A MACHINE

On the broad – and narrow – implications of ‘mechanisation’ in contemporary art.

A-ESTHETIC

A MACHINE AESTHETIC

Text by Travis Riley

For artist Eric Butcher, the artist is an active embracer and exploiter of new technology. He soon learnt, however, that common wisdom seems to largely disagree. The blueprint of his exhibition *A Machine Aesthetic*, which explores this premise, seemed at one point never likely to leave the planning table. After Butcher's initial attempts to be seen by the major galleries fell flat, the show lay dormant for a number of years. Enter, co-curator Simón Granell, whose first act was to revive the project through a meeting with Helen Baker, the former Director of Gallery North.

Through the guise of the machine aesthetic, the show considers the shift in the relationship between human society and the machine. So comfortable are we in our role as makers of machines that we can no longer deny the influence the machine and its aesthetic has on our lifestyle, the way we exist, and the way we function.

It is this aspect of the show that first caught Granell's attention. In this moment of machine-driven aesthetic fallout he is interested in how artists interpret a sense of 'being in the world.' 'It is,' he says, 'no longer a matter of coexistence with this fallout as increasingly we are driving it ourselves.'

The term aesthetic ensures that the imputation of the exhibition's title is specifically surface oriented; it refers to the visual manifestation of the machine made object, not the implied societal impact. Acknowledging this Butcher says, 'obviously the aesthetic, the look of something is a superficial exploration, but it's a way of leading into a whole host of other ideas.'

The aesthetic of many machine and digital-based technologies is incidental, dependent on functional design. Their visual incorporation into art, design and popular culture therefore – through romanticised reminiscences of Victorian industrial aesthetics or forward-looking, touch-screen laden, digital designs – already represents a shift from function to visual. The artist who explores the machine aesthetic therefore cannot help but also consider the purpose and character of the machine.

And it's not just antipathy towards an old-fashioned conception of machines that fed into Butcher's thought process when developing the premise, but opposition to an equally out-dated perception of the artist. 'If I talk to people at dinner parties and they say, 'what do you do?' My heart sort of sinks,' Butcher says. 'They seem to yearn for artists to be this kind of romantic hero, the tortured genius... what they don't want to hear is that maybe you have a white coat on and you make your art in a science lab or you make your art out of high technology.'

Whilst not ignored within the art world, there is a sense that art engaged in exploring the processes and aesthetics of the machine is neither well nor widely understood. Certainly, it doesn't get good press. 'People want to contrast the machine produced,' the lifeblood of our day-to-day, 'with the something else, the handmade, the craft-based object. It is an odd dichotomy and not a very helpful one.'

Indeed, the societal role of the artist is increasingly that of an innovator. 'That's part of what artists do, push at the boundaries of what it's possible to do and make with machines,' Butcher says.

The Artist as Machine

Granell and Butcher haven't forced a distinction between the adoption of a machine process, real or metaphoric, and the adoption of a machine aesthetic. Whilst a number of the exhibition's artists work in a manner immediately evocative of the title, making use of machine derived images and constructing machines of their own, their practices provide an alternative elucidation. Butcher fills me in, 'both Símon and I make work, engaged with a number of different sorts of processes that

