

Modal Auxiliary

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I was made to realize that, on the contrary, everything was simple: the machine is on the same level as the man who's walking towards it. He goes up to it just as you would go to meet another person.

Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* ~ 1942

Modal Auxiliary is an assembly of pseudo-machines and environments that lack any apparent purpose or strict mechanical function. Explicit purpose or function, the characteristics usually associated with machines, has been pushed aside by the pseudo-machines' dysfunctional abstract nature and their attendant environments in order to invite questioning.

A personal narrative based on formative influences from my childhood forms the inspiration behind the pseudo-machines and environments of *Modal Auxiliary*. The key experience that has become the focus of *Modal Auxiliary* occurred during my early years, when machines, not people, held a position of consistency in my life. Employing a personal narrative brings with it the obligation to provide a concomitant text to help explain some of the elements of the exhibition. This concomitant text is provided here. *Modal Auxiliary*, however, is presented in a manner that needs no accompanying text to arrive at *an* interpretation. The concept of open or multiple interpretations is suggested in the exhibition title's grammatical allusion. Modal auxiliaries modify or assist in qualifying but do not define an action. Modal auxiliaries acting in support of ideas are

In the opening quote protagonist Meursault contemplates his pending execution by guillotine in Camus' *L'Étranger*. Meursault recalls an image in a newspaper and realizes that the guillotine is not on a raised platform as he had mistakenly imagined, instead it stands flat on the ground. Annoyed by this realization Meursault's grievance is that "climbing up into the sky to mount the scaffold was something the imagination could hang on to."

such words as *may, must, ought, shall, should, will, and would*, characteristically used to help express tone, mood, or voice. Modals are both imperative and suggestive in nature and express a degree of certainty of action, opinion or attitude.¹ The fact that modal auxiliaries do not define an action is an important consideration for this exhibition. The machines of my childhood can be construed as types of modal auxiliaries. These machines were devices that did not define my life, but qualified or molded a certain period.

Viewers, who are not given this text, are free to develop one of their own to support the work. By posing questions about the nature of the machines and environments in *Modal Auxiliary*, the viewers' experience will parallel my own questioning as to the purpose and function of machines. *Modal Auxiliary* conveys the idea that machines are as much vehicles in a state of constant flux, with neither departure or arrival points, as they are modes of work and transport. The machines of *Modal Auxiliary* can be viewed as a metaphor for life or more precisely, for some point in the cycle of birth and death—arrival and departure. One presumably does not remember their birth and, presumably, will not remember their death. It is sufficient, then, if *Modal Auxiliary* conveys that the machines I have presented are as much vehicles of transport as they are vehicles of transition.

Modal Auxiliary represents a structuring of some of my past and present

¹ OED online. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. <http://www.oed.com> 07/07/07

experiences and a method by which to reflect on them. The exhibition also represents my ongoing desire to render those works that were technically beyond my reach as a child. In the process of creating *Modal Auxiliary*, my adult hand brings a sense of experience to the translation of wonderment and naivety. Such nostalgic reflection, however, is not always free of melancholy. *Modal Auxiliary* offers a whimsical view of abstract machines and the environments they occupy, but one that is tinged with decay and traces of sadness.

The impetus for this exhibition began with an interest in how we communicate through technology and with machines. This interest led me to consider the effects of technology on my interpersonal relationships, some of which now transpire at a distance. It became apparent during these self-reflexive musings that various formative experiences during my upbringing were the source of my interest with technology-influenced relationships. My childhood was one of constant geographic dislocation, but one that was also filled with the spectacle of unusual machines. The desire to build machines and depict constructed environments is also prompted by the fact that many places that I once called home were also remote and we depended on machines to function on a day-to-day basis. Most importantly, the desire to build machines stems from the fact that for me machines seemed more consistent than people. As a child, I moved frequently while growing-up. As a result of these frequent moves, I was repeatedly meeting new people, particularly adults. After a while I began to notice that certain characteristics and personality traits would transfer from one individual to the next. I found this transplanted

identity disconcerting because the form would change but not behaviors or expressions. People came to represent a sort of non-entity. These were individuals whose identity was somehow compromised. People represented a mélange of all the personalities I had come to know and I regarded their differing appearances as a façade. I never viewed this observation in a negative light nor did it prompt me to distrust people—it was never that complex. What it did was prompt me to look elsewhere for consistency and stability. Machines, to an impressionable child, retained both their form and function whereas people and the roles they occupied were interchangeable. To some extent the irony is that machines do change. They break down with use and different versions are produced. But in the narrow window of childhood none of this was apparent.

