

**Sydney College of the Arts**  
The University of Sydney  
Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours)  
2018  
BACHELOR OF VISUAL ARTS  
RESEARCH PAPER

*There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Bird*

by

**Paul James Cooper**

Sculpture Studio

October 2018

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## Preface

*Poetically, a riddle that is fully answerable is not much of a riddle. A trope that is fully answerable is not much of a trope. A poetic riddle is only answerable to its best nature if it is not answerable, in the sense that its answer does not close a question but goes on generating meaning.* – Eleanor Cook<sup>1</sup>

Modifying and re-imagining objects, technology and materials regularly play a central part in my art practice. These elements are used to hint at solutions, however I prefer it when they pose more questions than they answer. Although it did not begin as an intention, I lean heavily on my electrical engineering qualifications and experience when considering and constructing my artworks. My inner-engineer is always seeking out new ways to view, use and abuse objects, technology and materials.

The genealogy of my family too has fuelled my curiosity in the interpretation and re-imagining of, in this case, events. I was delighted and bemused when, while looking up the 1828 Census of the Colony of New South Wales, I discovered convict ancestry. Since then a further dozen convict have been found in my closet. None of this information was known to any member of my family. It turns out my maternal grandmother, whom I knew very well, was the granddaughter of a convict and yet she knew nothing of this. The story she was told and relayed, was that her grandfather was Jewish, which itself is wrong. My own mother still thought the Jewish connection was real until it came up in conversation only this year. It was only last year at an uncle's funeral where I first heard that my grandparents were SP bookies. I quizzed my mother about it and she told me she didn't pass on that information because, with her parents being busy every Saturday afternoon, it wasn't an enjoyable time of her childhood. That, and she was a little embarrassed about her parent's work. From these anecdotes, or lack thereof I was drawn further and further into seeking reasons behind thoughts, ideas, perceptions and airs.

Although my grandmother wasn't a great historian, she was quite a lark – we come from a long line of Irish ~~settlers~~ convicts. While there may be humour and absurdity included in my art, thanks to my grandmother, that is not my end goal. This quote by David Shringley sums up much of my approach to life and art practice:

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<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Cook. "Enigma as Art." *Literary Imagination* 6, no. 1 (2004): 134.

*I know a lot of people still don't see my work as serious, because it's funny. But then again, I've come to realise that the opposite of seriousness is not humour. The opposite of seriousness is incompetence. It's somebody who isn't really engaged with what they are doing.*

– David Shrigley<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Shrigley, Ralph Rugoff, Cliff Lauson, Martin Herbert, Dave Eggers, and Hayward Gallery. *David Shrigley: Brain Activity*. Anonymous 2012. Hayward Pub.

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Read more: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/story-behind-rube-goldbergs-complicated-contraptions-180968928/#1Cq4ELgLSU7R4IC2.99>

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## Introduction

There is a document that recalls an old lady swallowing a bird. This, on the outset does seem quite absurd and yet it could have referred to her having eaten a chicken sandwich. The records of the event, however suggests otherwise. These records being referred to is the song, "*There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*"<sup>3</sup>. (See **Appendix 1** for lyrics) The song begins with this old lady swallowing a fly and then her swallowing a spider to catch the fly. She then goes on to swallow a whole range of animals to rid herself of this darn fly. It doesn't take long for this simple mistake to turn into a seemingly insurmountable task.

This paper will be exploring the concept of machine-like sculptural artworks that are complex for affect and not for function. A review will be presented on the history of contemporary sculpture from its beginnings with Pablo Picasso's constructions through the incorporation of performance and audience participation to sculptures that interact with the natural forces of light, rain, weather and time. This inquiry will also discover that fictitious machines commonly referred to as contraptions provide an interesting link to contemporary sculpture that are machine-like and serve a purpose beyond aesthetics. This paper wishes to define a new term to describe a sculpture that has its origins with assemblages and combines participation with kinetics to record, document and create its own artwork. This term is the "*contraption*".

The 'purpose beyond aesthetics' to be explored will be how these contraptions can be used to document events and happenings. The documenting of art took on a new phase in the fifties and sixties driven by temporal works and performances. The term *documenting*, as used here is an all-encompassing word that includes recording, capturing and the instigation of a feedback process. One that goes beyond conventional forms such as written texts, photos and film to include sound and abstract drawings. Capturing the moment, not just for prosperity but for exhibition became an integral component of contemporary artworks. Documentation, as will be discussed, can become an artwork in its own right. Participatory performances by Yoko Ono, Roman Ondak and others are used as examples of artworks created by recording audience's visitation, feelings and thoughts. The artworks of Cameron Robbins provide another form of event-based documentation

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<sup>3</sup> Pam Adams, *There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*. Purton, Wiltshire: Child's Play (International), 1973. Pam Adams' illustrated edition is just one example and is available from University of Sydney's Fisher Library catalogue number 398.8 126 plus other examples from storage. Also sung versions on Youtube: Burl Yves <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQHmZMf6zwo>, Judy Collins (performing on the Muppets) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC\\_xO2aN\\_IA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC_xO2aN_IA) and Peter, Paul and Mary in concert <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6ZrH3gYn4M>



through an interaction with nature. The possibilities and alternatives to conventional documentation and the dilemma of the document as to where it stands in the timeline of event and review has provided a focal point for this research paper. This paper and subsequent artwork will focus on the capturing of an event. The capturing will be in the form of a drawing created by a sculptural machine<sup>4</sup> that is triggered by gallery visitation. It is this overriding of the original by the meta event of documentation that forms a significant thread through this investigation.

