THE EXHIBITIONIST

CURATORS' FAVORITES

The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968

GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

Matthew Drutt

My earliest memories of exhibitions are of people's legs. My mother, an art dealer in Philadelphia, always took me with her to openings. I remember glimpses of things on pedestals, days spent in repeat visits to specific installations, like the arms and armor collection or the Duchamp room at the Philadelphia Museum, and comical moments like a streaker running through a Robert Morris maze at the ICA. I thought I lived in the most progressive place on earth. But, looking back, there is one show that has had a transformational and recurring presence in my life and transcends all of these other memories.

The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age was a landmark exhibition organized by Pontus Hultén for the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1968. A groundbreaking curator, Hultén became the founding director of Stockholm's Moderna Museet in 1959, at the age of 35, and honed his craft there organizing projects that bridged European and American culture, including key surveys of Ed Kienholz, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol and retrospectives of Joseph Beuys, Jean Fautrier, and Jackson Pollock. In 1966 he shocked audiences with the exhibition *SHE—A Cathedral,* a collaboration by Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, and Per Olof Ultvedt in which an oversize sculpture of a woman contained an installation of Old Master forgeries, a milk bar, and a screening room; visitors entered the sculpture/exhibition space through the vagina. *The Machine* was Hultén's first foray into the historical and interdisciplinary survey that would characterize much of his curatorial work henceforth, with exhibitions conceived as vehicles for social and political change and museums used more as public forums than display centers. Indeed, the following year in Stockholm,

he organized *Poetry Must Be Made By All! Transform the World!,* an exhibition with a paucity of actual works of art and a discussion space that was used by supporters of the Black Panthers. As founding director of the Centre Georges Pompidou beginning in 1973, he organized a landmark series of shows devoted to the exchange of ideas between Paris and other cultural capitals—*Paris–New York, Paris–Moscow,* and *Paris–Berlin*—which practically came to define the modern-day concept of the interdisciplinary exhibition, with sprawling programs of lectures, theatrical performances, and film screenings orbiting a blockbuster survey of works of art falling within a larger-than-life topic.

In *The Machine,* Hultén traced the celebration and denigration of machines and machine ideas in art from Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer through Modernism, the contemporary incorporation of machines *into* art, and the aesthetic beauty of utilitarian objects being produced at that time. I'm not going to lie and tell you that I remember all of this clearly; I don't. I was six. It was my first visit to MoMA, maybe to New York. But I do remember distinctly the completely new feeling of utterly nonmuseological contemporaneity. For as unique as my experiences may have seemed to me by that time, nothing could have prepared me for the epiphany that occurred standing in this modern space of steel, glass, and marble, looking at art, things that were not art, distracted by views through the windows onto the city with cars and people going by, apartment buildings and townhouses on 54th Street looming large on the horizon. It was so unlike my experiences in Philadelphia, where the museum looks like the Parthenon, perched high on a hill away from everything else. Duchamp's bicycle wheel on a stool was cool, but the show also had a racing car hanging on the wall (Anthony Granatelli and Colin Chapman, *Lotus-STP Turbocar,* 1968). From now on, anything was grist for the exhibition mill.

My mother bought the catalogue for the show and gave it to me. Over the years, she would borrow it back more times than I can count, and we argued over possession. She needed it for her work; I needed it for my edification. It was unlike any book I had seen before. It has embossed metal covers, and on the front is the facade of that incredible building I had been in, the Museum of Modern Art, with people and cars going by, while inside the book, like inside that museum, there were things that were so familiar to me, I felt as if I had known them forever. I've never fetishized anything in this way before or since. The book has been a companion to my interests as they developed; first I was infatuated with Dada and Constructivism—I embraced rebellion and revolution—and then I exploded into Cubism, Futurism, the Bauhaus and industrial design, photography, contemporary architecture, Pop art, and media-based art. All of these areas became focal points of my professional work and my private obsessions, and the *Machine* catalogue has been my Physicians' Desk Reference as I work my way through them.

For a generation raised on art that is routinely informed by the moving image on high-definition flat-screen televisions, broadband technology, and handheld devices that allow us to speak, text, or watch video at our desks, in the backseat of a taxi, sitting in a public toilet, or curled up in bed, it must be hard to imagine just how incredibly revelatory this project was in its time. It was the first museum exhibition to include a work playing on videotape, Nam June Paik's *McLuhan Caged* (1967), at a time when television in the home was still an unsophisticated experience. In its review of the show, *Time* magazine asked, pointedly, "What adult American has not swatted a flickering TV set? Or made an uneasy joke about the day when the computer tries to take over?"[1] The latter observation was more compelling then than it might seem today, for while we whine about our reliance on digital devices and their intrusion into our daily lives, Hultén's exhibition opened in the wake of the release of Stanley Kubrick's epic *2001: A Space Odyssey,* in which a psychopathic supercomputer system (not so discreetly inspired by technology giant IBM) runs amok during a manned space mission to Jupiter. The movie came out just as the United States had launched the first of several manned Apollo missions, placing the country safely ahead of Russia in the race for the conquest of space. The film freaked everyone out. Against the backdrop of the war in Vietnam, with the Cold War prospect of mutual nuclear annihilation now inextricably bound up in the competition over intergalactic exploration, ambivalence (if not outright fear and paranoia) toward technology had reached a mass audience that the Fu-

The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968
Stamped on aluminum, printed in color
9 ¾ x 8 ½ in. (24.8 x 21.6 cm)

turists and Dada artists would have lusted after.

