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Exploration of Life and Decay in Technological Civilization

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EXPLORATION OF LIFE AND DECAY IN TECHNOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION

by

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B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Reflecting upon humanity's obligatory use of technology and its place in our collective evolution has become my endeavor. These reflections happen in a studio and through a process that influences the fine art objects produced. In turn the objects both celebrate and warn us of the dynamic and immanent enhanced human. I balance the use of modern machining processes with dark humor to comment and raise questions about the coexistence of man and machine in an increasingly absurd environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dedicated to Walter and Doris Wieser

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INTRODUCTION

As an artist I have spent a tremendous amount of time attempting to articulate meaning in my work. It is now, towards the end of my time as an artist in academia, that my art is becoming a coherent culmination of thoughts and feelings which I have experienced throughout my entire life. Many of the memories I have gathered in my 31 years once seemed insignificant but now their relevance is being revealed through the act of making. Working organically and reacting to my surroundings has led me down a path of personal emotive expression which I never thought possible.

CHILDHOOD

I grew up in the small mountain town of Davos, Switzerland. The Swiss are known for their intense need for quality and specificity. Many people from Switzerland live extremely prescribed lives. This restrictive control includes everything from school, to work, to social interaction. By the age of eighteen, most people are set in their career path through an apprenticeship and end up working there for the rest of their lives. One's appearance and general demeanor towards the world is something that is often judged. For example, the aesthetic quality of your handwriting is an enormous determining factor in securing a job. Even at a young age, I rebelled against this controlled world view and it often got me into trouble. The search for freedom eventually manifested in the making of art.

TAKING THINGS APART

Ever since I can remember I have been enamored with assembly and discovering the inner workings of things. When my brother and I were little (9 years old) we used to frequent a place called the “Brocka Schtuba” which translates to “Junk Room”. This place sold a gamut of old items like a thrift store. We spent most of our money acquiring discarded technology like old typewriters, radios and computer components. These items were the equivalent to my peers’ toys, but I found it much more engaging to disassemble them to figure out how they functioned.

My father was a carpenter. He owned and operated his own carpentry business in my hometown. Unlike most children, I had access to many tools and machines. Most kids cherish their toys, I destroyed almost all of mine. Their destruction, however, was not the end goal. The goal was knowledge. I did not invent fantasy worlds for my toys to occupy, I asked myself questions about their structural integrity or their method of assembly. One of my favorite tools with which to test my toys was a massive hydraulic press. Just how flat could I make this action figure? How much pressure does it take to crush a toy car? It was questions like these that made it difficult for me to play with others.

WILE E. COYOTE

I had a childhood obsession with the Warner Brothers character Wile E. Coyote. He is the antagonist in the Road Runner cartoon, but I often found myself rooting for him. His inexhaustible creativity and skilled hand in construction is something I emulated as a child. I also developed a sense of humor based in the slapstick failure of these machines. My first foray into creating a real-world Wile E. Coyote apparatus was when I was around six or seven years old. Like the traditional Swiss ‘table bomb’, which was a cylindrical device that, once ignited, dispersed toys and confetti across a room, I created a series of exploding packages. These boxes were not intended to harm anyone, and the explosions were small in scale. I experimented with the flammable components of fireworks and matches to create a customized blast. I gave my brother two of these prank boxes and watched in glee as the unexpected explosion terrified him. He refused my future gifts. After being forbidden to make bombs my attention would turn to other deconstruction and construction of machinery.

THE FOUNTAIN

A pivotal moment in my youth was my exposure to Jean Tinguely's work when I was around 10 years old. He was a Swiss artist and a pioneer in kinetic sculpture. Much of his work relates to the overproduction of goods in an industrial society. While visiting relatives in Basel, I encountered one of his kinetic fountains. Tinguely's fountain is an assembly of machines moving within and manipulating the water in a pool. I don't think I understood what I was looking at, I just knew that this was the coolest thing I had ever seen. I had never thought of machines as art until this point and it would take me fifteen years to realize the importance of that day.

EARLY EXPOSURE TO ART AND THE SEARCH FOR FREEDOM

There was a point in time, while living in Switzerland during which my father opened his own art design gallery. He began creating his own modernist furniture. At first, I did not understand why. My parents already had a successful business, so why do this? I asked my parents why and they could not give me a real answer, my father simply said, “I felt like I had to”. I did not understand why my father said this for a long time, but now I know this feeling all too well. Eventually he sold his carpentry business, which failed shortly after due to the town being unable to accept this change.

Nothing is quite as freeing as making something of your own, and I think my parents truly wanted freedom. This want for freedom is a big part of why I am in the United States. I think America was an opportunity for my parents to break out of their determined paths and be able to live how they wanted. We had been working on this move for some time, but the process was sped up due to my father winning the green card lottery. Fortuitously, this allowed for my immigration to Florida.

I spent a lot of time working for my father as a carpenter after we moved. The new business was different compared to the one in Switzerland due to a much higher degree of creative freedom. My mother and father were able to design furniture and kitchens in a way they wanted to. The American audience revered and respected the talents of a swiss craftsman, so much so that they trusted in us to make proper decisions. In Switzerland, tradition carries such weight in the aesthetic quality of one’s home or business that there is little room for deviation. Working there reaffirmed my love for woodworking, but I was simultaneously struggling with the constant demands being made by needy customers. Additionally, I did not want to work for

my father for the rest of my life and had a growing need for independence. This prompted my desire to further my education.