Research, through both readings and studio experimentation has led to the proposing of an artwork to be created that includes elements of complexity and audience participation to produce a record of visitation called *ACTUALITY No.2*, 2018.

Returning to the song introduced above and title of this paper for a moment, the prospect of using animals in art is on one hand quite preposterous, or on another, perhaps indulgent. Jannis Konunellis' *Untitled*, 1991-2011 (**Fig. 1**) places the viewer in the position of watching goldfish swim past a knife in a plate filled with water to suggest that because this is art it is something to question and yet if served on a plate ready to eat it becomes acceptable<sup>5</sup>.



**Figure 1.** *Untitled*, Jannis Kounellis, 1991-2011, goldfish, knife, plate, chair, water, photo Mona/Rémi Cauvin

If our old lady instead swallowed a bird to catch a fish, that was swimming by a knife in a dish, was she outside her brief or exploring new ideas?

This paper and the research it discusses aims to expand on contemporary concepts and conventions through unexpected turns and define the terms *contraption* and *documentation art*.

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<sup>4</sup> This sculptural machine I speak of is called *ACTUALITY No.2*, 2018 and will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> Museum of Old and New Art "Mona Blog: Hooks" Last modified March 3, 2017. <https://monablog.net/tag/jannis-kounellis/>

## Chapter 1: Documentation Art

Documentation is multifaceted. During its making, it is subject to the happenings and influences of the event it is recording. Once created, the document may outlive the event, particularly ephemeral events such as a site-specific sculpture or a performance piece. The documentation then becomes a source of influential reference to memory and research. Documentation can also be a memory jogger, statistical catalogue, an invitation for comment and feedback leading to some form change to the record or end up as the primary material, replacing the original event all together. Certain types of documents also fall under the heading of “instructions” that set out how to create/recreate an event, whether that be a song, in the case of a musical score, a building from architectural plans or a cake. Some artists, including Sol LeWitt and Allan Kaprow, made making art from instructions an artform. Another faceted component of the document is the feedback it provides by being a loop that re-enforces or balances an event. The phenomenon of the feedback also exists in electrical terms to create stability or oscillation in a circuit<sup>6</sup>.

Documenting as an art practice began in earnest in the 1960s, which, as discussed in Philip Auslander’s essay *The Performativity of Performance Documentation*<sup>7</sup>, can exist for at least two reasons, firstly as a record of an event or secondly, to ‘document’ a staged event for the purpose of creating a new artwork. Yves Klein’s *Leap Into the Void*, 1960 is used by Auslander as one such example of a staged-for-documentation event<sup>8</sup>. Providing yet another version of event recordings are Cameron Robbins’ machines, which use the influences of wind and light as the source of information for documentation.<sup>9</sup>

The dilemma of the document as to where it stands in the timeline of event and review has provided a focal point for this research paper. This paper and subsequent artwork will focus on the capturing of an event. The capturing will be in the form of a drawing created by a sculptural machine<sup>10</sup> that is triggered by gallery visitation. It is this overriding of the original by the meta event of documentation that forms a significant thread through this investigation.

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<sup>6</sup> Electrical circuitry can have either positive feedback (an oscillator) or negative feedback (to control an output) which is the equivalent of re-enforcement and balance respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006), pp1-10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p4

<sup>9</sup> Camron Robbins. "Wind Drawings" Accessed October 5, 2018. <http://cameronrobbins.com/wind-drawings/> This is details further in Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> This sculptural machine I speak of is called *ACTUALITY No.2*, 2018 and will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

## The Performative Cyborg

The theorist Nicolas Bourriaud in his text wrote that the interaction between the audience and performative/sculptural situations had a vital role to play – that the artwork exists primarily through its relationship and the social context and coined the term *Relational Aesthetics*<sup>11</sup>. This research extends the concepts embodied in *Relational Aesthetics* to include interaction<sup>12</sup>, as both a confluence of connections and associations experienced first-hand and through the resulting document. The resultant work becomes *Documentation Art*. The following are examples of hybrid sculptural-participatory artworks which are created through the involvement of the audience.

