

Gary Stevens

Time lies at the core of experience and seems incorruptible: it marches on and it drags, yet it paradoxically defies all efforts to describe it. Despite its centrality, we don't know what time is, we cannot capture it in its totality and it catches up with us all in the end. Artists treat time with care, even suspicion, and its use as a medium is a comparatively recent development. After nearly a century, though, our perception of time and space has altered radically, so that artists like Gary Stevens might even be thought of as sculpting time.

Time-based art first appeared when scientists were beginning to understand time as warped and wedded to space in ways hitherto unsuspected. Until then art either held time still, as an image, or simply allowed it to flow at its own pace, in film. Later, performance art became a prime discipline through which to problematise its perception, particularly in heroically durational pieces, which accentuate the here and now to monumental proportions. The instantaneousness and essential immateriality of digital video, though, presents an even greater opportunity for elaborate temporal play. Whereas structural materialist filmmakers of the 1970s were interested in emphasising the processes of film over its illusory, representational capacity, by way of devices such as jump cuts, looping and non-naturalistic framing, video invites a manipulation of its timeline in lieu of its physical qualities. In a recent move towards video, after more than 20 years of working in live performative situations, Stevens has expanded on this potential, supplanting a temporally governed narrative with a more sculptural sensibility. The video installation *Wake Up and Hide* (2006–7) involves a structuralist sort of approach to the video timeline, delving beneath the bonnet of narrative to manipulate temporal phenomena such as anticipation, action and effect.

The two constituent videos of *Wake Up and Hide* comprise many sections of footage shot in the same interior – a drawing room in a stately home, perhaps, or a hotel communal lounge – and projected onto two large screens so that the represented space appears almost life size. Without giving too much away about the technology of the editing or

installation, the video represents a series of actions and reactions enacted by performers, who are obviously influenced by the viewers' presence. Noises in the gallery interrupt the action onscreen, prompting a change in the state of play, as if the viewer's silent attentiveness, or otherwise, had a real effect.

The states of play in question comprise odd hybrid behaviours – part animal, part human, part object. On one screen, which constitutes the *Wake Up* part of the title, the performers enter the frame, take up a somewhat formal but believable stationary position and then, if uninterrupted for long enough, start to wilt absurdly. Stevens likens their bodies to bags of shopping – crinkly sacks that sometimes sit obediently or, because of some false equilibrium of badly tessellated shapes inside them, shift by degrees until they slump hopelessly. This slow atrophy is like the loosening of tension or falling asleep or growing old, yet the performers' resolute eye contact with the camera lets us know that they are aware of their own performance. We are not witnessing real slumping, but the simulation of slumping, and the performers never play dead: there is always some fidgeting or breathing that signals life, like the cycling movements of a video game avatar when the player leaves the controls alone.

The *Hide* aspect of the installation is more overtly creature-like. The performers – a different group of individuals from those in the *Wake Up* scenario – enter into frame from behind curtains, underneath tables or from some other hiding place, and take up an activity which they continue until interrupted by a noise in the gallery, at which point they hurriedly smooth over the soft furnishings, put objects back where they came from and generally clean up after themselves, then dash back into hiding. The scene approximates normality, as they adopt human activities – in turn rifling through a chest of drawers and fiddling with some bras, eating nuts, standing by the farthest wall drinking whisky or flicking between television channels – yet no one quite engages socially, this is not normal behaviour. They look around suspiciously at one another, enacting their tasks with the inattention of the heavily preoccupied, as though these idle moments are the complete but empty cupboards of these creatures' consciousness rather than downtime between thoughtful engagement. The spell is broken, however, when, like nervous

squirrels, a noise in the gallery scatters them into flight, the tension released by frenetic comedy retreat.

