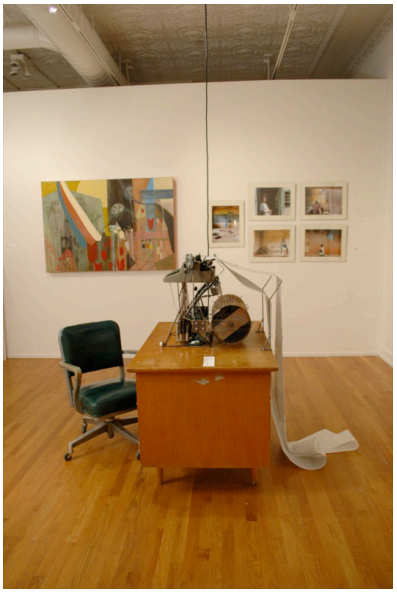
Matt Sanger

For Nothing

Introduction-

The objective of this project was to create a large kinetic sculptural installation as a continuation of mark making and writing machines I had worked on sporadically in my undergrad. The piece, comprised mainly of steel and wood, would write a phrase in cursive solely through mechanical means with an accompaniment of electronics for control. The work was situated in a warehouse space with nine other artists whose artwork fit together both cohesively with the space and with each other. In thought, the piece was originally intended to communicate futility or pointlessness. This was achieved through the use of mechanics or kinetics and the phrase "I think I can." To elaborate, the text was essentially reverse engineered from cursive and expressed through mechanical means. This action gave the machine a great deal of complexity in what was once a very simple human task of writing cursive. And so, the machine's sole existence is that of thinking it can do something and writing it out over and over. In other words, the machine was pointless and its actions were in fact futile. But much how the machine utilized this mentality, so did I, often telling myself "I think I can" as I spent long hours working on the machine as the deadline approached; kind of ironic I would say. And as I spent those hours with the machine, I couldn't help but bombard myself with questions. Why any of this? Why does it look this way? Why these materials? The answer "just because" wasn't enough to justify the hours of work that were going into the project. In



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effort to find these answers, I turned to myself and my past. To begin, I'll give a bit of a preface to my childhood to better justify answers to questions not unlike those above.

Creative Work-

Growing up, I had three channels on my T.V. at home and sixty acres behind my house. Naturally my brothers and I often found ourselves outside instead of in front of the lame T.V. My father, a hard working man, had stockpiled incredible amounts of materials, fasteners, tools, and so on from jobs he had held through the years. We took advantage of the resources at hand and frequently built tree forts, vehicles, and objects. This was how we played. As a young boy I was naturally inclined to watch what my dad was doing or help him. And for a better chunk of my childhood he was working on a large addition to our house. A likely assumption would be that I saw my dad as though he were playing too, and the structures, processes, and materials used when dad played were ideal. The trusses on the addition were something I found beautiful and the structure has stuck with me to this day. When I doodled as a child it was always a mode of transportation or a dwelling. I would draw in the electrical system and plumbing even though at a very early age I hadn't understood how it worked. I would even draw in fasteners. The structures used as support in the homes and tree forts were always the same; a really childish take on trusses. I would put these repeating triangular structures anywhere I thought needed support, floor or ceiling. As I grew older, my curiosity and play shifted into a new dimension with mechanics, wiring, auto restoration, and metal fabrication. And when it was time for college, I spent one semester in engineering school and immediately transferred into art, a place where I could use my hands and create. And

though one could label me as a failed engineer, I'd like to call myself a tinkerer, but I digress.

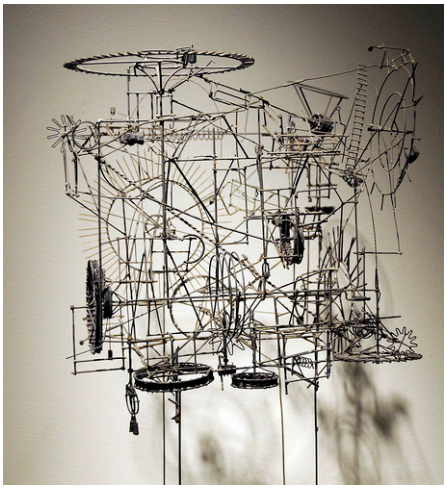
Moving onward, what I began to see through an analysis of my child hood was that this project became an exploration of my artistic decision making in relation to my childhood. I began to understand why I was making the things I make and why they look the way they do. I came to find there were indeed deep ties to my past and the acknowledgement of that allowed me to open up creatively just that much more. I create or play with these materials because that is how I have played my whole life. The machine looks the way it does with its chaotic triangular structures because that is how I have drawn. And if I were to communicate futility, this is how I would do it, with these materials and these processes and this aesthetic. These subjects are like a language to me and this is the language I use to express.