Yoko Ono's work, *My Mommy Is Beautiful*, 2004/2013/2017 (**fig. 2**)<sup>13</sup> is a great example of this. The work centres around the audience writing letters to their own mothers. The audience is invited to write a short note of recognition, love or even anger. The work also asks the participant to write down a feeling that you have towards your mother, that note is then posted on the gallery wall. The gallery wall becomes part sculpture and part everyday noticeboard but one that records the visitors' feelings in text, hand-writing style and the placement of the note. A similar work by Lee Mingwei, *The Letter Writing Project*, 1998, extends the note writing to anyone the visitor wishes to nominate. The letters are either openly displayed or sealed in an envelope and placed within the installation space. Once again, we see a documentation of visitors and their feelings.

Roman Ondak's *Measuring the Universe*, 2007-2018 (**fig. 3**) & (**fig. 4**) takes on another form of documentation. With this work, visitors to the exhibition space are asked to stand against a wall where a gallery assistant marks their height, then prints their name and the date of their visit. This re-calls the doorways with height marks, name and date of measurement in so many homes where children grew up and reflects on the passage of time and changes within the world we know. A beautifully aesthetic work that does not need to be read up close to appreciate. With thousands of visitors to these exhibitions the mark making on the walls offer a quick reminder that while most of us are similar, there are many interesting variations between us<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Liam Gillick, "Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'," *October Magazine* 115 (Winter 2006), p96.

<sup>12</sup> Here, interaction need not be limited to audience as natural forces such as light, heat and wind, etc can play a part.

<sup>13</sup> Image shows visitors to the Hirshhorn Museum (part of the Smithsonian Institute) adding their statements to the exhibit "*My Mommy is Beautiful*" by Yoko Ono

<sup>14</sup> Museum of Modern Art: MoMA Learning. "Roman Ondak, *Measuring the Universe*". Accessed August 18, 2018. [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/roman-ondak-measuring-the-universe-2007](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/roman-ondak-measuring-the-universe-2007)



**Figure 2.** Yoko One, “*My Mommy is Beautiful*” 2004/2013/2017. Audience participatory installation, sticky note paper, gallery wall, dimensions variable. Photo by Ron Cogswell



**Figure 3.** Roman Ondak, *Measuring the Universe*, 2007 – present. Audience participatory installation, felt-tip pen on gallery wall. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy MoMA and the artist.



**Figure 4.** Roman Ondak, *Measuring the Universe*, 2007 – present. Audience participatory installation, felt-tip pen on gallery wall. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy MoMA and the artist.

Spontaneity is the essence of *Chalk*, 2000-2016 (fig. 5) and provides yet another example of an artwork where the audience is invited to engage with a set of parameters and the results of their activity becomes the final record. This work by collaborative duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla is characterised by large sticks of chalk left in prominent positions in public spaces. What results is all manner of mark making by the passers-by who use the chalk to draw or write messages on the ground. Over the course of these chalking events, it has been noticed<sup>15</sup> that the public engages quite instinctively, some drawing simple doodles while other leave message of hope, despair, love or anguish all of which documents the feelings, interaction and reactions of the passers-by in that time and place.

These examples of documentation by a participating audience demonstrates the diverse and multifaced properties of the document. However, these examples of participatory documentation art exist only for the duration of the exhibition. In the case of *Chalk*, the marks made by the participants is witnessed by the passing public being washed away and the walls of *Measuring the Universe* are soon painted over, reinforcing the ephemerality of the performance.

These artworks which are part performance and part documentation require both parts to be a unit – they cannot exist on their own. In these cases, the conventional record-keeping forms of photographic images and written accounts are needed to recall the event. This paper will go on to consider other types of documentation and how they may be able to exist as separate entities to the creation process. Yoko Ono and Lee Mingwei's textural works, Roman Ondak's recording of gallery visitors and Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's mark-making projects all represent ways audience involvement is to integral this style of art-making.

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<sup>15</sup> Albert, Jane, "Chalk it up to Experience", *Broadsheet*, Sydney. Last modified October 15, 2015.

<https://www.broadsheet.com.au/sydney/art-and-design/chalk-it-experience>

Nicolas Chambers, curator modern art at NSW Art Gallery, is quoted as saying "It evolved in an interesting way, particularly depending on age, Adults' association was with mark-making [while] children had a different approach and were often interested in the chalk as objects, sticking them up like sculptures or grinding them into dust. And that's what the artists were interested in – metaphor and the vastly different responses."



**Figure 5.** Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, *Chalk*, 2017. Audience participatory installation, chalk. Photo courtesy Art Gallery of NSW.

## Chapter 2: After Assemblage

The notion that sculptures can produce an artwork of their making is explored here. The activation and interaction by an external source, whether that is an audience or a natural force, as a creative element, expands on the idea of autonomous, cyborg-like documentation art.

*Mechanise Something Idiosyncratic* – Brian Eno & Peter Schmidt: *Oblique Strategies*<sup>16</sup>

Rosalind Krauss in her book, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*<sup>17</sup> places contemporary sculpture in a realm of an all-encompassing territory that allows it to be anything from an impression in an open space<sup>18</sup> to a room that is so full of something it cannot be entered<sup>19</sup>. Taking sculpture in its contemporary form then adding performance and varying levels of autonomy have been characteristics of my recent art practice with the use of everyday objects, technology and actions to form works that are both self-determining and self-documenting.

