

close this window

History and Theory Graduate Studio 1995-1997 Catalogue

A Prayer Machine

Alice Guess

...the only thing about mechanics and science is that it works, anything moving around makes another thing move around and so there is satisfaction. But and it is very important anything that is alive if it moves around can fail to make something else move around as well as make it move around and so there is not complete satisfaction. Now what has art got to do with all this. Art is a little of both and until now it has gone on being something of both. It does make something move around by coming in contact with that thing but also it fails to do so that is it has failed to do so and so it has to do with something living.(note 1)

Gertrude Stein

Machines

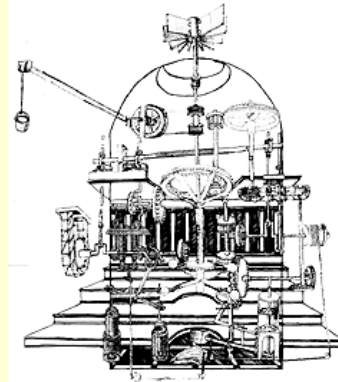
In his *Trattati di Architettura*, Francesco di Giorgio includes sections on machines for moving, measuring, and drawing water. Mills. Water driven lifts. Cranes, winches, and self-propelled carts.(note 2) The pages of the manuscript text are lined in elaborate drawings of a variety of complex machines. However, the relationship between the machines and the text is not as explicit as one reading it with modern illustrative sensibilities might expect. The text and drawings do not refer explicitly to one another, nor are the drawings blueprints for the actual execution of the machines. Although you can follow the forces and reactions through their components, the connections between them are not specific enough to be realized. The impossibility of being instrumentalized allows the machines to "work" as they are drawn. The realities of interlocking gears and pulleys gives way to the imaginative demonstration of forces and their origination. Di Giorgio's machines do not merely elaborate the effective radius of a particular gear; they make evident his world.

The reading of Di Giorgio's machines as an exploration of Aristotelian ideas is supported by his painting *The Coronation of the Virgin*, commissioned for an altarpiece in Siena. In the centre of the painting, Mary kneels as Christ crowns her. They occupy a circular platform of winged putti. Comparing the structure of the painting with Francesco di Giorgio's drawings, this platform can be seen as a toothed gear rotating on the implied shaft of the central axis. The rotation of the disk is enhanced by the imagined interaction of the supporting angels and the audience of saints that flank the "mechanism." But what generates the original rotation? Is it the hand of the saint kneeling at the terminus of the shaft, or is it the churning presence of the Almighty glimpsed through the portal of the heavens?

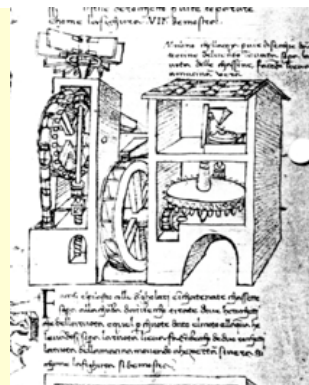
The first act of exploration into the mechanics of *The Coronation of the Virgin* was to consider the presence of the viewer as an integral component of the work. The fleshy host of angels and cherubim, the draped apostles, and the souls ascending all engage the supplicant at the altar beyond the frame. Next, the elements of Di Giorgio's drawn machines were reassembled in a metaphoric relationship with the structure of the painting. *The Coronation of the Virgin* describes the moment the Mother of Christ assumes her role as an intercedent between the prayers of mortals and the concerns of the divine. In the new machine she is represented by a bucket that can be lowered out of the frame of the painting to receive the desires of the people. She is then raised back into her heavenly position by Christ, now a spool, wound by the rotation of the central axis powered by the breath of God. The other characters in the painting became mechanical elements whose singular relationships appear to follow mechanical logic, but when viewed as a sequence of actions they are ambiguous in origin or direction.