For the most part I grew up on or close to remote military air bases and stations in the Canadian Arctic and Alaska. I was privy to varying degrees of spectacle. At one locale, rockets were launched with weather balloon payloads. In turn, the balloons would provide atmospheric data for long-range bombers that operated around the clock and across the North Pole. On warm summer days I would ride my bicycle to the runways and watch these giant airplanes take off from runways stretching over the tundra in an endless cycle of patrol. There was a sense of consistency and repetition to these events. The rockets were launched according to a schedule. Once deployed, the balloons would drift for days in the high atmosphere before returning to earth, only to be repacked and launched again. The bombers never ceased their routine, regardless of time or season.

At another location, the spectacle of transition was more ephemeral but nonetheless consistent. Cargo ships bearing foreign names and flags would appear at the docks, having picked their way through the pack ice of various straits, passages and bays after the spring breakup. The ships would transfer their consignments or fill their holds with wheat from steel tubes that protruded from mammoth silos. They would then disappear as silently as they had arrived—slipping their moorings overnight—only to reappear later in the season.

In the North what is passable during the summer becomes impassible in winter. *Snowmachines*, both large and small, dominate everyday transport and grant access to what is otherwise inaccessible. The permafrost, the underlying layer of perpetually frozen ground that limits stable road construction, also further hampers travel in the North.² For the vast majority of the North's inhabitants, long-distance travel is usually by air. Consequently, the departures and arrivals at the locales of my past were defined by entering a machine in one place and exiting in another. This curious aspect defined a cycle of leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar that would in turn become familiar. The only constant between these states of flux was something mechanical.

In order to employ the experiences of my past in my artistic dialogue, I began by abstracting the purpose and function of machines and the environments they occupied. In

² “Permafrost is defined on the basis of temperature, as soil or rock that remains below 0°C throughout the year, and forms when the ground cools sufficiently in winter to produce a frozen layer that persists throughout the following summer.” http://gsc.nrcan.gc.ca/permafrost/whatis_e.php

doing so, I began to question how machines did or ought to function. What has ensued is a consideration of balance between representation and abstraction. It is a balance between the properties inherent to machines, such as functionality and reliability—the very same properties I found lacking in people. My early observations and experiences, some quite extraordinary, are ones that now capture my attention and steer my visual language. Part of that language is the desire to present mechanical devices as more than the functional sum of their parts. My thought was that objects, in this case machines, could somehow be presented to carry a personal narrative and yet still refer to their mechanical origin.³ This thought manifested itself in a physical manner last winter while on a flight out of Toronto Pearson International Airport. When the jet began its take-off taxi, a small, swirling column of condensation rose from beneath one of the engines. The column flowed half a metre above the wing's surface, tracing its shape, extended down to the trailing edge and then vanished the moment we became airborne. The phenomenon neatly illustrated half of Bernoulli's principle of how an airfoil produces lift. The other half would have occurred under the wing. It was not the physics that was of interest, so much as the connection between natural forces and the unnatural or constructed. The condensation column neatly demonstrated a natural process that was inextricably linked to a machine. The column also revealed that the object had been constructed in direct consideration of natural forces. It was a simultaneous conformity of the natural with the constructed, as well as the constructed with the natural.

³ Joan Rothfuss, Joseph Beuys: Echoes in America, essay in Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy, p.50. Rothfuss' reference to Beuys' 1972 exhibition at Marcus-Krakow Gallery in Boston, "...works of art that Beuys conceived as traveling vehicles meant to carry his ideas beyond the reach of his physical presence."

At the precise moment when I was observing the small phenomenon provided by the column of condensation, I remembered an event from many years before. It too, was an event that occurred at an airport. I was watching mechanics dismantle the tail section of a small twin-engine plane. The purpose of their task, I discovered, was to load the airplane with an aluminum coffin too long to fit through the side cargo door.

The entire vignette that played out at Pearson Airport, the column of condensation in conjunction with the memory from the past, has now formed into a new, compounded memory. Recounting this new memory itself takes on an allegorical meaning.⁴ The Pearson Airport episode was one of harmony and discontinuity functioning together. The column of condensation illustrated a machine and a natural process in a harmonious fashion. The memory of the coffin loading was also an example of a machine being affected by a natural process, but not in a harmonious manner. The tail of the twin-engine plane was reassembled and the machine functioned as before, unlike its cargo that would only continue its process of decay. Harmony and discontinuity functioning together is something I attempt with my work so that it leads to the possibility of dual or multiple interpretations.⁵

4 Rainer Usselman writes in *18.Oktober 1977: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning and Its New Audience* that the *18.Oktober 1977* cycle "can only truly be understood through a supplementary text—if the pictures otherwise become free floating adding up to no discernable narrative, though they might suggest fragments of one—we are, according to Benjamin, faced with an allegory." p.24. (Walter Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel" in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 1928).

