IN OCTOBER 2017, THE WATTIS INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN SAN FRANCISCO OPENS A GROUP EXHIBITION TITLED *MECHANISMS*. THIS INTRODUCTION, AND THE THREE ARTIST-CONTRIBUTIONS THAT WILL FOLLOW IN SUBSEQUENT ISSUES OF CURA., SERVES AS A WAY OF GETTING THE CONVERSATION GOING.

THE MACHINE
A YEAR-LONG SECTION
EDITED BY ANTHONY HUBERMAN

A *machine* is too big of a word. It brings to mind an impossibly vast range of images – gears, steel, steam, molded plastic, blinking lights, switches, screens, and so much more. A machine is a thing that runs, blows, drills, cuts, copies, calculates, spits, runs, jams. It comes in a million shapes, sizes, and sounds.

However, *machine* is also somewhat of an obsolete word. It evokes heavy and greasy machinery, not the smooth surfaces of digital interfaces and the weightlessness of cloud computing. No-one calls their computer a "machine." In fact, the only time the tech industry talks about machines is in the context of "machine-learning," which refers to how systems run by artificial intelligence can learn to self-adapt and self-improve – and has more in common with the brain and the nervous system than with motors or pistons.

In the context of art and art exhibitions, one might trace the beginning of the machine's spiral towards obsolescence to Pontus Hultén's seminal 1968 MoMA exhibition *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, which considered the ways future-facing artists were not only finding new uses for old machines, but inventing entirely new kinds of art made with new kinds of devices that weren't quite called machines – ones that depended less on steel and steam engines and more on microchips, cybernetic loops, programmable circuits, and something called software. The show celebrated the way artists and engineers were working together to build increasingly sophisticated and complex technological objects.

In 1975, Harald Szeemann's *The Bachelor Machines / Le Macchine Celibi* at Kunsthalle Bern took a different track and honored Marcel Duchamp's use of the term "bachelor machine" as bringing together and confusing the mechanisms of the body, the mechanisms of machinery, and the mechanisms of knowledge and interpretation itself. Following Duchamp, the exhibition imagined *machines* as engines capable of uncontainable eroticism and of generating Dada-like absurdity, throwing into question the line between animate and inanimate.

More recently, Massimiliano Gioni's *Ghosts in the Machine* (2012) at the New Museum picked up on both of its major predecessors but seemed to side more with the latter by pointing to ways – via science or via superstition – that artists have located the man within the machine (and vice versa).

Today, the futures forecasted by Hultén and Szeemann have not only become true but have become common – lives and bodies are now run and regulated by technology. People do what their Apple Watches tell them to do. Today, however, we don't talk about machines as much as we talk about hardware and software.

In a most basic sense, the entirety of human history can be thought of as a constant back and forth between hardware and software. Tools yield rules yield tools yield rules yield tools, ad infinitum. In the 1960s, minimalist sculptures became immaterial conceptual systems, only to see attitudes becoming actual forms again. In recent years, some artists have turned the endless fluidity of

online images into physically 3D-printed forms, and, quickly, back into Instagrammed posts, in yet another game of musical chairs between abstraction and materiality.

However, a fundamentally material substrate characterizes even the most abstract notions – even *information* itself takes up thousands of acres of heavily guarded air-conditioned server farms. The physical *stuff* of machines, in the age of the cloud, the stream, and the cyborg, is still running the show. Hackers understood this long ago: policies and priorities aren't just ideas, they're actual (and steal-able) documents.

But why does *machine* sound so obsolete? Where is it? Has *machine* already made its way into the bloodstream to such an extent that it's indistinguishable from *protein*?

If so, that's dangerous – and I suggest trying to throw machines back into relief and make them visible again.

One place to begin is to look at what's next to it – at what's above or slightly larger than it, and what's within it, smaller or more specific. On one side of the machine is the *tool*, which is far broader and reaches farther back in time to include wheels, hammers, and knives. On the other side of the machine is the *setting*, which is more specific and hints at a future that is built and determined not by objects but by systems, parameters, protocols, and logistics.

Artists don't side with one at the expense of the other, but contaminate all three. They imagine ways of stripping machines down until they are just tools, pushing the settings until they break the machines, or asking tools to behave like settings. Faced with flexible, invisible, and invincible global networks, some artists today don't design new devices as much as they re-adjust parameters, rewrite rules, and insert delinquent trajectories into existing systems. When tools become settings, artists can manipulate machines and infrastructure to confuse any distinction between hardware and software.

The enemy, of sorts, is technology. In their article *Fuck Off Google*, the anonymous anarchist collective Invisible Committee writes that "just as the ideology of the festival is the death of the real festival, and the ideology of the encounter is the actual impossibility of coming together, technology is the neutralization of all the particular techniques." The goal, then, is to "pull technique out of the technological system."

But what exactly is technique, *tout court*? How can artists address – and contest – the ideologies of seamless connectivity? In a social, political, and economic context that demands (and rewards) efficiency, speed, and productivity, how can artists put forward propositions that exert a critical force: how to test existing systems with impossible tools, wasted time, and elaborate protocols that misalign outputs from their inputs? What, for example, is an inefficient or unproductive machine? Or a slower machine? By forcing purpose and necessity to contend with waste and dysfunction, can an artwork be an act of "mis-engineering"?

Installation view, Bachelor Machines, Kunsthalle Bern, 1975 Photo: Albert Winkler, Kunsthalle Bern 1975 © Kunsthalle Bern (pp. 73-75) Installation view, The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age, MoMA, New York, 27 November 1968-9 February 1969 Courtesy: The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence (pp. 70-71) Photo: The Museum of Modern Art, James Mathews © 2016. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence (pp. 70-71)