

## THINGS HAPPENING

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Studio Art.

By

Jordan Richard Krutsch

Director: Morgan Kennedy  
Assistant Professor of Sculpture  
School of Art and Design

Committee Members: Tom Ashcraft, School of Art and Design  
Heather Mae Erickson, School of Art and Design  
Ron Laboray, School of Art and Design

March 2017

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I've not been one for precise words, especially in writing. That being said, I am finally at the conclusion this may or may not matter with much depending on who is reading and/or listening. Some folks can feel your explanation while others have difficulty. I hope my plain speak is neither too plain nor too vague in that I desire a cohesive description and explanation of the relationships between my work as it is seen between my own perspective and that of contemporary art.

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my wife Amy, and my son Theodore for their love and support in putting up with the long hours and sharing in the financial aspects of attaining this degree. I'd like to thank my parents and parents-in-law for their love and support as well. Lastly, I give thanks to my thesis committee: Morgan Kennedy, Tom Ashcraft, Heather Mae Erickson, and Ron Laboray, the faculty of the school of art and select faculty of the Kimmel School for their repeated assistance and support.

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## ABSTRACT

### THINGS HAPPENING

Jordan Richard Krutsch

Western Carolina University (March 2016)

Director: J. Morgan Kennedy

While playing and investigating with an array of materials, objects, and processes in the studio, I try to make sense of how I experience the world around me. This experimentation and play, combined with an ever-present curiosity brings me to an underlying question in my present work –How does someone come to determine what is considered final when considering the ‘life’ of a piece? Is it a finished product? Is it constantly changing or developing? What, if any, is its final state? My research shows itself in kinetic installations, drawing machines, robots, and other various machines that I adapt to the locale. When making my work I choose to design hand-made components and source found and re-appropriated objects, further expanding communication through a visual vernacular. Much of the work, shown as installation, allows for travel to different environs sparking new questions, which in turn, lead to more avenues fueling my excitement and curiosity further. Arranging and displaying my artwork in each setting or context it encounters is an interesting challenge and critical to its operation. Finally the viewers’ reactions and engagement helps inform my practice.

## INTRODUCTION

"What will an artist say when you tell them, 'You know how to do your work'? Wendy Goodman (Home Design Editor for NY Mag), what would you say?"

"I'd say, 'No I don't.'"

"No you don't! I don't! I don't know how to do my work. I don't know what I'm doing, is what you're saying, but I know how to do it. That's your work, there's no right and no wrong."

-- Jerry Saltz (Mufson)

There is a certain amount of knowing that happens when I start to build a machine. I have an idea of what the function will be but I am not always certain what, if anything, it will create through its performance. I initially construct a machine to be spectacle-in-function. I build them without hindrance of the rules or by-the-book steps of conventional engineering (though I am surely following rules even if I don't always realize). I build with a sense of immediacy though they develop through iteration. My machines constantly evolve, sometimes with add-ons, sometimes as something entirely new, adding extension.

Conversely, when I am enveloped in my process of working, there is always an amount of not knowing. While challenges do arise in figuring out mechanisms and physics, in general I understand and can readily figure out the building of things. Rather the not knowing lies in the tying in of theory and self-diagnosis of my artist condition. I think this is partly what I enjoy so much about my current work. If I were to make static objects, formal in nature, the answers to my questions of 'why' would be more clear to me since they would be based solely in things that are measured: color theory, design concepts, craft and visual language. Conversely, I look at my current work and try to synthesize with much difficulty, its place in art theory, philosophy, and culture. All of which are rigorously debated and ever changing in taste. Embracing these unknowns leaves me feeling the need to explore further down the rabbit hole, all the while trying to better understand my locale.

