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VISUAL ARTS

Inner Workings of Our 'Mechanisms' on Full View in Horror-Tinged Show



By Calder Yates
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Imagine you arrive at the dentist's office to learn your appointment is canceled. Instead of giving you a cleaning or a root canal, the dentist demonstrates the tools she uses inside a person's mouth: operative burs, excavators, dental forceps, drills, probes and torque wrenches. You sit in the chair with your mouth pried open as the masked and gloved dentist turns the gleaming instruments in front of your eyes.

This is what it feels like to view [Mechanisms](#) at the Wattis Institute of Contemporary Art, a profound and discomfiting gathering of artworks that plumb the facelessness of our current machine age.



Installation view of 'Mechanisms,' at Wattis Institute. (Photo: Johnna Arnold)

Every major scientific and technological advance has artistic repercussions. *Mechanisms* explores this era's repercussions in an airy, deceptively large show of about 30 artists and almost 100 works. Curator Anthony Huberman opts for new or unfamiliar works over established masterpieces. The selection sheds light on a technology filled world that is as social and psychological as it is visual, if not more so.

For example, Cameron Rowland's piece *Disgorgements*, according to the wall text, consists entirely of "Reparations Purpose Trust and Aetna Shares." The work is modest in appearance: two large black frames, one



Installation view of 'Mechanisms,' with work by Cameron Rowland and Zarouhie Abdalian. (Photo: Johnna Arnold)

Despite its visual banality, *Disgorgements* evokes the lucrative financial mechanisms undergirding slavery in antebellum America. Prospective slave owners took out loans to purchase slaves. Then, owners took out insurance policies against a slave's untimely death that reimbursed the slaveholder for lost profits.

Yale historian David W. Blight writes, "In 1860, slaves as an asset were worth more than all of America's manufacturing, all of the railroads, all of the productive capacity of the United States put together." According to Rowland's research, Aetna profited in the issuance of such slave insurance policies. With *Disgorgements*, Rowland creates a new financial mechanism designed to disgorge 90 shares of Aetna to future unnamed beneficiaries if a federal financial reparations bill is ever passed, a keen social justice mechanism despite its current intangibility.



Around the corner is Danh Vo's *Twenty-Two Traps*, various antique animal traps made of iron. Rusting, they splay across the gallery floor. The perfunctory violence they intimate, along with their proximity to *Disgorgement* and *Lever*, a segregation-era water fountain by William Pope L., adds to a feeling of productive unease. At times *Mechanisms* looks like an ascetic horror movie, as if Francis Bacon decided to pursue conceptual art.

The exhibition culminates in *Deep Play*, a 12-channel video installation by the late German filmmaker Harun Farocki. Each screen shows a discrete component element of the 2006 World Cup Final in Germany. The 12 screens offer viewers an open choice as to what, exactly, constitutes this iteration of “the beautiful game”: the raw feed of the players on the field, the game theorists, movement analyses, abstract computer-generated representations, the sounds of police radios, or international TV production teams.

Deep Play, like most of the works in *Mechanisms*, is a view into the mysterious and sometimes confounding inner workings of system of production that delivers a seamless end product for consumers, seemingly without consequence.



Harun Farocki, 'Deep Play,' 2007. (Courtesy of Harun Farocki GbR and Greene Naftali Gallery, New York; Photo: Johnna Arnold)

An ominousness haunts the exhibition. Few works if any convey an overt optimism in technology like you might see in the projects listed in [Shared Portals](#), an archive of artworks and initiatives “that utilize technology as a means to create connections.” Shared Portals, created by Bay Area and California-based researchers, offers a counter-narrative to projects included in the Wattis’ show.

Mechanisms feels like a peek into the machinations that allow for images and technologies to slip into a cultural consciousness. It insists on the need for skepticism in this machine-age and for critique of technologies premised on a lack of accountability.

Visiting the Wattis, I was reminded of Zadie Smith's prophetic take-down of Facebook from 2010: "Everything in it is reduced to the size of its founder," she wrote. "Blue, because it turns out Zuckerberg is red-green color-blind... Poking, because that's what shy boys do to girls they are scared to talk to. Preoccupied with personal trivia, because Mark Zuckerberg thinks the exchange of personal trivia is what 'friendship' is."

When these machines — the various technologies that constitute our everyday lives — are taken apart by artists and held up to the light, will we like what we see? Probably not.



'Mechanisms' is on view at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco through Feb. 28, 2018. For more information, [click here](#).

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