

# Useless Machines for Dreaming, Thinking, and Seeing

## Useless Machines for Dreaming, Thinking, and Seeing

March 27, 2019 – September 1, 2019

Guest Curator: Gerardo Mosquera

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**BRONX MUSEUM**

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William Kentridge

*Untitled (Meccano Sculpture)*, 2011  
Mixed media  
76 ¼ x 35 ½ x 34 ½ inches

*Untitled (Wooden Kinetic Machine)*, 2013  
Wood, steel, aluminum, cotton, and found objects  
85 ½ x 31 ½ x 31 ½ inches

## Of art, machines, and uselessness

—Gerardo Mosquera

This exhibition puts on display machines created, transformed, or stripped of their original purposes by artists for symbolic, poetic, aesthetic, and subjective purposes. They are *art machines*: a unique technology that serves no utilitarian rationale, thus diverging from machines' practical functions. To stress this contraposition, the selection looked more for mechanical, machine-like artworks than for high-tech and digital devices. This gives its texture to a show that presents diverse approaches to the subject by artists with dissimilar poetics, coming from plural backgrounds and contexts, many of whom are not familiar to a New York audience.

Filled with noisy machines, the exhibition space looks more like a factory or workshop than a museum. The show also displays surprising products created by art machines that are not physically present. Although machines move, the exhibition is not about kinetic art, in which technology is subordinated to the creation of visual results. The goal of the exhibition is to examine the paradox of and tension between utilitarian technology and art's "inutility", which allows it a different functionality. By being useless in strict practical terms, these machines are able to make products that feed our imagination, enrich our knowledge in a way that science cannot, provide aesthetic jouissance, and are also playful and fun to experience.

The exhibition is also a reflection on the notion of uselessness. Since Immanuel Kant art has been defined as "finality without end", a pursuit motivated by a "disinterested interest" – in short, a useless activity. Oscar Wilde famously proclaimed "all art is quite useless", while Vladimir Mayakovski even dismissed art for wasting valuable materials for creating "useless structures". As a result of a long historical process of differentiation, the endeavor that today we call art lost its original religious, ritual, mimetic, and governmental functions to become a distinct activity: an aesthetic and tropological



Fernando Sánchez Castillo

*Method on the Discourse*, 2011  
Video HD  
22 minutes and 44 seconds

language for creating specific meanings through sensitive experience. Jan Mukarovsky has defined art as a sign that is not subordinated to any exterior aim but is independent and evocative.