## WHY I DO

### **BACKYARD BOXES AND TIME MACHINES**

I grew up in Defiance, Ohio, a small city in the northwest corner of the state, an industrial town. I was inundated with the smells, sights, and sounds of mechanized production. General Motors foundry, Johns Manville fiberglass, Defiance Metal Products, and Defiance Stamping all added to the rhythm of movement and livelihood. My parents were both elementary school teachers and both my grandfathers were blue-collar veterans. My maternal grandfather, in particular, played a large role in the evolution of my creative practices. As long as I could recall, he worked as a repairman at Zeller's Appliances just a few blocks away from my house. His workshop, in the basement of the old Coca-Cola bottling plant, was filled to the brim with radios, televisions, record players, and various other appliances. The tools he used were strewn about the workbench and the smell of electricity, dust, and oil hung in the air; this is where I played. To the chagrin of my parents, grandpa would stop by the house on occasion to drop off refrigerator boxes, non-fixable appliances, and scrap metal for me to play with. My summer days were spent outside erecting box forts, sometimes three stories high. My nights and when the weather was poor I would find my way to our basement to dismantle appliances and put them back together in new configurations. When I was ten, I built my first time machine from a typewriter, CRTV, and various other components. I plugged it in and ZAP, the room went dark and I imagined I had traveled through time. This was the genesis of my practice.

## MY WORK AND INFLUENCES

### THINGS HAPPENING

My machines are conglomerations of process, performative maintenance, play, inquiry, and love of material craft/anti-craft. A juxtaposition of convoluted processes and simple mechanisms, they are meant to visually enact discovery-through-play while questioning the requirement for a final 'product'. The machines are created from re-purposed objects, hand crafted components, and raw building materials. When sourcing these repurposed components, I consider how I use and investigate them. Likewise, I am cognizant to not delve deeper than necessary into any supposed meaning of those objects beyond what they are. Following the lead of artists Tom Sachs, Tim Hawkinson, and Ian Burns, many of my re-sourced items are used as-is (but not necessarily as specified) because they fulfill the purpose I require. An example of alternative use is Tom Sachs's "Lunar Rover" which uses a cable winch system as the steering control allowing for use of push button navigation of the vehicle (Pasternack). For me, it's the use of a <sup>TM</sup>Salad Shooter as a drive motor, baby monitors as switches, and electric carving knives as shakers. For another example, Ian Burns uses small fans and plastic spoons to keep inflated rubber gloves on track and in hovering movement playing a piano in his work "Hands Up – dead man playin" (Burns).

The importance of this alternative use of items leads to realization of the relevance of play and experimentation, which when intertwined, leads to discovery and further investigation. In the video from Motherboard, "Spaced Out" Making Mars with Tom Sachs", Gordon Millsaps, of Sachs' team, describes coming to use of the winch through play and haphazard experimentation; a very similar process of how NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory finds solutions to its problems, in this case the airbags on the *Pathfinder* Mission to mars (Pasternack). Similarly Burns found his way to placement of the fans and spoons as guides through a similar process of trial and error (Burns). Moreover with both Sachs and Burns, the

refinement of the final objects is left only as far as necessitates for the object to function both, mechanically and visually, as needed. Leaving a measured crassness in the craft of the object, I hope, keeps the process seen as re-doable by the viewer. That is to say, I hope my overt alternative use of things as well as a slapstick nature in my choice of limited/as needed refinement draws the inquisitiveness of the viewer by making the work approachable. It is in viewers' wonderment and analyses that I hope to engage and further dialogue.

Another attribute of my machines is the way in which they are activated. Much like Jean Tinguely and Arthur Ganson, I hope to have the public participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in the activation. "I do not leak, Navigator; You leak," is activated by a push button while "Drawbots," are activated by motion sensors. Asking the audience for even more participation, my piece titled, "You sing, I dance," is activated by the voice of the viewer/participant. In each of these instances the participant causes the activation of the piece moving it from a static object to a functioning machine. This activation furthers my motive of making the work tactilely interactive. Rather than interfacing through deconstruction of narrative alone, as with a static object, I give the viewer an option between static and kinetic. It's through this choice of physical involvement that the audience becomes part of my machines and their processes.

Last and equally important, is the maintenance aspect of my work. After re-reading Mierle Laderman Ukeles', "Manifesto on Maintenance," I was conflicted on whether I am maintaining or developing. In her manifesto, maintenance is described as prolonging the advance, repeating the flight and protecting progress while development is pure creation, the new, change, and excitement (Ukeles). By my practice, I gather that the former will lead to the latter and vice versa. With that, I lean toward it being a mesh of the two as Ukeles describes; a drive sustaining change leading to an excitement of constant progress and innovation. Adjustments, readjustments, adding and subtracting, filling and emptying; my machines are alive and need to be fed and cared for; Whether it is myself or someone else, the machines

need a human hand to stay on track. My maintenance is keeping things happening and making sure those things keep doing so.