UNDERGRADUATE WORK

I spent a good amount of time in college trying to discover where to channel my ambitions. After several sporadic semesters ranging in classes from Psychology to Astronomy and even Biotechnology I eventually ended up in the Arts. Within the art community I spent additional time seeking an outlet for my creativity and this manifested itself in the rediscovery of woodworking, but in an artistic context. Having grown up in Switzerland, a country revered for its beautiful environment, nature was an obvious jumping off point. To transcend carpentry as a craft I realized that I had to somehow alter the material beyond its roots. To mimic the vitality of nature with the static material of my heritage, I realized that I had to make the work kinetic. These thoughts aligned with Jean Tinguely's ideas on motion, he states, “Resist the anxious wish to fix the instantaneous, to kill that which is living. Stop insisting on ‘values’ which can only break down. Be free, live. Stop painting time. Stop evoking movements and gesture. You are movement and gesture.”¹

¹ Tinguely, Jean. *Für Statik*. Düsseldorf: Publisher Not Identified, 1959.

NATURE ABSTRACTIONS

The idea of injecting life into a sculpture was the basis for all my undergraduate work. My first kinetic sculptures were what I called “Breathing Machines”. They featured simple cam mechanisms to emulate something living. I explored this concept through the creation of several abstractions of nature. This included abstracted waterfalls, trees and humans.

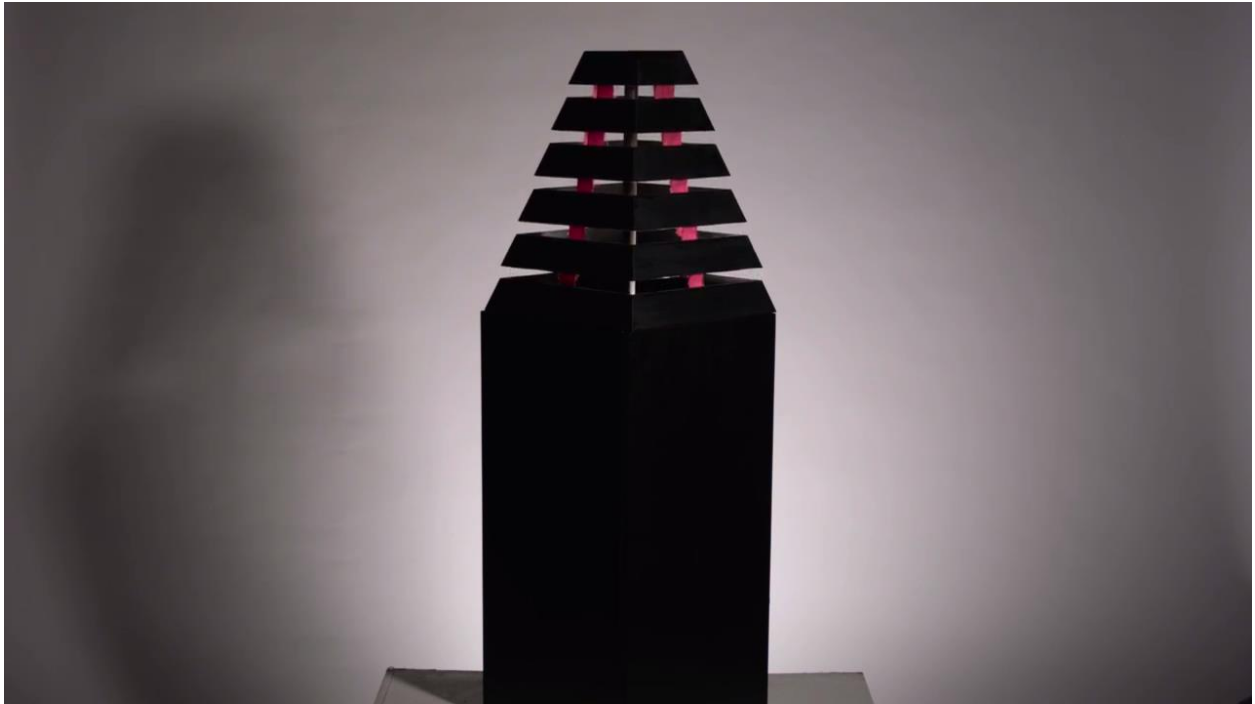


Figure 1 *Monolith # 1*, 2015. Made and photographed by the author in 2015



Figure 2 *Waterfall*, 2015. Made and photographed by the author in 2015

THE USELESS MACHINE

Through the guidance provided to me by professor Ryan Buysens and his ‘hate me’ project, in which we were asked to create art without a need for pleasing an audience, I came to the realization that these artworks were machines without a purpose. Machines are the ultimate accomplishers of tasks. Removing them from this functionality makes them transcend their role of assisting humans into the realm of commenting on or representing them. The idea of the machine with ‘zero purpose’, as I called it, was quite humorous. This led to the creation of several sculptures that were the embodiment of this joke. One of these pieces consisted of a mechanism that scratched a fork across a piece of glass. This created an awful noise, much to the disdain of my peers. This “anti-art” that was meant to reject the viewer, received much praise from individuals who could see the humor present in the work.

