Mechanisms

Gwen L. Allen interviews
Anthony Huberman

CCA Wattis
360 Kansas St.
San Francisco, USA
From October 12
www.wattis.org

Mechanisms brings together twenty artists who critically explore and reimagine the pervasive role of technology in contemporary life. Against the drives toward efficiency and productivity mandated by profit-driven enterprises, the artists in this exhibition throw wrenches into the smooth, organized workings of machines. By misusing tools, sabotaging systems, and thwarting outcomes they question our relationship with the machines that control our bodies and lives, and envision alternative scenarios in which failure, futility, idleness, and breakdown might be reclaimed as opportunities for human agency and creativity. *Mechanisms* is on view at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, from October 12, 2017 to February 24, 2018. A second and expanded version will open at the Vienna Secession in summer of 2018. Here, Gwen L. Allen interviews Wattis Institute director Anthony Huberman about the ideas behind, and planning for, the exhibition.

GWEN L. ALLEN: How did the concept for this show originate?

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: The ideas that inform it have been developing organically over the past several years. It's been a slow and gradual process, where I have let my conversations with artists steer my research. Sam Lewitt and Aaron Flint Jamison were particularly important early on. But also important was the context of San Francisco, where "technology" is all over every billboard, every newspaper, every conversation. I felt it was important to address this but also to complicate its terms and assumptions. There is a long intellectual and artistic history that has sought to articulate a critique of technology, and I wanted to think about where those ideas were in the work of artists today— to explore the ways in which contemporary artists are contesting or at least complicating our culture's infatuation with technology, speed, and efficiency.

GLA: The word "mechanism" can refer to a discrete thing—a tool or instrument—or a more complex process or system through which something operates. Both of these meanings seem to inform this exhibition.

AH: Yes, the title, *Mechanisms,* is plural on purpose, referring to a mechanism in the sense of an object or a device, as you say, but also a mechanism in the sense of an infrastructure, a protocol, a parameter, a standard, or an administrative mechanism. Today, some of our machines are objects, but many others are rules or systems or methods. Machines don't just produce objects but also manage and organize the way we work. The exhibition reflects on our mechanisms as tools in that more expanded sense. I think that by titling a show "mechanisms," I am creating a certain kind of expectation that this will be an exhibition of various machines or kinetic sculptures with motors or on-and-off buttons. Yet I have very deliberately avoided including any of that kind of work, which I hope will encourage viewers to consider the ways that "mechanisms" have grown to inhabit our lives in ways that are far more abstract, such that they might not even look much like "machines" anymore.

GLA: Furthermore, the adjective form, "mechanistic," has a connotation of being soulless, based merely in rational, physical procedures, without regard for moral or ethical consequences. And yet the artists in this show complicate such deterministic approaches to technology, insisting on a different set of values and possibilities.