Stevens is interested in the point at which the performers affect a semblance of functionality, yet their actions seem stripped of tangible purpose. The starting point for *Wake Up and Hide* was *Triple Trouble* (c. 1918), a silent film featuring the Keystone Cops, a bungling band of policemen that pursue criminals and fall prey to pratfalls, slapstick fumbblings and farcical chase scenes. The Cops rarely operate as individuals, but travel in a pack; they have few individuating characteristics and function either in an ‘on’ mode, when they are in pursuit, or an ‘off’ mode, when they fall out, lounge around and smoke. They are rather like those toy animals made of wooden beads held together by elastic, which collapse when the base of the podium they are standing on is depressed – they are either in formation or total disarray, ceasing to function entirely when they are no longer pulling together as a unit.

The portrait of the US police force as a dysfunctional band of drones was pretty subversive for the period. As Keystone Comedy producer Charles Samuels describes:

‘I think you know what I mean about cops ... policemen are natural foils for comedy. They have dignity, and wherever there is dignity, comics can embroil it, embarrass it, flee from it and thumb their noses at it. Like me, the average citizen is a little afraid of policemen. He enjoys reducing the cop to his own level. I wanted to take a giant step and reduce cops to absurdities.’<sup>1</sup>

This description of the bruised dignity of the butt of a joke – which every comedian or class wag intuitively knows – is theorised by Charles Baudelaire in *The Essence of Laughter*, where he describes the mechanism that is triggered when we see another person fall:

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<sup>1</sup> Mack Sennet with Charles Samuels, *King of Comedy*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954, p53

‘Laughter is satanic and therefore profoundly human. It is born of man’s conception of his own superiority. Since it is essentially human, it is also essentially contradictory, that is to say it is at once a sign of infinite grandeur and of infinite wretchedness: of infinite wretchedness by comparison with the absolute Being who exists as an idea in man’s mind; of an infinite grandeur by comparison with the animals. It is from the perpetual shock produced by these two infinities that laughter proceeds ...’<sup>2</sup>

The jump cuts in *Wake Up and Hide* – the points at which the performers appear to react to sounds in the gallery – are exaggerated versions of the neural episodes they represent. As caricatures of surprise and panic, they shirk off the nuances of human individuality for the sake of the slapstick archetype. Similarly, when the performers are idling in the room and looking furtive, or slumping while looking at the camera, their socially dysfunctional attitudes relief us of any impulse to empathise with a naturalistic scenario.

Such objectification is a cornerstone of humour or, as Henri Bergson put it in his theoretical exploration of comic effect: ‘Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion.’<sup>3</sup> But the pratfall is magnified in significance if we draw analogies with the biblical Fall and appreciate its connotations as a move away from Godliness. In *The Rhetoric of Temporality*, a development on Baudelaire’s essay, Paul de Man makes the connection:

‘As a being that stands upright [...] man comes to believe that he dominates nature, just as he can, at times, dominate others or watch others dominate him. This is, of course, a major mystification. The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds him of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature, nature can at all times treat him as if he were a thing and

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Essence of Laughter and other essays, journals, and letters*, New York: Meridian, 1956, p117-8

<sup>3</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: xxx*

remind his of his factitiousness, whereas he is quite powerless to convert even the smaller particle of nature into something human.’<sup>4</sup>

Falling, or becoming an object, then, is a profoundly serious *and* funny moment. It is also rather magical. The splitting of the person who falls into intellectual and animal doppelgängers recalls archaic notions of dualism, where the mind and body were considered to be made of entirely different stuff, and vitalism, a doctrine whereby life is not explicable in terms of chemistry and physics alone, but requires some magical ‘life force’. This life force, it was claimed, could be harnessed and manipulated through animal magnetism, mesmerism and other mystical processes. Although this sounds like hokum now, the slippery notion of consciousness, like time, still resolutely evades us in scientific terms. Stevens, on the other hand, delights in replicating this ‘life force’ in low-tech ways, and *Wake Up and Hide* is a self-consciously choreographed simulation that replaces naturalism with the ropiness of a mechanical toy that is winding down.

