

Join the Bots

A drawing machine experiment

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Throughout eight weeks from 4 November to 3 January I will explore the potential of machine generated drawings along the walls of the Window Gallery at Phoenix Art Space. This is a unique opportunity to experiment with a whole range of techniques I have worked with over the last years, to combine what I perceived to be separate genres: to blend 'old fashioned' drawings created by a mechanical machine with light, video and sound overlays and live stream the work in real time on social media. This is only the beginning of a journey to determine boundaries and congruencies within my practice, work on long standing themes and finding ways of pulling my ideas and techniques together - and also expressing some thoughts and issues I encounter in everyday life, wherever I go.

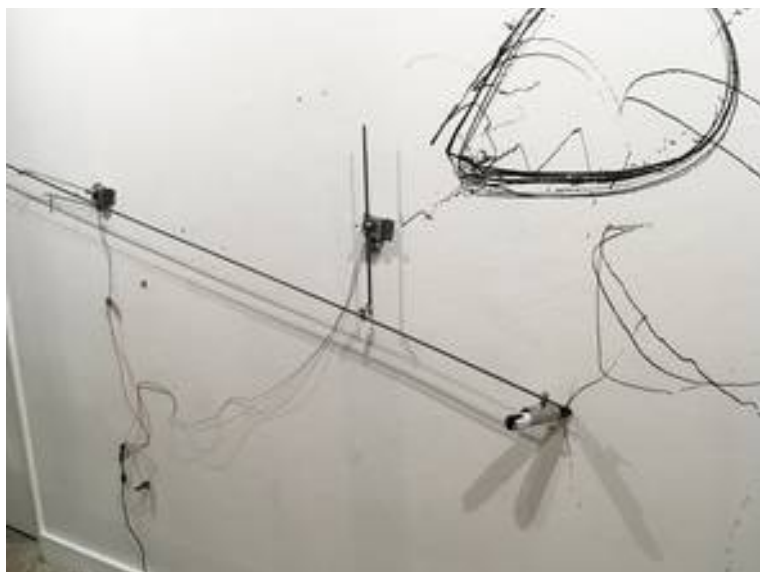
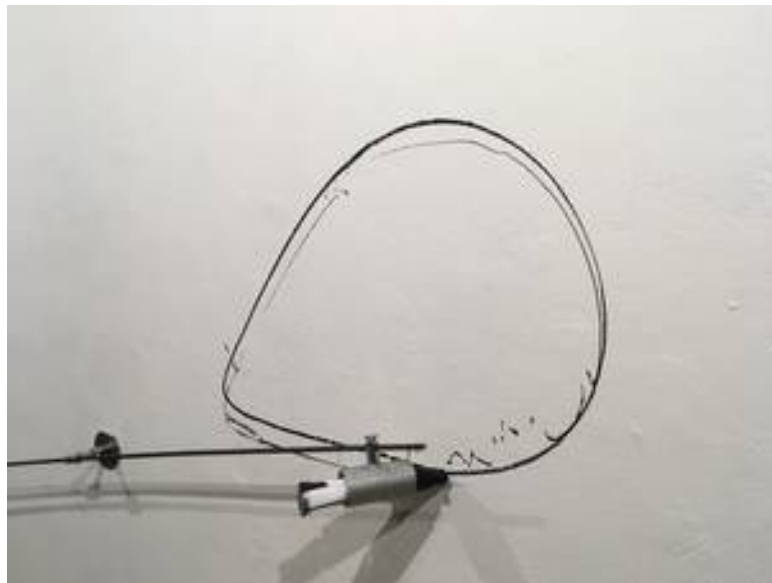
There's this growing feeling of a ubiquitous presence that dominates life, that more than I can ever grasp is happening at the same time and everyone takes the need to be present on many stages for granted; to deal with all the simultaneously incoming information and responding in 'real time', trying to optimise everything from keeping the body in optimal condition, being creative and good at multitasking, maintaining the perfect work flow and manage all personal and professional affairs in the most effective way. I often hear 'time is of the essence' and feel the expectation to completely merge life in a 'normal' physical world with the vast digital world of simultaneousness, where the noise of the swarm is deafening.

