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New Media Art

Schematic: *Canadian New Media Art in London*, [space] (studios), London. December 2008

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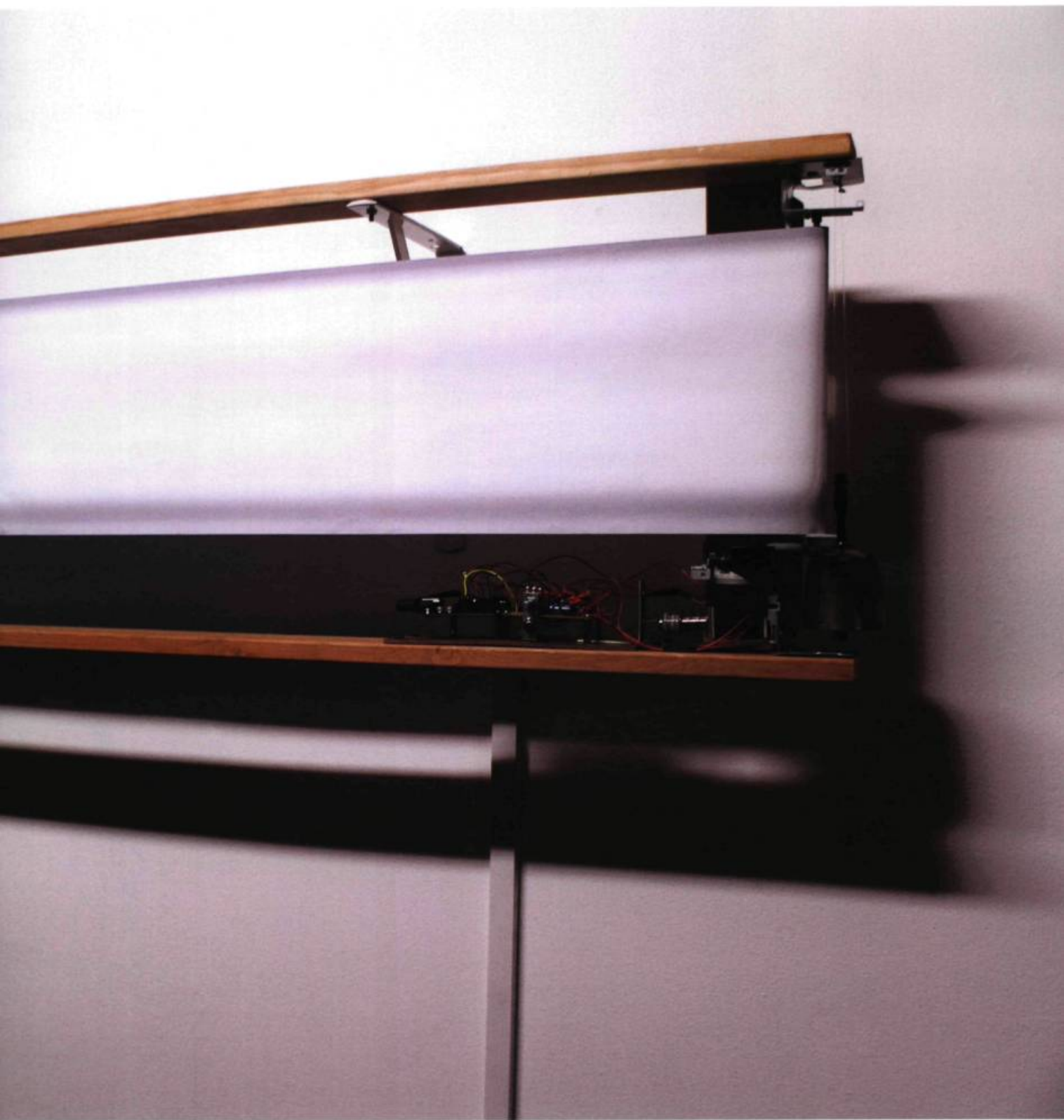
Canadian New Media Art

