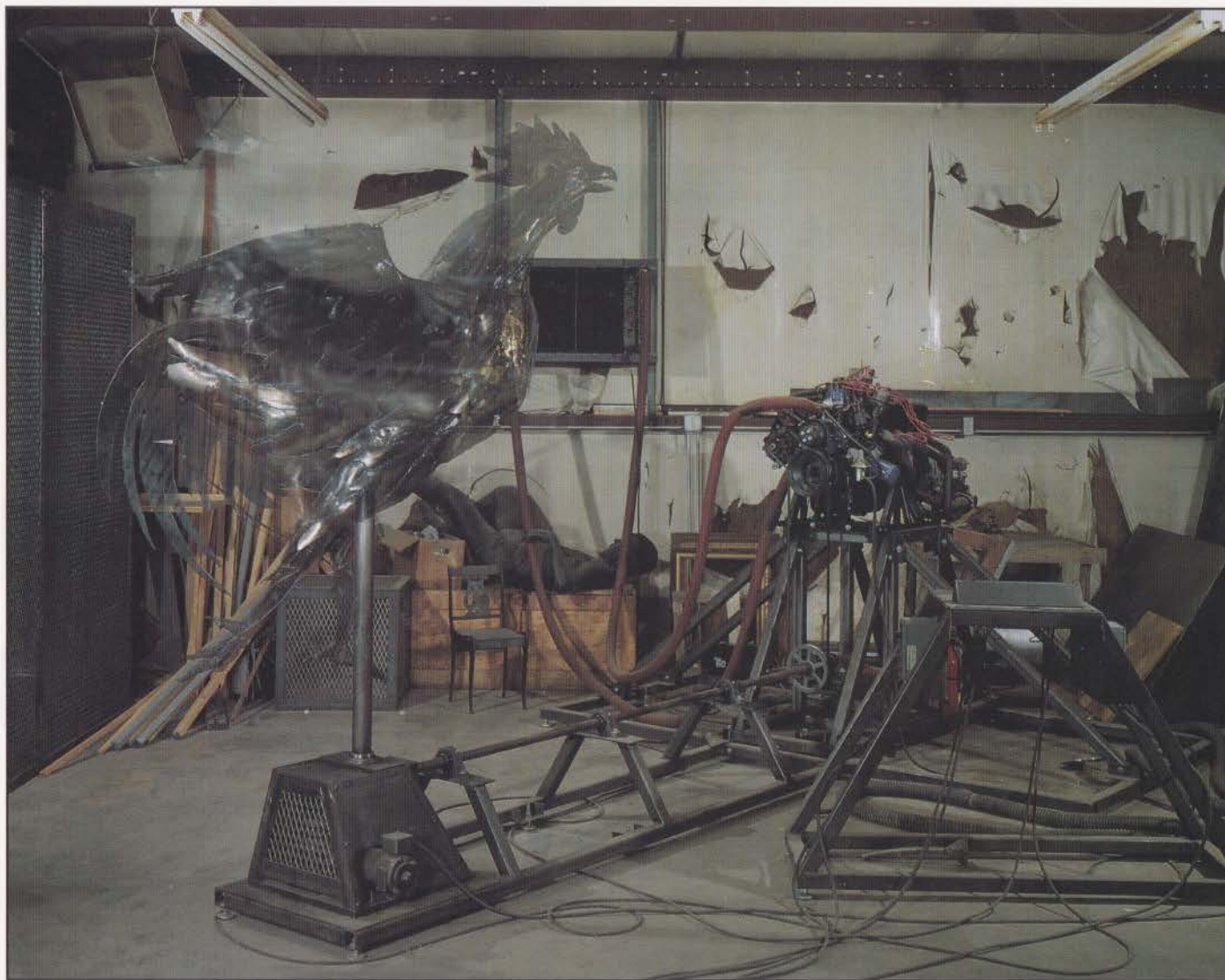


James Drake: Valley of the World



University Art Gallery | New Mexico State University | June 18 to August 16, 1997

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This catalog documents the exhibition, **James Drake: Valley of the World**,
which was organized by the University Art Gallery at
New Mexico State University.

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Soon after moving to New Mexico in 1995, I visited James Drake's studio in El Paso, Texas. This was my first artist's studio visit in the region and I was awestruck by Drake's large-scale sculptural works. I immediately conceptualized an exhibition featuring these at the University Art Gallery. Through a generous grant from the El Paso Energy Foundation, this project has become a reality.