### From chipped and poured to Ikea's Allen Key

The sculpture studio has a wide and varied array of disciplines to choose from or to mix and match and has numerous terms to describe these art forms. The traditional forms of carve, mould and shape sculpture took a turn from the early 1900's and has developed into an art practice that is more conceptually thought-provoking and can be more about the interaction and experience than the aesthetic. Heather Harvey, artist and gallery director, explains it this way, these '*experience creations*' offer the artist a wider scope of possibilities, possibly due to them not focusing on commercial opportunities, which offers the artist a freedom not associated with other disciplines<sup>20</sup>. The '*experience creations*' Harvey refers to are those same duration encounters Bourriaud calls *Relational Aesthetics* whereby the audience is no longer a passive viewer but is an active<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Brian Eno & Peter Schmidt, *Oblique Strategies: Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas*, 2015. *Oblique Strategies* is a set of cards drawn up by Eno and Schmidt to assist them during times of creativity block. This quote is the opposite of their card "*Make Something Perfect More Human.*" The "*Mechanise...*" quote suggests that something that is unique should be the subject of a process of repetition or multiplication. This is idea of the mechanized process is something I wanted to research further and possibly include in an artwork.

<sup>17</sup> Rosalind Krauss. *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, Vol. 8. (Spring, 1979), pp. 30-44. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0162-2870%28197921%298%3C30%3ASITEF%3E2.O.C0%3B2-Y>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. This is termed "not-landscape", p36

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. This is termed "not-architecture". P36

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, Heather, "A Brief History of Installation Art: From the Past to the Present", *A! Magazine for the Arts*, Volume 26, Number 9 — September 2018. <https://artsmagazine.info/articles.php?view=details&id=201007251946141353>

<sup>21</sup> Tate, "Art Terms: Installation Art". Accessed October 18, 2018. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/relational-aesthetics>

participant. The term *installation art*<sup>22</sup> is often used for large-scale contemporary sculptures that may have been formed through carving, moulding, shaping and/or created for pure aesthetic value. The scale of *installation art* is such that it frequently goes ‘beyond the plinth’ such that its size sits on the floor, takes up whole rooms or is situated outdoors. The focus here, however, is *installation art* that is based on concept through experience, interaction and the selection of and use of materials.

Contemporary installation art began its journey in the early 1900’s when Pablo Picasso pasted a torn piece of paper onto a drawing and thus created what was considered the first *papier collé*, or collage<sup>23</sup>. Picasso then went on to use metal and timber in his *Guitar*, 1912 and *Musical Instruments*, 1914, both of which are examples of assembling unrelated materials. By breaking with the tradition of using so-called ‘art materials’ as a basis for (representational) sculpture, Picasso found a connection with the everyday through objects. During this same period, the pre-1920s, Jean Arp a Zurich Dadaist, “as legend has it” tore up several drawings he wasn’t happy with and tossed them randomly onto a piece of drawing paper and “found what he was looking for”. His collage works are said to be “arranged according to the laws of chance”. Then, in the 1920’s, Arp began using timber in his work and expanded the ideas of relief<sup>24</sup>, once again a demonstration of the way materials can be used in lieu of representational form. Across the decades that followed, space, time and materials were viewed in new and inventive ways. While Yves Klein introduced a live performance aspect, furthering Jackson Pollock’s studio-based action painting style, European artists were seeking to incorporate alternative physical media with the concept of time and space. It was in this period that Frenchman Pierre Restany was formulating *Nouveau Realisme*, in parallel with the Pop Art movement. *Nouveau Realisme* took the everyday objects, junk and technology to assemble them into sculptural pieces as a response to popular culture<sup>25</sup>.

In 1961, curator William C. Seitz defined “*assemblage*” when he organised two exhibitions held in New York, “*The Art of Assemblage*” at the Museum of Modern Art and “*New Realism*” at the Sidney Janis Gallery which included both three-dimensional sculptural, and two-dimensional collage/photographic-montage artworks.

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<sup>22</sup> Tate, “Art Terms: Installation Art”. Accessed October 6, 2018. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/installation-art>

<sup>23</sup> H.H. Arnason, *A History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*. Revised and enlarged. London: Thames and Hudson, 1985. pp 135-37

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Pp 308-7, 350

<sup>25</sup> Tilman Osterwold. *Pop Art*. London; Köln; Taschen, 1999. Pp 116-18



Seitz defines assemblages as:

1. *“they are predominately ASSEMBLED rather than painted, drawn, moulded or carved;*
2. *entirely or in part, their constituent elements are preformed naturally, or manufactured materials, objects or fragments not intended as art materials”<sup>26</sup>.*

The exhibitions featured European artists Georges Braque, Jean Dubuffet, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso and Kurt Schwitters along with American artists Joseph Cornell, Bruce Conner, George Herms, Edward Kienholz, Robert Mallery, Robert Rauschenberg and Man Ray.

