

THIS YEAR-LONG SECTION  
CREATES A PUBLIC FORUM FOR  
THE IDEAS THAT ARE INFORMING  
*MECHANISMS*, AN EXHIBITION  
OPENING AT THE CCA WATTIS  
INSTITUTE SAN FRANCISCO, IN  
OCTOBER. I BEGAN WITH AN  
INTRODUCTORY TEXT THAT  
OUTLINED A FIELD OF INQUIRY,  
CITED A LINEAGE OF RELEVANT  
HISTORICAL EXHIBITIONS, AND  
BROUGHT UP A BROAD RANGE  
OF QUESTIONS. I'VE INVITED  
THREE PEOPLE TO RESPOND.  
THE FIRST IS ROBERT SNOWDEN.  
HE GETS RIGHT TO THE POINT AND  
DELIVERS A FAIR WARNING: WHEN

THE MACHINE: A YEAR-LONG SECTION  
EDITED BY ANTHONY HUBERMAN

WE TALK ABOUT ART AND  
TECHNOLOGY, WE CAN'T LOSE  
SIGHT OF THE WAR MACHINES.  
SNOWDEN HAS ASKED THE ARTIST  
LUTZ BACHER TO CONTRIBUTE  
*BIEN HOA* (2006-2007), A SERIES OF  
TEN PHOTOGRAPHS THE ARTIST  
FOUND IN BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA.  
THE PHOTOS SEEM TO HAVE BEEN  
TAKEN BY AN AMERICAN SOLDIER  
NAMED WALTER, WHO WAS  
STATIONED AT BIEN HOA AIR  
BASE DURING THE VIETNAM WAR.  
WALTER INSCRIBED THE BACKS  
OF ALL BUT TWO OF THE  
PICTURES BEFORE MAILING THEM  
TO A LOVED ONE BACK HOME.

TEXT BY ROBERT SNOWDEN  
IMAGES BY LUTZ BACHER



*This is my Section Chief and I  
during working hours 1 June 69*

*I love you  
Saltee*







This is just Plain Old Me  
1 June 69

Love ya  
Dad



This is a Huey Cobra, the baddest  
Helicopter in Vietnam. Those are  
sockets on the side of the ship.  
I wish I could take off and come  
home.

your man  
Kalter





This is a helicopter that got shot down  
over the rice paddies. Amazing as it may  
seem the guys inside weren't killed.  
I think this is also a good picture.



This is a practice session that the  
Fire Department has every now and  
then. They are practicing on a burning  
helicopter. I messed up on my border  
at the top of the picture.





This is Bien Hoa looking at it from  
the Air Base. This is a pretty good  
picture. Now do you think that's  
~~beautiful~~ beautiful? Can you see  
the wire, keeping the people from  
attacking the Air Base? That's what  
~~that's~~ those fences are out there for.



This is right outside the Air Base.  
Notice the beautiful homes and how  
nicely they are kept.





*This is beautiful Bien Hoa. Notice  
the beautiful skyscrapers and  
beautifully paved streets. Now do you  
understand why it's the ugliest place  
I've ever seen?*



At the outset of my mature life, I had a great talent for being satisfied. I'd had it all through childhood, and in my first year out of school, it was in my repertoire still. I could skip work and go to a bookstand or up to the Museum of Modern Art's library and be happy. I was so ready to be a human being and to read new books, and although my readings were rudimentary, something was happening to my brain akin to what had happened when I first got hold of the alphabet. I was discovering something new by the hour, where the books laid out something more of the way the world went before I existed. Some I have read and forgotten, others I remember, although not always perfectly. Indelible, however, is the MoMA catalog for *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*. I dug its steel cover and its understanding that the Museum itself was a machine. I enjoyed the pictures of industrial automata, Claes Oldenburg, and Marcel Duchamp, who represented a republic of discourse in which I hoped to be naturalized.

The subject was serious. The curator Pontus Hultén came to it with a complicated attitude, alert to the fact that technology goes to the peaks and lows of mind. Nearly the whole century was there, in one form or another, as was its un-obvious emotional business. The show was in touch with irony and nonsense. Shine and exaltation. Contempt and estrangement. But it was depressingly without grief for its own time. *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* opened in 1968. It was the fall Richard Nixon was elected. A time when the wild behavior of the United States was responsible for the most costly year of the Vietnam war, a year where America's armed forces dropped the greatest volume of bombs in the history of warfare in a thirty-mile section fanning out from Khe Sanh. (Some 110,000 bombs were put in those hills.) But the show didn't take its chances with machines of such consequence; machines which took space back quickly, expensively, with total panic and brutality. No bombs went off in Hultén's show. No blood was shed. The bang you heard was the boom of prosperity and the explosion of markets.

All images Lutz Bacher, Bien Hoa, 2006-2007 Courtesy: the artist, Greene Nafai Gallery and Galerie Buchholz

As I write this from the train, I will pass underneath MoMA on my way downtown. By the time I am home, I will have oscillated – from iron resolve through rapturous equilibrium to freighted unhappiness – that underlay a day in thinking about the politics of art. I will write many things down and scratch them out. But what won't go away is an insistence to question an exhibition whose moral perspective can hardly be said to not delight, the way a child might delight in American industry. This train is an express. We are going fast, and I feel exceedingly joyless. Hultén's catalog seems barely endurable under the spell of its own authority and sincerity. His machines remain unsullied. They perform beautifully, and make everybody momentarily forget everything they know about the violence of innovation.

The fact remains that getting things right is not what making exhibitions is about. It's about making them vulnerable to the complexities of America, and going perhaps where some pedigreed-betters wouldn't have believed we have any right to go with the language of art. And while I may sound like a tyrannical do-gooder, I don't believe art is a moral beauty contest. I do not suggest that all shows about art and technology pummel you with war. I simply know that the historic ones have not taken it up at all. They keep things sunny, leave out human aberration and disorder, forget the military industrial complex, and the not so simple fact that the history of our technology is also a history of our wars, power, and neocolonial safaris. Sad! This violence is ours not to dissipate with exhibitions but to intensify. What we could use, I believe is an exhibition – making Hieronymus Bosch, an American Bosch, an un-sermonizing Bosch, who detects in his creatures, what is enrapturing, and is no less engaged by the spectacle of life than by the mentality of art. Wild. Sane. A mind rich and wide-ranging, turbulent with troubles, bursting with grievance, a bewildered mind that in the first room of an exhibition, openly, good with reason, questions its equilibrium.