James Drake is among the most prominent contemporary artists whose work deals with issues of 'the border.' For more than twenty-five years, Drake has been a resident of El Paso, Texas, which is just across the river from Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico. Drake takes the title for the exhibition and his sculpture of a monumental motorized cockfight, *Valley of the World*, from a description of the El Paso area presented by beat generation author, Jack Kerouac in his *On the Road*. Kerouac describes the long river bed of the Rio Grande river that separates El Paso from Juárez.

"Dean and Marylou parked the car near Van Horn and made love while I went to sleep. I woke up just as we were rolling down the Rio Grande Valley through Clint and Ysleta to El Paso. Marylou jumped to the backseat, I jumped to the front seat, and we rolled along. To our left across the vast Rio Grande spaces were the Moorish-red mounts along the Mexican border, the land of the Tarahumare; soft dusk played on the peaks. Straight ahead lay the distant lights of El Paso and Juárez, sown in a tremendous valley so big that you could see several railroads puffing at the same time in every direction, as though it was the Valley of the World. We descended into it."

Excerpt from page 162 from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* that was indicated by a box in James Drake's sketchbook.

The exhibition, **James Drake: Valley of the World**, is a survey of five large-scale sculptural works from 1982 to 1997. Although widely known for his printmaking, drawing, painting and video, James Drake's sculptures are among his most important works.

James Drake's sculptural works are about dark and light, contrast and balance, poverty and prosperity, power and submission, paradox and angst of life in the industrial age, dichotomy of border culture, and transformation. Marti Mayo, former director of the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston termed his work "... direct and confrontational." [1]

In his *Artificial Life in the Valley of the World*, Drake uses one of America's cultural icons, the automobile engine, and changes it with a covering of snakeskin. This transformative aspect of Drake's art looks back to the surrealist objects of Duchamp, Man Ray or Meret Oppenheim's *Luncheon in Fur (fur-lined tea cup)*.

James Drake: Valley of the World presents the artist's spiritual journey through the land of darkness. We, the viewers, must accept his terms and seek peace and balance in this artificial world of disturbing contrasts.

Charles M. Lovell
June 1997

[1] *Border of Desire*, exhibition catalog, Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, 1992

James Drake: "Intelligent" Creations

James Drake's work explores the nature of creation and the concordant will to power, forcing us to question whether the two are inevitably linked. Creation can take many forms, and for Drake its investigation is often best accomplished by juxtaposition of opposites. In *Artificial Life in the Valley of the World*, a massive V8 automotive engine, whose every surface has been overlaid by python skin, is suspended from a steel rod with rubber wheels. The result is disconcerting: the ponderous engine, a marvel of technology, is rendered weightless, its tendrils coated by smooth, sleek snakeskin. The effect is more alien than mechanical, engendering interesting suggestions on how surface appearance can camouflage meaning. The engine, originally intended to provide power and energy through its many intricate parts, hangs inert. By contrast, the potentially deadly python moves sinuously across terrain with no evident working parts providing locomotion, but in this work it is broken into many sections, all leading nowhere. When conjoined, the consequence is unsettling, and vaguely disturbing: a creation having no sense of direction or purpose.

A major preoccupation of the human race throughout existence has been demonstrating our power to control nature. Often we celebrate our conquests by creating rooms wherein we proudly display our ability to terminate the life of larger, more ferocious, natural forms. Since the human race is weaker than most of the animals whose heads we display as trophies, our ability to end their lives comes through mechanical means. In creating his version of *Trophy Room*, Drake addresses this motivation for conquest and the will to power. By fabricating trophy heads out of steel, Drake questions the power of artistic creation versus the seemingly human need for the brutal act of killing. Additionally, if, as Christopher Langton proposes, the term artificial life literally means "life made by humans rather than by nature," Drake's work asks what form our trophies will take in a future increasingly dominated by forms of human creation if there is no blood to spill, no heads to hang on our walls?

In *Valley of the World*, racing car engines operate and power the frenzy of two enormous, steel roosters. Amid the overpowering roar of the gasoline fueled engines, one rooster whirls vertically, while concurrently, the other spins horizontally. In this maniacally choreographed burst of movement, the roosters are placed so that their talons miss piercing each other by centimeters: any closer and steel would meet steel in a thunderous clamor. Cock fighting, prevalent in Latin America and Asia, is a peculiarly bloody sport in which two male animals tear and lacerate each other's flesh until one is killed. Drake's mechanical configuration of this theme is bloodless, but the concomitant visual and aural cacophony assaults the senses, causing us to rear back, defensively, against the onslaught of noise and visual movement. In this, and in his other sculptures, the artist addresses vital questions of evolution, technology, human instincts and the impact of the artificial in the world of our future.