### **And now we add performance**

It was at this time, in the early 1960’s that Allan Kaprow referred to the free-flowing, somewhat impromptu and sometimes unpredictable performances known as *Happenings* “*as an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one time and place. Its material environments maybe constructed.... altered...invented or common-place...It is art but seems closer to life*”<sup>2728</sup>.

The ideas of constructed environments, place and time that Kaprow saw as integral elements to a piece being an “assemblage” and Heather Harvey’s notion of something that is more conceptual than aesthetic is confirmed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their collection of essays, *A Thousand Plateaus*. It is the connection between ideas and materials and how they use and re-enforce each other that defines a work as an assemblage<sup>29</sup>. Another way to view the assemblage is by looking at the relationship between the parts and the metaphors of materiality and not just the physical structure<sup>30</sup>.

### **In-built obsolescence and future proofing**

In this, the latest stage of the transformation of sculpture from being placed on a plinth to being built into the environment, Bruce Neuman, in the seventies considered the often-ephemeral nature

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<sup>26</sup> History of Modern Art, p603

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p613

<sup>28</sup> Mariellen R. Sandford, *Happenings and Other Acts*. London;New York;: Routledge, 1995 is an excellent reference book.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Chapter 12 1227 Treatise of Nomadology p 351

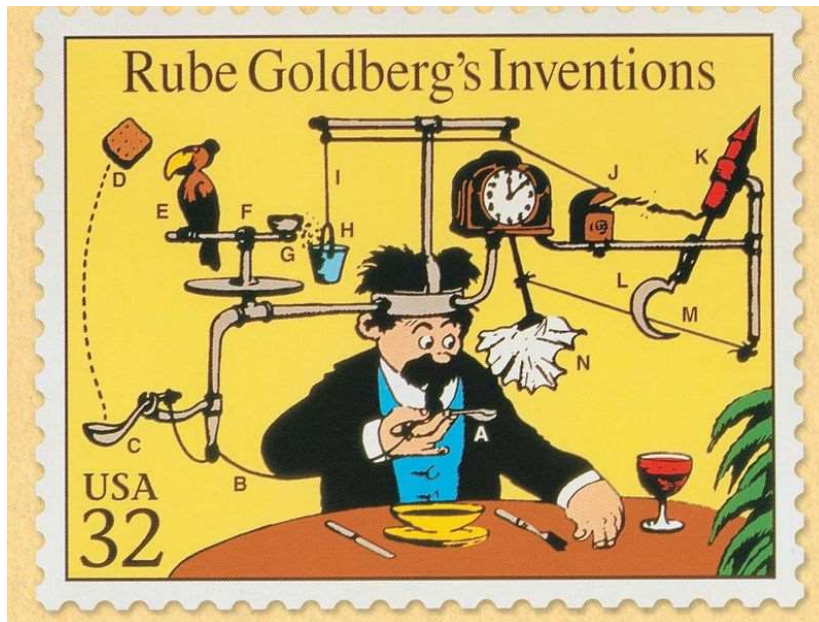
<sup>30</sup> Marcus, George E. and Erkan Saka. "Assemblage." *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 101-106.

of large-scale works to call them “*installations*”<sup>31</sup>. Installation Art, according to Neumann is a type of performance in many ways, or as Bourriaud might say, *you must see it in the flesh to fully grasp it*.

Art can be representational or abstract or somewhere in between, but its purpose is always to be art. Art can also be functional, certainly ceramic and glass works are often multi-purpose as aesthetic object, utilitarian vessel and/or conceptual, but installations tend to be for gazing at and pondering about. By adding the feature of machine-like purpose however, the installed assemblage takes on a life of its own.

### **Sculpture, usefulness and the contraption**

To understand this term *contraption*, we need to look away from art history for a moment and go to popular culture as the conception of the contraption is generally attributed to the comic strip author and illustrator, Rube Goldberg (1883 – 1970)<sup>32</sup>. Goldberg’s comics often included fanciful machines that were extremely complicated inventions that carried out comparatively simple tasks.



**Figure 6.** Image of stamp depicting Rube Goldberg’s *The Self-Operating Napkin* (1931). Originally published in *Collier's*, September 26, 1931

Such contraptions, whether as a drawing of an idea or when actually made to work, usually for competitions and/or exhibition, are referred to as *Rube Goldberg Machines* (**fig. 6**). Goldberg

<sup>31</sup> The Art Story. “Installation Art”. Accessed September 8, 2018. <https://www.theartstory.org/movement-installation-art.htm>

<sup>32</sup> Peter C. Marzio. *His Life and Work*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

could have been inspired by pastor and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>33</sup> who is credited to have coined a phrase “*all you need to do is build a better mouse trap and people will be knocking on your door*”.