Despite confusion as to the impulses and motivations of the performers, there is a classicism to the video image as a whole, a pictorial sense. The careful construction of the set (this is not a real interior after all) has the air of a theatrical stage or an interior in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch painting, while the furniture creates islands and passages that read like narrative episodes through which the characters can move. The framing of the image, too, seems to follow painterly rules of balance and equanimity, echoing the contrived naturalism of studied composition. Indeed, Stevens relates the bodily positions of his performers to portraiture. Velazquez, he points out, painted with such veracity and sensitivity that you become aware of the sitter’s awkwardness, their own sense of performance. His portrait of Phillip IV, for instance, imparts the slight wilt of the monarch as he holds his kingly pose – see the tinge of artifice as he performs being himself. In the *Hide* element of the installation in particular, the performers playfully exaggerate this tautology, making a conscious display of their self-consciousness.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul de Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, *Blindness and Insight*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p214

A previous video installation, and Stevens' first, *Slow Life* (2003), draws related allusions to painting. The five-screen installation shows people in domestic interiors performing simple acts, like passing a glass of wine or putting on a jacket, at the slowest rate possible without coming to a halt. Rather than simply the whole event being in slow motion, though, a confusion in temporal scale occurs when, say, a tap runs at real time in the background or we see and hear the crackle of a fire in the grate. Similar depictions of different types of time are intimated throughout post-Renaissance European painting: in Vermeer's *The Milk Maid* (c. 1658–60), for instance, the eternal stream of milk contradicts and perpetuates the instantaneousness of the moment; and Chardin often introduced instability to a scene of contemplation with an impetuousness spinning top or a house of cards to puncture the stasis and totality of the image.

In *Slow Life* Stevens corrupts the temporal logic of the image, whereas in *Wake Up and Hide* it is the rationale of the scenario that shifts. He makes a display of slippages, gaps and misappropriations throughout his works, facilitating a series of actions and utterances that appear to the viewer to replace reasonable purpose for dysfunctional playfulness. In this way he inscribes a boundary of the performance that lies beyond the mere bodies of its participants, sculpting in a wider phenomenological sense. You might even say that he sculpts the viewers' expectations. Purposivity, common sense, logic and causality are all concepts that we humans hold dear and, even though on scrutiny they are invariably found to be linguistic constructions as much as anything else, we continue to utilise belief systems and political ideologies that enable us to build with them, to communicate with one another and further our technologies. Stevens strips these purposive structures to their bare gestural armatures, reflecting back to us an image of our own methods for dealing with rootless paradigms.

It may sound a little overblown, but such issues of the source of consciousness, the nature of thought and its relationship to behaviour prompt all manner of other grand questions. As the psychologist Margaret A Boden puts it in *Purposive Explanation in Psychology*:

‘is there any real distinction between the mental and nonmental aspects of the organism? What is the mind, and does it have a structure? Are there group minds? What is the self, and what is meant by the “unity” or “integration” of the personality? Is each human personality unique? What is human freedom, and is it essential to morality? Are men’s actions unpredictable? What is psychological being, or “subject”? What is the role of ideas mediating between stimulus and response? Are conscious purposes important? Does the mind determine the body?’<sup>5</sup>

Boden attempts to synthesise two camps in psychology – the humanistic and mechanistic – which would essentially bring into unity the contradictory ideas of free will and determinism. The lineage of the humanist, or purposive, psychologists can be traced back to dualism, vitalism and metaphysics. The mechanistic psychologists, on the other hand, developed theories from more recent scientific disciplines such as neurophysiology and stimulus-response theory. Boden’s proposition is that purposive psychology should also entail the consideration of causal mechanisms or, in short, that our hidden impulses are also systematic reactions, albeit to less tangible causes.

An overlap of mechanistic inevitability and freewheeling purposivity is the well-spring of Stevens’ installation *And* (1997), for which he issues a sort of behavioural template or recipe to performers within a gallery space:

**And** is concerned with conscious repetition. The performers sample natural and common gestures and expressions. It is a cyclical series of encounters between the performers, or periods of isolation, which are seen as phases within the cycle.

The transition from one phase to the next is mostly determined by a single performer taking the initiative to change, which cues the rest.

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret A Boden, *Purposive Explanation in Psychology*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972, p3.