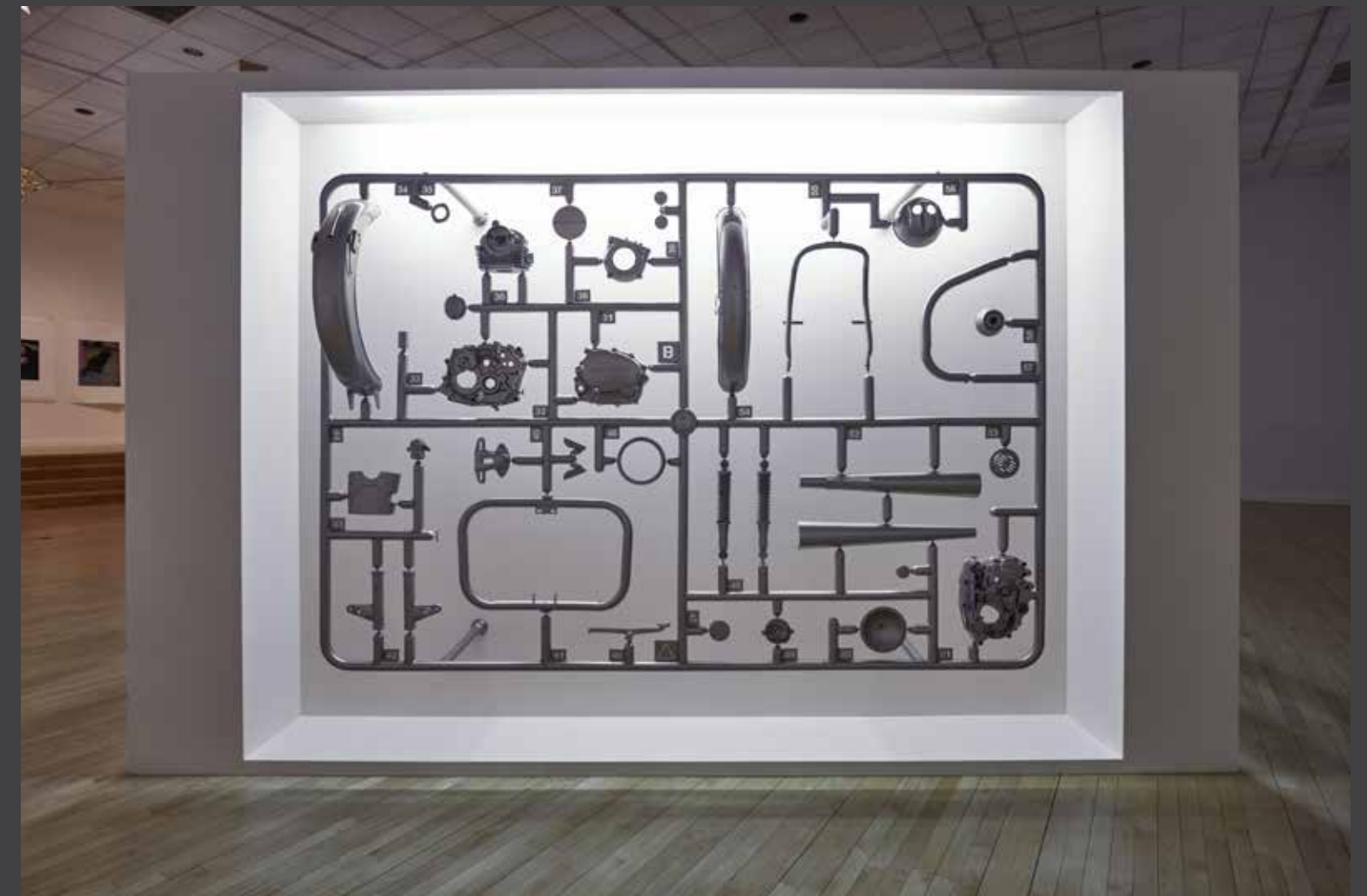
However, this is not to say that art has no functions, but that its spiritual and practical functions derive from its autonomy. There is even a line of thinking that goes from Friedrich Schiller to Peter Bürger up to Jacques Rancière that analyzes how the independence that art acquires in bourgeois society allows it to escape this society's rational praxis. Art therefore surpasses a praxis focused on material goals to achieve human fulfillment through its free and "disinterested" practice, which also lends it a critical ability. Rancière posits that art's autonomy and its political promise constitute – more than a mere polarity – a combination that activates the two poles. Other contemporary thinkers as Claire Bishop have emphasize the relevance of keeping the political, social and aesthetic aspects together in contemporary loose and hybrid art practices, such as "artivism" and participatory art.

These recent discussions have remote precedents. For Ovid there was nothing more useful than the useless arts. Philosopher Martin Heidegger seems to echo the Roman poet: "The most useful is the useless." He based this idea in the ancient Greek notion of *theoria* as a superior energy that dispenses with practical managements. He immediately added: "But to experience the useless is the most difficult undertaking for contemporary man" – an affirmation that is becoming increasingly apparent in our pragmatic, post-utopian society.