The sudden break we are all experiencing right now, the void into which society seems to be falling, swiftly shifting into slow motion and retiring into the work from home mode is a fascinating moment. Machines are taking over even more of what we used to be quite happy to do ourselves. The digital helpers, our friends we all take pride in using to the best of our knowledge are filling the gap, while we take a step back and reevaluate the analogue world we come from, adjusting our domestic conditions to the new challenge. I am filling the void in our empty studio building with my examination of what is real, finding the cornerstones and how I can respond in my work to the questions I see everywhere.

This break opens up an empty space for me to try some ideas without time pressure, to set to work in the deserted Window Gallery and start from scratch: using my tools to find out whether a machine can produce a valid drawing. Putting mechanical bits together and see if they can speak a language. Testing my basic skills to create something like a poem along a wall and get this whole contraption to draw lines that bear secrets.

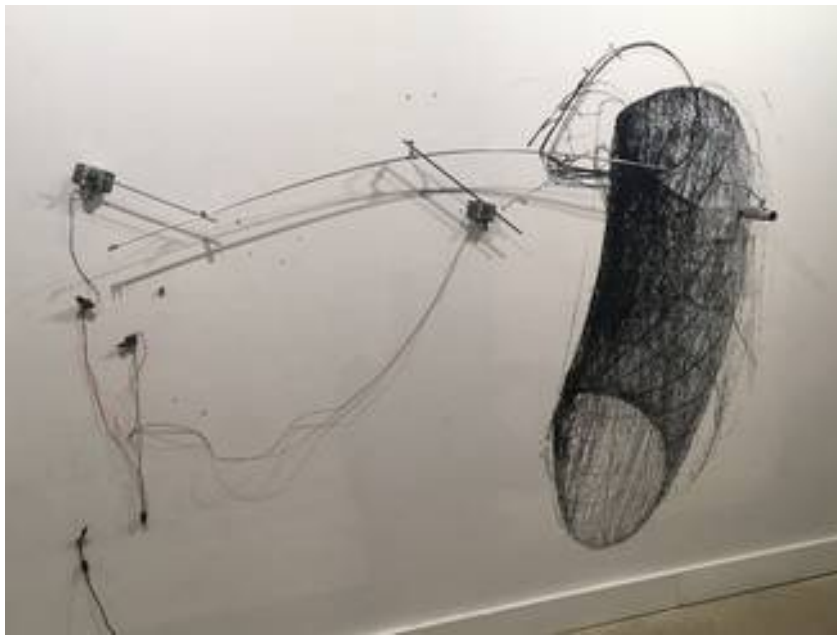
Stage 1:

Watching the clumsy movements of the first rods mounted and being pushed by little DIY motor units, the clunking and rattling of the marker along the white wall, I register the first encouraging signs that tell me there's more to gain from this skeleton-like technical apparatus: a quite fragile and sensitive line that, in its nonrepresentational mode of drawing responds in a quite unexpected precision to its creator's mistakes and technical blunders. So I order new materials and try to focus on the next steps: to give the machine better conditions for its art job!