SIMÓN GRANELL *Nov '10 – Feb '12*, 2010-12
oil on linen, 35×35cm

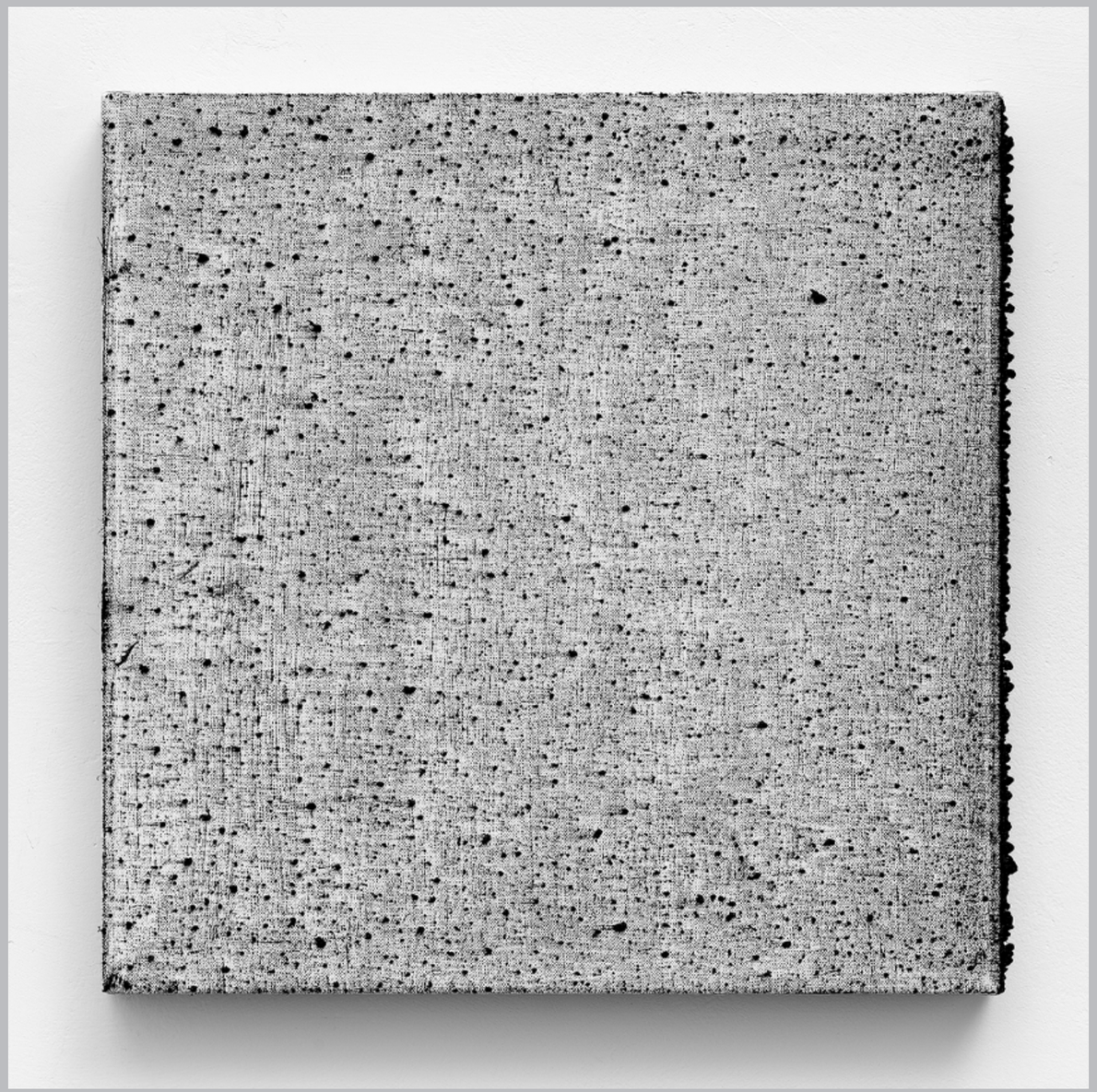


Photo: Peter Abrahams

involve disciplining your body and / or your mind to behave in a quasi-mechanised way.'

Butcher exercises a sporting analogy to describe the physical aspect of his practice. 'When I was at university I rowed at a reasonably high level and (in training) what you do is you break down a seemingly simple, even trivial action into its component parts and realise it's actually quite a sophisticated movement. You do it over such a long period of time at slow repetitions, at a high volume of training, but not at a high pressure so that it becomes an instinctive activity, so you don't have to think about it anymore, so that when you come to the point of crisis – when you're chucking your guts up because you're working so hard – that's just the way that you behave.'

PAUL GOODFELLOW, *Fabled Eye Accommodates Revelations*, 2012, software, computer and electrical components, 60×60×17 cm

Butcher's physical process, like the processes in sport, is subservient to an end. The physical gesture that he engages, the act of squeegeeing paint onto and off of various aluminium sheets and sections, is a means of amplifying errors that have occurred in the material.

Granell invests similarly in process, but for him the gesture is, in no sense, a means to an end. When painting, he employs 'a set of rules including colour, brush size, brush mark and the process of application that reduce the possibility of decision making once the painting has started.' As Granell paints, the surface of the painting is incrementally obscured by a succession of strips of paper. 'The clearest indication that a painting is finished is when there is nothing visible left to paint.'

