

NELSON HENRICKS
(MTL)

ORDINARY MAGIC: ON
PETER FLEMMING'S
INSTRUMENTATION

Text commissioned by Skol for the
exhibition *Instrumentation*, as part of the
International Digital Arts Biennial

Then she got into the lift, for the good reason that the door stood open; and was shot smoothly upwards. The very fabric of life now, she thought as she rose, is magic. In the eighteenth century, we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices from America; I see men flying – but how it's done, I can't even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns.

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*.

When I walk into a hardware store, I feel like making things. Peter Flemming's *Instrumentation* seems to emerge from a similar impulse. In a physical sense, this immersive sound installation is constructed from materials that evoke both narratives of and spaces for *building*: saw horses, bricks, raw lumber, clamps and vices; carpenter's workshops, inventor's labs, and artist's studios. Flemming extends conceptualist practices that conflate the gallery with the studio, and in doing so, equates process with product. Notions of building are at the forefront of Flemming's installation, but also *building as labour*, and rendering labour visible to the viewer. This is a radical aspect of Flemming's project, and one that undermines the hegemony of the digital age. Showing how something is done goes against the grain of capitalism, which strives to keep labour invisible.

A computer is like magician's hat. Inside it, mysterious things happen, but we have little or no understanding how. When confronted by some spectacular phenomenon, it is enough to say, "A computer did it" to dispel any questions concerning how it was made. With digital technology, labour is invisible and inscrutable. While record players produced turntablists, "scratching" and hip-hop, the CD player has no equivalent. Without specialized knowledge, digital technology resists the democratizing urge towards subversive repurposing. Flemming's practice bridges this gap between the analog and the digital, and in doing so, reconciles the two.

Instrumentation is phrased over two rooms. In the first space are four sculptural arrangements made from wood, metal, glass, and found objects. As mentioned above, many of these constructions suggest narratives of building; objects such as photo tripods and drums shift this narrative to the realm of artistic creation. The sculptural arrangements act as speakers, emitting long drones and plunking percussive rhythms in an endless, ever-changing, aleatory musical composition. Moving from the large first room into the smaller second room, we see the point of origin for these sounds: a tabletop installation built from buckets, bricks, paint cans, electronic components, piano wire and tapping drums, triggered by an array of low-budget light-activated sensors. The first room presents a product, the second room a process.

In the passage by Woolf quoted above, Orlando gives herself over to the magic of not knowing, of not understanding. I would argue that showing how something is made, how something is done, can produce its own kind of magic: the magic of ordinary things. This is the enchantment of children's science experiments, where wonder is brought forth from everyday objects. For me, moments of revelation, especially when they arise from impoverished materials, heighten my interest and engagement. This is no doubt due to the paradoxical relationship between what is shown (the magical) and how it is shown (the meager). Though Flemming's *Instrumentation* is made from the humblest objects and materials, the music it creates is mood instilling: peaceful, haunting, mysterious... *beautiful*. Music is the most abstract of the arts, but also the one most adept at pulling at our heartstrings. It is from this paradox that Flemming's *Instrumentation* derives its magic: the sublime can be found in the commonest of things.

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The exhibition *Instrumentation* took place
from April 27 to June 2nd, 2012

I realize that this text could be perceived as contradictory. Some might argue that, while Flemming's work seems transparent and comprehensible on the surface, it is in fact entirely dependent on the kind of inscrutable computer-based technology that I am, to a certain extent, railing against. In addition to this, my decision to integrate the quote from Woolf is questionable. Orlando's magical perception of elevators, airplanes and radio seems quaint to us now: the old magic has been superseded by a new magical order, one that will no doubt seem charmingly old-fashioned to readers eighty years hence. Perhaps this is the real triumph of Flemming's *Instrumentation*: by using clever sleight of hand he convinces us that there is no difference between the old magic and the new. All technology is open-ended, transparent, and free, and can act as a gateway to the sublime.

Nelson Henricks was born in Bow Island, Alberta and is a graduate of the Alberta College of Art (1986). He moved to Montréal in 1991, where he received a BFA from Concordia University (1994). Henricks lives and works in Montréal, where he has taught at Concordia University (1995 - present), McGill University (2001- 2003) and Université du Québec à Montréal (1999, 2003). He has also taught at the University of Toronto (2003). A musician, writer, curator and artist, Henricks is best known for his videotapes, which have been exhibited worldwide. A focus on his video work was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as part of the Video Viewpoints series (2000). His writings have been published in Fuse, Public, Coil magazines, and in the anthologies "So, To Speak" (Editions Artex, 1999), "Lux" (YYZ Press, 2000) and "Caught in the Act" (YYZ Press, 2004). With Steve Reinke, Henricks coedited an anthology of artist's video scripts entitled "By the Skin of Their Tongues" (YYZ Press, 1997).

Active for over a dozen years, **Peter Flemming** is a folk machinery artist, doing electronics handcraft 'by ear,' tinkering intensively and intuitively in the studio. His most recent work is an ongoing series of experiments about resonance, explored via sound, electromagnetically activated materials, mechanical performers and makeshift amplification devices. Past work has included lazy machines, solar powered artworks and hypnotically repetitive automatons. He has exhibited extensively internationally and been the recipient of numerous grants, awards and residencies. An occasional writer and curator, he has produced exhibition texts for other artists, presented papers, organized events and developed lecture series. He is an active board member or member of several local arts organizations. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Flemming currently lives and works in Montréal, where he teaches electronics for artists at Concordia University.