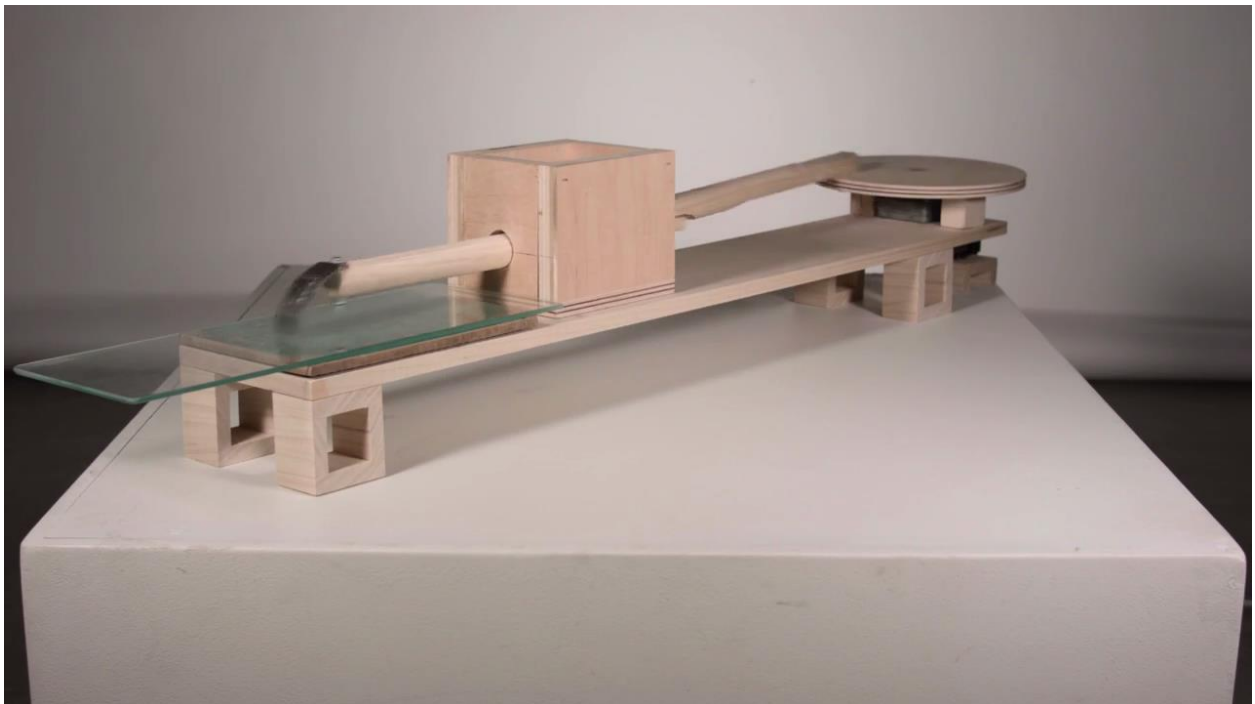


Figure 3 *Annoy-O-tron*, 2015. Made and photographed by the author in 2015

At the same time, I began to read about the DaDa art movement, finding comfort in the work of Marcel Duchamp. DaDa was a rejection of what had been the status quo in an art world driven by capitalism. Duchamp made me realize that pleasing an audience does not have to be the intent behind an artwork. As stated by Duchamp, “What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion.”² The remainder of my undergraduate works consisted of farcical, kinetic sculptures that were intended to taunt my audience.

In time, I realized that jokes and abstractions were not enough to create meaningful artwork. Humor only gets you so far. Again, through the help of Professor Buysens, I recognized this idea of the ‘quick read’ and the ‘slow burn’. The quick read being a joke that initially draws in an audience and the slow burn, which is an additional layer of meaning that only becomes revealed through further contemplation of the artwork. This realization initiated a search for meaning in my artmaking which became a driving force behind my need for a higher level of art education. Little did I realize that my work was indeed loaded with meaning, yet I was unable to articulate it for quite some time.

² Seitz, William Chapin., Marcel Duchamp, Rudolf Arnheim, and Gregory Bateson. *The Creative Act; Panel Discussion*. Huston, 1957.

BEGINNINGS OF GRADUATE SCHOOL

Early on in graduate school, I was repeating the same ideas but with ever improving craftsmanship. As in my undergraduate work, the hunt for stronger content was difficult. Ultimately, I concluded that making was a form of thinking and that meaning would arise through experimentation. This led to the discovery of four distinct threads in my work, irony, mechanization, process and wood. I began following each of these to find a connection between all of them. The works that resulted from these thoughts were relatively unconnected to each other. However, they did eventually lead to what I consider my most successful work to date.

HUMOR AND IRONY

Much of my work involves humor and/or irony. These visual puns can be both blatantly obvious or personal to me. Humor is a way for me to process many occurrences in my life. I very much enjoy putting smiles on people's faces and the people who know me well can attest to my willingness for playing the fool. Humor is also an effective form of communication. Art can be very cold and distant for the average viewer and I believe that humor can bridge that gap. In a way, I am using ironic jokes to facilitate an instant connection to my artwork. This playfulness is not only a relieve from the banal, but also a commentary on the absurdity of the time we live in.

With the piece titled "Monkey" I was exploring this concept. The kinetic sculpture is an abstracted ape that's about the size of a human torso. It sits on top of a pedestal waiting for a viewer to engage its motors via the use of a foot pedal. Once activated two motors make the piece jump from side to side. The movement that occurs is partly random, depending on the position of the motors. This element of chance causes the piece to sometimes fall over or even leap off the pedestal. Most people find the movement funny at first and are then horrified by the realization that they just caused this artwork to leap onto the floor.

