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Some Bad Timing: stance, stasis, and movement in works by Tom Dean + Murray Favro

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Some Bad Timing: stance, stasis, and movement in works by **Tom DEAN + Murray FAVRO**

Gordon LEBREDT

It is always possible to go some distance.
–Sigmund FREUD

I would call this a scene, the "scene of the subjectile," if there were no already a force at work prepared to diminish the scenic elements: the visibility, the element of representation, the presence of a subject, even an object.
–Jacques DERRIDA

What follows has been inscribed between two impressions, two relays — or, if I may say so, between two fixations. Two posts, then, between which these all too belated (but one could just as well consider them to be all too premature) revisions might be said to oscillate. Another way of putting it would be to say that the places or placings of these things, these events are not, to my mind, particularly stabile. Now this instability is not entirely the "fault" of the "objects" in question. Rather, ambivalence here also extends, according to each instance, to what I have referred to as a fixation. Thus, my fixation, in each instance, will have been itself just as unstable, just as ambivalent — a condition I believe to be attributable to the particular constraints that have ordered the reception of what persists as a demand or calling.

Constraints that, to say the least, are rather severe and, given the circumstances — out of which a re-visioning of sorts is anticipated — all too ready to lend themselves to what many will consider nothing more than a form of interpretive violence: an uncalled for distortion of the facts. Yet, in such circumstances I'm inclined to view the effects of such abuse not only as a very distinct possibility but a necessarily distinguishing, if not determining characteristic of their entire *mise en scène*. At the risk of going too quickly, I will simply say that I consider this distortion a measure of the distance, the almost irreducible distance one must endure when compelled to mind one's fixations.

Before going any further then I must confess that I have never actually encountered these sources or "scenes" of my so-called fixations, never experienced them first hand as things in themselves so to speak. Even so, at some point each of them —sight unseen — somehow impressed themselves on me; each, in turn, persisted enough in its distance, its afterwardsness to fix in my mind something like an image.

First fixation, first image: itself a remnant from a previous performance, Tom Dean's *Three Sheets to the Wind* (1995) consisted of three commercially available bed sheets fixed sequentially to a clothesline that spanned a temporary exhibition space in downtown Toronto.[1] Off to one side, three oscillating pedestal fans provided a constant but fluctuating "breeze" that gently set the sheets in motion. Having remembered reading of the work somewhere, in a newspaper review perhaps, a quick call to Dean confirmed the essential details. I confessed I had, however, forgotten the title of the work. As a well-known seafaring expression, "three sheets to the wind" refers to someone who is overly intoxicated, someone whose gait, much like the motion of a large sailing vessel at sea that has had the misfortune of having more than one sheet come loose or untethered (sheets being the ropes or chains that secure the lower extremities of a sail), is less than steady. By all appearances then someone who, having drunk to excess, is apt to stumble, to miss a step and, as a result, maybe suffer a precipitous fall. Three sheets, three subjectiles — without their sheets. Which is to say: being more than one, more than two, they are now indeed too far gone. Unfettered, they at once perform something like a "first event," "the support, the surface or the material, the unique body of the work…, *at its moment of birth*…."[2]

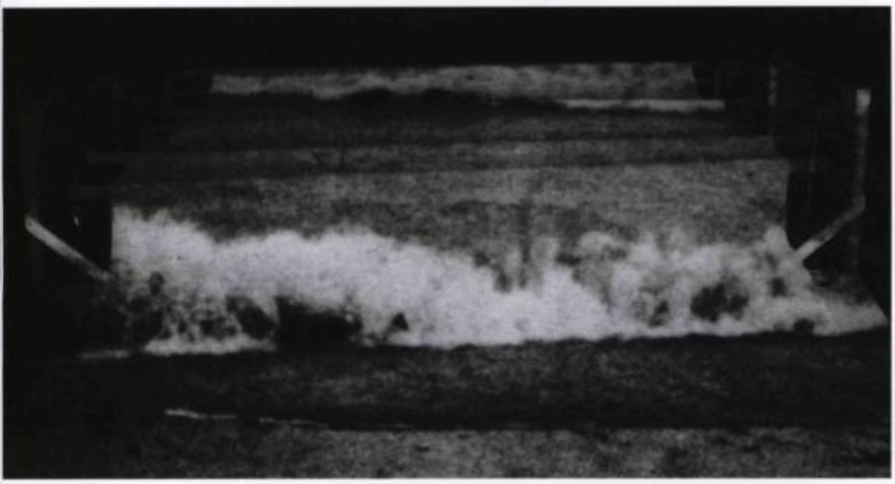
[…]

Several weeks previous to my conversation with Dean, my mind was besieged by another very similar scene. It was — no, it still is — much stranger, more *unheimlich* than Dean's. I can picture it quite clearly in my head but can't for the life of me remember where I might have first come across it. Obviously, this time the source of my fixation is a reproduction — possibly from an issue of *Arts Canada*, or maybe *Vanguard*. I comb my archives. Nothing. A few days later, on a visit to a local art dealer, I find what I'm looking for: there, on page 23 of an art catalogue are two reproductions of a work by Murray Favro called *Synthetic Lake*.[3] Again, as I admitted above, I've never seen it, the real thing, in the flesh and blood as they say. Even so, I have no problem imagining it in operation: a rather large, ungainly mechanical contraption, which, once up and running, does its best to simulate the action of waves breaking on a shoreline. I ask a colleague of mine if he knows of the work. He replies that he doesn't. I immediately impress upon him what I take to be the uncanniness of Favro's set-up, that for me, as a scene, it happened to surface as if in a dream. I again emphasize its persistence, its by now obsessive claim on me. At this point I let it go.