There is always a sense that, just as Butcher's aluminium paintings are predicated on the imperfections of the material and his human action, so the interest in this style of mechanised working is built not upon the finesse of the finished product, but on the small instances human imperfection evidenced.

David Connearn's drawings are formed of a sequence of lines, each following the contours of the last. Seen as a whole, the drawing becomes a series of amplifications, each slight human error augmented before fading back towards straightness. Viewed a few steps back the imperfections are regularised. What's left is a grey, textured, slightly misshapen rectangle positioned towards the centre of the paper.

Butcher summarises, 'in behaving as closely as possible like a machine there might just be this tiny little gap between what one produces and what a machine produces, but within that little gap there's something quite important, something utterly human,' Granell rebuts, 'a line drawn by David Connearn will inevitably evidence his hand and the intention is to draw a straight line but not one like a machine.' It is not necessary to look at the work as a means of attempting to achieve a robotic ideal. 'Mechanisation might easily be substituted by words such as ritual or customary.'

Michael Roberts' watercolours have an immediate visual correlation with Connearn's drawings. His images are filled with the same harmonising lines, though vertical not horizontal, painted not drawn, the initial impression of process is similar. Where Connearn's marks are sparse, monochromatic and functional however, Roberts' brush marks vary in thickness and diverge wildly in colour – purple lines coat a pink base and brown overlays lurid green.

Connearn's drawings are methodical and seem to lack impulse. This is their mechanistic characteristic. They are built on the trajectory of a never-ending series; there is no rationale for him to stop or change parameters. Roberts' watercolours appear less systematised and more felt. The gradations in line and colour aren't procedural. The act, Roberts says, was 'a way of clearing the mind, an enjoyable repetitive process with limits.' It seems that though Roberts finds himself acting mechanistically, he is further removed from the ritual than Connearn. It is a disengagement predicated on the emotional rather than the intellectual.

The Audience as Machine

Whether or not the artist of procedural practice is consciously caught up in the premise of acting as a machine, a highly methodical approach often leads to a mechanistic form of viewership. 'Here,' Granell says, 'I would be thinking of Dan Hays.'

Hays' *Colorado Snow Effect* painting series takes its lead from video-based imagery of snowy scenes. The almost monochromatic scenes are painted with, in Hays' words, 'daubed pixels of pure saturated colour.' The abstraction inherent in the process is more akin to the noise on a television screen than the dots of pointillism.

The representation of the monochromatic through colour is referential of the three colour channels of a television monitor, assimilated and naturalised by the human eye and brain to create a more complex image than is being shown. It is these 'optical events that take place in the viewing of the work' that Granell speaks about when talking of a mechanised viewer; the human facility for creating images.

Andrew Bracey too engages in the impact of the machine on the viewer. His 2009 work *The Jump*, a re-imagination of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), replaces the photographic images of the original with paintings. The paintings are colour saturated and have a clear surface texture. Besides the images depicted they hardly bear comparison with the photographs; they are less regular, less accurate and less mechanistic.