Indeed, there is a long tradition among philosophers and writers to praise the inutile. What is at stake in general is not to sustain uselessness as such, but to defend the importance of spiritual activities and creations that did not involve direct functional aims. Aristotle was the first to establish that knowledge is valuable in itself, and not for providing practical utility – something that we frequently forget today. To praise inutility is a reaction to the materialistic values enhanced by capitalism, which have been criticized for moral and spiritual reasons. Following a typical romantic spirit, poets Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire have opposed aesthetics

Shyu Ruey-Shiann

*Dreambox*, 2012  
Wolf 125 motorcycle, motors,  
metal frame, steel, wire, sensors,  
transformer  
156 x 120 x 90 inches approximately



Jairo Alfonso

*Telefunken 584827*, 2012  
Video  
5:08 minutes





Simón Vega

*Tropical Mercury Capsule*, 2010  
Wood, aluminum, tin roofing,  
cardboard, plastic, television, fan,  
icebox, and stereo  
Variable dimensions

to utility: what is useful is ugly. Scientist and philosopher Pierre Lecomte du Noüy considered uselessness as a distinctive component of the human condition when he remarked that only human beings perform useless acts. For Montaigne, however, “there is nothing useless, not even uselessness itself.”

Simón Vega’s spacecrafts cannot fly through space. Highlighting the humorous disparity between everyday-life objects and sophisticated high-tech devices, they articulate the polarization between First World science and engineering and the spontaneous and creative bricolage of recycled materials typical of slums. Vega’s spaceships become improvised homes that are, in the words of curator Claire Breukel, “no longer centered on orbiting Earth but simply living on it.” The metaphorical implications of Vega’s *Tropical Space Proyectos* series is even more evident in his installation in this show: a full-scale interpretation of the 1961 Mercury Ballistic capsule, which was designed as the first US project for launching a human to space. However, when the Soviets put Yuri Gagarin in space one month before Mercury astronaut Alan Shepard, the Mercury Project had lost part of its original purpose of winning the Space Race—it had become “useless.”



José Iraola

*Untitled*, 2012 (from the *Broken Camera* series)  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
40 x 60 inches

*Interior*, 2012 (from the *Broken Camera* series)  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
60 x 40 inches

*Untitled*, 2012 (from the *Broken Camera* series)  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
40 x 60 inches

*Mona Lisa*, 2012 (from the *Broken Camera* series)  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
60 x 40 inches

*Tribilina*, 2012 (from the *Broken Camera* series)  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
60 x 40 inches

*Untitled*, 2012 (from the *Broken Camera* series)  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
40 x 60 inches

*Untitled*, 2012 (from the *Broken Camera* series)  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
60 x 40 inches

José Iraola takes photographs with a broken, useless camera that “creates” artistic images beyond the artist’s control. The device diffracts in unexpected ways the light that travels through its lens, contradicting to the extreme the supposed capacity of photography to reproduce reality. The condition of being useless allows the “imaginative”, fascinating and unexpected photographs that the broken camera seemingly “takes by itself.” If Iraola activates a broken camera, Shyu Ruey-Shiann deactivates an operational motorcycle on which he used to travel around Taiwan. He disassembled the vehicle to transform it into a “Dreambox”, a machine of subjective memories and imagination. In his video, Jairo Alfonso takes apart an old Telefunken radio while the device continues to broadcast notable Cold War events – including a classic song by the Beatles and soundbites of the Space Race, the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War, and Martin Luther King’s assassination – only to conclude with a Mexican ad for a painkiller drug. The piece is a

moving reflection about history, deterioration and the passage of time.

Wim Delvoye created perhaps the ultimate example of useless art machines in his *Cloaca* series: complex, room-sized devices that mimic human digestion with the sole purpose of obtaining "real" feces. The artist has worked with scientists, designers, computer experts, and technicians just to create machines to defecate in museums, our auratic cathedrals of culture. *Cloaca* takes to the absurd almost all fields of the Modern project, in a sarcasm to our civilization. Ironically, Delvoye's piece in this exhibit is only a sculpture, a nonfunctional substitute for his absurd machines: in short, it's twice useless.

Shih Chieh Huang is the most high-tech artist in the exhibition. However, he collides electronics and high-tech components with everyday objects to create low-tech visually fascinating installations, which are the hybrid outcomes of downgrading technology. Conversely, Arnaldo Morales is the most "machinist" among his peers. Morales has devoted his career to creating strictly mechanical art machines. Although "useless," his works are nevertheless "real," self-sufficient, and, at times, menacing machines. They are machines for machine's sake, a condition that reinforces their artistic character. On the contrary, machines are only a sector of William Kentridge's oeuvre. His two interactive bricolage works on display can be triggered individually by visitors to playfully activate a "hand-made", almost poetic movement in a personal one-on-one relationship with the pieces, based on the Meccano model construction system.