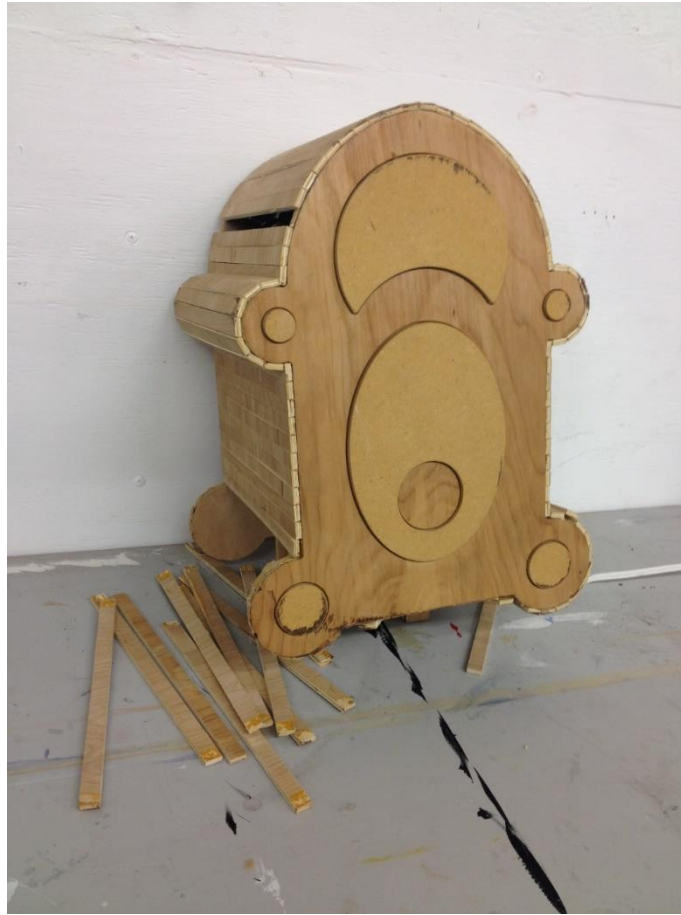


Figure 4 . *Monkey* (After its final destructive leap), 2017. Made and photographed by the author
in 2017

I find a lot of satire in the concept of a randomly self-destructing sculpture. For some, the piece is simply a dancing critter. For others it is pure embarrassment, having to scramble to pick the piece up of the floor and reposition it hoping no one saw them “break” the artwork. Additionally, the simian like quality of the form harkens to the organ grinder’s monkey. This quintessential “dancing monkey” pokes fun at the expectation of art as entertainment. The onlooker becomes torn between their role as audience member and puppeteer. Ironically, the public becomes the top banana. I enjoy subverting the context of the gallery. It is unusual for art to be touched in this manner. With this piece I was interested in creating a different experience

for the viewer. Galleries often lack a sense of humor and carry with them a very serious atmosphere. I wanted to disturb what can be a churchlike ambience in the gallery. Or as Jason Farago of the BBC poignantly stated,

“These days we frequently use religious language when talking about art. We make ‘pilgrimages’ to museums or to landmarks of public art in far-off locales. We experience ‘transcendence’ before major paintings or large-scale installations. Especially important works – Mona Lisa at the Louvre, most famously – are often displayed in their own niches rather than in historical presentations, all the better for genuflection. What is the busiest day of the week for most contemporary art museums? That would be Sunday: the day we used to reserve for another house of worship.”³

³ Farago, Jason. “Culture - Why Museums Are the New Churches.” *BBC*, BBC, 16 July 2015, www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150716-why-museums-are-the-new-churches.

MECHANIZATION

Movement is another thread that connects my work. The combination of motion and sculpture is a potent one. In my mind, movement is another factor that I can control in my work that adds an extra coating of nuance. Many painters and sculptors attempt to convey motion in their works. Works such as Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" mimic movement. But why not inject literal movement into the work?

As stated by MIT engineer and kinetic sculptor Arthur Ganson, "I guess I'm fascinated with motion because I find that whenever anything is moving, I have some feeling about it. It doesn't matter what kind of motion it is. A motion will always evoke some kind of reaction." I whole heartedly agree with this statement. The world is in motion. Our bodies are made to recognize and respond to motion. Kinetic art, to me, is much like knowing how someone is feeling or what they are thinking without any indicators of said feeling other than the subtle movements of their face or the position of their body. After all, you can not spell emotion without motion.

A prime example of the expedition of this idea is my collaborative work created with Ryan Buysens. The piece "Fabricarium" consists of ten disks, about a foot and a half in diameter, covered with colorful fur fabric. These circles are wall mounted and their center moves in and out via the use of a pantograph mechanism. We were trying to explore the concept of the familiar and the uncomfortable. The colors and circular form carry with them a childlike feel, while the movements are rather strange and distressing. Responses to this piece varied greatly. Some people thought these were humorous hats, others were reminded of an undulating pimple other still got an incredibly uncomfortable reference to reproduction from the piece. The truth is

that there is no correct answer. Combining form and motion will undoubtedly stir up strong feelings, no matter what those feelings might be. In the end, it is impossible to convey a singular meaning in your work no matter how much control you take over varying aspects of the piece. Each individual viewer sees their own truth, and I am comfortable with that, as long as something is seen.



