

Robert Hengeveld

By John G. Hampton

Upon entering Robert Hengeveld's installation, "Natural Revision" at Mercer Union, the space might be quiet, or it might be alive with the sounds of nature. The entrance is a narrow hallway of scaffolding and armatures backed with cardboard and lined with Rube Goldbergian inventions. Steam rises from a makeshift smoke machine, crafted from a faucet trickling into a cup, which hangs, dripping onto a hot iron. A series of motors simultaneously trigger a pair of tweeting bellows as they tip a cuckoo bird up and down, back and forth. The contraptions are clearly the under-workings of an elaborate façade, but it is set up backwards; the mechanics are presented to the viewer before the illusion they're crafting. Turning around the corner reveals the rest of the installation; the whole of the front gallery is occupied by a sweeping pastoral installation of artificial lawn, cheap plastic jewels, cardboard, fake deer, papier-mâché and kitschy lawn ornaments. Despite the obviously synthetic nature of the space, it is quite breathtaking, even sublime, like a DIY Garden of Eden crafted from the refuse of consumer culture.

Part of the pleasure of viewing a Hengeveld sculpture or installation comes from examining the complex yet elegant solutions he constructs to serve very simple purposes. Every element of the installation seems to assemble itself; the automated landscape is clearly human-made, but it doesn't feel as such. While Hengeveld's sculptures interact with their environment, they are not "interactive sculpture" per se. Rather than relying on the "cause and effect" interactivity of human-interfaced buttons and switches that art audiences became so familiar with in the nineties, Hengeveld's work, if triggered by the viewer at all, responds subtly. In "Natural Revision," Hengeveld puts delays on the motion sensors that trigger the series of tweeting birds, water sound effects, and the inflation/deflation of a plastic deer. Even though the viewer activates the space, it doesn't blatantly acknowledge this fact; rather than glorifying the agency of the viewer, it asserts the being within the environment. Appearing to follow its own rhythm, Hengeveld's constructed environments come alive—not by recreating life as we are familiar with it, but by awakening the latent life force within our familiar surroundings.

When Erwin Schrödinger attempted to create a scientific definition for life, and in the process gave birth to the field of Molecular Biology, he wrote:

What is the characteristic feature of life? When is a piece of matter said to be alive? When it goes on 'doing something', moving, exchanging material with its environment, and so forth, for a much longer period than we would expect of an inanimate piece of matter to 'keep going' under similar circumstances.¹

This scientific/poetic definition of life as motion beyond reasonable expectation, could also describe the wonderment of viewing Hengeveld's art. His work is eminently likeable, arising partially from the whimsical selection of materials, but also because there is something familiar in the actions of his objects; they "keep going," following their own rhythm. They are easy to anthropomorphize because they are "alive"—or at least, they expose the latent life within the objects they are referencing.

Hengeveld directly compares the presence of life in plants versus machines in *Kentucky Perfect*, a self-maintaining lawn sculpture where the machines that routinely mow, water and provide light for the lawn take on more of a life than the lawn itself. While *Kentucky Perfect* was installed in Neutral Ground, as part of the group show "natural Forms" in the Fall of 2010, I never tired of seeing viewers delight in watching it perform each new task, like a puppy doing tricks. In "Natural Revision," this same investigation is expanded upon, but the organic is abandoned completely, existing only through reference. The "rock" and "water" formations Hengeveld has constructed are loosely inspired by the nearby Algonquin Provincial Park—a park named after a people who recognized the spirit within every piece of nature. While Schrödinger scoffed at any belief in "supernatural forces," his theories were not so far removed from those of the Algonquin people, or any other group that believed in the life force of nature. Schrödinger's main point of departure was his desire to believe that the mystery of life could be unraveled.²

While earlier scientists (who also were supposedly against any spiritual understanding of life force) said that emergent properties in biology—the building blocks of life—"must be treated as brute facts toward which the only honest stance is one of natural piety,"³ Schrödinger was one of the first scientists studying life after the discovery of DNA and RNA, the building blocks of organic life. The scientific community at this time was filled with wonder, jubilation, and intrigue, not from marveling at the unknown, but from discovering a path towards knowing. With the structure of DNA revealed



"Natural Revisions," 2011, **Above:** installation view, An assortment of synthetic and common materials, decoys, water, beads, electronics, and other material; **Left:** Detail of orchestrated cuckoo birds. Cuckoo birds, bellows of varying pitch, motor, solenoid, on a plywood and cardboard backing. Both images courtesy of the artist.



by X-ray diffraction patterns, a scientific understanding of life seemed on the horizon; it was a structure laid out in a recognizable language, waiting to be charted out. The magic in Hengeveld's work—like the joy of scientific discovery—does not only arise from the mystery, but perhaps more importantly, in the reveal. Hengeveld reveals the secrets to all of his tricks, and contrary to expectations, they become more magical with this demystification, not less. The sculptures' authenticity is

constantly undermined, yet they still work. Any opportunity for naïve revelry is denied, yet the magic perseveres. The power behind the illusion here is displaced, found in (supposed) comprehension rather than shrouded in mystery.