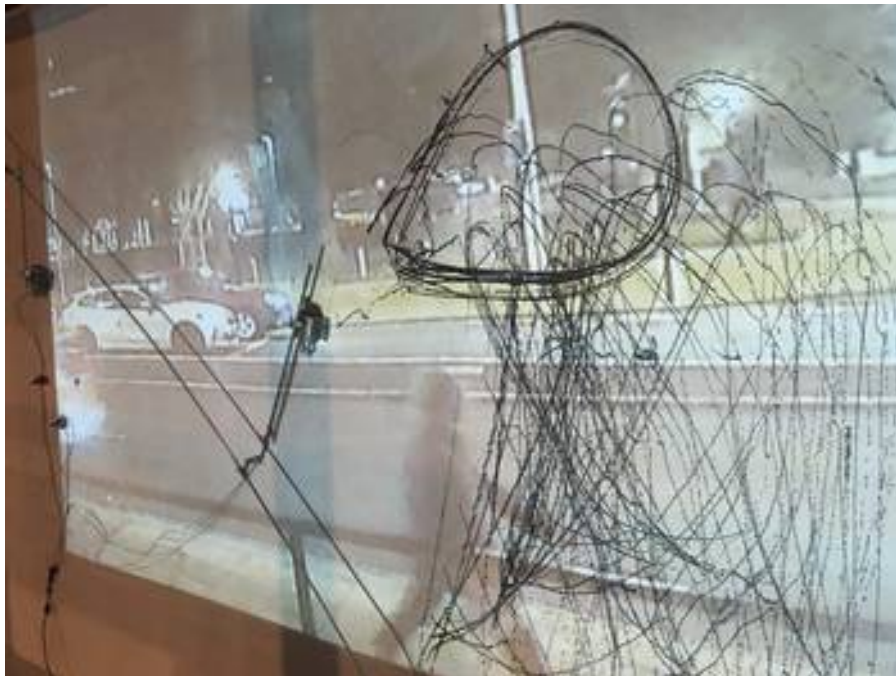


A surprise!

While the very first attempt to make my first version of the machine create at least something results in a little balloon drawn on the wall, with the still rather overweighted iron rods creaking and clunking and the electric motors barely coping with the weight, the second go with improved materials and engineering reveals something quite unexpected: an almost perfect 3D shape, a kind of tube shape hatched in shaded in academic precision, reminding me of my early years in drawing still lifes, trying to master the illusion of space on a 2D paper.



Not that I had intended anything of this kind of drawing nor had I a plan what the machine would be supposed to do - the entire project being an experiment - I was amazed to see how delicate the lines came out, how much of the qualities I would expect of myself when making a drawing would be emerging from a 'stupid' machine that I watch doing my work. As if it was my own extended arm and hand going after the shape, just the way I would first circumnavigate the intended object with my pencil in grand lines and gestures, blocking it all into the format and then start focusing on more detailed aspects and make it a drawing worth examining.



An projected overlay of the street scene outside the building taken with a live camera and thrown onto the live drawing motion creates a quite stunning effect: the physical machine drawing lines over projected reality transmitted from outside. As if the two were competing in their claim to represent something real - each in their own way - I feel there's some more work needed to make the leap of connecting two such different media in a meaningful way.

Stage 2

Having completed the first drawing on the wall with quite demanding presence – instead of on a sheet of paper directly on the wall and therefore unremovable – I decide to try the next one. Tweaking some of the tricky points where better manufacturing is crucial to get a better flow and overcome some mistakes I had noticed, I put a sheet of paper up this time, to first test what the rods would make, rather than let it off the leash and irrevocably occupy a new space on the wall. Again, what I get is a surprisingly well formed 3D shape: a loose collection of quite intriguing lines, orbiting around an invisible centre and slowly revealing a shape that could be something like a hat or a loosely draped veil or scarf.

The paper of course gives a quite different expression: the marker makes its tracks firmly and decisively on the smooth surface, clear cut lines in full black.





Having used only two electric motors so far, I decide to add another to the system, thinking the extra layer of already unpredictable movements of the rods and the marker at the end will make things more interesting. Having rearranged the whole machine on the wall and giving it more space to expand, I set it off and wait:

My first impression is the motion of a windscreen wiper – not nvery promising and nothing really interesting about it.



Maybe I was spoilt by the previous drawings that had been produced with only two motors and the 3D surprise, so I wonder how to carry on and rethink my approach. Another lesson learnt!