Emerson’s metaphoric verse has been taken a little too literally to the point that mouse traps are the most invented machine in the U.S. with around 4,400 patents applied for each year<sup>34</sup>. Other comic/cartoon examples must include the stop-motion clay series by Nick Park of Aardman Animations<sup>35</sup>, *Wallace and Gromit*. In the *Wrong Trousers* episode, Wallace, the passionate inventor of labour-saving devices for home and beyond takes a so-called NASA invention, Techno Trousers and adapts for his own purposes such as being able walk up the side of a wall when decorating, however things all go pear-shaped when the trousers’ controller lands in the wrong



**Figure 7.** Video still of *Wallace and Gromit – Wrong Trousers*.

hands. These crazy and complicated inventions that are presented as great time-savers are rather flaky at best and should remind us that our reliance technology can lead to more time wasted than saved.

The issue with the contraption examples here is that they are fiction. Their factiousness however, does highlight the issues found when trying to invent a machine to carry out simple tasks. As an

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<sup>33</sup> Joel Porte, Sandra Morris, and Cambridge University Press. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Cambridge [England];New York,: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>34</sup> Ruth Kassinger, *Build a Better Mousetrap*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. p. 128. ISBN 0-471-39538-2. It is John Mast who was the inventor of the spring-latch wooden and metal mouse-trap in common use today in 1899.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Lord, Nick Park, Brian Sibley, and Aardman Animations (Firm). *Cracking Animation: The Aardman Book of 3-D Animation*. Rev. ed. London;New York,: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

engineer, I am interested in the how's and why's things are made and used and as an artist how and why sculptural contraptions are relevant to contemporary art.

### **Contraption vs assemblage**

To translate the term, "*contraption*", into an art context this paper will now compare it to the term "*assemblage*" and seek to differentiate them through their purpose. The term "*sculpture*" is used here for any three-dimensional artwork<sup>36</sup>. For Seitz, an assemblage is a sculptural work that is the sum of the re-purposed parts, that is, there are many physical aspects to the object that have a conceptual relationship, either to each other or the artwork itself. This research proposes that when an assemblage has characteristics that go beyond the kinetic structures of Alexander Calder's mobiles and is more conceptually-based than Goldberg Machines, then it may be called a "*contraption*". A *contraption* can be said to be "*the sum of the interactive-parts with the possibility of chaos and undetermined outcomes*"<sup>37</sup>.

From the premise, artists who create *contraptions* might include Roman Signer (born 1938 in Switzerland) and Cameron Robbins (born 1963 in Australia). Robbins' sculptures which he refers to as "mechanical-devices" interact with the natural elements of wind, rain and sunlight, producing artworks (drawings) that are a result of a collaboration between artist and nature<sup>38</sup>. The recent work by Robbins, *Remote Sensor*, 2018 (**figs. 8 & 9**), installed outdoors in the city of Sydney at Barangaroo is a great example to explore the notion of a contraption with. While the wind as a volatile yet productive force in the world was the focus of the work, the structure incorporated unexpected personal items like a Ventolin puffer and hand-tools, effectively re purposing the everyday into its logic and schema. Robbins' mechanical-devices with their objective of interacting and then recording the interplay with external forces (weather events) together with an array of personal affects suggests that, in accordance with this paper's findings that this and other of his works might be described by the word contraption rather than assemblage.

Roman Signer's *Canal*, 1992, provides another example. A bicycle fitted with pyrotechnic rockets and two fabricated walls that form a narrow canal-like passageway. The rider, Signer, dressed in

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<sup>36</sup> Rogers, Leonard R. "Sculpture". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed September 10, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/art/sculpture>

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze and Guattari discuss chaos as a function of territorial and social environmental forces and that chaos is not the opposite of order but "the milieu of all milieus", or the free-willed actions and interactions of a situation. *A Thousand Plateaus*, Chapter 11, 1837: Of the Refrain p313

<sup>38</sup> Robbins, Cameron. "Wind Drawings". Accessed October 5, 2018. <http://cameronrobbins.com/wind-drawings/>

fire-proof clothing and helmet, pedals down between the walls with the rockets a blaze, leaving scorch marks that represents the rider's travels (figs. 10 & 11). Signer, once a keen kayaker gave up the sport after a friend was killed white-water rafting<sup>39</sup>. The marks left by the rockets' flames and placement of the bicycle beyond the narrow walls not only refer to the actual performance but also as a reflection of his memories of his late friend and how his emotions and coping mechanisms have changed over time. The marks left behind by the performative element of *Canal*, 1992 are reminiscent of Signer's focus on time, movement and forces, the title links the work to his persistent inclusion of water without using any<sup>40</sup>. Being propelled by pyrotechnics, gravity or human energies, Signer's contraptions incorporate chance, chaos and absurdity as central components. Signer references Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913-14 to explain the way he goes about his art making which is a hands-off approach allowing random acts, nature and chaos in a realm of absurdity to take control<sup>41</sup>.

The term *contraption* as discussed and defined here suggests it might be a fitting term for sculptures that produce new artworks as a by-product of their activity. The *contraption* is often a combination of an assemblage which uses kinetic energies derived from external sources such as natural forces or audience participation as seen in the work of Cameron Robbins.