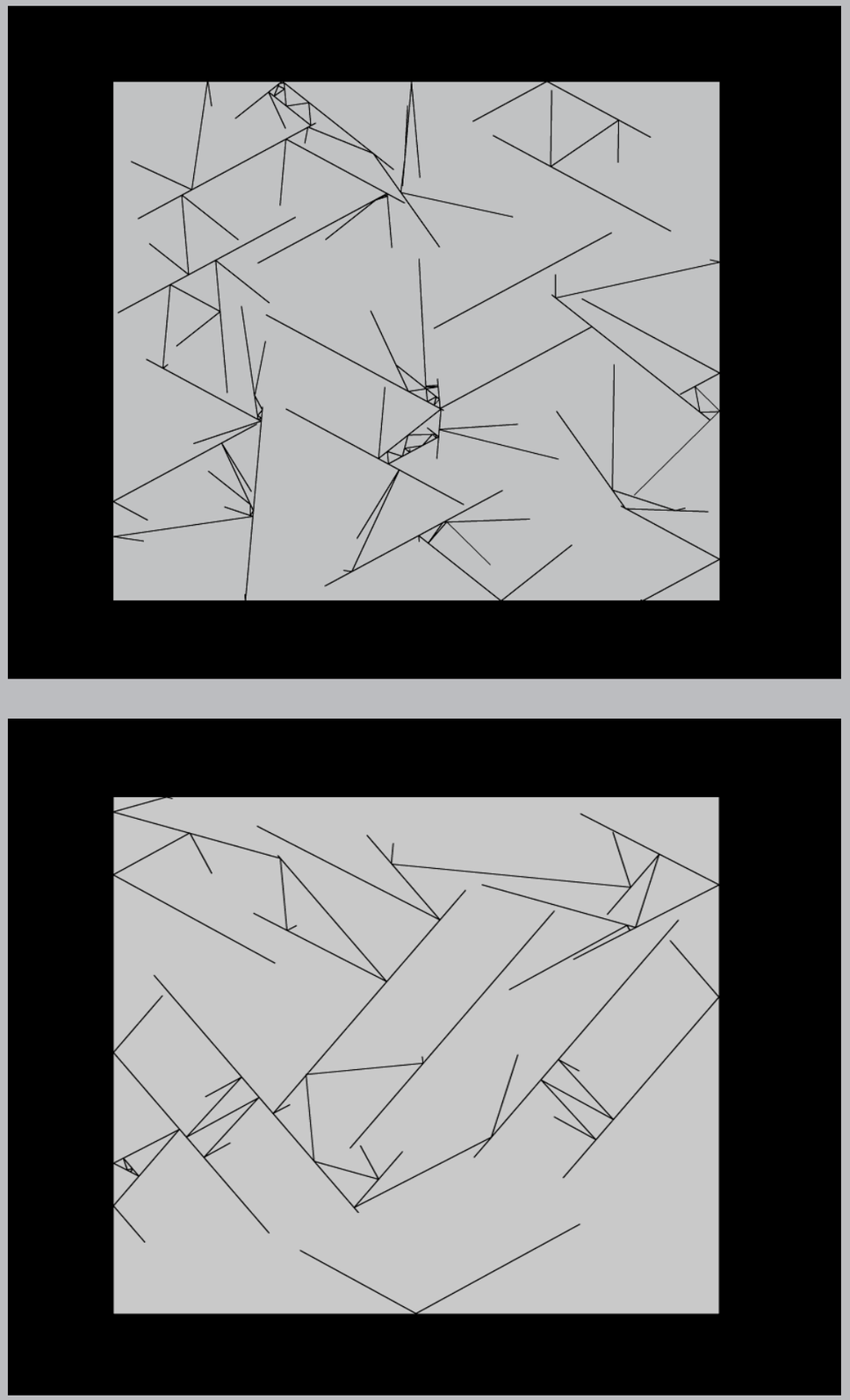
Edited into Chris Marker's timeline, the paintings find themselves installed in a new structure. The viewer's ability to interact with a painting for as long as they choose, as would be the case if they were hung on the wall, is replaced with a more fleeting conception of the image, one representative of a filmic attention span. Speaking about the work Bracey says, 'to make the work I became like a machine ... each of the 500 or so compositions (though not the colour or painterly decisions)' were dictated by Chris Marker's choices of image, the timing by the original film. 'The work', Bracey goes on to say , 'is as much cinema and the machine as it is painting and the studio.'

ANDREW BRACEY *Brainscape 24*, 2006 Etching and aquatint, 30×25 cm

The Contemporary Machine

The exhibition title likely puts in mind an image of industrial, cogs and wheels machinery but within its denotation is a call to comprehend a relationship between art and more recent technologies. Dan Hays' paintings rely on an appropriation of visual associations created by the working methods and glitches of new technologies.

Similarly, Paul Goodfellow produces work by combining traditional and new



DAVID CONNEARN, stills from *Error Drawings*
1976–2011, projection

techniques; making paintings with the aid of a laser cutter controlled by a program he developed. In an essay in the 2011 Transition Editions publication *About Painting* he summarises his practice as 'interested in controllable systems, and the limits of controllable systems.'

The machine represents something Goodfellow can control and concede control to. This technological element is used to draw attention to the nature of painting, which is an 'imperfect system.'

Rob Currie's sculptural installations are constituted of video and audiotape. The constructions appear as compositions of black, reflective lines, twisting and threading through any space in which they are installed. It could be labelled a deliberate misuse of the material –an aesthetic application of material designed to hold information for display, but not to be displayed itself. The tape, however, already seems dated. It is no longer at or anywhere near the cutting edge of technology. These installations are perhaps the best use for it now, a reuse of now defunct technology.