*And* is not a reconstruction or portrait of any single human state, but expresses the cusp of a number. Besides the obvious uncanniness of seeing a room full of people apparently stuck in mechanised grooves, the piece might be thought of in terms of a mischievous compulsion to upset the flow of causality, the unease of technological encroachment on to the body or the centrality of repetition in ritual. Bergson sees such repetitive behaviour as optimum conditions for creating comic effect:

‘The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine. [...] We shall probably find that [the comic drawing] is generally comic in proportion to the clearness, as well as the subtleness, with which it enables us to see a man as a jointed puppet. The suggestion must be a clear one, for inside the person we must distinctly perceive, as though through a glass, a set-up mechanism. But the suggestion must also be a subtle one, for the general appearance of the person, whose every limb has been made rigid as a machine, must continue to give us the impression of a living being. The more exactly these two images, that of a person and that of a machine, fit into each other, the more striking is the comic effect, and the more consummate the art of the draughtsman. The originality of a comic artist is thus expressed in the special kind of life he imparts to a mere puppet.’

By this criterion, then, *And* is funny indeed, as Stevens does not render a puppet life-like, but the inverse – his performers act like stuck robots with a knowing twinkle of mischief.

Stevens’ methodologies are decidedly low tech: performative works like *And*, *Slow Life* and *Wake up and Hide* are built from verbal instructions, naturalistic settings and performers wearing their everyday clothes. That performers are from the community of artists and friends that Stevens finds himself surrounded by, rather than professional actors, is also important. His recent use of video, too, has introduced a technology that can approximate the desired effect with actions and editing alone, rather than expensive rendering in some extravagant digital special effect software. As many sculptors find, harking back to the methods and materials of *arte povera*, the transformation of the



everyday is often more startling than flashy fantastical fabrications. And Stevens' low-tech aesthetic is extended to the way that a piece is directed. Something that seems as baroque as *And*, as cinematic as *Wake Up and Hide* or as painterly as *Slow Life* is arrived at through fairly simple and direct verbal instructions. 'Pass that glass of wine as slowly as possible' requires a physical concentration that makes any thespian inflection impossible.

In both of Stevens' video installations this self-awareness of the performers is etched into the image and there is a consequent tension between mode of construction and the representation of what is constructed, the slow-mo of the glass and the effort of the arm that proffers it. Unlike real machinery, whose smooth automatism demonstrates the disembodied intelligence of its human fabricator, these scenes are compounds of the director's and the performers' efforts. As yet, no super computer can learn in a human way or understand such notions as intention and causality, although artificial intelligence researcher Douglas Hoffstadter explains the Eliza Effect, whereby we credit a machine with more intelligence than it would ever be capable of: 'A trivial example of this effect might be someone thinking that an automatic teller machine really was *grateful* for receiving a deposit slip, simply because it printed out 'THANK YOU' on its little screen.' He encapsulates it as 'a surprisingly unguarded mentality in which anthropomorphic characterizations of what computers do are accepted far too easily, both outside and within the field.'<sup>6</sup> This is certainly the tendency that Isaac Asimov's *2001: A Space Odyssey* draws on – it is the quintessential story of technological mutiny. An installation such as *And* plays on ambiguities of authorship, direction and individual choice to oscillate between these modes of intelligence.

For the performative installation *Here & There* (2002) at Mugatxoan, Fundacao Serralves, Oporto, Portugal, Stevens moved outdoors to the tree-lined avenues and formal gardens beyond the architectural framing of a gallery space. For this piece instructions revolved around key positions, copying actions and the occasional capricious dispersal of

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas R Hofstadter, *Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies*, London: Allen Lane, 1997, pp157-8.

the group. The result was strange flock-like behaviour, which the peripatetic spectators could consider from a distance or intermingle with, creating confusion as to who was performer and who was audience. Working together and, now and then, bursting apart, the performers took on attributes of molecules, collaborating in being stuff and creating contrasts between their amorphous, unpredictable formations and the regimented shrubbery of the ornamental garden.