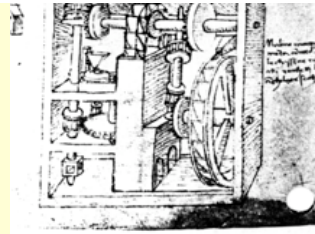
So what then is the relevance of a machine to access the divine to our contemporary situation?

The machine in the late twentieth century is no longer an artifice to demonstrate the wonders of a world as it was in the Renaissance. It is also no longer the symbolic vessel for the promise of progress that it became in the late nineteenth century. As utopia becomes dystopia, as depicted in such films as *Brazil*, *Twelve Monkeys*, and the animation of the Brothers Quay, the machine becomes our inescapable dark angel. Hiding behind the brain man made for it (the computer), the machine lurks, threatening and vengeful. If civilization were to collapse, as various "prophets" of our age decree, we would not be able to regain our innocence, leaving the machine behind. Directed by computers, natural forces, or man himself, it will not simply disappear. In the face of the dark possibilities of the machine is it possible to find hope? If we must carry it on our backs can we find a way to offer it some of our humanity?

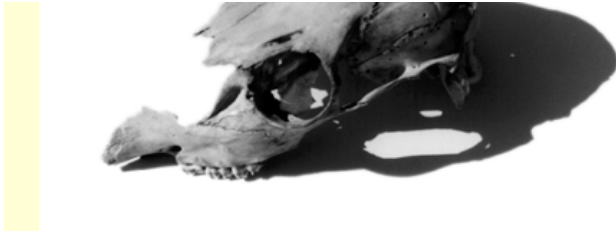


Francisco di Giorgio Martini
The Coronation of the Virgin, 1472 (note 3)





Francisco di Giorgio Martini
Machine drawing from *Trattati di Architettura*



Prayer

Who if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying. (note 4)

The haunting first lines of the Duino Elegies are Rainer Maria Rilke's prayer for the twentieth century. He calls out to the angel and at the same moment acknowledges through his terror that it does not really exist.

We go on praying.

On December 26th 1992 at twilight, I held the deer's head in my hands and said a prayer as I felt its warmth overtaken by its stillness. Stillness wrought by the first bullet from my own gun. I have had the skull with me ever since. The prayer I said that day recounted in the fissures between the bone.

The Prayer Machine

An attempt to instill hope in a machine through translation of the action that embodies it.

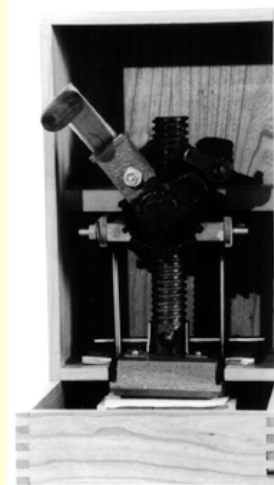
A heavy rectangular box. Cherry, sanded to red golden smoothness. You are confronted by Rilke's *Prayer* and the prayer for the slain deer.

To unlatch the box you must hold the skull in your hand. Once it is open, you assemble the tools: ink, brushes, and a handle; and consider the dark cast iron machine to which they belong.

You prepare the printing plate. To write backwards is a labour. Every word chosen. Every letter considered. In the reflection of Rilke's cry what will you ask? You lift the machine into printing position. It weighs over its support. To what do you commit your prayer? Paper? Earth? Water?

The handle attached, you begin to crank. It turns easily because the machine has assumed the burden of your prayer. All of its weight and work just to carry the plate a distance not even the length of your thumb extended.

This machine celebrates the delivery of desire. It translates a desperate breath into mechanical action. It does not presume to imply a destination.



Notes:

1. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (London: Virago Press 1985), 44.
2. Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *Trattati di Architettura* (Milan: Il Polifilo 1972).
3. Reproduced from Enzo Carli, *Sienese Painting* (London: Summerfield Press 1983).
4. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Modern Library 1995), 331.