

REVIEW

Hlady's installation an intriguing and provocative show

Marla Hlady: Shelf Works

Neutral Ground
Until May 31

In what appears on the surface to be something of a curious and perhaps even impossible synthesis, Toronto artist Marla Hlady fuses in her intriguing work the orderly, almost mechanical repetitions we associate with 1970s Minimalist art and music with the disorderly, almost anarchic visual and aural chaos we associate with 1930s Dadaist art and noise events.

AT THE GALLERIES



**JACK
ANDERSON**

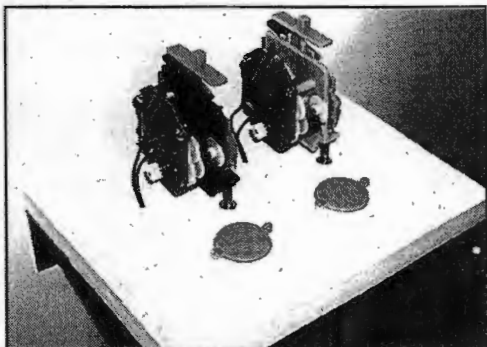
Exhibited cleanly and even clinically on individual shelves lined up one beside another, Hlady displays as sculptural objects numerous pairs of almost identical small, self-contained mass-produced steel and plastic motorized machines and miniature audio speakers. Dangling from each is an electrical cord which, when turned on, activates these mechanical units: numerous spinning cogs, gears and moving parts engage, creating loud clacking, whirring and squeaking noise.

es that emanate from the speakers at regular intervals. Animated by the juice of electricity, stillness is supplanted by movement, silence is supplanted by sound and order is supplanted by chaos.

Clearly, some kind of anthropomorphic machine "conversation" is taking place here. But as much as we assume that each of these amusing little devices in each pair is identical to the other and that they must therefore "speak" the same machine language with the same tone of voice, it becomes immediately apparent that they are instead just slightly different from each other. We notice that not only does each machine move at different rates, but that as a consequence of this, the conversation or "duet" between them becomes progressively more and more disordered and more and more discordant: this is less a chorus of voices in unison than an incomprehensible Babel of noise.

Although in this particular system the component elements seem to be both alike, they are in fact unlike. Indeed, each individual machine here is in fact out of sync with the other through its own unique modulations and deviations. Clearly raising questions about continuity and discord within a proscribed and limited system, Hlady metaphorically critiques here Modernism and the machine, progress and social utopianism.

One of anything may be considered a singularity, but two creates a relational system. Just as each paired machine here has a conversation with its other, we viewers engage in a spatial,



Marla Hlady: Shelf Works (installation detail), mixed media

emotional and intellectual conversation with these chattering little objects. From viewer to viewer, Hlady's objects promote not one singular reading of them but a multitude or network of readings.

Motivated by desire, we might even consider that as we gaze at and listen to these machines, we strive to adapt to them; if only momentarily, we become "assimilated" into their systems. Clearly, Hlady turns the tables on us here: by definition, machines are built to fit into and expedite human systems.

Nonetheless, without external skins to shape them and declare their original purpose to us, and without any translation for their language, we cannot find a meaning or place for these objects: these are essentially useless devices. Indeed, neither what these insistently vocal machines utter nor the original use they were put to is in any way apparent to us: although noisily audible, these are machines that are, for the most part, mute and indecipherable.

Hlady raises questions here not only related to language, but to its interpretation. And it is clear from the get-go that we have no idea what these machines ultimately mean: they thus prompt an existential condition of "not knowing" which invites an epistemological crisis related not only to what we know, but how we know it. In the end, Hlady's superficially whimsical work forces both a consideration of the nature of reality — about how we perceive objects and events and how we understand them — and about the nature of human consciousness as well.

Looking small but meaning big, Hlady somehow spins abject machine pathos, abject machine humour and abject machine beauty into some ambiguous but poetic rumination on human desire and loss. It is ample evidence why Hlady's name is cropping up in Canadian art circles more and more these days. It is also one of the most intriguing and provocative shows we have seen in Regina this year.