

The Self-Aware Stage-craft of Robert Hengeveld's Living Sculptures

By Kelly Jazvac

This winter I went looking on CBC's website for information about the Harper government's re-scripting of Parks Canada's 100th anniversary press conference. But I couldn't find anything. I could, however, find a headlining story about a VW Jetta driver 'terrified' by a burning seat warmer.

Clearly no one wants to die in a car engulfed in flames from a malfunctioning luxury option. However, should this be headline news? And what story got bumped to make space for this one?

To help me reconcile these questions, I turn to American author and Pulitzer Prize winner Chris Hedges, who commits sociology in his 2009 book, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of the Spectacle*. Here he quotes Daniel Boorstin, who uses the term 'Pseudo-events' to describe this phenomenon: "In 'The Image: A guide to Pseudo-events in America,' Boorstin writes that in contemporary cultures the fabricated, the inauthentic, and the theatrical have displaced the natural, the genuine and the spontaneous, until reality itself has been converted into stage-craft." I don't doubt that the VW driver story was true and upsetting, but what *was* crafted is how it is prioritized and mediated to the public as front-page news. If you don't buy this story as exemplar, perhaps today's home-page headlines, "Duchess Kate Channels Princess Diana in Cute Polka-Dot Dress," or "Selena Gomez Orders Shots of Jack Daniels on 21st Birthday" will convince you.

Boorstin's comments bring me to the artwork of Robert Hengeveld. His art, perverse in its extreme non-deviance, goes so far towards unreasonable perfection it gets creepy-funny, like one round too many of teeth whitening. In *Kentucky Perfect*, looking not dissimilar to a factory farm of the near future, the lawn takes a backseat to the complex apparatus supporting it. Equally perverse is the sterile quality of the life-promoting actions: the daylight lamp's movements are reminiscent of a full body X-ray scan at airport security; the mower recalls an unfortunate scene in a Mad Men episode involving a John Deere mower and a body part; the watering system, although visually the most calming care-giving element, makes a noise like a vehicle being raised on a mechanic's hoist.

In the impressive kinetic sculpture *Ghost Rider*, the robotic arm (that can perform 360o of maintenance) looks as though it has been appropriated from a vehicle assembly line, given some garden shears and reassigned a new task. I half expect a 'sponsored by...' sign in the background. Perhaps this is what happens to machines when they too get a pink slip, or when they screw up installing the seat warmers.

These sculptures function as complicated proposals for uncertain times. They make sentient, disrupted spectacles of the non-spectacular. The stage-craft, to which viewers more or less have visual access (even if, like me, they don't grasp *how* Hengeveld made the stage-craft), works very hard to keep the greenery perfect. Although the robotics are clearly complex, they are very matter-of-fact about their presence as robotics. Hengeveld has opted to leave the mechanisms exposed, so the work of maintaining the grass becomes the art as much as the grass itself.

To return to Chris Hedges and Daniel Boorstin's 'pseudo-events': the artist has here made a non-event (literally watching grass grow) into an elaborate spectacle. In doing so, he not only provides his audience with an opportunity to be both delighted and entertained by the work, but he also provides a moment and space for viewers to commit some speculative sociology themselves while waiting in the contemplative pauses for an immersive, high-performance maintenance action to begin. The absurdity of such an event creates a sort of antidote to the reality of those aforementioned soft headlines called "news." If growing perfect grass is not yet passively newsworthy, in Hengeveld's work it becomes actively and engagedly art worthy – and thus creates a space where this new media art is well-positioned to maneuver through the spectacle of the media; a space where questions can be asked about what might be a luxury option, and what might actually be at stake.