5 Eleanor Heartney writes in the "House of Huang" *Art in America*, March 2006. p.163. about Haung Yong Ping's exhibition *Bat Project IV*, a section of fuselage from an American spy plane at the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis, that "One leaves this exhibition reeling with ideas, Huang strategy throughout is to unmoor fixed notions of identity and causality. Divination, metaphor and chance serve in his hands as tools for expressing the inevitable chaos of a world that will not submit to simple opposition."

My observations, experiences and influences, the reassessing and connecting of events, all materialize into a loose process—a type of working method that defines my artistic process. Part of this process is an ongoing exploration of creating work with found objects and scrap material, such as wood and cast-off machines parts. I sort the gathered objects by shape, scale and material and engage in a comparative assessment to determine which parts, materials and forms best function together. I usually do not approach a construction with a plan. Instead, I rely on intuitive decisions to steer the process. External factors such as source photographs and my own drawings also influence the process to some extent. Discarded furniture is a central component in the construction of the machines. Discarded furniture reflects the lack of structure I experienced in the past. Childhood items like furniture became interchangeable. In the process of relocating, furniture was often discarded and acquired anew elsewhere. Gathering used furniture is perhaps reflective of a process of reclamation. Old sofas and armchairs, however, have a more imminently practical use. Once stripped of their fabric and cushioning and dismantled, select parts of the interior wooden and mechanical parts form the predominant lines of the machines.

Machine V has the appearance of a machine that could traverse difficult, snowbound terrain while carrying a payload. Yet, there is no explicit mode of propulsion nor is there room for a driver. The rear of *Machine V* suggests a luggage rack and is made from old sofa armrests. The tail fins derive from a sofa's back and side supports and lend an aviation illusion to a machine that appears not to have flight capability. The front of

Machine V takes a slightly different direction of thought. Extending forward, two rails support a rectangular metal industrial fan shroud with a circular opening. Supporting the front end is a mono-ski assembly fabricated from a set of wooden cross-country skis. Under the rear of *Machine V* is a snowmachine track made from rubber matting and wooden slats. *Machine V* suggests the practical purpose of carrying a load but it fails in its ability to perform this task. Despite its rugged guise and imminent practicality, it is a device where purpose quickly collapses into query.

Drawing, the other main component of my practice permits a wider scope of exploration than the three-dimensional work. In appearance the drawings are illustrative and bear a resemblance to mechanical diagrams. This is connected to both my interest in the mechanical objects and the illustrated books that fueled my childhood imagination. The drawings titled *Construction* numbered *I-XI* and associated smaller works are produced in a largely intuitive fashion. As in the three-dimensional works, attention is paid to materiality. The drawings are executed with a mix of pen and ink, gouache and acrylic, various types of sticker paper and thin textured materials. I employ a method of approach using a loose structure of collage. What ensues is largely a formal exercise. Yet strict adherence to perspective, scale and representation is not a large concern. In the process of making the drawings a type of game develops, where each mark, each area that is filled, limits the remaining number of moves or marks. The depiction of certain objects or parts of objects limits the inclusion of other objects. Similar to the three-dimensional machines, disparate parts are combined in a manner that supports or

complements other sections. The distorting and flexing of geometric planes and intersecting perspective lines are intentional as it opens space and allows for inclusion of what I deem important to each image. The objective, if one exists, is to create an uncluttered picture plane while pushing the images to depict implausible environments.

The dioramas, presented as a triptych, bring together visual considerations from the drawings in a tangible manner. They depict scenes of scale airplane parts or wreckage and are constructed on platforms supported by wooden pylons that in turn rest on a base of white blocks. The white bases and wooden pylons directly reference construction methods in northern communities, where foundations are not possible because of the permafrost. The pervasive sense of decay or instability is intentional and is illustrated by a literal breakdown of the environment in the dioramas. As with the drawings, breaking down the environment leads to a sense of implausibility. Unlike the drawings, the dioramas present implausible environments that contain objects in a tangible form. Tangibility, along with a shift in scale, raises questions about perception. The dioramas can be viewed in context as actual objects and real ground, whereas two-dimensional work is often viewed within the context of the picture plane or window. A shift in perception, one that brings in elements of the *real* world to an implausible world requires some element of suspended disbelief or a sort of *hallucination* as one definition of perception suggests.⁶ Perception is a complex thing and requires a number of other

⁶ Henri Bergson writes in *Memory and Matter*, p.318 that "...the belief that we construct matter from our interior states and that perception is only a true hallucination... It is this belief that we have always combated whenever we have treated of matter. Either, then, our conception of matter is false, or memory is radically distinct from perception."

factors to occur. Along with *hallucination*, space and an object must be tied to a physical presence.⁷ It is the possible shift in context when viewing the dioramas and the suggested ingredients of perception that interest me. I can link these thoughts to how I interpreted people during my childhood. I recognized people as physical entities, but saw them as representations, as unreal in construction and presentation. In hindsight, it seems that there was a missing ingredient in the recipe of viewing people as whole or tangible.