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<sup>39</sup> Gerhard Mack, Roman Signer, Paula van den Bosch, and Jeremy Millar. *Roman Signer*. London; New York;: Phaidon, 2006. P23

<sup>40</sup> Other examples of Signer's contraptions include *Action*, 1989 whereby while standing up against a wall with a paint roller in hand paint is fired at him leaving a splatted 'shadow' and *Fahrrad mit Farbe*, 1995–2003 (Bicycle with Paint) which is another work incorporating a bicycle, this time the bike remains stationary with the rear wheels spinning in a trough of paint that spray a wall.

<sup>41</sup> *Roman Signer*. p48





*Left: Figure 8.* Cameron Robbins, *Remote Sensor*, 2018. Wind machine, graphite on paper, dimensions variable. Installation detail. Photo: Paul Cooper

*Right: Figure 9.* Cameron Robbins, *Remote Sensor*, 2018. Wind machine, graphite on paper, dimensions variable. Installation detail. Photo: Paul Cooper



*Left: Figure 10.* Roman Signer, *Canal*, 1992. Fabricated wall, pyrotechnics, bicycle, performer with PPE, dimensions variable. Performance. Courtesy Helmhaus, Zurich

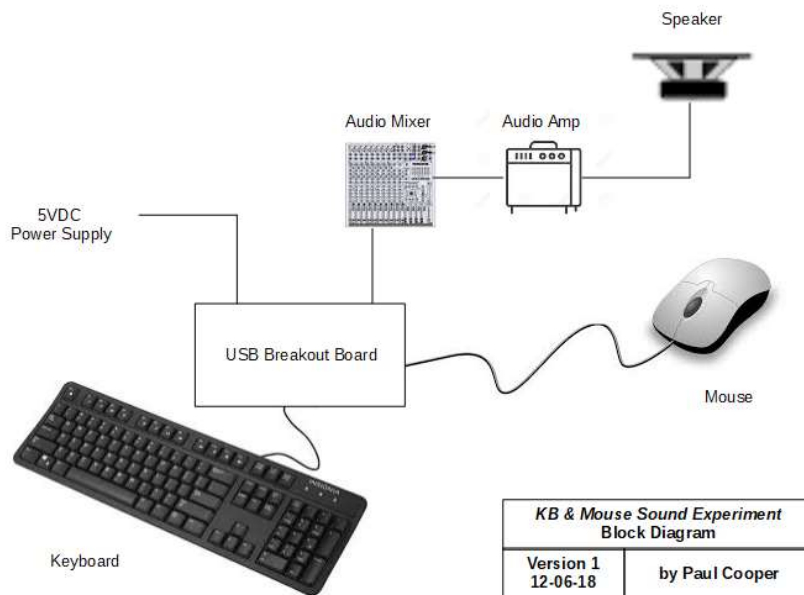
*Left: Figure 11.* Roman Signer, *Canal*, 1992. Fabricated wall, pyrotechnics, bicycle, performer with PPE, dimensions variable. Installation detail. Courtesy Helmhaus, Zurich

## Chapter 3: Things That Go Bump

A large part of my recent studio research has been experimenting with the manipulation of electrical and electro-mechanical ready-mades. The first such work, *Untitled (microwave with traffic cones)*, 2015 (**fig. 12**) included a microwave oven that only worked with the door open (or rather only appeared to work). This year I have been successful in using computer keyboards and mice to generate sounds with just input power and amplified speakers (**Fig. 13**).



**Figure 12.** Paul Cooper  
*Untitled (microwave with traffic cones)*, 2015.



**Figure 13.**  
Keyboard and Mouse  
Sound Experiment  
Block Diagram.  
Digital image by  
Paul Cooper

The studio research that emerged from this inquiry led to the exploration of using movement (presence) sensors and how information gathered could be converted into another form and manipulated while maintaining its original data. The transformation of digital signals to analogue and sound into mechanical force without synthesising or triggering externally stored data files or computer programs was a personal brief to view how energy and data could exist in alternate forms. What eventuated was a multi-component work with the title *ACTUALITY No.2*, 2018. The installation senses the presence of viewers and generates charcoal drawings in response to and as a record of their presence and interaction. The three parts: 1) an interactive/kinetic sculpture, titled *ACTUALITY No.2*, that does the sensing and produces the documents, 2) the resulting documents are titled *File, Ready or Not* and 3) an audience participatory work using paper bags, *Charta Sacculi*. As an overview of this work, it may be recognised as a self-determined, self-documenting *contraption*. It is envisaged that the installation will include a passageway through which viewers can walk, their presence and movement is detected by at least 2 CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) cameras establishing an immersive feedback environment, the resulting live video signals are converted to audio and the resultant sound are used to create a charcoal drawing. (See **Appendix 2** for a more technical description). The document has qualities of a “print” as the charcoal is transferred from a set of speakers onto paper. The term “print” is also fitting as the method is akin to the way a computer inkjet printer works. The use of the term “drawing” is used here in this paper for the sake of simplification as the document is a charcoal work on paper. Recording and documentation are an integral part of this installation so the third work references “opt-in/opt-out” inclusions like so many online application forms and advertising pages. Visitors to the exhibition space are offered the choice to either “erase” or “store” their “data” by blowing into a paper bag. This is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the way we are so willing to offer information without too much or any thought at all to gain access to web-based online conversations, information and shared events.

