

“Art can’t stop the machine.” On political posturing + preempting failure as a poor defence in the *Mechanisms* group show

Alec Recinos, 8 January 2018
Reviews

Upon entering San Francisco’s Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, one is faced with: steel vents placed sculpturally on the floor, a broken outlet, a dilapidated menu signboard, a vinyl window decal of a wikipedia URL, and a shallow pink trough filled with grease perched diagonally atop a plywood, linoleum, and wood curve. The works in this first room — by Charlotte Posenenske, Cameron Rowland, Lutz Bacher, Park McArthur, and Terry Atkinson, respectively — are, like nearly all in the rest of the show, free of cogs, gears, or motors. *Mechanisms*, curated by Anthony Huberman, and on view from October 12, 2017 to February 24, 2018, largely forgoes the trappings of material machinery, opting instead to focus on the machinic flows in which we are trapped.

Here Huberman follows in a line of thinking most prominently established by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their two-volume work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. “Everywhere it is machines,” they declare in the first volume, *Anti-Oedipus*, and for Deleuze, Guattari, and now Huberman, machines are both things and systems of organization, that function primarily to produce flows, relations, and desires. *Mechanisms* intends to bring together artworks that rework these very instruments in order to reveal and complicate the oppressive efficiency demanded by dominant systems of power.

Huberman begins the exhibition with an admission of failure. “Art can’t stop the machine — nothing can,” he rather fatalistically states in the brochure. It feels a bit as if he is hedging his bets, simultaneously shielding the show from any expectation of enacting actual change, while still undergoing the political posturing that is now *de rigueur* in contemporary art. Though it shines overall, several works in *Mechanisms* feel as impotent as Huberman’s tepid theorizing. Danh Vo’s ‘Twenty-Two Traps’ (2012) is exemplary in this regard, never moving beyond its most literal material reading, and remains nothing more than a selection of antique animal traps arranged on the floor.

‘https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marta_Russell’ (2013) by Park McArthur similarly disappoints. An adhesive vinyl decal of the URL for the Wikipedia page of the writer and disability rights activist Marta Russell, the work lacks proper contextualization (such as that which it received in McArthur’s 2014 exhibition *Ramps* at Essex Street Gallery), and never succeeds at making the connections at which it vaguely gestures (the web, collectivity, ableism, etc.). Its failures are made all the more apparent, given that it is the only internet-related work in a show located in the heart of Silicon Valley.

Where these works remain inert, the best ones have an agency of their own, and none more so than Cameron Rowland’s ‘Disgorgement’ (2016). To the viewer, ‘Disgorgement’ appears at the extreme end of what German art historian Benjamin Buchloh termed the “aesthetic of administration,” as the formally uninspiring arrangement of 26 printed pages of legal documents displayed in two frames.

As boring as they may seem, the legalese of the forms details the creation of the Reparations Purpose Trust, established by Rowland to essentially create a sort of forced corporate reparations on behalf of the insurance company Aetna, which (like many other firms in the field) once issued policies covering slaves. Here, Huberman’s prediction of the failure of art comes true, but in a very different light. ‘Disgorgement’ remains essentially indifferent to Art, and the usual systems and standards no longer seem to matter. It is the purest example of a mechanism in the show, and having been set into motion, it runs, jerry-rigging alternate relations between histories, systems, and people.**

The *Mechanisms* group exhibition is on at San Francisco’s The Wattis Institute, running October 12, 2017 to February 24, 2018.



Mechanisms
(2017/18) Installation
view. Courtesy the
artists + Wattis
Institute for
Contemporary Arts,
San Francisco.



Danh Vo, ‘Twenty-Two
Traps’ (2012)
Installation view.
Courtesy the artist +
Wattis Institute for
Contemporary Arts,
San Francisco.



Mechanisms
(2017/18) Installation
view. Courtesy the
artists + Wattis
Institute for
Contemporary Arts,
San Francisco.