Roxy Paine is well-known for his machines that manufacture abstract sculptures and paintings: useless machines that make useless art – in a bewildering "Benjaminian" way. On display in this exhibit are six of his machine-produced sculptures, which, interestingly, resemble the excretes of Delvoye's *Cloacas*. Adding a twist to Paine's irony of creating art mechanically, Fernando Sánchez Castillo inverted the function of military robots designed to deactivate explosives by turning them into artistic devices that create paintings and sculptures. Stripped of their original purpose to disarm bombs,

Wim Delvoye

*Cloaca Travel Kit*, 2009-2010  
Mixed media  
10 x 30 x 20 1/4 inches



Shih Chieh Huang

*VT-34-BTB (Blue Angel Eye)*, 2017-2018  
Mixed media  
168 1/4 x 26 inches





Roxy Paine

S2-P2-MAR38, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
32 x 37 ¼ x 35 ½ inches

S2-P2-MAR32, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
13 ¼ x 20 ¼ x 20 ¼ inches

S2-P2-MAR35, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
17 ¼ x 22 ¼ x 20 ¼ inches

S2-P2-MAR43, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
24 x 19 ¼ x 15 ¾ inches

S2-P2-MAR30, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
16 ¾ x 32 ½ x 29 inches

S2-P2-MAR11, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
23 ¼ x 30 ¼ x 19 ¼ inches

the robots now operate in a sarcastic useless manner, very distant to its original function.

In Chico MacMurtrie's piece the proximity of the machine to humans becomes biological. In a subtle, random way the work suggests organic, rather than technological functions, such as breathing, and is based on a morphology of nature. In contrast, Adriana Salazar's delicate works directly mimic human daily life actions. Her humorous pieces are like precarious bricolage robots that frequently fail to complete their simple functions. Given their rickety structure and irregular performance, Salazar's works bond with Vega's spacecrafts. To close this relationship between machines and humans, Stephana McClure introduces the cyborg's physical and interactive connection: the machine as part of the human body. Her artificial implants eliminate the need for a keyboard to mediate between the act of typing and the device that prints the outcome of this action. The product is an unreadable text: a non-figurative image instead of the poem that was actually typed. The artist stresses the performative, percussive action of the work over the resulting abstract drawing.



Chico MacMurtrie

Hexagons, 2012-2019  
High tensile fabric, Mac mini, Max/MSP,  
electronics, pressure sensor, foam,  
and polystyrene  
Variable dimensions

Algis Griškevičius' works are the only ones in the show that do not correspond to an urban context, to which machines and technology in general are usually associated. Not only because his photos are staged in the countryside, but due to the rustic handicraft character of the technological devices that he represents using natural materials, which elicits a humorous contrast. None of his photographs are digitally manipulated, adding to the somewhat medieval, fanciful quality of his work, which is reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings.

Like Griškevičius, Juan Downey and Johanna Unzueta represent rather than build machines. Unzueta's sculptures and installations fixate on basic mechanical parts in a minimal, abstract manner. She employs felt, a light, textural material that generates a suggestive disparity with the tough metal of industrial chains and pipes. At an early stage in his career, Downey – a pioneer of video and interactive art – made fascinating drawings and prints that depicted machines to capture invisible energies and other inventive functions. Although these machines

would not be accepted by science, the artist drafted them with the rigor of technical diagrams – and he even constructed some of the machines as interactive artworks. A drawing of his project for the Roosevelt Island Housing Competition in 1975 shows his utopian vision of dwellings as ecologic machines.

Talking about imaginary machines, perhaps Peter Fischli and David Weiss' landmark video is the most whimsical of the artworks on display. Using unrelated common objects, the artists created a bricolage chain reaction mechanism that uses surprising mechanical and chemical procedures to follow an itinerary heading to nothing – or just to the pure fantasy and enjoyment of inventiveness.