Figure 5 *Fabricarium*, 2017. Made and photographed by the author in 2017

PROCESS

I employ Computer numerical Control (CnC) machining and other modern processes such as laser cutting and 3-D printing in my work. All these processes begin in the digital world and are then translated into tangibility through the use of a machine. The machining of material has become a central part of my creative process. Not only does the utilization of machines allow for increased speed and precision in making, it also relates to the meaning behind my work. I utilize machines to raise questions about technology's place in our lives. What better way to make this statement than to use technology and art? This redundancy of making art about machines with machines is a way to circle the two together.

Your medium of choice has an impact on the content of your work. I believe if I was to comment on our tech-based culture with handmade objects, my argument would fall flat. Art and technology are closely intertwined. As said by Albert Einstein, “After a certain high level of technical skill is achieved, science and art tend to coalesce in esthetics, plasticity, and form. The greatest scientists are always artists as well.”⁴ Using contemporary technology in my art making is a way to ensure that my work is an observation of the time in which we live. Artists must always propel their work into the next era. Much like science, art is a means for humans to understand, explain and create dialogue about their surroundings.

Through the utilization of these tools I realized, my process always involves building in parts. I wanted to further investigate this idea by creating a homage to these components. With the piece “Spring Pusher” I wanted to use gears and springs as the focal point of the piece. It consists of a black box with a glass top, underneath which sits a set of twenty gears in a

⁴ PBS. Accessed March 11, 2019. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/einstein/producer.html>.

rectangular configuration. On top of the glass are several springs. As the gears turn they drag the springs around on the glass surface using magnets which are imbedded in the gears. The parts successfully become the centerpiece while the unpredictability of the position of the springs still allows for some playfulness.



Figure 6 *Spring Pusher*, 2018. Made and photographed by the author in 2018

WOOD

Wood as a material is something that connects all my work. It is a something that I am very fond of for several reasons. It serves as an excellent source of warmth in work that otherwise would have a machine-like coldness. Additionally, plywood and MDF (medium density fiberboard) is a customary material. It's not 'real' wood. This is natural material modified for structural purposes relating to the enhanced state of modern humans. I imbue it with a rich layer of meaning by continuing this process of making something dead, alive again. This idea of reanimating the dead has been present in my work since my undergraduate studies. It is something I was unable to articulate in my mind for a long time.

With the piece "Wind Welle" I created a deconstructed inside out tree. The piece consists of a wooden rectangular cube, that's about four feet tall, within which is a series of abstracted leaves. The leaves are made from MDF, which, although being a terrible quality of wood, perfectly demonstrates the idea of reanimation. These 'leaves', painted gold for emphasis, move in a cyclical fashion inside their frame via the use of two groups of gears and levers. In a strange way, creating work like this is a way for me to appreciate nature and to give this material one more chance at life.



Figure 7 *Wind Welle*, 2017. Made and photographed by the author in 2017

TYING THE THREADS

Irony, process, mechanization and wood all have become part of the langue that I use in order to explore the idea of machines as communicators of thought and emotion. This alphabet became the vocabulary of my most personal bodies of work. This work manifests as a set of kinetic sculptures relating to life and death and two-dimensional prints and engravings exploring our continued evolution through the use of tools. These tandem oeuvres operate as two sides of the same coin.

STRUGGLE BOTS

Struggle Bots is a series of kinetic sculptures from a more emotional place than any of my previous work. They were inspired by back to back traumatic events that became a catalyst for diving much deeper into my own psyche. My grandfather passed away unexpectedly. Two weeks after, my cousin committed suicide after a long battle with depression. To process my thoughts and feelings about these events I felt the need to make work about it. Never before did I want to make work about such dark and personal subject matter. I was conflicted about using their likeness to make art. Doing so, in my mind, would be a cheapening of their passing. Also, I was feeling guilty for being unable to be there for them and my family due to the distance between us and my preoccupation with graduate school. To process my emotions and pay homage to my loved ones I became determined to find a way to approach this.

My solution arrived through three simple words, life is struggle. The fact that we all struggle is something that connects humanity. This universal quality of humankind made me realize that I did not have to speak about the struggles of my family members specifically. This allowed for the resulting artwork to become something that has meaning for all. Through the ubiquity of this topic, these sculptures also manage to transcend the realm of art therapy. These pieces did help me deal with my sadness, but they could also help others.

MACHINES AS RELIEVERS OF STRUGGLE

Life is difficult for all people in their own way. Everybody has trials and tribulations that must be overcome. To struggle with the everyday demands of living is normal. The inception of tools and machines came about to simplify tasks and alleviate struggle in some capacity. Upon making this realization, it became obvious to me that to comment on this, making a machine that itself was locked in eternal struggle made sense.

STRUGGLE BOT # 1

This piece consists of a three-inch-deep black frame that contains a small kinetic sculpture. The kinetic structure takes the form of an abstracted human with two silhouetted legs at the base. Several gears and a frame make up the upper half of the piece. It is powered by an electric motor, the wires of which are used to suspend the piece from the top of the frame. The legs move in a walking motion. This abstraction is attempting to move from one side of the frame to the other, across a landscape made up of red wire. Opposite of the walker are two power switches which the walker is attempting to reach.

