Max Dean has used machines to shape his works, with results that are unexpectedly human. **Lisa Gabrielle Mark** looks at some of his recent projects

button pusher

ABOVE: **Max Dean**
As Yet Untitled 1992–5
Industrial robot, metal, found photographs
Variable dimensions
Photo Isaac Applebaum

LEFT AND OPPOSITE: **Max Dean**
____. Performance Festival, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, May 13–14, 1978
Photo Glenn Lewis

An oft-told story of a performance that Max Dean once staged in Montreal goes something like this: during the performance, unsuspecting audience members were confronted with someone being dragged into a room, rigged to a pulley system. Since it seemed the person would eventually end up hanging by his or her ankles, the audience frantically tried to prevent this by making all sorts of noise—someone even played the violin—until the threat of danger had passed (no one seems to know exactly when or how it ended). Like an urban myth, the story seemed more sketchy, more fantastical each time I heard it. Occasionally the performance was even attributed to another artist. Years later, as I am researching Dean's work for this article, I feel compelled to set the record straight and ask him what really happened.

The performance, cryptically titled ____., was created for a performance festival at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1978. It involved a timer on a plinth, set for 35 minutes; next to that was a light bulb in a socket, and next to that a winch. Located in front of the "stage" area were some seating and a microphone stand. As the audience settled in, the timer started and the light bulb went on. Suddenly from an open archway the cable connected to the winch began to pull someone into the room. The anonymous figure was gagged, blindfolded and bound at the hands, knees and feet. It was Dean, but as he later explained, he wished to be unidentifiable in order to avoid creating any undue influence on the audience's reaction. Someone in the room made a noise (I like to think it was a gasp), and the light bulb went off and the winch stopped. When the audience fell silent again, the winch started up.

After figuring out the correlation between their behaviour and the fate of the bound person, audience members set about clapping and making noise in order to stop the unknown man from hanging upside down. As time passed, the clapping began to wane; luckily, someone had happened to bring a violin, and pulled it out and began to play. (This is surely one of the most merciful performance-art audiences on record.) When 35 minutes was up, the performance was over. Dean never restaged ____. because, as he pointed out, the audience's reaction was completely spontaneous; a savvy audience might let him hang.

FOR 30 YEARS, Dean has created performances, installations and events that invite the active participation of viewers, who are called upon to perform (or refrain from performing) certain actions

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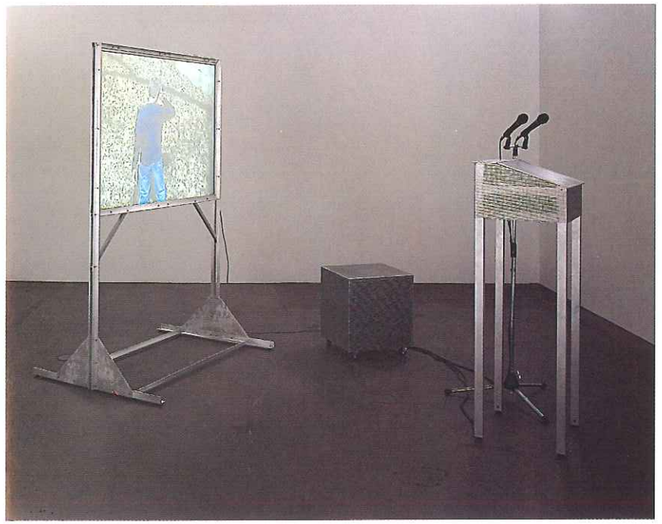
that will determine the outcome of a piece. Because the works have tended to be ephemeral or have been dismantled after presentation, they've generally entered collective consciousness through viewers' testimonials. However, if Dean's work lingers in the mind, I suggest that this is not because you have witnessed a shocking spectacle (like some of Chris Burden's early performances), nor is it because you have engaged in a circumscribed ritual (*à la* Hermann Nitsch). It is because as a viewer, you assume some responsibility for your experience and, in many instances, your presence is registered. Instead of the usual museum protocol of momentarily glancing at an artwork and then moving on, Dean's work asks you to make a conscious choice to engage (or not), then watch as the consequences unfold.

From October 2000 to June 2002, visitors to the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in Toronto are being treated to vintage Dean. A group exhibition, "Canadian Stories," which also features Ian Carr-Harris and John Massey, offers *The Telephone Piece*. It is a work Dean, like Massey, originally conceived for the "OKanada" exhibition curated by Pierre Théberge for the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1982. Back then, the ambitious piece was called *Von Hier Nach Da* (From Here to There) and it comprised a table and six telephones inside a square, Plexiglas structure. The new circular version at Hendeles contains a table with three phones. Lining the inside of the curved Plexi wall is a continuous stream of audiotape that winds and unwinds horizontally. When visitors enter the structure, a moving mechanism is triggered. It runs along the inside circumference of the Plexiglas, lifting the audiotape and playing what sound like excerpts of various phone conversations. As many as three visitors at a time can then choose to pick up the phones and make calls. As soon as someone initiates a call, another device records the conversations onto audiotape and proceeds to affix it to the Plexi with a steady stream of removable glue. Forty-five seconds into their conversations, callers become part of a conference call with others using the phones and those being called outside. If a visitor is alone, there is no conference call. One additional phone line also allows someone to call in from the outside and join in the conversation (often unbeknownst to the callers).