As a reaction to these neoliberal times focused on utilitarianism and profit, this exhibition presents some provocative examples of art machines to produce dreams, feelings, critical thoughts, and ironies; to see what microscopes, telescopes and cartographies cannot show; to fly without taking-off; to do the impossible. Such are some of the uses of art.

Special thanks to Gintaras Česonis, Wim Delvoye, Minjung Kim, and Pamela Vázquez.

Algis Griškevičius

*The First Lithuanian Astronaut*, 2009  
Toned photograph  
26 x 39 inches

*Inexorable Desire to Fly*, 2004  
Toned photograph  
27 ½ x 78 ½ inches

*Plane-Man*, 2009  
Toned photograph  
26 ½ x 39 ½ inches

*Iron Rain*, 2005  
Toned photograph  
27 ½ x 42 ½ inches

*Growing Distant*, 2007  
Toned photograph  
25 ¾ x 42 inches

*Airship of Illusions*, 2017  
Wood sculpture  
Variable dimensions



Juan Downey

*Project for Roosevelt Island  
Competition Section of Proposal*, 1975  
Drawing  
27 x 40 ½ inches

*Do It Yourself: A Small Mass Produced  
Machine*, 1967  
Color etching, artist's proof  
19 ½ x 24 ¼ inches

*Do It Yourself: Capacity Relay*, 1967  
Color etching, artist's proof  
19 ½ x 24 ¼ inches