The figure represents a human stuck in an eternal struggle while attempting to reach the end of its life. Death in this case being represented by the off switch. Red wire is used as a landscape to symbolize the previous struggles that have taken place in this realm. Wire is the lifeline of the machine, reminiscent of veins and arteries in the human body. This lifeline is simultaneously holding the figure in place, preventing it from reaching its goal. The piece is representative of the difficulties of life that we all experience. It is a commentary on suicide, but also serves as a reminder of our interconnectedness through the daily struggles of life.

With this piece I can communicate my feelings of distress, while not creating something that is capitalizing on the passing of a family member. The use of someone's likeness, or even making art about a recent traumatic event oftentimes seems as though it was made with monetization in mind. Creating something that makes a more broadly appealing message is a way for me to process personal feelings but not commodifying death.



Figure 8 *Struggle Bot # 1*, 2018. Made and photographed by the author in 2018

STRUGGLE BOT # 2

This sculpture is made up of a pedestal on top of which is a kinetic sculpture. The kinetic piece is powered by wires penetrating through the top of the pedestal. Two mounting plates with one motor each make up the body. Attached on each side of the motors is a series of levers with a 3D printed hand at the end. The piece moves on a cycle, causing each hand to move back and forth in a crawling motion. Opposite the sculpture is a power switch positioned just out of reach of the hands.

Conceptually this piece is very similar to Struggle Bot # 1. It differs in that it has been removed from the formers' frame. It is also attempting to reach its off switch but cannot due to its own wiring. To further humanize the machine, this piece features much more detailed human components in the form of appropriately articulated hands. Additionally, the body of this piece is more human like and features a simplified intestine as part of its design. The pedestal on which it sits is purposely low to the ground to cause the viewer to look down upon the piece. To further emphasize the idea of struggle, the hands are painted with graphite, which over time will leave numerous scratch marks on top of the pedestal.

With the removal of the frame, this kinetic sculpture loses its specimen like quality and therefore feels much more alive. Additionally, instead of being put on display, the audience has to literally look down on the "crawler" creating an automatic air of empathy. This piece will over time go off course, and passersby are invited to help correct its course. Even if doing so only perpetuates its struggle, it also prevents the piece from jumping to its demise.



Figure 9 *Struggle Bot # 2*, 2018. Made and photographed by the author in 2018

STRUGGLE BOT # 3

This kinetic sculpture is made up of seven independent units each suspended by their wiring from a wooden board. The individual units consist of a base plate, modeled on the human figure, with a motor and two gears. Each of the two gears contain designs inspired by the nervous system and stomach. Attached to this mechanism is a set of levers at the end of which are skeletal hands made from laser engraved paper. The mechanics are arranged in a way that causes the hands to move in raking like motion. While active, the individual units caress or attack each other depending on their current orientation, which is random.

With this piece, I wanted to create a more universal dialogue about struggle. The piece differs from its previous iterations by having multiple units active at once, as well as the inclusion of an element of randomness. Since the separate kinetic sculptures are within reach of each other, they can get stuck on another unit, and also free themselves from this predicament. Over time, the paper hands become twisted and eventually they will get separated entirely from their corresponding mechanism. This represents the damage that outside factors can impose on any one given individual, and its lasting effects on that individual's life. Violence and humor combine to emulate life. Interaction between the abstracted humans is meant as commentary on humans as a source of both relief and strife in their respective lives.

Many of these concepts relate back to Jean Tinguely's later work. After he became ill in old age and fell into a coma for some time, he spent the rest of his life making work about death. His pieces represented a "dance with death" that was meant as both a humorous attempt to defy death but also a constant reminder of his inevitable demise. Much like his use of animal bones in

his later work I am using abstracted human body parts to emphasizes my own preoccupation with mortality.



Figure 10 *Struggle Bot # 3*, 2019. Made and photographed by the author in 2019

ENGRAVINGS

To more rapidly develop ideas, I realized that I needed to work with a quicker process. Kinetic sculptures are extremely involved and often take months to develop. This understanding lead to the experimentation with Two-Dimensional work which was something I had not done in quite some time. Of course, all my artwork was at one point a sketch but finished 2-D work was not something I did.

PRINTS

My experimentation with printmaking started with the discovery of a simple image transfer process. To rapidly produce prints I wanted to stay away from etching plates or cutting woodblocks. Being able to digitally create and manipulate imagery, and then assemble said imagery manually via Xylene toner transfers was a perfect method to quickly produce new work. This process felt very much like building a machine, due to beginning with separate parts, which had to be assembled into a whole.

My initial imagery was inspired by Terry Gilliam's collage work for the Monty Python franchise. These images and animations contained a certain humor in them, yet still served as powerful commentary on society. As I began making lots of these absurd prints, they all shared an underlying thread. This connection was the combination of organic and manmade elements as vehicles to make a statement about the state of the world. These prints also relate to the 'Mechanomorphs' created by artist Francis Picabia. During this period of his artmaking his collage style work was meant to personify specific people through the combination of various mechanical imagery. Much of this work was inspired by his first visit to America. Picabia stated that, "Almost immediately upon coming to America it flashed on me that the genius of the modern world is in machinery and that through machinery art ought to find a most vivid expression."⁵

⁵ Cannfield, William A. *Francis Picabia: His Art, Life and times*. New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979.