[…]

Once I have the images of *Synthetic Lake* before me I'm struck by a certain structural aspect of Favro's work, one that it shares (at least with respect to the effects that it reproduces) with each of the three sheets (or shrouds) of *Three Sheets to the Wind*. More to the point, I feel both works partake of — how should I put it — a certain *operationality*, a labouring (mourning?) suggestive of nothing other than some resurrection scene.[4] I may be wrong, but in each case something — call it "life" — works to differentiate itself, to distance itself not so much from death (the inevitable) but from what I'm compelled to call fiction. Or to be more precise: in both cases, something figural returns; reanimated (in each case its movement bearing in varying degrees the arrhythmic characteristics of an automaton), it struggles to maintain its stance, to reassert its presence as a discrete "object."

Tom DEAN, *Three Sheets to the Wind*, 1982-1995. Three commercially available bed sheets, pylons, clothesline, three industrial pedestal fans. Installed in a Toronto warehouse space in 1995 for an exhibition by the collective known as Nether Mind.
Photo: Tom Dean. Courtesy National Gallery of Canada.



Murray FAVRO, *Synthetic Lake* (*Lac synthétique*), 1972-1973. 2.9 x 6.1 x 12.2 m. 16 mm colour film loop, projector, wood, canvas, rope, electric motor, metal fittings. National Gallery of Canada. Photograph © National Gallery of Canada.

Now both operations show this labour as a struggle with, if I may say so, the image. In Dean's case things are already somewhat precarious for it seems that the image has more or less given up the ghost. It has, in a word, departed, left the scene. Only the subjectile remains exposed. Thus he leaves it for Favro to force the issue, to have as a concern the *re*graphing of the thing. We could say that, for Favro, it would appear that photography—in all of its absoluteness — must, in each and every case, overrule the support.[5]

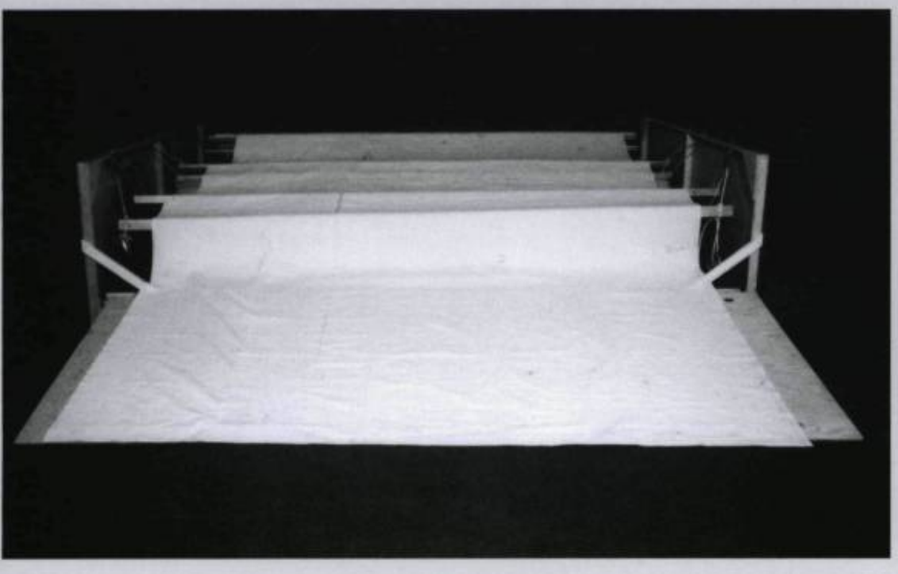
Or so it would seem.

If, on the one hand, Dean is left to wrestle with his ghosts, Favro, on the other hand, has as a problem one that is innately photography's own. Thus it would seem that the latter is drawn to wanting to solicit what the photograph, on the basis of its inherent automatism, does best: to mechanically (re)present what is out there, to trope or to mirror so-called reality. For it would appear that the image resembles nothing if not a cloak, a covering that, as all of Favro's works involving projection demonstrate, can be retrofitted to facsimilies the very object or objects from which it has been originally stripped. Of course any such attempt is always already marked by futility given that it has as a presupposition a notion of vision based solely on geometry.