A number of concerns are brought together in *Modal Auxiliary*. Some of these deal with materiality and the ordering or structuring of objects. Other concerns are raised on a more emotive or intuitive level. These are concerns that are reflective of the influences that have come to shape my artistic practice. Part of the impetus in creating my work is rooted in formative experiences. The recollections that contribute to the images and machines were formed in childhood. The product of my nostalgic reflection is not solely depicted as idyllic or utopian. I attempt to differentiate and incorporate my adult perspective in my work. The drawings and three-dimensional works carry elements of whimsy, humor and sadness that signal a maturity of reflection. What ensues is a balance of harmony and discontinuity. The goal of *Modal Auxiliary* is to provide a place to explore my personal narrative, while providing a structure for other interpretations. This approach is reflective of the grammatical meaning, where a modal auxiliary qualifies or modifies an action without describing that action. Again, it is sufficient if *Modal*

⁷ Bergson also writes, in *Memory and Matter*, p.8 “What I call matter the *aggregate* of images, and perception of matter these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body.”

Auxiliary conveys the notion that the machines I have presented are as much vehicles of transport as they are vehicles of transition.

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Exhibition Documentation



Modal Auxiliary, invitation, 2007



Modal Auxiliary, exhibition detail, Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, 2007



Modal Auxiliary, exhibition detail, Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, 2007



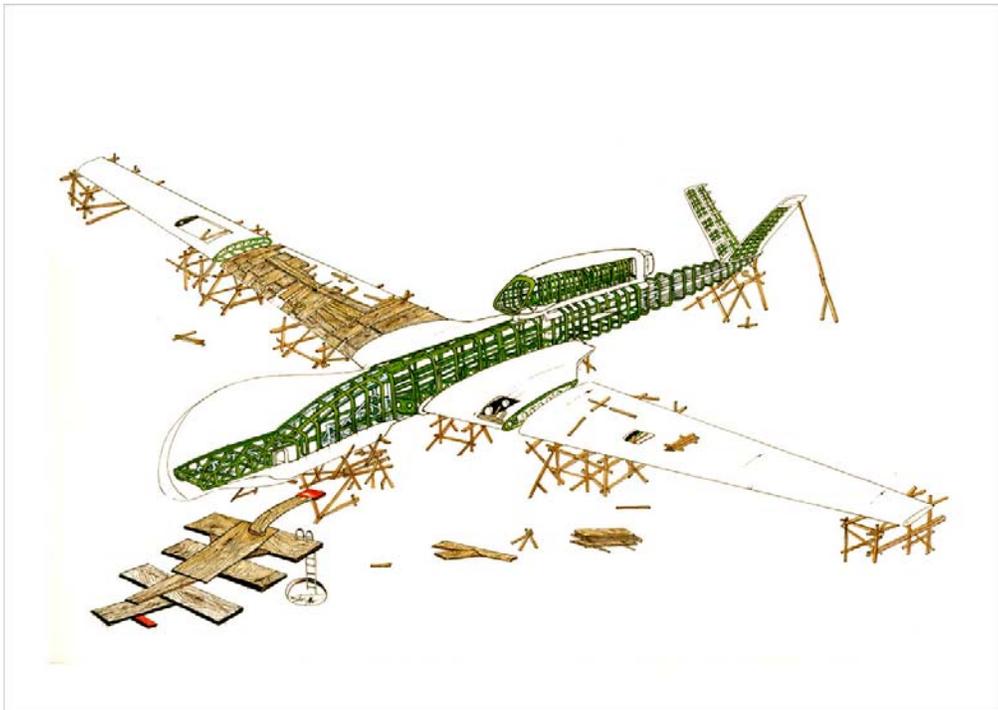
Machine V, Mixed media, 36" x 144" x 48" / 24" x 72" x 31" - 2007



Diorama I, II, III - mixed media 18 x 22 x 12" each - 2007



Diorama II (detail) - mixed media 18 x 22 x 12" - 2007



Plane IV, Ink, acrylic/gouache on paper, 22 x 15" - 2007



Plane III, Ink, acrylic/gouache on paper, 22 x 15" - 2007