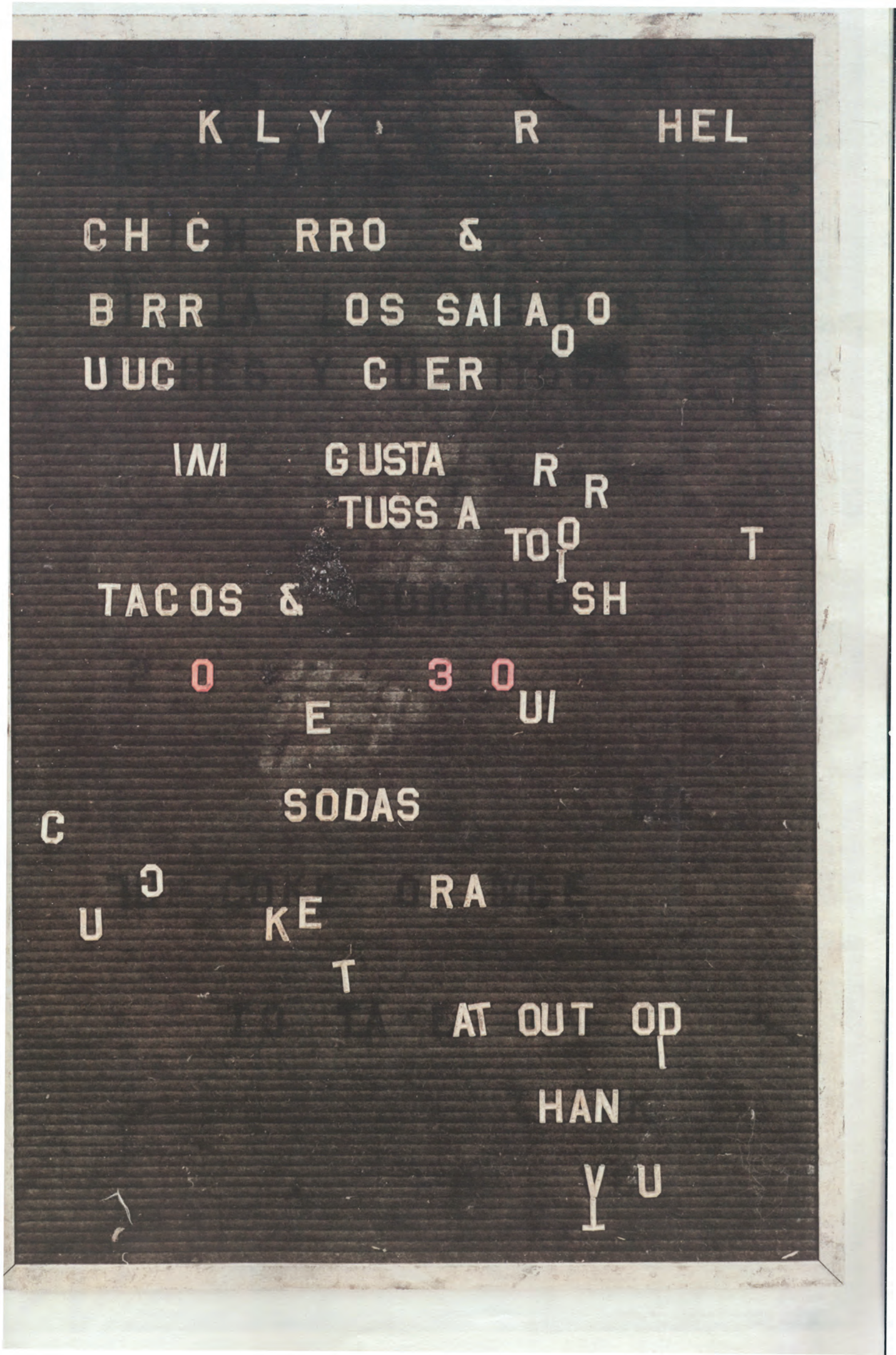
AH: My research led me to focus less on what our tools can help us produce, and more on what kinds of "regimes" our tools enforce, what kinds of ideological agendas are baked into them. "The tool shapes the hand," as they say, meaning that a hammer, for example, not only allows us to hit a nail into a piece of wood, but also demands that we configure our hand in a specific way and move our arm in a specific way. In that sense, the tool has demands. In looking at works of art in the context of my research for this exhibition, I was less interested in works that address the "products" of technology, such as pieces about Google or Facebook or any other product, and more interested in works that get at the abstract sets of values that subtend our machines and technologies. In other words, instead of trying to be critical of Uber, for example, I wanted to find ways to challenge the value system that makes Uber's success possible. For Uber to succeed, it needs to exist in a context where the notion of "efficiency" is considered to be a good and desirable thing. In the context of capitalism, in fact, one could say that pretty any and all machines or technologies operate within a logic that considers efficiency to be a good and desirable thing. And I think art provides a language that can disagree or distance itself from that.

GLA: Did you draw on any particular theorists or thinkers in developing the framework for the exhibition?

AH: Many! As I said earlier, specific artists were my point of departure and became the central spine for the exhibition, and I worked outward from there. But I soon found my way to the vast literature connected to the critique of technology, with writers like Sigfried Giedion, Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, and Vilém Flusser, all the way to more contemporary voices like Maurizio Lazzarato, Benjamin Bratton, Keller Easterling, and Pamela Lee. One particularly useful book was called *The Mantra of Efficiency,* by a mechanical engineer named Jennifer Alexander, who traces the history of the notion of efficiency, where it comes from, how it developed into what it is today, and how it has become what she calls a "technological orthodoxy." In fact, I invited her to speak and she will be giving a lecture about her book at the Wattis in October.

GLA: I'm curious about the exhibition catalogue, which I understand will feature sections by each artist and make use of a range of printing techniques and paper stocks.

AH: Yes, the book is a rather unusual object. I have a habit of never making catalogues that actually "document" my exhibitions, and this one falls in line with that same approach. It doesn't document the show as much as runs alongside it. Some of the artists have provided materials that overlap with what they are showing in the galleries, and others have made more abstract contributions. My own essay doesn't mention any of the artists in the show but is a larger reflection on the historical and theoretical framework that informed the exhibition. The exhibition itself, though, is in the galleries, where it belongs, not in the book. The graphic designers of the book, Scott Ponik and Julie Peeters, were given a very simple prompt: readers should pick it up and wonder how many different machines were necessary to make the object. So, yes, there are a range of printing techniques, papers, et cetera. Trisha Donnelly's contribution was to design the cover, which is absolutely gorgeous.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