Barbara J. Bloemink



Blue Love Seat

1989

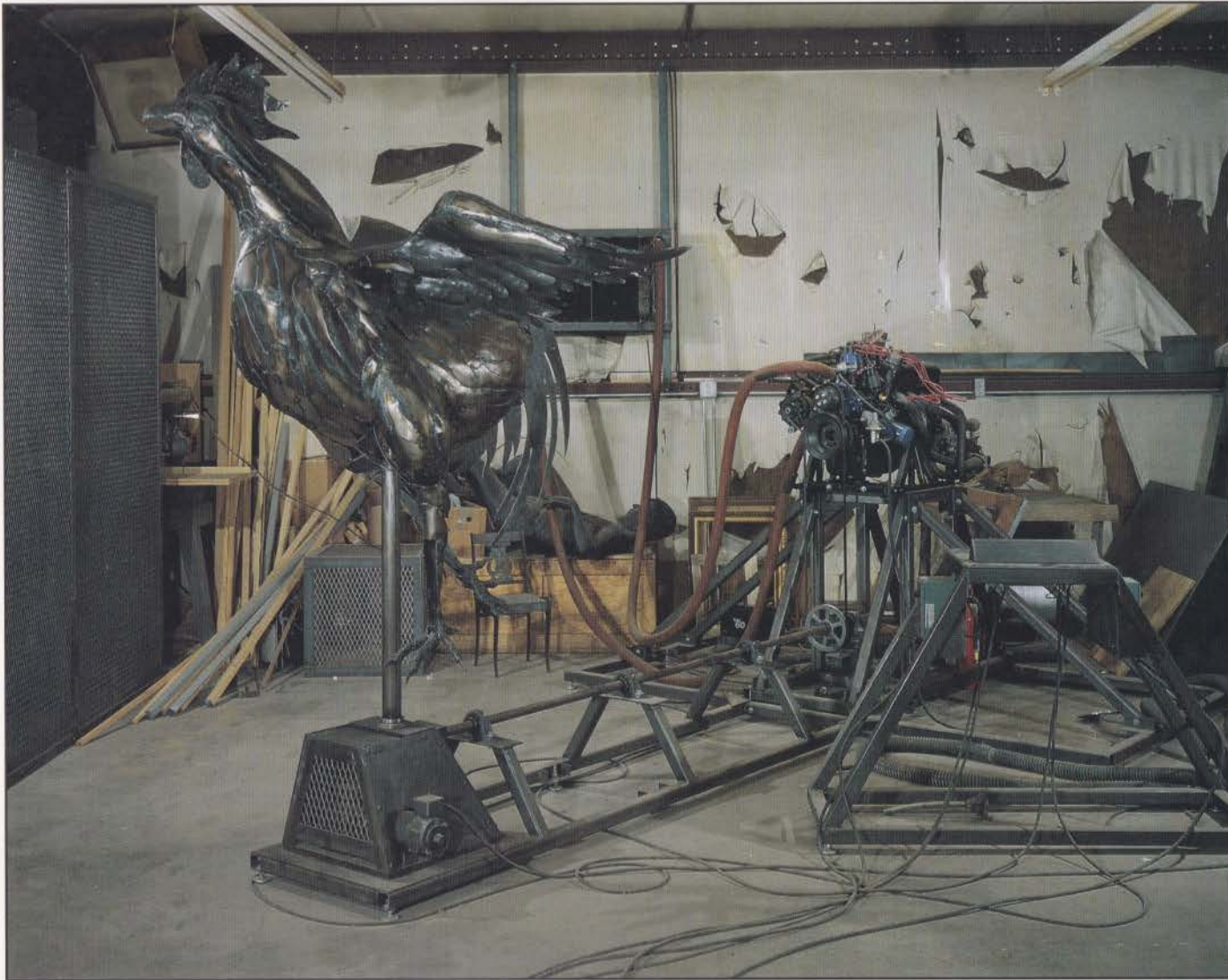
motorcycle engine, steel, paper and pastel

top panel: 46x72x2-1/2 inches

table: 26x20x18 inches

two benches (each): 20x32x18 inches

Courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, Louisiana



Valley of the World

1992

steel, automobile engines and automobile parts

144x288x360 inches

photo: Dan Barsotti

*This passion of our kind
For the process of finding out
Is a fact one can hardly doubt,
But I would rejoice in it more
If I knew clearly what
We wanted the knowledge for,
Felt certain still that the mind
Is free to know or not.
It has chosen once it seems,
And whether our concern
For magnitude's extremes
Really becomes a creature
Who comes in median size
Or politicizing Nature
Be altogether wise
Is something we shall learn.*