The day I visited, the most popular topic of conversation was, understandably, *The Telephone Piece* itself. Gallery callers attempted to describe it to incredulous phone-mates elsewhere. (The social dynamics were fairly predictable: polite or shy callers tended to remain silent for long intervals while other, chattier ones went into great detail about the work.) As we spoke, we could hear the conversations of those who had been there before us, talking pretty much about the same things.

The Telephone Piece was running smoothly that day, but Dean is no stranger to technical difficulties. When the work was exhibited in Berlin, it used a greater number of phone lines and was frequently out of service (the East Germans turned off some lines). Now, standardized conference calling for up to eight people is available to any phone subscriber (and removable glue is as common as Post-it notes). The seamless remounting of *The Telephone Piece* draws attention to the fact that what was once cutting-edge technology has become as ubiquitous as telephones.

Occasionally Dean's work gets ahead of itself, technically speaking. At an exhibition at the Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto this summer, he presented his *As Yet Unrealized* robotic chair models alongside an animated short film that showed a chair collapsing, then slowly putting itself back together. The National



LEFT: Max Dean
Sneeze 2000
DVD, video projector, privacy window, electronic components
Variable dimensions
Photo Robert Keziere
Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery

OPPOSITE: Max Dean
As Yet Unrealized 2000
12 wooden chairs, DVD Variable dimensions
Photo Isaac Applebaum
Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery

Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa funded initial research into the project in 1984, but the technology was not sufficiently developed at that time to go ahead with it. During a recent visit to Dean's studio, however, he indicated that he is working on the project again and hopes to complete it soon.

The truism that artists push the boundaries of technology seldom finds more thoughtful and elegant expression than in an artwork by Max Dean. There are no extraneous elements, and built-in cues clearly indicate what is being asked of the viewer. Compared, for instance, to the mechanical excesses of Chris Burden's *When Robots Rule: The Two Minute Airplane Factory*, exhibited at the Tate Gallery (Millbank) in London in the spring of 1999, Dean's use of technology is downright understated. Burden's piece is an elaborate, nearly room-sized automated factory that manufactures small, rubber-band-powered airplanes made of paper and balsa wood. The scale and complexity of the contraption seems intentionally absurd in comparison with its intended output of toys. While Dean's works are superbly designed, they do not fetishize technology by using it merely for its own sake. Nor do they take any particular issue with it, as Burden clearly does.

Dean uses technologies of varying degrees of sophistication—from the state-of-the-art robotics of the *As Yet Unrealized* chairs to the ingeniously simple ball-point glue dispenser in *The Telephone Piece*—as a means of interfacing with his audience. Most often, it is the technology that allows us to engage with the work. No artist is an island and Dean's studio buzzes with technical consultants, machinists and assistants. His regulars include Jim Ruxton (electronics), Alex Laverick (machinist and software consultant), Matt Donovan (machinist and designer for *The Telephone Piece*) and "the wizard," Colin Harry, who is known for his marvellous technical and problem-solving abilities.

A newer work also featured in the Hobbs show, *Sneeze* (2000), is a classic example of Dean's economical approach to design. Visitors to the gallery first encounter an aluminium lectern with two microphones standing near a large pane of glass; they stand on one side of the glass screen. If viewers choose to speak into the microphones, they trigger a series of six still images that appear consecutively on the glass, which is engineered so that the images appear on both sides of the pane at once. Each microphone triggers its own sequence of images: speaking into the right-hand microphone calls forth images of a man photographed from the back in a studio-like interior; the sequence shows him walking to a desk drawer and pulling out some files. The still images are then replaced by a moving DVD image, in which the camera closes in eerily on the back of the man's neck. Speaking into the left-hand microphone initiates a still sequence in which the same man is walking outside, with his hands over his face apparently in distress; these are followed by a DVD showing the man falling to the ground and lapsing into a seizure. Though the viewer might continue to speak into the microphones after the sequence of still scenes has given way to the moving image, the DVD segments are not voice activated.

In both sequences, the viewer loses control of the work at the moment of greatest vulnerability for the subject. Furthermore, the viewer at the microphones looks at the stills and moving images in reverse while viewers on the other side of the glass see the images the right way around. In this way, the person at the microphone effectively manufactures the experience (including the many stops and starts that result from not speaking continuously) for people on the other side. At the end of each DVD segment, an electrical process within the glass makes the screen transparent for ten seconds, so that the viewers can see each other.