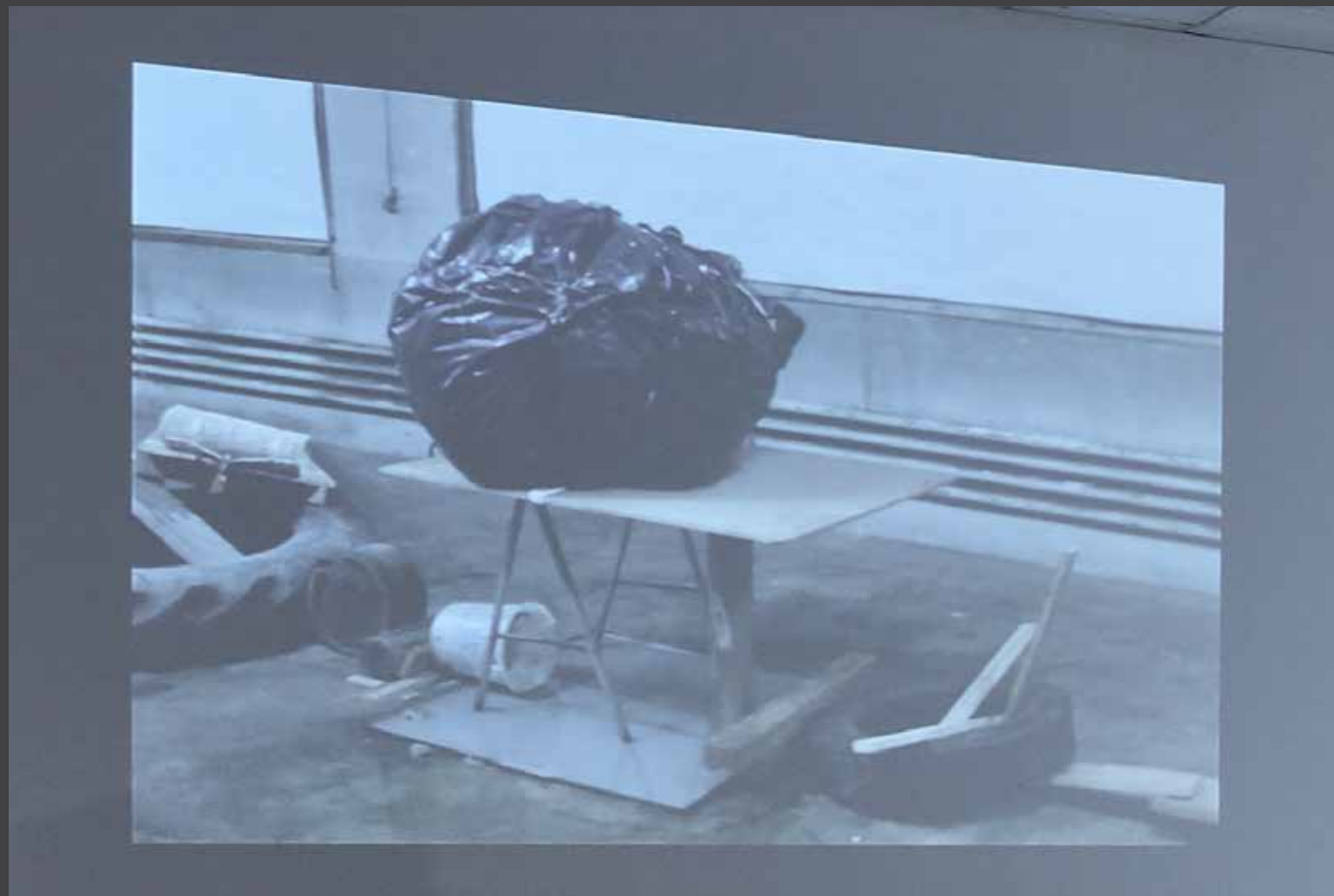
Johanna Unzueta

*Industrial Gear*, 2013  
Felt, recycle spool, thread  
36 x 6 inches

*Hanging Chain*, 2013  
Felt, wooden spools  
13 x 5 feet

*Untitled*, 2018  
Felt, recycle spools, recycle wooden beam  
26 x 6 x 10 inches

*Mural Sink*, 2018  
Felt and thread  
117 x 79 x 13 inches



Peter Fischli & David Weiss

*The Way Things Go*, 1987  
16mm film transferred to video  
(color, sound)  
31 minutes

## Checklist

Jairo Alfonso

*Telefunken 584827*, 2012  
Video  
5:08 minutes  
Courtesy the artist

Wim DeLvoe

*Cloaca Travel Kit*, 2009–2010  
Mixed media  
10 x 30 x 20 ½ inches  
Courtesy the artist

Juan Downey

*Do it Yourself: A Small Mass Produced Machine*, 1967  
Color etching, artist's proof  
19 ½ x 24 ¼ inches  
Bronx Museum Permanent Collection

*Do It Yourself: Capacity Relay*, 1967  
Color etching, artist's proof  
19 ½ x 24 ½ inches  
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*Project for Roosevelt Island  
Competition Section of Proposal*, 1975  
Drawing  
27 x 40 ½ inches  
Bronx Museum Permanent Collection

Peter Fischli & David Weiss

*The Way Things Go*, 1987  
16mm film transferred to video  
(color, sound)  
31 minutes  
Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Algis Griškevičius

*The First Lithuanian Astronaut*, 2009  
Toned photograph  
26 x 39 inches  
Courtesy the artist, Gintaras Česonis  
and Kaunas Gallery

*Inexorable Desire to Fly*, 2004  
Toned photograph  
27 ½ x 78 ½ inches  
Courtesy the artist, Gintaras Česonis  
and Kaunas Gallery

*Plane-Man*, 2009  
Toned photograph  
26 ½ x 39 ½ inches  
Courtesy the artist, Gintaras Česonis  
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Toned photograph  
27 ½ x 42 ½ inches  
Courtesy the artist, Gintaras Česonis  
and Kaunas Gallery

*Growing Distant*, 2007  
Toned photograph  
25 ¾ x 42 inches  
Courtesy the artist, Gintaras Česonis  
and Kaunas Gallery

*Airship of Illusions*, 2017  
Wood Sculpture  
Variable dimensions  
Courtesy the artist, Gintaras Česonis  
and Kaunas Gallery

José Iraola

*Mona Lisa (from Broken Camera series)*, 2012  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
60 x 40 inches  
Courtesy the artist

*Interior (from Broken Camera series)*, 2012  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
60 x 40 inches  
Courtesy the artist