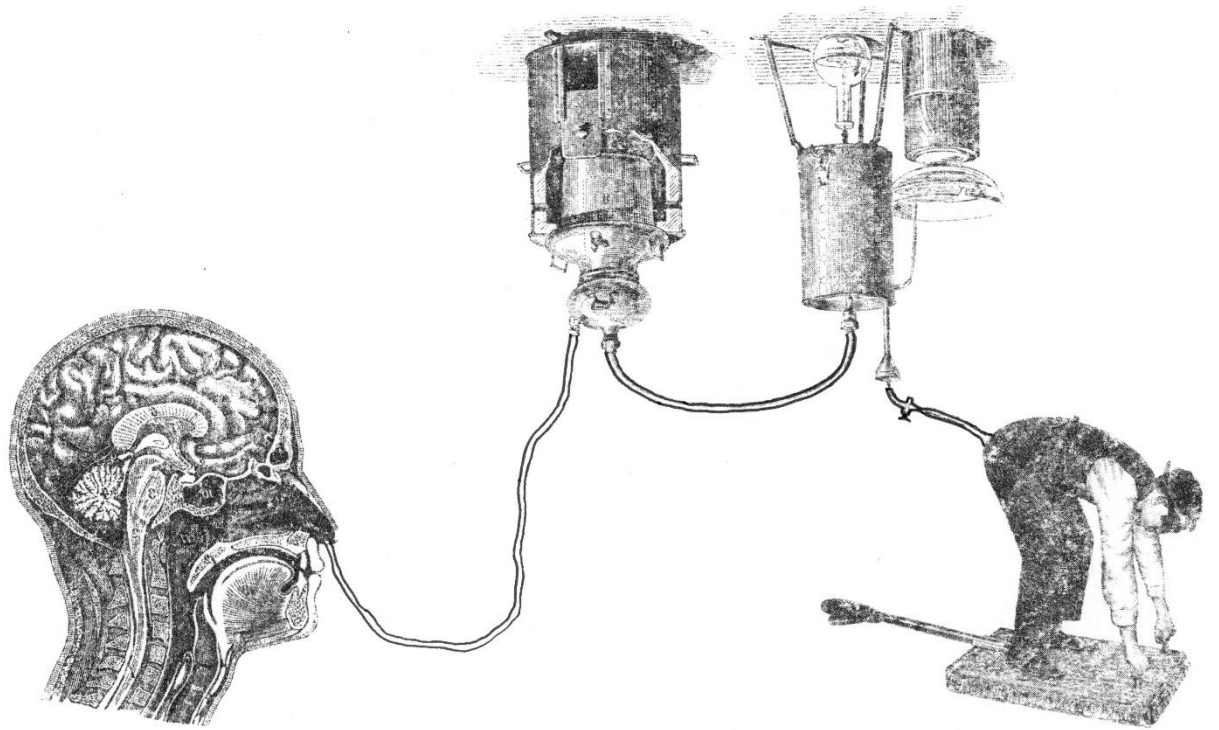


Figure 11 *Soul Apparatus # 13*, 2017. Made and photographed by the author in 2017

MOTOR ANIMALS

There came a point during the creation of these prints during which I wanted to re-introduce an element of three dimensionality into the work. After some tinkering I discovered that my prints could be digitized and subsequently engraved using a CnC machine. This led to the formation of several engraved works that are similar in appearance to tradition wood blocks used for printing. All these pieces feature animal skeletons modified with the addition of mechanical components. This imagery is meant to serve as a reminder of our origins in nature and our current enhanced state of being. Furthermore, it was at this point that I frequently got asked why I was not inking and printing these blocks. For this work to speak to a 21st century audience I did not want to rely on such an old method. I wanted to avoid the anachronism of the block print because the intent of the work was to comment on what we are becoming. To me, the engraving had already taken the place of the print and the original is the digital file. Through the use of CnC machining what would traditionally be a one of a kind blocks, became something that could be repeated.



Figure 12 *Motoelk*, 2019. Made and photographed by the author in 2019

HUMAN ENGRAVINGS

My large-scale panel engravings are an appropriation of Tinguely's thoughts on overproduction, but in relation to contemporary society. My work aims to comment on the oversaturation of imagery that has run amok in today's world. In a world in which we are so overexposed to visual information, much of it loses its impact. We as a people are also becoming increasingly hungry for more and more imagery as is evidenced by the infinite scroll style of online media. I aim to emulate and satisfy this overstimulation in my engravings.

All these engravings utilize a black background and the exposed wood makes up the actual image itself. This was done to emphasize the contrast between the alive and the mechanical. Like some of Tinguely's black sculptures in which he painted his sculptures black to emphasize their mechanical nature. I also pull from Tinguely's later work, in which he became overtly aware of his own mortality.

V-MAN

V-man is the first large scale engraving. It takes the form of a six-foot by six-foot black square made from painted birch plywood. This larger square is made up of 36 separate panels which had to be connected to assemble the complete image. The image itself is based on Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man". Amassed within this famous silhouette is a collection of hundreds of images, all of which are related to tools and machinery.

With "V-Man" I kept my scale at human level. This is done so that viewers can identify more easily with the work. The image of Da Vinci's Vitruvian man is a metaphor for all of humanity. Using imagery that the general populous is familiar with is also a way to allow viewers to instantly recognize and connect with a work of art. This recognizability serves the purpose of drawing the viewer in, while leaving room for them to interpret the smaller components of the work after seeing the whole.

