

A DISQUETING MUSE

Linda Norden



Craig Kalpakjian, *BIOS-fear*, 2016. Cockroaches, acrylic, Roomba vacuum. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

The Trojan Horse is an historically spectacular example of {man's} ingenuity in the making of machinery. What {man} cannot do {himself, he} devises in the way of mechanics to work more powerfully for {him}. The Trojan Horse, then, becomes a {newly} significant symbol, if taken in the light of the history of machinery. Let us assume that the Horse stands for the Machine. And let us interpret the legend of the Fall of Troy with this in mind. First, the invention of the horse {as camouflage} could symbolize the birth of the machine; secondly, the curiosity of the Trojans parallels the fascination that {man} has had with mechanization whether it is an egg-beater or a complex IBM computer; thirdly, the adoption of the horse by the Trojans heralds modern {man's} invitation to the machine to enter every phase of {his} intimate as well as social life; and lastly, the horse, becoming the Frankenstein monster, indicates the trend in the twentieth century of "mechanization taking command," as so aptly put by Dr. Sigfried Giedion. And so the story of the Trojan Horse may be considered a microcosm prognosticating the future course of events related to {man's} concern with the machine world.

—Jermayne MacAgy

{MacAgy's} creed—like all creeds—had to become alive. No one could be expected to love art, unless seduced.

—Dominique de Menil

We are way past the mid-century moment from which the great, late twentieth-century curator Jermayne MacAgy orchestrated the acutely intelligent, intellectually ambitious,

and, by all accounts, curatorially spectacular exhibition *The Trojan Horse: The Art of the Machine*. The lengthy epigraph above served as exhibition proposal and statement. But the ambition of that show, and its confident tackling of the complex ideas set forth in architectural historian Sigfried Giedion's 1948 *Mechanization Takes Command*, remain inspirational.

MacAgy is not a household name among our current generation of professional curators. But in the fifty short years she lived, between 1914 and 1964, she was hugely popular, astonishingly prolific, beloved by countless East and West Coast artists, and regularly singled out for praise by the likes of René d'Harnoncourt, James Johnson Sweeney, and Buckminster Fuller for her incomparable installations. Joseph Cornell, with whom she shared ideas and projects, dubbed her "Frisco Sal," alluding to the sway she held as both curator and director of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. She was also the muse and curatorial avatar for Dominique and John de Menil and for a young Walter Hopps, collectors and curators better known now but openly indebted to MacAgy's inspiration.¹ (MacAgy, whom de Menil described as both a freak and a genius, lies buried between Dominique and her husband.) MacAgy's shows, of which *The Trojan Horse* is but one in over eighty staged during her lifetime, were unique in their exploration of extremely sophisticated scholarship and intellectual thinking via exhibition. She had graduate degrees in both Venetian art and folk art, a bachelor of art history from Radcliffe College, and two years of tutelage under the visionary Harvard curator-scholar Paul Sachs. She

believed in “the power of handsome, elegant, commanding installation, acting with and always evoking the innateness of the things exhibited,” and the capacity of those objects and artworks to engage viewers in often unfamiliar ideas.²

My interest in MacAgy for this brief entry, however, is more opportunistic than historical. I’d recalled MacAgy’s inspired formulation of the Trojan Horse as “first machine” while trying to come to terms with an oddity of an artwork I wanted to write about for this catalogue—contemporary artist Craig Kalpakjian’s *BIOS-fear* (2016), a Roomba kitted out with a miniature Kandor-ish dome, sheltering not a utopian city but a passel of exotic roaches. MacAgy’s astonishingly succinct condensation of Giedion’s mid-twentieth-century “anonymous history” of the effects of mechanization on modes of life and her original formulation of the Trojan Horse as both “first machine” and a generative exhibition trope had long impressed me as a model instance of curatorial scholarship. MacAgy’s precisely enumerated, but not entirely consistent, premises allowed her to stage an exhibition that both embraced and opened to question Giedion’s thesis: “People in general should understand how their work and their inventions—whether they know it or not—are continually shaping and reshaping the patterns of their lives.”³

Kalpakjian’s *BIOS-fear* has little obvious in common with MacAgy’s invocation of the giant Athenian hiding horse as “first machine” save for its capacity to elicit complex emotions and its oblique allusion to subterfuge. *BIOS-fear* is a rather tiny, remote-controlled robotic disc, which happens to vacuum, and its oversize transparent dome conspicuously reveals, rather than

conceals, its creepy contents. But the curator in me is thrilled to draw parallels between Kalpakjian's intriguingly repulsive insular environment and MacAgy's seductively savvy read of the Trojan Horse as an animal effigy fully charged with live men; a military machine camouflaged as sculptural offering; and a complex symbol for all that mechanization incites, enables, and transforms—of machines as a sort of smuggling of live alien bodies within a counterintuitive container. (*BIOS-fear* as a Trojan Horse for the post-millennial domestic interior, I thought.) MacAgy's consideration of the Trojan Horse as a "microcosm prognosticating the future course of events," seemed uncannily in sync with much of what Kalpakjian's *BIOS-fear* proposed and provoked, at least in terms of emotional response. And while *BIOS-fear* alludes more to our age of surveillance and the imaginary of science fiction than to material history, an observation the artist made about the ways we imagine our future *inaccurately* resonated with Giedion's thesis. Kalpakjian notes:

It's always amusing...what these futures get wrong.... Immediate fears subside when they don't come to pass as predicted, while we ignore the accumulation of more subtly troubling problems that eventually lead to an outcome that's equally dire, or worse...⁴

Objects designed to do one ostensibly desirable thing, and that are embraced for that capability, work as evolutionary dominos, engendering life changes no one seems to know how to anticipate. We are forever stymied by what

we wish for. Kalpakjian’s hilarious machine mockery and MacAgy’s ever-ebullient and ever-up-to-something-more installations—including her suggestive didactics for *The Trojan Horse*, such as “Drawings for interchangeable parts for Large Machines”; “Tree-Lifting Machine for Transplanting Full-Grown Trees”; “Apple Corers, Potato Peelers, and Spool Winders”; or “Schlumberger Perforating Guns and Dipmeter Computers”; and engravings titled “Gulliver Imprisoned by the Lilliputians”; “Erection and Protection of a Battery with Sacks of Wool”; or “Machine to Retrieve a Cannon from the Sea”—remind us to take ourselves a little less seriously and our “inventions” and readiness to adapt maybe a little more so.

NOTES

Epigraphs: Jermayne MacAgy, “Introduction to the exhibition *The Trojan Horse: The Art of the Machine*, September–November 1958, Contemporary Arts Association of Houston,” in *Jermayne MacAgy: A Life Illustrated by an Exhibition*, by Dominique de Menil (Houston, TX: University of St. Thomas, 1968), 38.

Ibid., 10.

1. In addition to de Menil’s tribute catalogue, *Jermayne MacAgy*, see Calvin Tomkins, “A Touch for the Now: Walter Hopps,” *New Yorker*, July 29, 1991; and Tomkins, “The Benefactor: Dominique de Menil,” *New Yorker*, July 8, 1998.

2. Jermayne MacAgy, “On Installation,” *California Palace of the Legion of Honor Bulletin* 11, nos. 1 and 2 (May–June 1953).

3. Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, date TK), TK.

4. TK