When in 1972 David Hall first showed *101 TV Sets* in London's Gallery House he couldn't have known that just forty years later he would be re-interpreting the work as *End Piece*, an observation of the end of London's analogue television transmission. There is always work, Goodfellow's included, that responds incisively to contemporary technological developments, but the evolutions won't seem current for long.

The Makers of Machines

Following on from Goodfellow's high-tech paintings, Tim Knowles' work is considerably more in keeping with an analogue abstraction of the machine.

'Unlike many of the other artists [in the exhibition] he seems to work in a project-based way' Butcher says. Many of Knowles' ventures are driven by a particular machine or device made for purpose and by which 'people become pawns or players.' The devices function to map projects or to track the progress of participants. The process is representative of scientific documentation, but Knowles' curiously unanalysable data, be it the movements of the vehicle that carried the work to the exhibition or the actions of a participant guided only by wind direction, resists the scientific sensibility.

Knowles' machines are integral to the creative process and the output of the project. There is a necessary and reflexive relationship between the artistic act and its product. I wonder if there is any risk of artists relinquishing too much control or becoming too removed from the output of their works.

Similar to Knowles, 'Natasha Kidd is the orchestrator of her works' Granell says 'but once installed they are often self-generating or operated by the audience. It struck me once when discussing her work with her that it was remarkably anthropomorphic despite her absence. One can see the work as an arterial system of copper pipes directing the emulsion around the space, driven by the pump, all of which may flood or break down at any moment. So, while in fact an elaborate machine, its analogy is very much of a human drama.'

The Machine as Makers

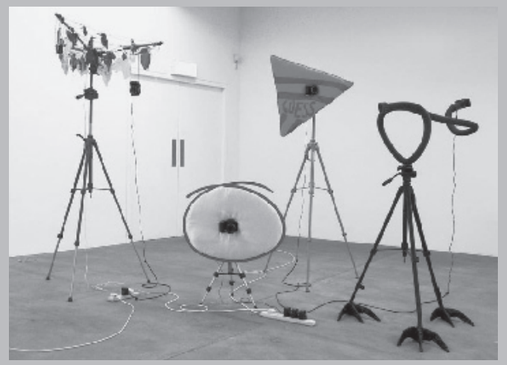
Chess computers feed off human interaction; they become unbeatable by being beaten by humans. They're based on programming that has to practice before it can get good.

'Machines,' Butcher says, 'are the way they are because we're the way we are, and that's fed back, so we find ourselves behaving in far more mechanised ways.' Butcher is talking here of a dialogic link between machine and human development.

Early mechanised systems were often modelled on human movement. As technology

has developed, principles of design have acknowledged that a better system will be based upon the characteristics of machine functionality, so bypassing any human reference. Human behavioral processes and methodologies now owe as much to machine production as machine characteristics do to human nature.

In sport, statistical analysis systems are used to chart not just the effectiveness of a team but the movements of each player: their speed, approach, even the number of steps they take. When analysed, this data is used to establish a player's efficiency, effectiveness, and ultimately, their value. The machine is telling us how to operate.



EMMA HART *To Do*, 2011
mixed media, dimensions variable

Emma Hart's work is concerned with the lens. So much so that her 2011 show TO DO at Matt's Gallery found her creating sculptures that incorporated cameras into their fabric. The cameras were switched on, and short, repeating videos on the camera screens chattered away. A number of the cameras were also set to record. In these instances the camera makes the event as much as records it.

The real-time recording highlights a disjuncture between an experience of things and how they appear on film; the lens is in this sense, creating as well as recording. Moreover, the camera forces an altered human interaction with the space. People know they are being observed, even if only by a lens.

The machine is the ultimate version of the manmade object. It is a projection of human ideology and fallibility. In its fabric it combines human development and innovation with human romanticism and miscalculation. The machine aesthetic is full of contradiction.

