

Rumor Mill & Machine-Made Theory

Review by Craig Saper

Broeckmann, Andreas. *Machine Art in the Twentieth Century*. The MIT Press, 2016.

This book is an investigation into a rumor—namely, the rumor that there is something that can be called “machine art,” something that is probably neither a particular genre nor a well-defined field of artistic practice. I attempt an explication of the rumor, rather than offering proof of its truthfulness. If there is or was a machine art, it may have been something like this. – Andreas Broeckmann

To live-up to the possibilities described in this book, this review should have been algorithmically machine-written, and perhaps read by a Stelarc-lik cyborg; the feedback loop should have been immediate, visceral, and paradoxically affective and intimate. Instead you're left with the old artisanal version of a review, even if it appears in an electronic scholarly journal, of a printed-on-paper book; and, you dear reader probably also fall short of the ideal cyborgian reader imagined by Donna Haraway. Short of writing a review as a form of speculative machine scholarship, we can still mine Andre; Broeckmann's extended definition, theorization, and cataloguing of possibilities in machine art – even a rumorological analysis indicated above in the epigraph. One might call Broeckmann, who is an important theorist and scholar of technology, art historian, curator, editor, professor, and former Transmediale organizer, a “machine” as he churns out another overview and extended definition of an entire ~~genre, practices, or form~~ ... no? ... rum of its existence in, and as, art. Perhaps that metaphoric notion of the hyper-productive scholar as machine pushes all of machine art over to the ephemerality of conceptual art instead of an explication of the rumor that “there is or was a machine art.” As an explication, this book offers an essential study of *late* twentieth-century machine art, and mostly uses earlier examples from the futurists and constructivists, and even a couple of lines on nineteenth century examples, as supporting material. It is a book that will prove extremely useful not only to art history classes, but also to cultural studies and philosophy classes. It is a short book, but packed with notes, a bibliography, and an index that all make up a third of the book.

Before the twentieth-century and outside of the art and cultural realm, the definition of machines involved a simple set of attributes. Machines were defined as transforming and transferring energy, multiplying force and/or speed, and potentially changing the direction of a force with the basic principles of the lever and inclined plane configured in multiple ways including gears, wheels, etc. Every machine engineer knows that definition, but none of those attributes appear in any of the artworld's definitions, even including Broeckmann's careful and nuanced articulations and delineations the mechanics', or engineers', conception of a machine is never cited, mentioned, or even dismissed. Instead curators, artists, and scholars have a much more metaphoric and metaphysical conception. Since the 1960s at least, interactivity, manipulations, visual cues, and, most importantly, electronics (or at least electricity) seem embedded in the wobbly definitions of machine art.

Organized around thematic threads, rather than chronological development, the study interrogates the “symptomatic” “vagueness with which the artistic engagement with technology has been framed discursively throughout the twentieth century ... in order to develop a more consistent and analytical description of an aesthetics of the machine in art, focusing especially on its associative, symbolic, formalist, kinetic, and automatic aspects,” while also serving as an imaginary catalogue of some of the greatest hits of machine art – again, mostly in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The themes or motifs of algorithm, image, body, and ecology, run through these works and the historical theories, descriptions, and manifestoes.

The book begins with a condensed history from Filippo Marinetti in 1909 to the Dadaist's interpretation of Tatlinism to Tatlin's own (perhaps ironic) denunciation of his eponymous -ism that would use industrial practices and materials into artworks to Bruno Munari's 1938 warnings against the machine's increasing enslavement of people to Johnson and Barr staging the key “machine art” exhibit at MoMA in 1934 as an expression of “design formalism” in the machine age. These key moments lead to the contemporary usage and understanding of machine art as a genre with all of its inconsistencies and contradictions as artifacts of its exhibitions and manifestoes history. Of course, Broeckmann's own book is part of that lineage now, and one might be tempted to read some of the same contradictions and lacuna in this contemporary study. While the Barr and Johnson exhibit promoted the notion of the “the dream of the beauty of technics,” the emergence of machine art rather than the art of the machined, the industrial, or the manufactured, as Broeckmann argues, was much more fraught with diverse, and critical, anti-industrial perspectives.

The title would be less eloquent, perhaps, and vaguer to simply call it *Machine Art: Toward A Definition*, but then the chapter titles could set-up the focus of the project on post-1948 examples with discussions of earlier examples as precursors. The study is immensely useful and insightful as an interrogation of how curators, art historians, and artists have understood the frame of machine art, and one could read diverse perspectives. One could read Broeckmann's study as an elaborate and brilliant theorization, much like Gregory L. Ulmer's clunkier *Applied Grammatology*, as using the artworks as gears in an analysis of the machinations of our culture's machinic and cyborgian metaphysics. It also reads as if running through every important exhibit catalogue on art and machines in the twentieth century to try to figure out the rumor of this thing called machine art. Art and art history now occupies the space of some of the most sophisticated theory – and the art in this book are keys to operating Broeckmann's finely-tuned study of the conceptual underpinnings of much of contemporary art: as an unintended riff on Sol LeWitt's concept that “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” There are stirring readings of theory through these artworks, for example, in wondering if Deleuze's and Guattari's “hollow depth” is too much of a jump to Stelarc's “hollow body.” Appreciating Vaucanson's flute-playing automaton as performing beside a more than a century lat

