

Deus Ex Machina

Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto

May 9 to September 26, 1992.

Érick Desprez takes the title of his installation from the Theatre. *Deus Ex Machina* is a theatrical term, latinized from the Greek *makhane*, 'the god from the machine'. In the denouement of a Greek tragedy, a crane behind the main stage area would help create the illusion of a god descending into the scene, intervening in the affairs of mortals. This intervention would effect a resolution of the plot. With *Deus Ex Machina*, Desprez signals his own intervention into the drama of collective memory and the popular imagination.

Desprez relocates historical conflicts within the six sides of a die. Hellenic stories of the gods are collapsed with the moral and mystical paradigms of middle eastern and western medieval metaphysical texts. *Deus Ex Machina's* basic form is based on dice. In this framework, philosophy is contextualized within chance and theatre. In the installation, Érick Desprez works through a found-object aesthetic to rebuild certain basic elements in the formation of western culture.

Deus Ex Machina is constructed as a cube, 8 foot square. Four posts each support a circular saw blade at their upper extremities. These poles are the primary construction elements of the installation. Like telephone poles, they are tree trunks transformed, stripped of their bark and oiled. Emblems of the physical presence of the mass communications age, they serve as evidence of a sophisticated technological infrastructure cutting through a natural landscape. The simplicity of the tree trunk also forms the architectural basis of the piece, like the columns of the temples built in the height of Hellenistic Athens. Their dually ancient and post industrial character connect a point of cultural origin with the immediate present. The poles are like a totem to a post-modern overdetermination of an object's meaning.

The saw blades suspended high in the sculpture manifest the ancient oppositions of heaven and earth,

spirit and body. The artist poses the heavens and heavenly bodies in their jagged circular shape. With the rotary movement of the saw blades he suggests the conceptual perfection of the circle. While the spheres recall stars, they remind us how fragile our bodies can be. The physical threat that these sharp objects pose is a warning against the misuse of tools to satisfy human ambitions of power.

The poles are connected by cross bars to define the cube. Suspended metal parts are hung from the cross bars to represent different numbers on the sides of the cube, suggesting a die. Dice are powerful symbols for Desprez as the die puts the order of numbers into the realm of chaos.

Desprez is interested in both the power of chance, and the power of numbers. Throughout his installation work, he examines the significance of numbers in ancient texts. The intersections of Mysticism and Natural Science are brought to the foreground. Modern accounts of the struggle of order and chaos are created through ancient allegories. Desprez draws upon textual sources from all traditions to underwrite *Deus Ex Machina*.

Whereas this piece continues to explore the concepts central to the artist's other works, in this installation Desprez breaks up formal simplicity through the saw blades' top heaviness. The gross physicality of the oiled tree trunks and metal parts is integral to the significance of the piece. Metaphysical contemplation is sparked through an understanding of the materials, their origins and placement. *Deus Ex Machina* follows Romanticism in its grand humanist struggle to re-embodiment meaning out of (post-modern) chaos. It re-enacts an Œdipal search for origins after the fall of unified systems of meaning.

Desprez' use of the theatrical device of the *deus ex machina* signals both the danger and the hopefulness of the installation. Right from the origin of the concept, the god's descent from Olympus could mean reconciliation or judgement. In Euripedes' *The Bacchæ*, a capricious and vengeful Dionysus re-enters the

tragedy in its final moments to put an end to the frenzy and insanity of the dramatic developments. He shows no mercy, his judgements are harsh over the acts of mortals, his punishments are severe enough to include exile or worse. Euripides presents no heroes, *The Bacchæ* ends with an unburied body in an empty city. For all the dramatic moments when the crane lifts a god into the scene to resolve conflicts, Euripides' tragedy concludes in punishment. Moral paradigms of the past collapse or overlap when pressured by our late twentieth century perspective, where Desprez' theatrical cosmology constructs redemption and punishment as two sides of a coin.

Desprez constructs the conceptual framework of the installation from basic elements of ancient theories about the structure of the universe, the interrelations between human beings and the earth, and gods to the planets. The god that descends from the machine stems from ancient Greek tragedies of the fifth century BC. In its original conception, *Deus Ex Machina* was to be treated as an acoustic instrument. Within the framework of the piece was a musical component which made direct reference to the medieval notion of the music of the spheres. Through the astronomy of Ptolemy, early Church doctrines conceived of the revolutions of the planets in their spheres as a divine harmony. Ptolemy's cosmos had earth at the hub, surrounded by the sun and moon and known planets, ordered in perfect numbers. Outside of these spheres were stars and then ether and chaos. These calculations had their correlation to music theory. Desprez' attraction to this notion lies in its theoretical harmony, and the struggle of divine order and chaos over the universe. The installation plays out this conflict, both physically and aurally.

The power of perfect numbers is seen to bridge the distance between body and spirit, earth and heavens. Yet, Desprez installation is too threatening, the internal space too daunting, to ease and facilitate the reconciliation of conflicts. Desprez is not simply nostalgic for a divinely ordered past. He recollects the conceptual unity of ancient and medieval beliefs in a divinity, ironically articulating these concepts in the

materials of modern industrialism. A collective memory is awakened and left to scramble to resurrect a higher order from within our modern chaos. Desprez taunts this memory, offering redemption and reconciliation while manifesting the danger our pride and ambitions present us. The saw blade-stars focus our aspirations and are tools to cut them down.

Frederick Peters
from *Clamorous Intentions*