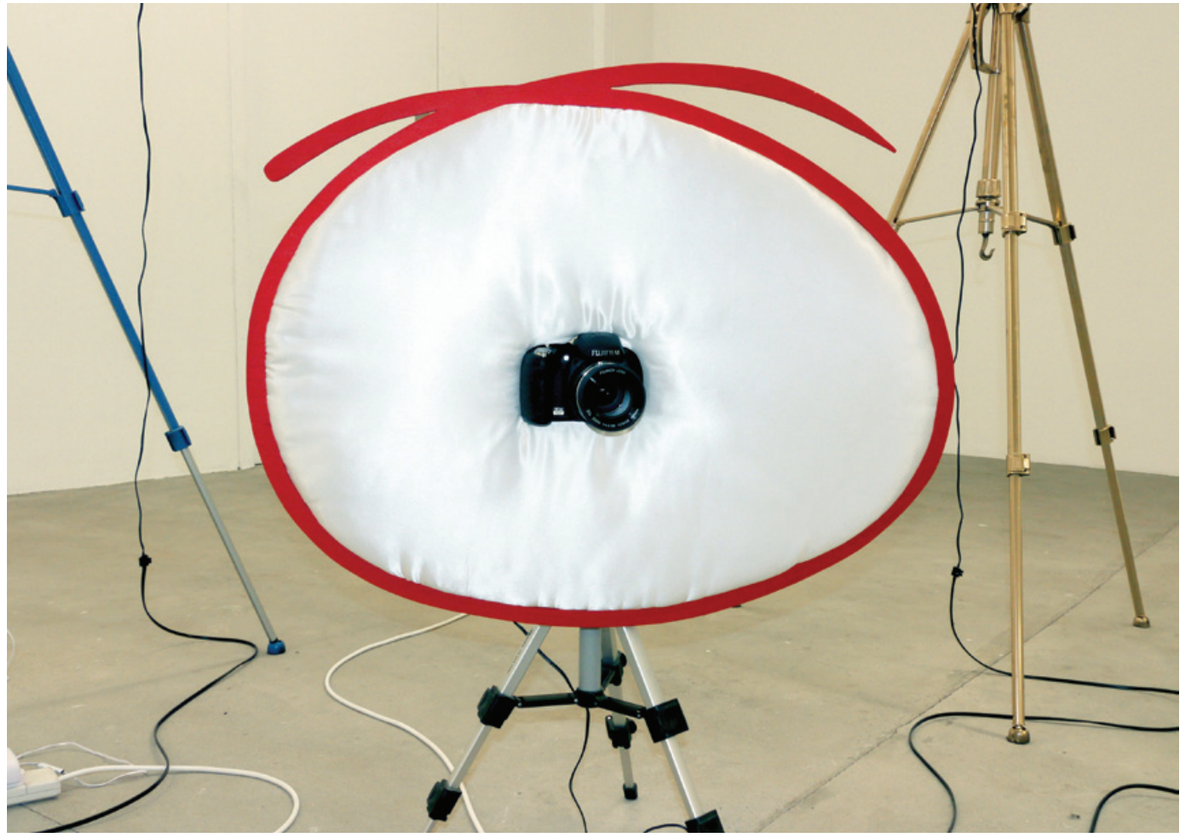
We want the machine to be perfect and unerring, but we create fantasies of infallible machines that do us harm. We identify with the machine chiefly as a means of pure non-aesthetic functionality, yet we fixate on the industrial-chic design of cavernous coffee shops and ever increasingly design machines that replace function with aesthetics. We intend to subjugate the machine in a factory where it can do those tasks too fiddly or too menial for us, but we desire those products more that are made without its assistance.

That is why the machine now must be desirable in itself. It must stand in the place of its products, of its output. And so we discover that the machine that planned to remain unnoticed now shapes us as much as we shaped it. It is this shift of status that makes the relationship between human and machine such a rich topic.

PICTURE CREDITS: Opening spread (left): Eric Butcher, *I/R. 581,* 2012, oil and resin on extruded aluminium section and stainless steel, photo Peter Abrahams. Opening spread (right) Robert Currie, *57 Minutes and 28 Seconds,* 2008, mesh and audiotape, 40×40×40cm, courtesy of the artist.

A Machine Aesthetic is a national touring exhibition launched in December 2013 at Gallery North University of Northumbria, followed by The Gallery Arts University Bournemouth, University of Lincoln, Norwich University of the Arts and concluding at Transition Gallery, London in November 2014. The exhibition is curated by Eric Butcher and Simón Granell and supported using public funding by Arts Council England.

text + work TheGallery ARTS UNIVERSITY BOURNEMOUTH



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