## **DRAWBOTS**

“Drawbots” originally developed as a way to disconnect my hand as much as possible from an end product. This curiosity was driven by discussions about authorship and ownership. I was wondering how to ask questions such as, “Are they the same thing?” “What’s the difference between the two?” “Why does this matter?” For a starting point I set out to create random line with seemingly little to no parameters guiding placement. I consider these unplanned lines optical statements of non-representation (both visual and personal). While the drawings ended up as I had hoped, I found my hand intertwined further being that I was the one creating the processes through which I was hoping to detach. It was then I realized that process in itself, for me, is the greatest evidence of my hand. In turn this became a focus in my thesis work. After playing with and exhibiting the work I realized, for this piece, I want the viewer to consider concepts pertaining to a general disconnect between consumer and product as well as connections between product and process. I also ask for consideration of the necessity of the ‘product’ and/or processes that create it. Can they exist one without the other? To what end? These ideas stem partly out of the activating participant, in that they do so unknowingly and without seeing the process initiated by their action. Conversely, those who *are* present and viewing the movements tend to look around or ask, “What is making them move?” “Where is the sensor?” or “What is being documented?” “Why? Or Why Not?” I hope these questions lead to an investigation of production and the processes behind it.

During operation of, “Drawbots,” the participants are unaware of the happening they have activated. An infrared motion detector, which was originally designed as a wireless driveway alert system, causes the activation when triggered by the participant. The Drawbots themselves are created from plastic storage containers, scavenged motors, pencils, and a repurposed radio receiver end of the aforementioned alert system. The receiver has three

preset chiming alerts that sound when activated, each with different patterns. Through a transistor connection, the alert transforms to a switch, turning on the motor rather than making a noise. As the motor engages the Drawbot gyrates on a surface creating marks. The marks left are visual representation of things happening. Movements: slow and fast, long and short, quiet and loud, are equalized through the sensor's detection. The output of that detection becomes an image of gibberish albeit a record of a day's events. At the end of each day the panel on which the Drawbots live is hung on the wall and in its place is set a new one restarting the process.