One of the key commands of *Here and There* was stupid hiding, as Stevens calls it – sticking heads in bushes, lying down or standing conspicuously behind objects. Stupid hiding is an enduring motif in Stevens’ performative installations, and it signals that strange margin, once more, that lies between animal and human intelligence. Scientists have recently discovered that humans share 96% of their DNA sequence with chimpanzees. This means that only 4% of our biological makeup is responsible for language, art, war, psychoanalysis, space flight, face transplants, baked Alaska and so on. We emerge from nature, try our damndest to rise above it and control it, then slide inescapably back into its very substance. Our 4% is powerful, but not invincible. It is also a great source of fascination, making us human, individual and conscious, providing us with the alchemical fuel of sensible motivation and causal intentionality. Stevens repeatedly looks at this liminal essence, perhaps reconstructing through his performers a mysterious sensitivity or reflexive response to some deep atavistic prompt.

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It is not really necessary to categorise an artist in these interdisciplinary times, but it is interesting to track Stevens’ practice in relation to the disciplines and histories of theatre, live art and visual art. Although there is a pervasive and crucial relation to time throughout his video and performance work, Stevens works with recourse to photography, painting and sculpture too. As *Slow Life* is a distinct evocation of the domestic scenography of Vermeer, Sickert’s *Ennui* (c. 1914) has particular resonance in the idle moments of *Wake Up and Hide*. The edge of these performative videos lies not at the peripheries of the performers’ themselves, as in live work to camera that prioritises

the body, but the image as a whole. Perhaps photography might provide an even closer link, by way of its historically problematic interception of time with image, past with present.

Conceptual art, too, becomes a reference point if we look beyond the informatic aesthetics of the period style, as Mike Sperlinger describes it in 'Orders! Conceptual Art's Imperatives' (2005), and towards the constitutive ambiguity and temporality of early conceptualism. The conceptual subgenre that Sperlinger concentrates on is that of orders, instructions and commands, which:

'often served as a kind of shorthand to foreground issues including individual agency, authority, language, the realisation and recording of the artwork, and, not least, the possibility of failure [...] the relationship between idea and material form, concept and work, is constantly dramatised. This drama naturally involves play with the parameters, the limits within which a work can be realised and the extent to which content is prescribed.'<sup>7</sup>

This is not dissimilar to the mechanisms of many of Stevens' collaborative performance pieces, although his humanised mode of production produces a softer, more socialised outcome than, say, Sol le Witt's rectilinear products – the results of mechanically working through a logical process.

The dematerialisation of works like *And* and *Here and There*, and the fact that Stevens considers them more as installations or exhibitions than performances, made afresh with each new location and set of performers, also situates his practice within dialogues of Live Art; although the insistence of many theorists and practitioners that Live Art should exist only in the moment that it is experienced by viewers, that it should hunt down, like elusive prey, the essence of the here and now, is somewhat scotched by Stevens. The instructional script-like essence of his works can be sent around the world in digital or

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<sup>7</sup> Mike Sperlinger, 'Orders! Conceptual Art's Imperatives', *Afterthought: new writing on conceptual art*, London: Rachmaninoff's, 2005

printed form and reiterated and, by dint of repetition, revision, deviation and inflection, it draws on a slightly different realm of cultural production. Contemporary devised, improvised and physical theatre revolves around performers as a generative source for a piece, perhaps working in a room for weeks to find actions, phrases or atmospheres that are somehow interesting and can germinate into something to be worked on. A phase of creative development, in which ideas are tried and tasks implemented, may then coalesce into a transcription, with a script for dialogue, movement and stage direction, from which the minutiae can then be refined. Many of Stevens' scripts involve actions only, or instructions for dialogue devoid of specific content, which are then handed on to the performers, so the order of development, from improvisation to script, is inverted but the principle of a negotiation between fixity and fluidity remains paramount.

Historically, this way of making performance can be traced back to *commedia dell'arte*, when actors would improvise within an outlined scenario involving stock characters. A development of this surfaced in the 1960s, in the atmosphere of political and liberational theatre, with collaborative companies emerging as a redoubt against the tide of dominating institutions and ideologies. Although Stevens is not advertently making political work, it nonetheless reverberates with collectivism and often creates conflicts between socialisation, status quo and culpability of the performer. The animus of much of the work, too, carries Orwellian overtones and nods towards discourses on models of democracy. Stevens' structures are more in keeping with social democracy than its liberal counterpart, though as, like an Eliza Effect of the performative group, the outcome is only as autonomous as the direction allows it to be.

