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Kinetic Sculpture that Moves at a Snail-like Pace

by [Joseph Nechvatal](#) on [August 13, 2015](#)



Pol Bury, "43 éléments se faisant face" (1968) (private collection, courtesy Galerie Patrick Derom) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

PARIS — I particularly admire Pol Bury's (1922–2005) shimmering, kinetic work when it almost imperceptibly quivers in a way that doesn't immediately register with the viewer. At Espace Fondation EDF, Curator Daniel Marchesseau and Velma Bury, the artist's wife, have assembled an exceptional historic presentation, *Pol Bury: Instants donnés (Given Instants)* (free to the public) of Bury's whimsical art. His art was initiated by the shifting visions of the Cubo-Futurists and intensified by the sculpture of Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, László Moholy-Nagy, Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, and then the kinetic art of Nicolas Schöffer and [Takis](#), et al. Like Bury, these artists were concerned with opening up the static, three-dimensional sculptural form to a fourth dimension of time and motion that seeks to de-materialize the art object.

Bury's art also traces back to 1960s Op Art: that hard-edge geometrical movement largely inspired by various optical experiments of Marcel Duchamp. Jesus-Rafael Soto, Bridget Riley, the GRAV group, Yayoi Kusama, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Yaacov Agam, Marian Zazeela, and Victor Vasarely (among others) are key Op references here. Op Art implied the kinetic in that its illusions effected an appearance of motion. But Kinetic Art also pioneered the use of optical movement and fashioned links between science, technology, and art.



Pol Bury, "Sphère avec deux plans sur un cube" (1975)
(private collection, courtesy Galerie Patrick Derom,
Brussels) (click to enlarge)

Simply stated, the term 'kinetic' means the study of the relationship between moving bodies. Hence the term 'Kinetic Art' is usually used to describe either three-dimensional mobiles or constructions that move in either foreordained or unplanned ways. With Op and Kinetic Art, the artwork calls attention to the spectator as an individual, mainly his or her changing perceptions, thus resulting in a decline in art's sequestered, fetishistic standing as an *objet d'art*.

This trend is very well exemplified by the work of Belgian Pol Bury. Given the period-piece nature of the exhibition, I found it stylistically engaging albeit retro in look. It recalled for me the shiny, futuristic space age designs of Paco Rabanne in 1960s Paris that also involved the use of moving, metallic discs.

In truth, Bury's rather clunky-looking sculptures are far more interesting to experience than look at (particularly in reproduction), as their snail-like pace lends a cool, Zen-like atmosphere to a room. Purring, hidden motors leisurely tickle groups of forms in slow, seemingly random, trembling movements. Particularly funny and gratifying is his erection series where small, wooden rod-forms every so often twitch a bit upwards and then pathetically wilt back down, such as in the huge "4087 cylindres érectiles" (1972) and the smaller, earlier "Rérectile" (1964). The works here are hypnotic. At times, one senses a breeze in the room that does not exist.



Pol Bury “4087 cylindres érectiles” (1972), 250 x 710 x 45 cm (© Centre Pompidou, MNAM/CCI, Paris) (click to enlarge)

Bury’s wiggly hairy wall pieces, such as “2270 points blanc sur un losange – Entité” (1965) and “1815 et 2185 points blanc” (1967) are optically unsettling. They consist of a textured, wooden picture plane with protruding bunches of grass/hair-like tendrils, again powered by a veiled motor. Their unexpected and irregular slow motion gives them an element of dilated time where surprise and chance emerge. That quality seems to me to be a legacy of the Surrealists.

Young Bury’s first influence was René Magritte, who inspired Bury to start painting in a Surrealist style. But Bury abandoned painting in 1952 after encountering the sculpture of Alexander Calder. Calder’s mobiles, in particular, made a powerful impression, one that we can see in Bury’s first kinetic, weather vane-like sculptures from the 1950s. In 1955, these works led him to being asked to participate in the historical exhibition *Le Mouvement*, organized in Paris by Denise René and Pontus Hulten. Thereafter, Bury motorized his pieces, and chose to live permanently in Paris with significant time spent in the United States between 1966 and 1971, particularly in Manhattan and Berkeley.

His musical instruments, like “17 cordes horizontales et cylindres” (1973) and “12 et 13 cordes verticales et leur cylinder” (1973), create an unexpected minimal music through the grinding, scraping, and rattling of a hidden mechanism. This mechanical murmur, along with the plucking of the strings, creates a tiny, eccentric symphony of impromptu notes and noise. Also on view are a number of fountains and models where Bury incorporated water as an additional ingredient of movement, though the viewer has to pay close attention to notice the actual churning of water.



Installation view of ‘Pol Bury: Instants donnés (Given Instants)’ (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Whimsical humor and delight permeate the works’ gentle, visual poetry, which for me makes Bury a key figure in the context of the history of art-tech achievement. Yet generally, Bury’s work is not as technically sophisticated or flashy as Nicolas Schöffer’s, for instance (who also had an enlightening retrospective at Espace Fondation EDF a few years ago). Schöffer’s “CYSP 1” (1956) is considered to be the first cybernetic sculpture in art history made with electronic computations, developed by the

Philips Company. In that piece, colored lights bounce off revolving, polished metal towers, casting ever-changing lights and shadows onto huge wall-screens and into our eyes. Oh la la! Party room! By contrast, Bury's polished, metal pieces, like "Grand cube miroir avec demi-sphères" (1970), have only a bit of this heavy metal razzle-dazzle. Generally speaking, his slower, more modest, post-Surrealist displays of technological prowess protect the work from falling into the 'special effects' category of spectacle.

Bury has said: "Speed limits space, slowness increases it." This show proves him correct, as we are given the time to ponder Bury's work as artist, technician, and engineer within a history of art and technology. A history that is far from exhausted.

Pol Bury: Instants donnés continues at the *Espace Fondation EDF* (6, rue Récamier 75007 Paris) through August 23.

Espace Fondation EDF kinetic art **Pol Bury**