Figure 1. *ABSENT*, <https://vimeo.com/198776272> (Video) 2016

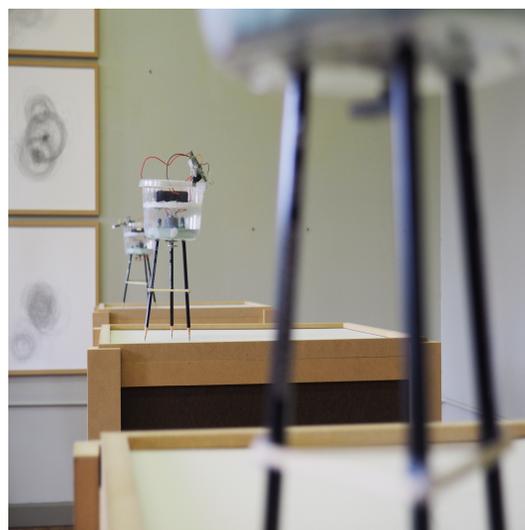


Figure 2. *Drawbots (Absent Exhibition View)*, 2016

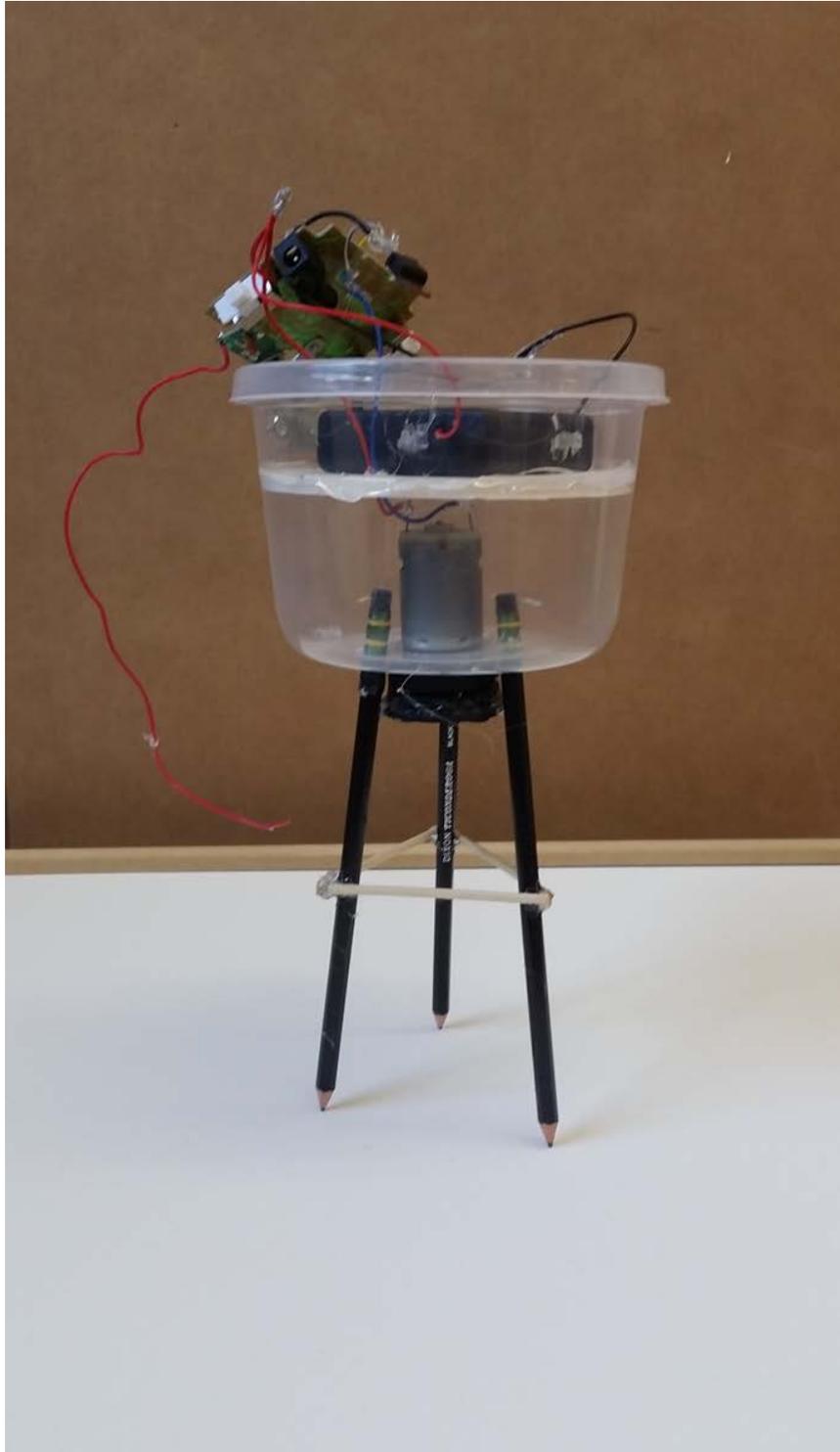


Figure 3. *Drawbot 0002*, 2016



Figure 4. *Drawings from ABSENT Exhibition, 2016*

## **I do not leak, navigator; You leak**

“I do not leak, navigator; You leak,” is a machine that makes a mess of things. The machine, originally activated by a motion sensor light, is now activated by a push button sensor like many machines by Jean Tinguely. Like Tinguely, I hope to have the audience choose to engage with the machine. Utilizing common building materials and keeping craftsmanship at an accessible level allows for that approachability by lowering the perception of high art value. Another facet of this iteration of the piece is the addition of the compression roller in replacement of the paper roll collector. I chalk up these changes made to ease maintenance requirements. Even with the changes there is a fair amount of maintenance that goes in to this piece. The ink needs to be maintained to a certain level, the paper can run out or off track and due to the amount of ink spilling out, floors may need to be mopped or marked for slip hazards. Feeding and maintaining the machine adds to the performative nature of the piece in its entirety.

When the machine is activated a sign illuminates reading ‘THINGS HAPPENING.’ Simultaneous to the illumination, a pump starts, the arms begin moving, and a Salad Shooter™, acting as the drive motor, powers the compression roller thereby pulling the paper across the surface. As the paper and arms move marks are made and the paper is left ribboning out into a pile. The machine is loud, spectacular, and is a visualization of the immediacy of my process.