W. H. Auden After Reading
A Child's Guide to Modern Physics

As humans resolve life's complexities, most of our own making, we endlessly come up against the limits of large numbers, the sheer quantity of variables at work in the world. The gravity of our histories, the dynamics of our bodies, physical, social and politic, and the flux of our desire, the press to mean, to do or say significantly—all these infinitudes tax our meager capacity to intuit, let alone inflect, the resistant reality that whirled our species into being.

Since Eden, the 'place of pleasure,' our sentence is to be, through animals, domesticated—*d'hommestiqué*, in Jacques Lançan's marvelous play on *homme*, *Homo*—and condemned to cultivate Nature in order to survive. The same knowing—the *sapiens sapiens* part of our species-being—that precipitated humans into culture, into word and figure, art, science, and technē, has served as the central organ of our strivings. As we enter the sixth millennium of literate, rationalized civilizations—the fourth for what has been forged into our 'Western' regime—we may be forgiven some ambivalent pride at what our technologies have wrought, however high the price. But ambivalence cannot mean indifference. One of the glories of culture of all categories, whether the 'simple' societies that until recently constituted most of humanity, or the most cosmopolitan of city-states, is the high degree of attunement to the grandeurs and depth of our universe, visible or not, evident in our belief-systems. One of the most startling such conjunctions comes to mind in reflecting on the recent work of James Drake.

As the early Greeks struggled in the pass from a hieratic mythology to a purely human understanding of natural law, their first scientific efforts, as recorded in the fragments of the pre-Socratics, were of astounding profundity. Chaos, the unformed empty space of the void, Hesiod relates in his *Theogony*, became, through the generative force of Eros, the source of all creation, divine and human. A century later, Pythagoras, physician as well as physicist, extended this mythology to postulate the existence of Cosmos, the order of the world, One but infinite. He worked in a scholarly religious community of like-minded brethren devoted to mathematics and mysticism as a way of life, seeking the knowledge embodied in the power (ethos) of music, the Orphic art that with its harmonies shaped the world as we know it. All is number, he preached, and figures—the work of fingers,' so to speak, digits—held the secrets to the forms of *Physics*, Nature. It took yet another hundred years, and then some, before Plato felt ready to take Pythagoras on.

The greatest of the world's mysteries is change. How was it possible for something to come into being from the nothing of the void? In his attempt to refute Pythagorean notion of infinity, Zeno conceived the famous paradox of Achilles and the hare: how is forward motion possible if each advance to an end must cover an infinity of smaller steps, each of which can be in turn subdivided ad infinitum? Zeno, an early modernist, had invented dialectic, the use of a logical argument to indirectly prove or disprove an otherwise inaccessible truth. The questions of Being, Existence and Cause trouble us to the present, and find their most extreme forms in Heideggerian phenomenology

and modern physics. (One polemical history of quantum physics was recently written as a series of footnotes to Zeno, but a broader history of human knowing, its expression and effects, is better seen as a series of footnotes to Pythagoras.)

We now have a quasi-complete theory of the emergence of our physical worlds, and in what is called chaos or complexity theory, the beginnings of a structural understanding of how self-organizing systems emerge from disorder and persist, how they transmute and deform in ways that defy the simple predictions of the linear dynamics we formerly thought ruled them. Chaos theory deals with the complexities of turbulence and sudden transition, its essence being, according to James Gleick, 'the delicate balance between forces of stability and forces of instability.' This theory applies most clearly in what are called damped and driven systems, oscillating like pendulums and subject to the forces of friction and entropy, but inflected by supplements of energy from without. Its findings are most clearly presented in the schemas these computer-generated complex numbers generate: spontaneous fractal maps of the self-similarity characteristic of natural shapes, recurring on any scale we choose, infinite or infinitesimal.

Eros, in its human, societal form, seems such a system par excellence; reproduction never means mere replication. Long ago, we humans made a fateful choice in passing from simple, 'mechanical' societies to the more complex, organic ones familiar to us from our history. Claude Lévi-Strauss compares it to the difference between clocks and engines. 'Societies like these have managed to effect an internal imbalance or disequilibrium they use both to produce much more order—we have societies that work according to mechanism—and, at the same time, much more disorder, much more entropy, even on the level of relations between humans.'

