

Polyrhythms and Multigrain Vibrations

by Tim Dixon

“Everything has a function. The form follows the function.”

I left my studio visit with Clara Hastrup turning these words that she had said over in my mind. In Hastrup's work everything is in motion, and everything is defined by something else, while also defining something further - bringing it into being or taking it out of action, moving it or changing it.

A fan may switch on, a string may resonate, an image may move back or forth on a screen by a frame or two or more, and we may trace it back to figure out that it was triggered by something else, which may be triggered by a sound, which may be triggered by growth of a plant or the speed and direction of the wind or the height of the tide on the Thames. This leads to that leads to this leads to that leads to this leads to that and so on.

There is sometimes a feeling of imminent collapse in the work - like everything is going off at once and it could all fall apart. Or maybe nothing will happen.

It brings to mind the rudimentary programming language of Boolean Logic Gates: commands like AND, OR, NOT, IF. If X is Y then Z is A. If X is not Y then Z is B. Simple commands combine together to create complex systems.

Hastrup's work always opens out to an element she cannot control, and she frequently finds this in nature: the movements of fish, the pattern of the spines of a cactus whose growth follows the Fibonacci Sequence, and at Standpoint the speed and direction of the wind outside the gallery and the cosmic forces that determine the movement of the tides on the Thames.

Polyrhythms and Multigrain Vibrations sets five works interlinked into a sequence beginning just above the gallery entrance, where an anemometer reads the wind speed outside the gallery and a digital wind vane reads its direction. Live signals feed the data into the gallery triggering a sequence of actions and reactions:

The wind's direction triggers two rotating platforms, rotating the plant in *Weather Plant with Trimming Scissors* where proximity sensors trigger scissors to trim the palm's leaves, and shifting the lamp in *Weather Lamp with Flowerpot TV*. Light levels thrown by the lamp are measured by lux sensors triggering four videos of water lilies coming into bloom to move, frame by frame, back and forth, operating as a stop motion animation.

The wind's speed modulates the playback speed of an instrumental version of Stevie Wonder's *I just called to say I love you* in *Wind Radio* and activates up to four fans in *Equilibrium Cerealis: Vibration RGB*.

Equilibrium Cerealis... continues a series of works Hastrup has made using breakfast cereals. Her interest is multifaceted: their cartoonish form, the garish boxes, their dumb banality and their symbolic potency as a highly-processed, mass-produced post-war American consumer product. But also key to choosing which ones she uses is their ability to make a great sound when they strike a musical instrument from height.

Inside each of the 30 packs on this large mobile, a small electronic device determines how much cereal will drop and how often, calculated to have fully emptied the boxes by the end of the exhibition – with the levels hopefully, but not necessarily, maintaining equilibrium throughout. As cereals drop, a drum kit below is struck, with vibration sensors altering the colour of the lights throughout the space.

Mobiles as artworks of course link back to Alexander Calder's experiments with creating sculpture that could exist not statically but in motion – the force and moving power of the wind is inherent in their form, as is their sense of weight and balance in motion. Hastrup's mobile admittedly is deliberately unstable.

Alongside this *Tidal Range* sees five containers containing Campari, Flash bathroom spray, Fairy liquid, coffee and tea empty and fill according to live data of the rising and falling of the tide in the Thames, itself tied to the rotation of the Earth in relation to the position of the Moon. Given that a full cycle takes approximately 12 hours 25 minutes this may or may not be noticeable during your visit. While Hastrup's mechanisms are usually exposed in clear plastic 'Sistema' Tupperware, *Tidal Range* hides its workings in specially made plinths, though trailing cables may make us wonder what is at play here.

Hastrup talks about her work in terms of 'systems', a way of working with its roots in late 1960s and early 1970s conceptual art practices when artists tried to move away from object-based practices as a way of challenging the status of the art object. Artists such as Hans Haacke created works like *Condensation Cube* (1963-65) whose physical form is altered by the conditions in the room in which it was shown. Opening the work up to the world in this way led Haacke to increasingly challenge the social and political conditions that the work also existed in, birthing the practices associated with institutional critique.

Hastrup's work demonstrates a similar openness to the world, incorporating found objects and reconfiguring them into elaborate systems, always reaching a point where the artist relinquishes control and brings in an element that can't be determined in advance. She positions her work in the context of contemporary consumerism – implicated in it but seeking to question it and undercut by a certain self-conscious comic stupidity. The objects she uses are clean, new products, fresh off the shelf or out of the delivery box (at least, at the start of the exhibition, before the contents of other objects is dumped onto them).

Instability and precarity run through the work, in the homespun, hand-made contraptions programmed by the artist need looking after, the materials used are inherently unstable and self-destructive.

When we take a component and make it part of a larger whole, combine it together with many others we get a composition. It's an apt term for thinking about Hastrup's work as it shares so much with music. It unfolds spatially, sonically, and temporally, with more than a touch of Cageian openness to chance and humour to it.

The elements brought into play find and trace the edges of where control ends and order meets chaos, when the human ability to determine the resulting effects of defined causes run up against the mounting complexity of the natural world, where the inputs become so various that the outputs cease to be predictable.

And it's here in this tension that the work holds us.

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This text was commissioned by Standpoint on the occasion of Clara Hastrup's Mark Tanner Sculpture Award exhibition 'Polyrhythms and Multigrain Vibrations' 22 May - 4 July 2026.