Schematic: Canadian New Media Art in London, [space] (studios), London, December 2008

chematic includes the work of five artists well known in Canada but whose work is rarely seen in the UK, and in fact for four of them, never before seen in London: Germaine Koh, Nicholas Stedman, Peter Flemming, Norman White and Joe McKay. The exhibition was originally initiated by Heather Corcoran (now curator of new media art at FACT in Liverpool) and was led by Edinburgh-based, Canadian new media artist and curator Michelle Kasprzak working with Heather and London-based producer Gillian McIver (disclaimer: as a Canadian curator living and working in the UK, I was also named on the original grant application to the Canada Council as a curatorial advisor). The title is slightly misleading as there is not a single schematic on view, although the works could be thought of as proof-of-concept iterations of mechanical circuits. What unites them aesthetically is their visibly hand-made engineered mechanics. It's a confounding show, but viewing it generates a very welcome kind of confusion about what role we might play, as viewers, users or participants, in relation to "new media art". We expect "Canadian" new media art to be mediatic, savvy and ironic, all McLuhan-inflected screens and layered multicultural narratives. Instead here we are met with object-based sculptures which are meditations on the processes of the natural world—lots of plywood, visible mechanical elements and kinetics. Canadians will know that the artists are a diverse group in terms of age and experience: Norman White is an iconic figure and his *Helpless Robot* from 1987 which challenges its viewers to assist in physically turning it around and around with audible emotionally intelligent feedback in the form of a kind of conversation from the object itself, is great to experience in person. Germaine Koh is the most widely shown of the group, her conceptual art installations and interventions have been included in a number of international biennials and the piece on view, *Fair Weather Forces: Water Level* was originally proposed for Liverpool in 2006 but not realised (another existing work in the same series was shown at Tate Liverpool instead). The piece is a series of custom-made velvet rope stanchions containing circuits and bicycle chains, connected to a receiver which reads tidal information from a remote solar-powered water-level sensor; as the tide rises so do the ropes. It doesn't react to your presence in exactly the same way that a nightclub bouncer might ignore you and let others pass if you aren't wearing the right clothes. Nick Stedman's *ADB* kinetic sculpture which responds to the touch of visitors (reading their skin temperature and heart-rate and curling up or unfurling accordingly) suffered some mishandling early in the show and unfortunately had to be withdrawn and returned to the artist. Joe McKay's understated but oversized progress bar, *The Big Job*, is a kind of mechanical scroll painting, and is distinctly underwhelming although quaint. Sadly it feels too obvious next to Germaine Koh's well considered and subtle sculpture, and discourages the viewer from spending time with it (perhaps it was hung too high?) which is a shame considering much of McKay's other work which sounds great: video software for mixing the sunset live, drum foot pedal powered cell phones, cell phones attached to telegraph keys. Most impressive for its Canadian-ness and its size and form is Peter Flemming's *Canoe*, lacking its usual plastic water-filled basin due to technical difficulties but nevertheless stunning with the mechanical arm paddling through space.

As Michelle Kasprzak starts her exhibition essay with reference to the first documented automaton (a "digesting duck" exhibited

