

Perte de Signal at the Kinetica Art Fair, London

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<http://esse.ca/fr/perte-de-signal>

Kinetica, now in its sixth year, is London's technical innovation art fair, featuring a wide range of art, design and curatorial new media projects. The promotional material on its website claims that many works at Kinetica "exemplify universal concepts, heighten consciousness and advance human potential,"¹ but, as with many art fairs, the scale and similarity of the booths, paradoxically, both allow the works a new audience and, at the same time, threaten to engulf them in an indiscriminate sea of sensors, motors, holograms, flashing lights and moving parts, which can do little to speak to the press material's grandiose intentions. The fair's promoters rely on the well-worn tropes of new media rhetoric, which would seem to all-too-readily equate audience interactivity with audience creativity, and increased gadgetry with advances in "human potential" (without seeming to want to acknowledge either, on the one hand, the possibility that some of these works might suggest non-anthropocentric understandings of potential; or, on the other hand, the fact that interactive gadgetry can descend into techno-fetishistic, pacifying spectacle much more easily, perhaps, than it can produce new forms of potential). In spite of its inflated, aspirational rhetoric, what I would hope to find at an art fair such as Kinetica is precisely something that is *not* universal – something that might pose a problem or critical question for new media: put it at odds with itself, out its antagonisms or reveal something of its limits.

In this light, the everyday, decidedly "low-tech" elements used in the four displays by Perte de Signal (Quebec's representation at Kinetica) were a welcome contrast from the glitzy gadgetry of most of the booths. A lacy paper airplane in Pavitra Wickramasinghe's *Take Hold Lightly, Let Go Lightly*; eggs and dried peas in Samuel St-Aubin's *De choses et d'autres*; plastic mesh in Maxime Damecour's *Temporeal*; the familiar texture of string looping around string in Patrick Harrop's *Vortical Filament*: these elements opened so-called "new media" onto many other sculptural, conceptual and social histories, and addressed some of the physical, philosophical and political stakes that constitute the point of encounter between the material and the mechanical.

St-Aubin's display contained two dinner plates raised up from a dotted surface, spinning around on an angle; their movements made a single dried pea on each plate travel around in circles. Nearby were two horizontal spoons, side by side, rigged up to motors which led the spoons through a sometimes synchronized, sometimes disjointed circular dance. A single egg held by one of the spoons would sometimes leap onto the next spoon as the motors brought them close together. With delightful simplicity, these works point to the many forms of disjuncture that arise when the perfectly smooth, regular, mechanical motion of motors encounters the far more complex, singular contours of everyday objects. The peas' not-quite-spherical surfaces "interpret" the motor's motions differently, tracing idiosyncratic lines around the

¹ Kinetica Art Fair, http://www.kinetica-artfair.com/?about_us/art-fair.html. [Accessed 24 October 2014].

plates. (Sometimes, they even fly off.) The egg wobbles awkwardly at one point in its mechanical dance, as if its internal fluids, permeated with their own momentum, were struggling to slow down to their mover's newly reduced speed, to reconcile themselves to the new timescale of the spoon's contours. The minute perception of motion is, arguably, becoming an increasingly politicized terrain, given, for instance, recent research into gait recognition, which would enable users to identify criminals whose faces are obscured from surveillance footage, or to secure buildings without ID cards, by scrutinizing each person's walk as they come in. In an era which pervasively – and increasingly – links particularity of motion to identity, St. Aubin's piece argues against this link, inviting viewers instead to closely perceive movement as a relational property, inhabiting the space between objects and mechanics rather than belonging to any one element.

In *Temporeal*, Maxime Damecour creates a strikingly effective approximation of the effect of viewing a jump cut in real space, using plastic mesh and speakers. A looping ribbon of mesh, resting on metal rods attached to hidden speakers and lit with flickering LED light strips, suddenly shudders, tenses, changes its position slightly. The flickering lights break the scene into simulated "frames", and make the movement feel as if it happened by montage, rather than by physical motion. This subtle, but extremely effective technique raises questions about the effect of filmic forms of perception on the material imaginary. It engages with the filmic cut as an anticipation of other, instantaneous forms of transporting material. Yet at the same time, it also entertains an illusion that the looping plastic mesh is tensile, muscular, stuttering, self-moving. Hidden in the shadows of the strobe, the material both sinks into filmic history, and assumes the semblance of a new autonomy of movement.

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