But it's precisely this lack of fit in Favro's case that appeals to me. Doubtless his recourse to photography and its projection — not to mention the rather crude attempt at animation — can be now considered marked by so many unavoidable technical limitations, limitations that, it must be noted, give the work what many would see as its charm, its *character*. Even so, I don't see any advantage in viewing such lapses, these incongruities or inadequacies, as something that could or should have been avoided. On the contrary, I feel that they — the seams and syncopae of *Synthetic Lake* — should be exacerbated. To help clarify things, it might be of some use to examine Favro's "object," his subjectile (what, insofar as it sacrifices itself to light, comes to lie beneath the image), consisting of little more than a horizontal canvas surface draped over a mechanical armature that, when operational, induces in the aforementioned surface a series of repeating, wave-like undulations. This gesture, with all of its hubris, strikes me as comical, perhaps even bathetic; yet the effort its operation expends in order to impart movement — to what, in effect, gives the impression of "life" —to the subjectile, the surface of inscription, does more than simply "bear on nothing," on the merely frivolous. Thus at some point one must take the measure of the programme, of the *amina* ("breath") that from behind the scenes (there are at least two scenes or two figures at work here) accounts for the action: the impression of a surface rising and falling according to a measured cadence or rhythm. The "programme," as a kind of pre-inscription, dictates the action, forces the support to mimic, eurythmically I presume, the actions depicted on the projected film. Rather than withdrawing (more or less disappearing as in most the artist's other projection works) the support gets up on its legs so to speak and proceeds to mark time with the image. It would, however, given the mechanics involved, be difficult to imagine exactly how this *mise en oeuvre*, this movement-in-place of the support could ever come into step with the projected action, let alone, together, sustain anything like an ongoing syncopation. It's as if Favro never intended to keep the two scenes apart, to maintain a relationship that, if everything could be synchronized (or synthesized), would be essentially specular, a condition whereby each scene, each surface would stand off as the mirror of the other. In other words, if one's goal is to achieve perfect synchronization, to have the two scenes and their figures resonate sympathetically, one must be capable, at each moment, of distinguishing between them. So, one can be forgiven for assuming, as I just did above, that the programme, right from the start, favours synchronization, that any discordance, any lack of registration would not be immanent to its operative inscription or code: its schema.

The schema holds forth; it's what gives the entire set-up its form, or more importantly, its stance, and it follows, its stability. But with the introduction of movement, that form or stance is displaced — in time. And the results, I can imagine, can be catastrophic with respect to its mimetic programme. Then again, I don't believe imitation (mimesis as imitation) to be the issue here; rather, it's a question of an iteration or *re*-petition that works to undo the constraints of what I assumed should produce a more measured, more consistent beat. Here, what surfaces in repetition in order to (re)figure the subjectile so that it might align properly with the attending image, carries with it an arrhythmic component (what in repetition would have it fold back on itself, not to cancel itself out but to put it out of step with itself), a *delay* if you like whose only function is to play havoc with the programme, to the point where the distinction between scenes — say between form and the formless and, I might add, between fiction and non-fiction, the virtual and the non-virtual and so forth — threatens to collapse.

[...] ←



Murray FAVRO, *Synthetic Lake* (*Lac synthétique*), 1972-1973. The apparatus without projected film image. National Gallery of Canada. Photograph © National Gallery of Canada.

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NOTES

1. The exhibition, staged by the Toronto-based collective Nether Minds, was located in a warehouse space at 376 Dufferin Street.
2. Jacques Derrida, "To Unsense the Subjectile," *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Cambridge: Massachusetts and London: England, The MIT Press, 1998), p. 65.
3. Christopher Cutts was kind enough to provide me with a copy of the exhibition catalogue *Murray Favro*, London Regional Art & Historical Museums and the McIntosh Gallery, University of Western Ontario, 1999. Favro's *Synthetic Lake* (1972–73) is reproduced twice, once showing the set-up without the projected 16 mm colour film loop component engaged and again as fully operational. The work is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.
4. In both cases we are dealing with machines, with assemblages whose animated sequencing are driven by more or less calculable programmes. Thus, as mere machines, it is their inorganicity that opens them to the charge that they are, at bottom, uneventful, that nothing happens (nothing that would in any way constitute an event) that is not already contained in their programmes (Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p 118). These things run, as they say, on automatic and don't require our intervention in order to do whatever they are programmed to do. As animations, however, both these machines exhibit, at the core of their operationality, a pneumatically inspired movement: the rise and fall of the support or subjectile as resembling the action of some sort of diaphragm. It is on the basis of this sensation of compression and decompression, folding and unfolding that "happens" to the surface of a demarcated field–a surface representative of the field of the visible as a seemingly undifferentiated whole–that I broach the question of resurrection or resuscitation: the breathing of "life" into what is nothing more than a technical performance.
5. The phrase the "absoluteness of photography" is Stephen Melville's by which I take him to mean photography's inability to outmaneuver its technical automatism, its innate obligation to, as he puts it, "representation in and as presentation." See Stephen Melville, *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*, ed. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1996), p. 206.