Figure 5. *I do not leak, navigator; You leak*, 2016



Figure 6. *I do not leak, navigator; You leak* (Detail), 2016



Figure 7. *I do not leak, navigator; You leak* (Detail-2), 2016

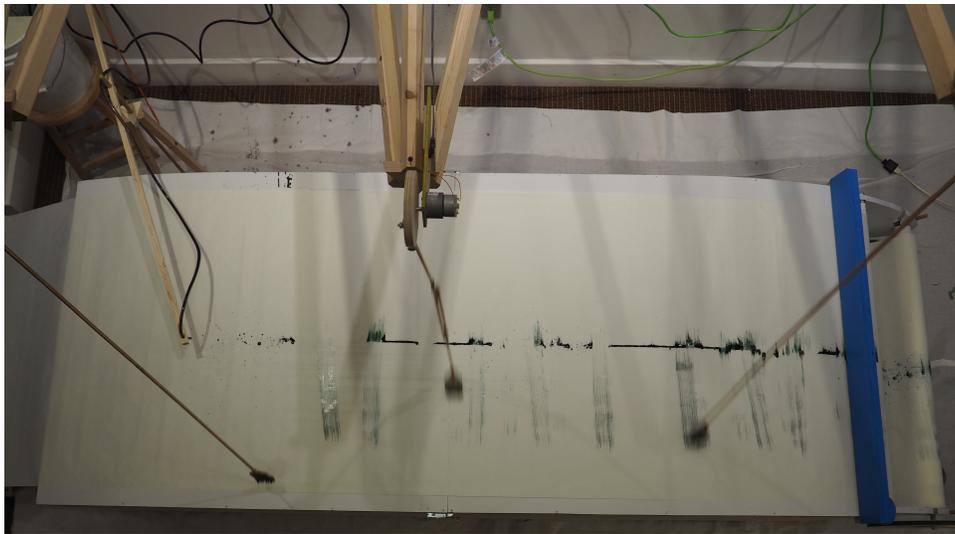


Figure 8. *I do not leak, navigator; You leak* <https://player.vimeo.com/video/198775236> (Video)

2016

## **YOU SING, I DANCE**

“You Sing, I Dance,” asks the viewer to further participate in its process by requiring the voice of the viewer/participant for its activation. Upon the participant’s singing, the machine begins moving about its surface while shaking a basket full of charcoal powder onto a prepared substrate. The machine moves around the substrate via a <sup>TM</sup>Sears Kenmore sewing machine motor with a found propeller attached to it. The basket of charcoal is connected to a recycled electric carving knife that has arms in place of the oscillating blades. As with “I do not leak, navigator; You leak,” the materials found in this piece are all very common and easily approachable. Through this use of approachable materials and processes the viewer can engage in the act of singing to the machine. As an added inclination to viewer participation there is a karaoke screen set, with headphones, guiding the viewer to sing along. This action adds the viewer to part of the overall of performance of person and machine. The songs on the screen, “King of the road” and “You can’t roller skate in a buffalo herd,” both by Roger Miller, I chose for their absurdity and humorous narrative.

By interacting by singing to the machine, a duet of performance is made that creates a connection or comfort and trust between art and participant. It is my intention that viewers gain a feeling of direct relationship to artwork with which they are engaging, physically, emotionally, etc. at both the present and into the future.