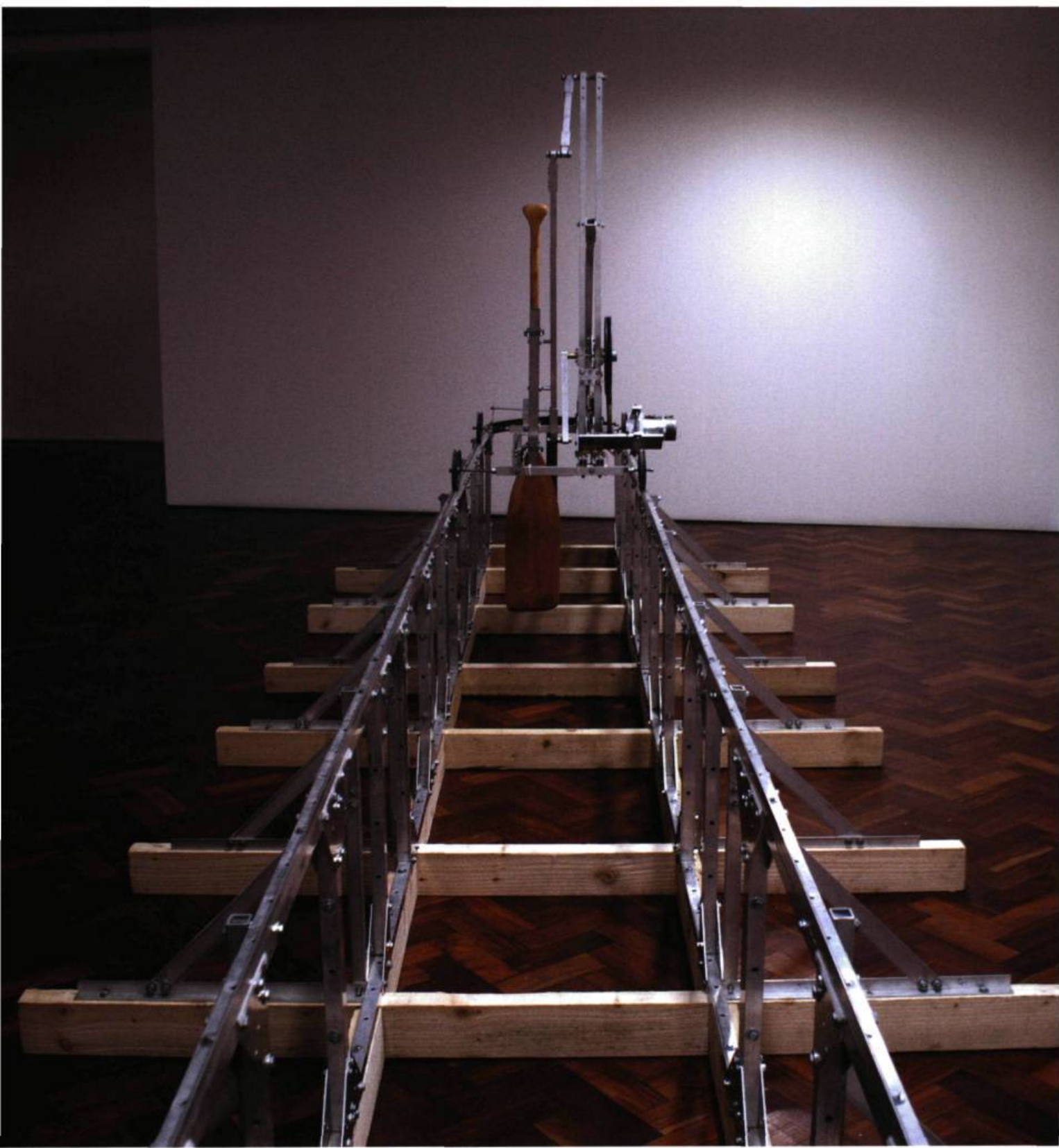


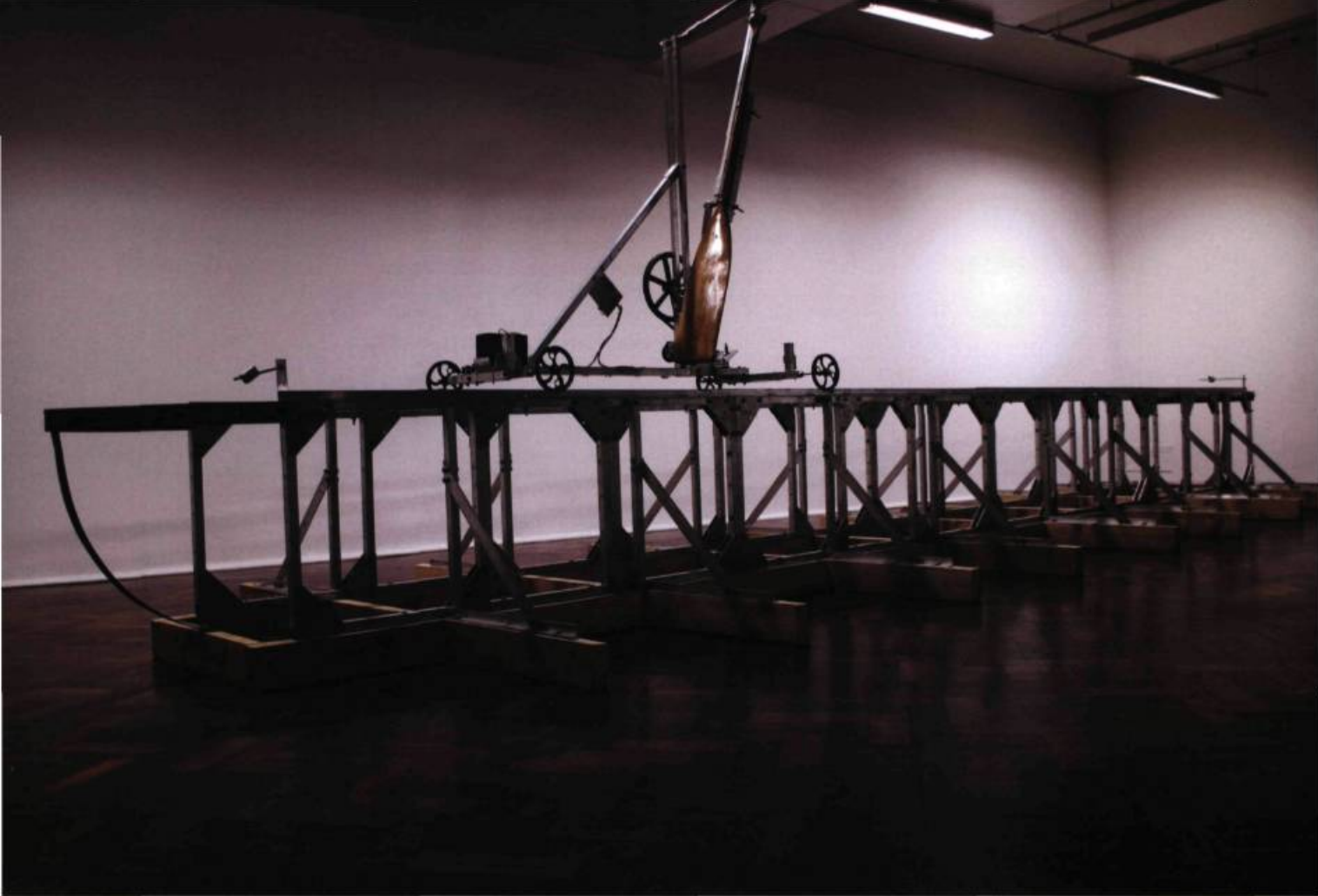


Joe McKay, *The Big Job*, 2005. Motors, wood, paper, electronics. Photo: Gillian McIver.









in 1738) it might have been more fitting to focus the title of the exhibition on the fact that it is full of lovingly crafted robots of sorts rather than schematics, after all these are actual working machines not just conceptions of them. Norman White has written of his piece that he tried "to give blatantly electro-mechanical systems a life of their own" and that is the case with all of the works in this exhibition. There is something distinctly human (or indicative of the lack of humans) in the works of Flemming and Koh, which refer to someone, but moreover nature and the built environment, that isn't present in the white cube gallery. Flemming's *Canoe* has been through a number of iterations, at one point running on solar power when installed outdoors, and so its accidental modification here is all the more intriguing (a video of the water-filled version was included). For me they fall into the category of evocative objects, of a scale we know and recognise, familiar and, like the digesting duck, they are a kind of performing machine, doing their thing whether you are there or not. White's and Stedman's robots are the most interactive, or responsive to your presence, but at a funny scale (too big and too small, or perhaps too burly and too precious), outright artistic creations which make reference to something very much beyond the world we live in. (Interestingly, White has released the software script for the artificial intelligence program of the *Helpless Robot*, creating another level of participation in the piece beyond its presentation in the gallery.) Which leaves something sardonic about McKay's progress bar, which again is a performing machine but a cartoonish reminder of your ineffectiveness as an interactant in the world of technology (on screen you would click and wait for the file to load and watch the progress bar helplessly, here you can't even click, and it feels like if you could click on it, it might mangle your hand as it stalled).