Hultén knew this and acknowledged it in his introduction to the show: "All of us have a rather unclear and not very dignified relation to technology. We put hope in the machine and then get frustrated when it deceives us. How the artist in particular looks upon technology is very important—because it is the freest, the most human way of looking at a nonhuman object. Perhaps the artist will show us the way to a better relationship."[2] Not content to rely solely on preexisting works to make his case, Hultén took the additional and unusual step of inviting the newly formed Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), a collaborative venture founded in 1967 by the engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer and the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman, to coordinate a competition seeking projects that explored interactions between engineers and artists, not something preconceived by either member of each engineer-artist team. *The New York Times* announced, a year before *The Machine* opened, the selections of the jury of distinguished scientists and technology executives. The 114 selected projects were shown concurrently at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and MoMA as part of the exhibition, with cash awards of $3,000 going to the best entries.

Sadly, little in the way of coherent visual documentation of the exhibition as installed seems to have survived, but the *Machine* catalogue does include nine projects specially selected by Hultén. They appear at the end of the book, with a bluish chromolithographic cast to distinguish them from the other works in the exhibition. The implication is unmistakable: These are the waves of the future. The pieces look almost commonplace by today's standards, objects that respond to human touch, a heartbeat, or the clapping of hands. I vaguely remember Niels and Lucy Jackson Young's *Fakir in ¾ Time* (1968), which combines an air blower and a vibrating arm to create a mechanical fountain of textile cord or mechanical tape dancing 40 feet into the air at 100 miles per hour. Even *Time*'s critic was impressed by it, having written off much of the rest of the show as "plenty of jiggling junk and blithely bleeping electronic marvels."[3]

One of the few surviving official installation shots of the exhibition is reproduced here; it shows what one would expect of an exhibition at MoMA back then. Far from the implied cacophony of chaos described above, it shows a spaciously installed room of contemporary masterworks by Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Watts, Jean Tinguely, and others residing

comfortably alongside the E.A.T. "science projects." The fans in Rauschenberg's painting and one of the Oldenburg sculptures must have seemed nostalgic, even anachronistic, in the modern age of air conditioning. How deceptively calm and dignified it all looks. Out of view, back in the catalogue on my shelf, another, more sinister set of pictures looms larger in my mind as the enduring imagery of this project. The frontispiece and its companion at the end of the book are documentary photographs of Tinguely's infamous 1960 self-constructing and self-destroying work of art, *Homage to the City of New York,* a piece that had a brief birth and death in MoMA's sculpture garden, under a Buckminster Fuller dome. Tinguely set the piece in motion on a cold, wet night in front of 250 onlookers. When it failed to destroy itself after 20 or 90 minutes (accounts of the evening conflict), the artist set it ablaze and finally hacked it with an ax until it stopped working. As John Canaday noted in his review of the evening, "Mr. Tinguely makes fools of machines while the rest of mankind permits machines to make fools of them. Tinguely's machine wasn't quite good enough, as a machine, to make his point."[4] Perhaps not, but as for art, I can't imagine more fitting symbolism for Hultén's project.

Notes

1. Exhibitions: "Love, Hate & the Machine," *Time,* December 6, 1968.

2. Cited in Ibid. This precise remark does not appear in the catalogue, so it must have been a brochure or wall text.

3. Ibid.

4. John Canaday, "Homage to City of New York," *The New York Times,* March 18, 1960.

Mirror's Edge installation view, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2000, showing works by Yinka Shonibare and Joachim Schönfeldt

FROM THE RIGOR OF THE MODEL TO THE EXACTNESS OF ITS ITERATIONS

Juan A. Gaitan

The request to write a critical essay on an exhibition that has inspired me to reflect upon curatorial practices brought to mind Okwui Enwezor's *Mirror's Edge,* which I saw in its iteration at the Vancouver Art Gallery nearly 10 years ago. This was the first exhibition that Enwezor produced after being appointed director of *Documenta XI.* In the capricious calendar of what we might call "contemporary art years," *Mirror's Edge* is already history. Conversely, there isn't enough hindsight on this show or the issues it spoke to for it to be considered historically. It might belong to an extra-historical period Walter Benjamin called the "just past," a past in