Traditional theatrical roots run even deeper, as Stevens has performed a number of more overtly scripted works. In *Not Tony* (DATE), for instance, the artist uses rudimentary costumes and props – a stick-on beard, a rubber duck, dogs' ears, a teapot – to designate different characters and rooms within a family home. A distinct narrative unfolds and characters develop, but Stevens is not slipping into the 'bourgeois', absorptive narrative that dramatists since Brecht have sought to frustrate or negate. *Not Tony* draws attention to the fabrication of its illusory world, and the representation of another place is

interrupted by constant referral to the mode of construction. The same is so of *Thread*, a straight monologue in which an evocation of a play is performed through a secondary register of description. The piece begins something like this:

(The lights come up on a man standing in the centre of a bare stage.)

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Originally I came on to the stage because I had been accused of murder (It's a long story). Either I had been framed or there was a string of extraordinary coincidences that led the police to me. The only way to prove my innocence was to find the killer, but I had to escape first. I walked straight out of the front doors of the police station during a break in the interrogation. I turned left and tried to mingle with the crowd. I looked up and saw a policeman looking straight back at me. I ran and darted into the foyer of a theatre. I went through the double doors into the auditorium - no one stopped me. It was dark and I sneaked along behind the back row. All the seats were taken so I couldn't sit down and no one was standing so, even in the dark, I was conspicuous. I went through a door with a curtain over it and down a corridor. There were a small set of steps and I went up them. I found myself standing in the wings looking onto the stage. It was brightly lit and the colours were intense. I heard a scuffle from the corridor. The police had followed me. There was a figure that I couldn't quite make out lurking in the dark behind me, which stopped me going further backstage. The police were on the stairs. I had no choice: I went onto the stage. The heat of the lights hit the side of my face as I stepped on. I adopted a certain attitude – I forget what attitude it was – to make it seem that I was in the play. I sauntered on, with my hands in my pockets – that was it – and nodded casually at the other actors.<sup>8</sup>

The consciously pedantic way in which Stevens describes the events that led to him finding himself onstage break all the rules of dramaturgy. 'I forget what attitude it was', for instance, negates any possibility of us being able to visualise what is being described. We are made so completely aware of the language that is being spoken by the man who stands before us that the secondary, illusory space of the narrative we are hearing remains

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<sup>8</sup> Gary Stevens' script for *Thread*.

very much elsewhere. Unlike the transportative aims of traditional literature, here the set-up is reaffirmed with every word. The text is aware of its status as text and the performance so self-conscious to the point of self-reflexivity that Stevens cunningly succeeds in feeding the rules of theatre back on to itself, obtaining an immediacy that any Live Art practitioner would die for.

The triangulation of the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer has shifted as paradigms change. Since the dissolution of Modernism the autonomy of the artwork has been breached, with the reciprocity between artwork and viewer occupying as central a position as that between artist and artwork. Interpretation, then, has become as valued as intention, with a corresponding empowerment of the audience when it comes to the meaning of an artwork. Live Art certainly insists on this reciprocity and relativity, asserting that a piece is not only different every time it is performed but also different for every individual viewer. Theatre, too, has experienced an increased fluidity of relations between stage and auditorium, action and meaning, with fragmentary or decentred work offering ambiguity as an interface for individuated responses. Stevens has also inched towards a practice that absorbs the viewer within its make up. The intermingling of the viewer in the installations *Here and There* and *And*, for instance, makes for a more immersive viewing experience, whereas *Slow Life* and *Wake Up and Hide* literalise this even further, in that the audience can have an influence on the events onscreen. But beware once more of the Eliza Effect – this is not a truly interactive situation. The action is preordained, programmed by Stevens, and the viewer simply draws out of the piece a certain furtive behaviour that has been constructed within its ontology.