Drake's *Valley of the World* series is a literally terrific embodiment of this dilemma. The snakeskin-covered engine confronting us with prospect, if not memory, of the worst fate imaginable: that animate beings are no more than machine scrap. As the old Greek proverb had it, 'The unflogged (read, 'unflayed') child does not learn.' Snakes have been universally associated with the temptation and terror of knowing. For centuries, one of Pythagoras' principal competitors for providing access to knowledge was 'Pythō,' the Greek nickname for the oracle at Delphi, the site of the world's *umbilicus*, guarded by a snake slain by Apollo. Much has transpired since the famous gnomon 'Know thyself' issued from the 'raving mouth,' as Heraclitus described her, behind the (snakeskin?) mask of the monster Pythoness. 'In the order of force, spirit—mind—is always the stranger, as Roberto Calasso writes. Our world, too, is a miscegenation of digital and organic intelligences, driven by machines of internal, not infernal, combustion that produce destruction and waste along with information and order. Nor is the content any easier to discern: the percussive beats of Drake's engines are closer to the ecstatic drumming of Dionysos than to the lyric clarity of Apollo.

Then as now, knowing-that has rarely meant knowing-how, whether or not 'puters ever replaced Pythō. Like

structuralism, which also dealt with the play of impersonal elements in the construction of our worlds, chaos and complexity theory is only one method seeking uses. What we, for lack of a better word, timidly call post-structuralist theory is a synthesis of philosophical modalities striving to return the phenomenological—the consciously experienced—to the forces that determine our fates. But the realm of *technē*, the Greek term for any product of artifice, including the fine arts, has its own ways of knowing, and in this respect the artist still remains as much a knower as the scientist, the mystic or the artisan. The present imbalance between our artistic theory and practice—we in the art-world are driven to read vast quantities of powerful and sophisticated theoretical work from many disciplines, while contemporary art-practice remains only marginally influential—will only be redressed if art-making passes into common knowledge in a way that has so far eluded it. Artists must somehow become pedagogues as well as oracles. 'The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths,' declared another artist of the mask and veil in a luminous work from 1967. In the intervening generation, several communities, not unlike the mystical or monastic ones so crucial to the culture of classical and medieval antiquity, have sprung up in the southwest, from Chinati to Santa Fe (Holy Faith, appropriately enough). The Santa Fe Institute, in particular, a Manhattan Project for peacetime, has become a spiritual home for complexity, giving its researchers the kind of creative freedom usually associated with artists, and is seeking to develop intellectual collaborations with non-scientists. Drake himself has developed a deep interest in the work of the institute.

But conceiving gnomic art is not enough, either: for information to become experience it must be transmitted directly. The work of the Muses only rarely visits museums, and the oracle, according to Heraclitus, 'neither speaks nor hides her meaning, but indicates it by a sign.' Lévi-Strauss goes on to reflect on the engineer, who seeks to 'interrogate the universe,' and the bricoleur, the tinkerer who must deal with the 'residues of human handiwork.' The former always seeks to transcend, into the realm of concepts; the latter remains on the down side, that is, in the realm of signs. When Drake investigated this realm in *Tongue-Cut Sparrows*, his work for Site Santa Fe in 1996, he succeeded in cracking a secret code used by the loved ones of prisoners to communicate across the bars from afar. Such coding 'accepts, even demands a certain thickness of humanity,' for Lévi-Strauss the hallmark of the sign. Mixing *technē* with aisthesis, the domain of senses and feelings, is always an elusive goal. For the judgment of a successful art-work, as with a sign, we should start with dictum of Charles Sanders Peirce, quoted by Lévi-Strauss (in English!): 'It addresses somebody.'

R e f e r e n c e s

- Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1993)
 James Gleick, *Chaos* (1987)
 W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (6 vols., 1962–1981)
 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1962)
 Fred Alan Wolf, *Taking the Quantum Leap* (1989)

Perhaps, as Nietzsche suggested, we struggle too much to bore beneath the surface. We may only respond when addressed, even when it is a question of life and death. But in our glut for more information we find ourselves in the same impasse as Auden's children or Lévi-Strauss' 'savages.' Responsibility is something you try on and grow into; it cannot be sloughed off and on like a snakeskin. Outcomes will be, as ever, difficult to foresee. But divines must always have said of us behind our backs, 'You can always tell humans, but you can't tell them much.'

Warren Niesluchowski