*Tribilina (from Broken Camera series)*, 2012  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
60 x 40 inches  
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*Untitled (from Broken Camera series)*, 2012  
Giclee on photographic paper, unique print  
60 x 40 inches  
Courtesy the artist

William Kentridge

*Untitled (Wooden Kinetic Machine)*, 2013  
Wood, steel, aluminum, cotton and found  
objects  
85 ½ x 31 ½ x 31 ½ inches  
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery

*Untitled (Meccano Sculpture)*, 2011  
Mixed media  
76 ¼ x 35 ½ x 34 ½ inches  
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery

Chico MacMurtrie

*Hexagons*, 2012–2019  
High tensile fabric, Mac mini, Max/MSP,  
electronics, pressure sensor, foam and  
polystyrene  
Variable dimensions  
Courtesy the artist

Stefana McClure

*Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of  
Arranging One's Books*, 2006  
Single channel video  
36 minutes  
Courtesy the artist

*Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of  
Arranging One's Books, Georges Perec*, 2006  
Teflon mounted on museum board  
11 ¾ x 23 ¾ x 1 ¾ inches  
Courtesy the artist



Arnaldo Morales

*Tentaculosa no. 12*, 2012  
Industrial materials  
192 inches diameter  
Courtesy the artist

Roxy Paine

*S2-P2-MAR43*, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
24 x 19 ¼ x 15 ¾ inches  
Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery

*S2-P2-MAR35*, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
17 ¼ x 22 ¼ x 20 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery

*S2-P2-MAR32*, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
13 ½ x 20 ¼ x 20 ¼ inches  
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Low-density polyethylene  
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*S2-P2-MAR30*, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
16 ¾ x 32 ½ x 29 inches  
Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery

*S2-P2-MAR11*, 2011  
Low-density polyethylene  
23 ¼ x 30 ¼ x 19 ¼ inches  
Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery

Adriana Salazar

*Self-portrait*, 2009  
Mixed media  
Variable dimensions  
Courtesy the artist

*Machine that Tries to Thread a Needle*,  
2005  
Mixed media  
Variable dimensions  
Courtesy the artist

*Careless Machines*, 2004  
Mixed Media  
Variable dimensions  
Courtesy the artist

Fernando Sánchez Castillo

*Method on the Discourse*, 2011  
Video  
22 minutes and 44 seconds  
Courtesy the artist

Shih Chieh Huang

*VT-34-BTB (Blue Angel Eye)*, 2017-2018  
Mixed media  
168 ½ x 26 inches  
Courtesy the artist

Shyu Ruey-Shiann

*Dreambox*, 2012  
Wolf 125 motorcycle, motors,  
metal frame, steel, wire, sensors,  
transformer  
156 x 120 x 90 inches approximately  
Courtesy the artist

Johanna Unzueta

*Mural Sink*, 2018  
Felt and thread  
117 x 79 x 13 inches  
Courtesy the artist and 57w57Arts  
Gallery

*Hanging Chain*, 2013  
Felt, wooden spools  
13 x 5 feet  
Courtesy the artist

*Industrial Gear*, 2013  
Felt, recycled spool, thread  
36 x 6 inches  
Courtesy the artist

*Untitled*, 2018  
Felt, recycled spools, recycled  
wood beam  
26 x 6 x 10 inches  
Courtesy the artist

Simón Vega

*Tropical Mercury Capsule*, 2010  
Wood, aluminum, tin roofing,  
cardboard, plastic, television, fan,  
icebox, and stereo  
Variable dimensions  
Collection of the Perez Art Museum  
Miami  
Gift of Mario Cader-Frech and  
Robert Wennett.

Adriana Salazar

*Machine that Tries to Thread a Needle*, 2005  
Mixed media  
Variable dimensions



Stefana McClure

*Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of  
Arranging One's Books, Georges Perec*, 2006  
Teflon mounted on museum board  
11 ¾ x 23 ¾ x 1 ¾ inches

*Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of  
Arranging One's Books*, 2006  
Single channel video  
36 minutes





Arnaldo Morales

*Tentaculo* No. 12, 2012  
Industrial materials  
192 inches diameter