In this way, perhaps the wittiness and the fallibility of the works in the show are what unite them as strangely Canadian. (I am reminded of a panel at a College Art Association conference in Toronto in 1998 which was titled, "Just what is it that makes Canadian art so different, so appealing?"). In her essay Kasprzak hints at the humour within these kinetic intelligences on view: "The Big Job is unfinishable, and reflects the Sisyphean nature of other tasks taking place in the gallery, such as the Canoe paddling to travel nowhere, and the Helpless Robot continually seeking help and never being satisfied with its placement." Lastly, it is worth commenting on the tenacity necessary to pull off a professional show like this in an artist-run space of the most ad-hoc kind, with a geographically dispersed curatorial team and with the strength of the British pound to the Canadian dollar. The shipping alone must have cost a fortune; maintenance of technical works of new media art isn't easy or cheap either. For the commitment of the curators and the generosity of the artists, most who were here for the opening, we should be grateful for the chance to have seen these works together in one place at one time.

SARAH COOK

Sarah Cook is a curator of new media art and post-doctoral research fellow at CRUMB at the University of Sunderland, UK (www.crumbweb.org). In 2008 she was the Inaugural Curatorial fellow at Eyebeam Art and Technology Center in New York where she curated an exhibition of hacked everyday technologies including the works of Michel de Broin, Max Dean, YooJoun Paek and Paul deMarinis among others (*Untethered*). A Canadian who has spent a lot of time at the Banff New Media Institute, Sarah combines exhibition-making, writing, editing, jurying and consulting in her practice.