theorization of both “operational images” and “instrumental images,” as outside the human interpretation and ultimately collapsing the machine vis coding, and intervention without human eyes. It is beyond the scope and space of this review to go through the gears in this theory, but it runs through Steichen, Keenan, Farocki, Manovich, Sekula, Bredekamp, Krämer, Schmidgen, and Guattari, Deleuze, and Lacan. It's a thrill ride to read.

In another section, Broeckmann reminds us of N. Katherine Hayles's discussion of the Turing test as first developed to distinguish between man and woman, and later to test whether the responses were from machine or human. The section on this weird cultural interchangeability of women for machines runs throughout art, media, literature, and theory, and again in what I am tempted to call a *grand écart en l'air*, Broeckmann produces a feminist reading that sets in motion theories and artworks from Carrouges and Duchamp, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *Ève future*, in which the hero falls in love with the machine-woman Hadaly, an “electrical phantom” from which he can later liberate himself, or the female machine creatures E. T. A. Hoffmann's novella *Der Sandmann* and in Fritz Lang's movie *Metropolis*. And, pushing off from Paul Haviland's 1915 “We Are Living in the Age of the Machine,” and noting that “the equation of man as creator, engineer, lover, and of woman as creature, machine, mother, leaves one somewhat dumbfounded. But these generalizations are not merely a cliché, but indicative of a pattern” for Broeckmann. Bringing in theorists like Heep, Hayles, Haraway, and Caroline Jones the book introduces a counter to the false myth that women are not the maker-engineers in the artworld, but using the machines and technologies for weaving, composing, and playing – not constructing. He notes that “Given the scarcity of women artists in the field of “machine art,” it's striking how many of those who engage with technology also work with textiles and weaving. We can think of artists like Varvara Stepanova, Gunta Stözl, Anni Albers, or Ingrid Wiener, but also of Orlan's surgical reconfiguration of her own body, or of Tania Ruiz Gutierrez's deconstruction and layering of video material in ways that open it up to symbolic meanings by visually coding or weaving multitemporalities into the texture of electronic images.”

Broeckmann correctly notices that it is a mythic construction that creates that narrative – and it is a narrative repeated even in some of the feminist theorizations – forgetting artists like “Lynn Hershman Leeson, Rebecca Horn, Seiko Mikami, or Steina Vasulka, we find women who do things other than weave, code, and network.” This section reiterates that the “powerful myth on the relation between women and technology, the concept of “building things and taking them apart” remains the preserve of men,” appears in even radical feminist curators and theorists discussions. The book goes on to look at Steina Vasulka and other women pioneers in machine art, like Sonia Sheridan, and one could mention even more – and although the book has this crucial corrective one wonders why Nam June Paik is discussed, but not his partner Shigeko Kubota; Joseph Beuys, but not Fluxus artist more involved in technology Alison Knowles; Eduardo Kac, but not his colleague at the School of the Chicago Art Institute, Adelheid Mers; even in literature Ezra Pound is discussed, but not Gertrude Stein. All of these women were, or are, involved in machine technologies imprint on their art and influential on our thinking about those possibilities. Once the book opens that box, it is difficult to contain it.

This nicely packaged study, as is typical of the MIT Press designed books, uses machine art – real or phantasm – to make accessible theoretical and philosophical perspectives on the role of the machine in our culture and our misconceptions of what is arguably the central role of the machine in the twentieth century. The readings supplemented with color-plates and black and white illustrations of a wide array of artworks and projects, made me think as I closed the book that this would make a spectacular exhibit-catalogue for a, perhaps, impossible curatorial project. Maybe staging this show with these artists interrogations and demythologizing of “the dream of the beauty of technics,” would be (and already is in this book, if read as, in part, a manifesto) the culmination of Broeckmann's own project begun decades ago and announced in an online article from the 1990s: “Techno-Parasite use whatever technical systems or apparatuses they can find as hosts, drawing on their output, their energy supplies, and cycles to procreate and grow. ...Techno-Parasites suck other machines empty, disrupt their circuits, effect power cuts, disable them, destroy them. ...The parasite is a strategist and an ecologist; it knows its environment and, like a nomad, it is good at “passing through” and at conquering through movement, rather than at occupying, settling, and conquering by force. ...The hypothesis put forward here is that the parasitological aesthetics described by Michel Serres is, at least in part, applicable to the net.artistic practice.”

Machine art, rumor has it, intervenes in our world using the tools of the saprophytic ecologists of the twentieth century. This book is the guide and user's manual.

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