires is nothing more arcane than the local Radio Shack or Home Depot. *Generelle Morphologie* is animated by the combination of such contradictory and complementary elements: the push-pull relations of 'nature' (as represented by the birds and the ambient sounds of pond life) and 'culture' (science, technology, museums), kinesis and stasis, poetics and politics, simplicity and complexity, the humourous and the poignant, the random and the highly controlled. In a culture where the pursuit of knowledge with a purpose has been replaced by the compulsive consumption and accumulation of information as commodity and where experiences that were once directly lived have crystallized into representations, liberation is to be found in ideas, objects and acts that seem simple, absurd and irrational.

Clint Wilson has described his installations as attempts "to erase the functional and replace it with the senseless," but they also do more. In the tradition of the best idea-based art of the late-twentieth-century (the work of Conceptualist Hans Haacke comes to mind), Wilson's installations attempt to heighten our awareness of the ideological underpinnings of those things which we have come to accept as natural, neutral, transparent and unmediated. The title of this exhibition, *Generelle Morphologie*, is drawn from a nineteenth-century text on mutations in animal physiology by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel. Morphology is the study of the structure of things: whether it be the structure of organisms or the structure of words in a language, morphology seeks to contain, explain and define the phenomena that are a part of our lived experience. The taxidermied birds, each one bearing a tag that identifies them as the property of the zoology department at the University of Alberta, act as a visual metaphor for our cultural fixation with identifying, naming and containing phenomena in the name of scientific investigation and technological innovation – in a word, 'progress'. But their randomly activated, circular waltz is a negation of the relentless, teleological march of evolution. On the walls of the gallery,

biographies:
Isabela C. Varela is a writer and curator based in Edmonton. She is the Assistant Curator at the Edmonton Art Gallery and a member of the Board of Directors of Latitude 53. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from the University of Alberta and will receive her Master of Arts in Art History, Visual Art, and Theory from the University of British Columbia in the spring of 2001.

Clint Wilson received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Alberta in 1985, and his Master's from the University of Victoria in 1988. He has shown extensively throughout Canada, most recently with solo exhibitions at the Khyber gallery in Halifax and at Kingston,
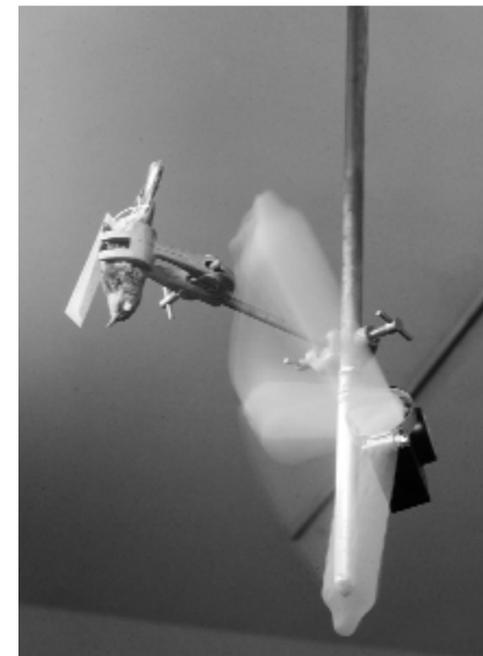
front cover image:
*Gravity and Grace (*detail)
eighteen wind generating machines with ornithological specimens suspended from each
mixed media, 2000

back cover image:
...but the clouds ,(detail from installation)
mechanical ecosystem, mixed media, 1999

background image:
digitally altered, circular phylogenic diagrams

This is a Stride Gallery brochure written by Isabela C. Varela who has been chosen by the artist because of her particular interest in the project. These publications provide regular opportunities for diverse writers to publish work that furthers critical discourse about contemporary art.
director: Robin Arseneault

THE STRIDE GALLERY