Futility, the theme of this work, is then not just in the outcome or action of the work itself, but it is a reoccurring theme in the creation of the work as well. It is the frequent encountering of roadblocks, the incessant miscalculation of completion time, and the inability to make a project that blows myself away; that is what makes this work futile.

Contextual Discussion-

It is obvious that I am not the first to have done work in this medium, and therefore I have my sources of inspiration and predecessors. One of the most relevant and influential artists I have researched is Arthur Ganson. What I admire most about his work is his overly complicated means of creating what is usually a very simple outcome. He

composes his work in such a way that the process of getting to the result becomes just as if not more important than the result itself. This becomes apparent in the way he films his work as well. He will spend most of the film on the mechanics of the machine and show a short bit of the result at the end. More importantly however, Arthur's work is entirely centered around mechanical principals and showcases the beauty they often possess. The quiet, yet mesmerizing movement of his completely handmade assembly of wire gears and levers allow onlookers to enter his work through causality and intuition. In the case of his works with found objects paired with mechanics, the audience is able to associate more of a meaning to the piece. Perhaps this is achieved through a simple action the object performs or connections with the object drawn from an individual's own life. In my work, I carry the same admiration for mechanical principals and overly complicated mechanisms, however there are times when I choose to incorporate electrometrical components such as relays, solenoids, switches or motors and this is where our work begins differ. These components bridge the gap from the computer age back to the machine era, a place where I find my work to exist in the spectrum.



Arthur Ganson

On the topic of the machine era, artist Jean Tinguely is another tremendously influential kinetic sculpture who worked nearly exclusively in machine era materials and found objects. Tinguely, who I would call the father of kinetic sculpture, often created crude, noisy, heavy, and at times massive kinetic assemblages out of parts that are all reminiscent of the industrial era. While at times I view his work as a bit too crude, I cant

help but applaud his selective use of objects and careful attention to form, color, and texture. The combination of these components gave his work an unparalleled sense of unity and composition. In my project, Jean's use of these elements as well as the heavy machinery aspect of his work has greatly influenced my stylistic decisions. What I wanted to build on from Tinguely however, was further calculated or precise movement and the addition of complex analog and electronic features to accomplish more meticulous tasks.

Jean Tinguely

An artist who I feel incorporates these electronic systems and at times maintains the ambition of Tinguely, is the sculptor Tim Hawkinson. What I really appreciate about Tim's work is his diversity from piece to piece and his unorthodox use of materials that often result in interesting visual effects. His "Signature Chair" piece was one of the biggest influences for the creation of my "I Think I Can" piece in that it was purely mechanical and wrote in cursive. His other works like the "Uberorgan" and "Emoter" were great examples for the endless possibilities of electronics and microcontrollers in art. My typewriter piece above and his "Uberorgan" actually functioned in similar ways with the integration of microcontrollers and analog memory for the input. What is most intriguing about Tim's work though, is once again his use of materials. In visual art materials are everything about a piece. It is what it is made of. Hawkinson is a master of taking a material we are extremely familiar

Tim Hawkinson

with and exploits it in an installation through unexpected means to create a new sense of unfamiliarity. The result is surprise, an element I feel is very much a part of strong artwork and something I strive for in my own.

Lastly but certainly not least, the artist Janet Zweig influenced several aspects of my series. While our work indeed differs both aesthetically and conceptually, a common thread between the two is our use of paper and phrases. Her paper use however, is where I believe she has had the greatest impact on my work. In my "I Think I Can" piece I utilize a spool of paper not too unlike she does, with receipt paper falling to a pile on the floor after it has been printed upon. But what is the rationale for having a spool and it piling onto the floor? For me, it represents two simple concepts: time and evidence. A large spool of paper can been seen as a scroll of time, and the pile on the floor is evidence of the time spent. When observers see this in relation to the machine, it provides more credibility to the life and presence of the installation.

While I indeed have more sources of inspiration, these are the ones I feel deserve mention. These individuals, each in their own way, have shaped me as an artist and laid the foundation that my work builds upon. They have surely made significant contributions to the art community, something I strive to do.

Conclusion-

In conclusion, this piece represents my first step into the world or large-scale kinetic installations and my first attempt at integrating kinetic art with a conceptual message. While the work may have room for improvement in both craft and message, I still feel overall it was a success. But where do I go from here? Can kinetic sculpture say

something more? Can it *do* something more? What I can say for certain is that I will continue to explore the field of kinetic sculpture and refine my craft. I will also dig deeper into the possibilities of the medium to find more relevant concepts within. One route I may take for the next collection of sculptures is one that is based on more mainstream current events. Maybe the machines could comment on the economy, consumerism, or water shortage. The possibilities are endless and only time will tell.

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