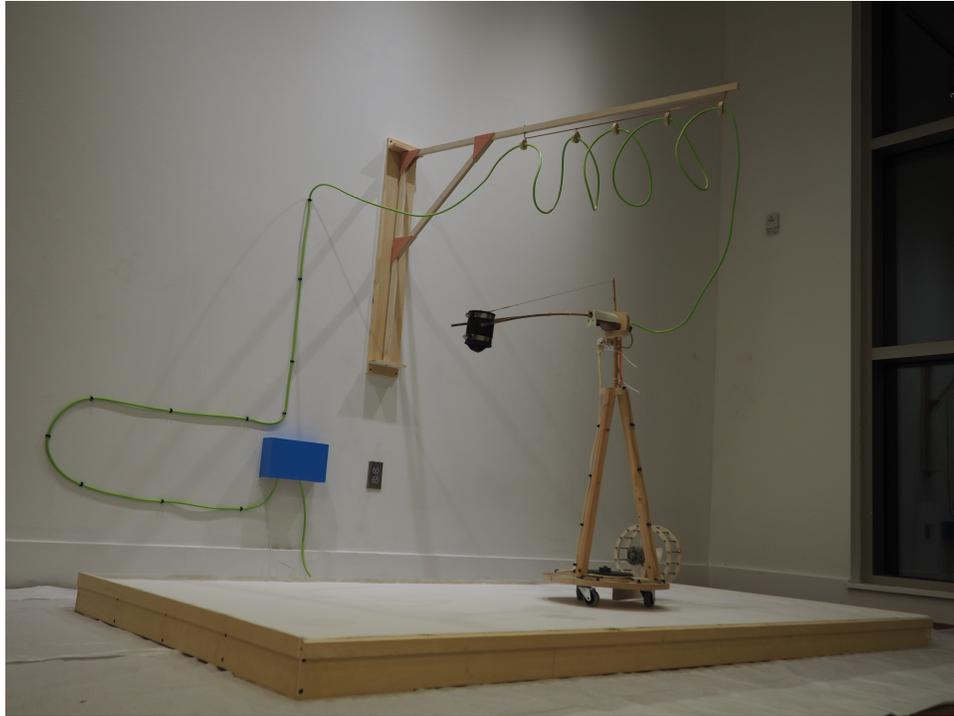


Figure 9. *You Sing, I Dance*, 2016

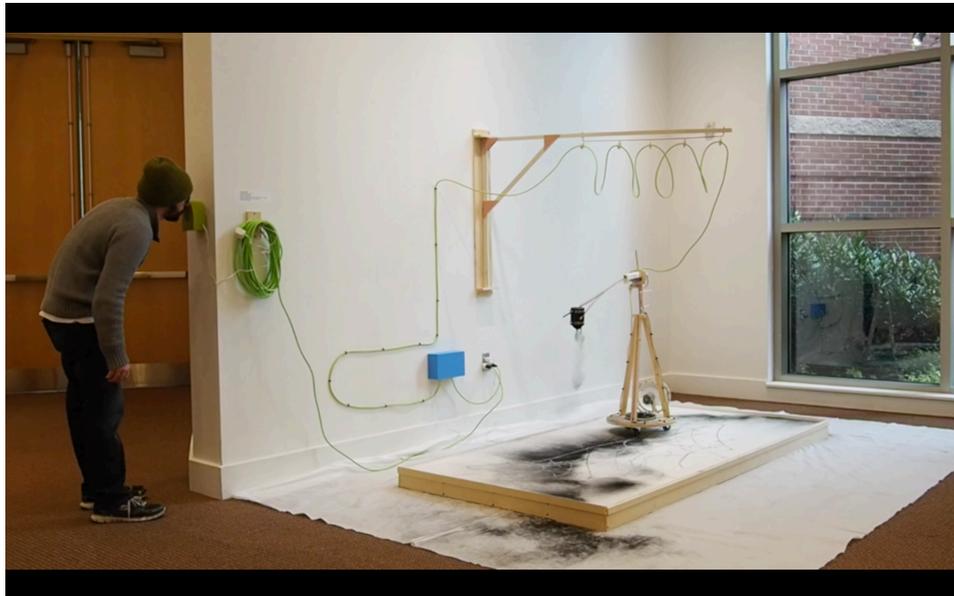


Figure 10. *You Sing, I Dance*, <https://player.vimeo.com/video/198782932> (Video) 2016

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, having witnessed the reception of these works by gallery patrons I feel more iterations are likely to be made. These changes are due in part to the uncertainty of viewers in whether or not to interact with the pieces or questions how the interaction is made. Likewise when the interaction is made obvious or they understand how to interact there seems to be apprehension to do so. I wonder then, how can I better direct this interaction? Is there a necessity to be forceful or is there need for a more obvious activation?

Kinetic interactive artwork may leave participants feeling they accomplish nothing through participating if nothing is being made. With that I am curious how to make the machines engage further with the public and vice versa.

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