While viewers of *Sneeze* feel the strongest sense of responsibility at the moment when control is lost, an earlier work, *As Yet Untitled* (1992–95), gives viewers control that is coupled with

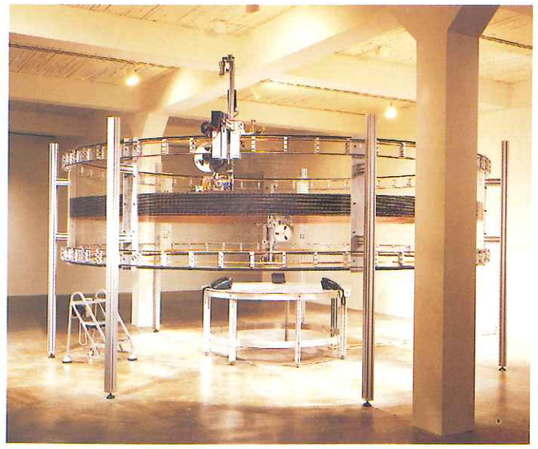
a sense of responsibility for their actions. The piece comprises a robotic arm, a box of old photographs, a conveyor belt, a paper shredder and a pair of metal hand silhouettes placed at approximately chest height. The arm lifts a single photograph from the box, pivots and presents it to the viewer, then pivots again and drops it into the paper shredder. The shredded photograph pieces then move along the conveyor belt and are dropped onto a pile on the floor. The viewer may intervene in this process by placing her or his hands against the metal hands; this causes the robotic arm to alter its course and simply place the photo in a nearby box for safekeeping. (The grace with which the robotic arm executes its tasks is positively balletic.)

When the work was shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1996, viewers demonstrated all kinds of reactions: some could not bear to let a photograph of an actual person be shredded and endeavoured to "rescue" them; others, perhaps perversely, did the opposite. Some developed other criteria for intervening; and some merely tried their hand, so to speak, and left it at that. Over the course of the AGO presentation, *As Yet Untitled* went through tens of thousands of ordinary snapshots. The work has also been shown in Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, Brussels and in the "dAPERTutto" section of the 1999 Venice Biennale. In March 2001, it travels to Sheffield, England.

As Yet Untitled seemed to impart an urgency and moral gravity similar to ____. but instead of a live human being, we were given photographic representations of human beings (identifiable but nevertheless anonymous) as well as other more-or-less banal snapshot subjects such as landscapes, pets and buildings. With ____. the situation was fairly straightforward: the audience made a collective choice to spare a person the trauma and discomfort of being hung upside down. But *As Yet Untitled* was another matter entirely. While we all know that photographs are not people, their symbolic proximity to the real thing throws a spanner in the work's moral mechanics. For some, photographs are surrogates for the people they represent and defiling them can mean anything from insult to omen.

From ____., *As Yet Untitled* and *Sneeze*, we can see that Dean's work has a history of engagement with issues of identification, projection, anonymity and responsibility. (*The Telephone Piece* also touches on these themes, albeit obliquely.) Photography, and more recently video, are recurring catalysts for his work's complex psychological dynamics. With *As Yet Untitled* you look at and judge, as it were, photographs of and by other people. However, in *Pass It On* (1982) you are the subject of the photographs.

For the piece, Dean placed a bathtub, a camera and a clock inside an old dentist's office located in Montreal's Drummond Building. The camera faced the tub and was calibrated to take pictures at five-minute intervals. Viewers entered when a light in the adjacent waiting-room indicated that the room was vacant. Alone in the empty space, many apparently took the opportunity to have a quick bath, but others—perhaps more modest or suspicious—remained fully clothed. Either way, the Polaroid



Max Dean
ABOVE: ***The Telephone Piece*** **2000 (rebuilt from 1982 installation) Telephone conferencing system, audio, record and playback system, Plexiglas, aluminium components 5.33 m diameter x 2.44 m high Photo Robert Keziere**
RIGHT: ***The Telephone Piece*** **(detail)**

camera recorded the participants' actions and the resulting photographs were taken away by the subjects. What happened in the room became a secret you could choose to keep or reveal, depending on what you did with the evidence.

An extended time-based work, *The Self-Timed Portrait* (1993), requires that subjects donate their own photographs. The piece is built around a statistic indicating that the standard life expectancy of a man is 76 years. The subjects, usually Dean's personal friends, are asked to contribute one photograph of themselves for every year they have left before turning 76. These are then arranged in chronological order from most recent to earliest and encased in a steel frame box. Over the course of a year, an automated mechanism moves the photo on top down towards a steel basin, eventually dropping it inside. Presumably when the subject approaches 76 (the hypothetical end of life) his baby photo will be the only one left. In addition, a counter displays the number of hours the subject can expect to keep body and soul together, according to statistical probability. I imagine a subject who lives longer than 76 years staring at the empty space where his photographs used to sit. Would the extra time feel like a gift? Or would it just remind him of the inevitable day when he no longer is? As in *As Yet Untitled*, the relentless automation of technology is pitted against the unpredictability of the human heart.

Clearly, Dean is interested in pushing emotional buttons, but he avoids guiding his viewers towards any particular epiphany. He opts instead to heighten viewers' awareness of their own ambivalence. To engage in one of his works is to risk revealing something of yourself. Given what Dean has risked to realize them, perhaps it is a fair exchange. ■

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