This subversion of the mechanics of illusion encourages an examination of the magic in the everyday, portraying it not as something inaccessible, but rather as something familiar, something that has always been surrounding us, but that we simply haven't seen. While the wind is a commonplace mystery, it is rare to wonder about its mechanics. In "Natural Revision" a ladder leads to a hidden cove where a viewer can turn the crank on a wooden spool covered with canvas, emitting delightfully whooshing wind sounds, reducing the mystery of this phenomenon to the simple workings of an old-timey wind machine. This charming wooden device evokes a nostalgic longing for simpler technologies in the same way the synthetic turf and rocks try to connect viewers to an experience that is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. The landscape we are familiar with is shifting, and Hengeveld's practice has

an ambiguous relationship with the artificial landscaping that is becoming more commonplace: His work finds life in the synthetics being used, while simultaneously drawing attention to their lack of life through their need to be reanimated.

Our world is being increasingly thrust into a state of ambiguity between authenticity and artifice. The makeshift representations of objects and ourselves that pop up through technological means create an increasing dissonance between materiality and existence. We are more and more likely to have knowledge of the existence of people, creatures and things, without having any physical experience with them. Even technology is undergoing an assault on its physical presence. Working against the abjection of wires, buttons and switches, technology is becoming increasingly wireless; it is migrating to the “cloud,” decentralized and ethereal, the metaphysical plane for our electronic world (although in actuality the “cloud” is a series of massive warehouses hidden amongst industrial areas in cities across the world). Steve Jobs describes Apple products as “magical,” repeating his mantra, “it just works;” the idea that there is any type of machinery behind an object is disguised so that it can be imbued with an apparent sentience. Like Hengeveld, Jobs wants to bring life to his constructions. Similar to the images of wood, paper and leather in the calendar and book apps in the iPhone (engineers seem to be obsessively recreating that which they have displaced, perhaps to retain nostalgia or maybe just to squelch a sense of personal guilt) Hengeveld rarely incorporates natural materials into his reconstructions of the landscapes, instead taking on the challenge of imbuing the essence of nature into synthetic materials. Like a necromancer, he takes the “dead”—synthetics and familiar, everyday objects—and returns them to life, haunted with circuitry, levers, switches and charm. But like Frankenstein’s monster, Hengeveld’s creations never fully elude death.

Coupled with the kitschy charm of “Natural Revision,” there is an underlying pathos that comes from its laboured, deliberate attempt at reanimation. A cute inflatable deer in the installation becomes a pathetic facsimile of life when it is connected to an air pump as if it is on life support; it is caught in between life and death in a painfully slow choreography of the life cycle. The inflated deer pathetically deflates as its air leaks, dissipating into the room, leaving its body a wrinkled, lifeless shell. But before it is fully spent, the pump kicks in, returning it to form, health and life as its air supply is returned. Hengeveld toys with artificial life, illusion and the altered familiar, creating a haunted house full of automatons, both entertaining and unnerving. While it successfully capitalizes on pre-established emotional connections, there is still something missing.

Despite Schrödinger’s belief that the discovery of DNA

would help us isolate and recreate the essence of life, that task has been abandoned by contemporary scientific philosophers for more specific goals,⁴ and the Wikipedia article on “life” follows essentially the same definition he laid out sixty-seven years ago. Hengeveld’s open-source mechanisms and constructs, too, appear to reveal more than they actually do. Although I understand how the work is constructed, it still contains an essence that escapes comprehension. Perhaps it is the aura of the art object, or the discursive power of the sign. Whatever it is, it is something familiar, something that feels within reach, even if it isn’t. We still cannot find the site of “life” in the artwork, nor in the organism. The world that Hengeveld has constructed in “Natural Revision” is the Meinong’s Jungle to his previous works: a place where all possible life exists, waiting as potential until it is realized in the “real.”

Perhaps it is this small retention of mystery that generates the spark of life, and the belief that one could unravel it is just an illusion that hides a deeper truth. In a recent piece, *Still Looking For More*, Hengeveld placed what appeared to be ordinary salt-and-pepper shakers in a café in Sackville, New Brunswick. The shakers alternately vibrated a subtle Morse code message: “THERE’S MORE TO LIFE THAN THIS.” That mantra echoes throughout all of Hengeveld’s work, reminding us that there is more “life” around us than we generally acknowledge. “Life” cannot be found in mechanical schematics or relegated to organic entities, but it is hiding in plain sight, everywhere we go.

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Notes:

1. Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1944)
2. Schrödinger cites the appearance of perpetual motion within the living organism as the source for the belief in the supernatural and life force. “It is by avoiding the rapid decay into the inert state of ‘equilibrium’ that an organism appears so enigmatic; so much so, that from the earliest times of human thought some special non-physical or supernatural force (vis viva, entelechy) was claimed to be operative in the organism, and in some quarters is still claimed.” —Ibid, p. 70
3. Manuel DeLanda referencing Samuel Alexander (1920) and C. Lloyd Morgan (1931). Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), p. 2.
4. Ibid