To create a proper observation of modern man the image of the Vitruvian Man serves as a perfect vessel. This drawing was meant to represent the ideal proportions of a human being. I thought it would be interesting and thought provoking to alter this "perfect" form with images from the now. Much of the images used are related to war and violence. The use of such images is meant to spark discussion about what technology is currently functioning as in the modern world. Of course, technology has greatly assisted humanity. It has extended our lives, it has revolutionized the world and the use of tools becoming obligatory in ancient time has greatly aided our evolution. As stated in the book *Stone Tools and the Evolution of Human Cognition*, "Stone tools are among the most distinctive features of the lives and evolution of hominins and, through them, material culture came to play an increasingly important role in the behavior of our

ancestors.”⁶ That being said, technology has also cause untold destruction and continues to erode and alter society.



Figure 13 *V-man*, 2018. Made and photographed by the author in 2018

⁶ Nowell, April, and Iain Davidson. *Stone Tools: And the Evolution of Human Cognition*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2011.

OTZI

At almost twelve feet tall and five feet wide, Otzi is the largest artwork I have made to date. It consists of twelve separate birch plywood panels, each of which is painted black. These panels are all connected to form the massive engraving. The silhouette of “The Iceman” found in the Otztall valley on the border of Austria and Switzerland is used as the source image. Within this outline, is an avalanche of imagery related directly to Otzi and ancient man and many images of modern technology.

Otzi is imposing. I decided to make this piece on a grand scale for multiple reasons. One is to capture a level of detail that I find acceptable. When engraving, small complex imagery can sometimes become muddled and lose all detail if the lines are too close together. Another reason for his size is to confront the viewer with a monstrous presence. In dealing with this quality I find kinship with Leon Golub's large-scale paintings. In describing his own work, Golub states, “I once described myself as a machine for producing monsters. But my production of monsters is miniscule compared to the real production of monsters.”⁷ In this, he is referring to the ever-evolving atrocities of humankind. I am expanding on this conversation by focusing on technology as the catalyst for this violence.

For my piece “Otzi” I utilized the image of a well-preserved corpse from the Bronze Age that was discovered in Switzerland. This however is not just a random body. The contorted position of Otzi is unmistakably that of a corpse. This serves as a reminder of the impermanence

⁷ The University of Chicago. “Leon Golub: Process (Yun-Fei Ji, Kerry James Marshall, Ravinder Reddy, Clare Rojas & Sylvia Sleight)”. Filmed July 15th, 2011. YouTube video, 2:41. Posted July 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2wbFf6pc4k>.

of the human body. Otzi also serves as a vessel for technological advancement, as he was found with very advanced tools and equipment for his time. As much as he was a survivor, his technology was not enough to save his life in the end. Through this work I hope the viewer can realize the potential of technology as a catalyst for evolution and as a means for humanity's survival. However, technology might also be the cause of human self-destruction. This dichotomy is the crux of my artwork and is also present in my kinetic work.

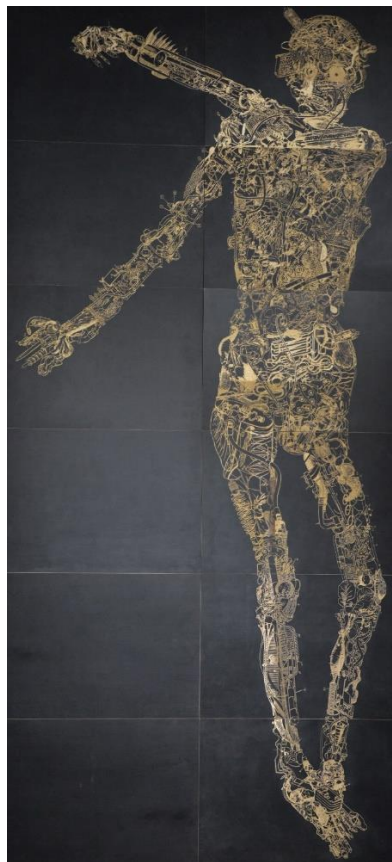


Figure 14 *Otzi*, 2019. Made and photographed by the author in 2019

CONCLUSION

As an artist, my artwork represents both my love of technology and my respect for its future implications. We as a species are becoming more and more enhanced through external means than ever before. As stated in the book *The Techno-Human Condition*,

“To mention just a few of the standard features of your enhanced brain and body, you now come equipped with a fully re-engineered immune system, an up-to-date capacity to distinguish fact from fiction, a completely revised set of cultural assumptions about gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, and for those of you under thirty, or addicted to i-phones, a special condensed language module for instant messaging – all in your own brain and body. Perhaps even more impressive is the amazing range of customized enhancements that some of you have chosen to add to your standard equipment package, including ceramic alloy joints, neurochemical mood modulators, and hormone performance boosters.”⁸

However, as much as technology has aided us as a species, it has also caused problems for everyone. Our ever-increasing dependency on machinery has led many further and further away from their animalistic roots. This is evidenced by the rise of social media and the subsequent decline in actual human connection. Additionally, technology has been misused for its potential for destruction since its very inception. War machines and weapons are a direct example of this, but so is pollution and other unforeseen effects that are caused by our advancement as a civilization. Technology is unique in that it could be the only way to save ourselves as a species.

⁸ Allenby, Braden R., and Daniel R. Sarewitz. *The Techno-human Condition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

Other creatures on this planet could never hope to halt their own extinction through a self-created vessel for solving their problems. Simultaneously, we are destroying ourselves with the thing that could be saving us all. This duality is something I aim to explore in my work. To raise questions about all our connections to technology is the only way for me to express my feelings of respect and concern of human automation.

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