The work did not, however, begin as a document generator. It was initially conceived as an immersive interactive feedback work and grew to include the concept of documentation. Previous



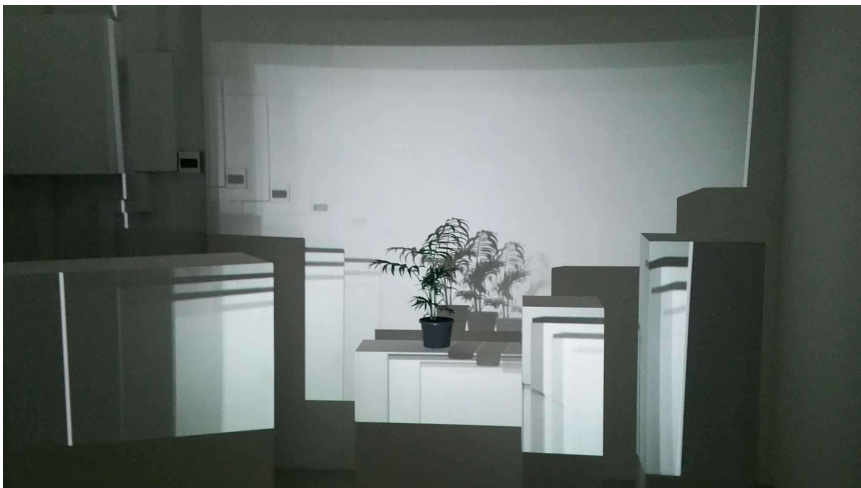
**Figure 14.** Paul Cooper, *Jackson Pollock Meets Greg Norman*, 2017. Golf ball, golf tee, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 25 x 8Hcm. Photo: Paul Cooper





**Figure 15.** Paul Cooper, *Beware the Thane of Wi-Fi*, 2018 Mixed media, multi-media installation, dimensions variable. Installation detail. Photo: Paul Cooper

works of mine such as *Jackson Pollock Meets Greg Norman*, 2017 (**fig. 14**)<sup>42</sup> and *Beware the Thane of Wi-Fi*, 2018 (**fig. 15**)<sup>43</sup> are both artworks that documented the external forces as images. It was these artworks that helped to inform *ACTUALITY No.2*. The development of the video component of *ACTUALITY No.2*'s was developed out of another previous work, *Actuality*, 2016,



**Figure 16.** Paul Cooper, *Actuality*, 2016. Mixed media, multi-media installation, dimensions variable. Installation detail. Photo: Paul Cooper

<sup>42</sup> *Jackson Pollock Meets Greg Norman*, 2017 was made by golf swings during teeing-off while playing a round of golf. A loaded paint brush was attached to the golf club I used to tee-off and the canvas captured my swing.

<sup>43</sup> *Beware the Thane of Wi-Fi*, 2018, exhibited during the Constant Craving Exhibition, curated by Dr Therese Keyon at Eramboo Gallery. My heart beat was played through speakers loaded with spices (Eye of Newt and Salt) that sprayed out onto canvases. (Eye of Newt is more commonly known as Mustard Seed).

(fig. 16) a video loop that projected the black and white image of a space back onto itself. There is a re-occurring use of black and white in much of my artworks<sup>44</sup> as it highlights the way our eyes respond to and interpret light, shapes, contrast and colour<sup>45</sup>. Perception and exchanging or confusing one sense<sup>46</sup> with another are elements I endeavour to include in much of my practice.

### ***ACTUALITY No.2 – the contraption***

Using video feedback to create a space for engagement as shown in **Figure 17**, the participating viewer stands between CCTV cameras and a television monitor. The video images loop back onto themselves in much the same way two mirrors facing each other would. These video signals are also used to make drawings through a process that converts movement into sound (vibrations) whereby the vibrations are used to splatter charcoal onto paper. The longer the viewer participates, the more the drawing develops.

This work developed from initial explorations with a DSLR camera with the video output connected directly to the TV. The camera's zoom lens was remotely controlled, a feature that enabled the image oscillations necessary for the feedback to be self-sustaining. When considering documentation art as an outcome for this system and the significance of different types of cameras, the idea of CCTV came to mind. The inclusion of the CCTV cameras is a stronger fit with the concept as it better hints at the idea of covert documentation. The switching between different cameras has the same effect as the previous zoom function and provides the anticipated image oscillations.

### ***File, Ready or Not – the documentation***

As previously mentioned, documenting, documentation nor documentation art as a process were part of the initial intention for this work. It was after exhibiting *Wi-Fi* that the decision to include a form of autonomous art-making was made. The process including experimenting with various pigments, including Langridge dry colours, chalk and making my own lamp black by collecting

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Cooper "Artworks". Accessed October 19, 2018. <http://www.silentseven.com.au>

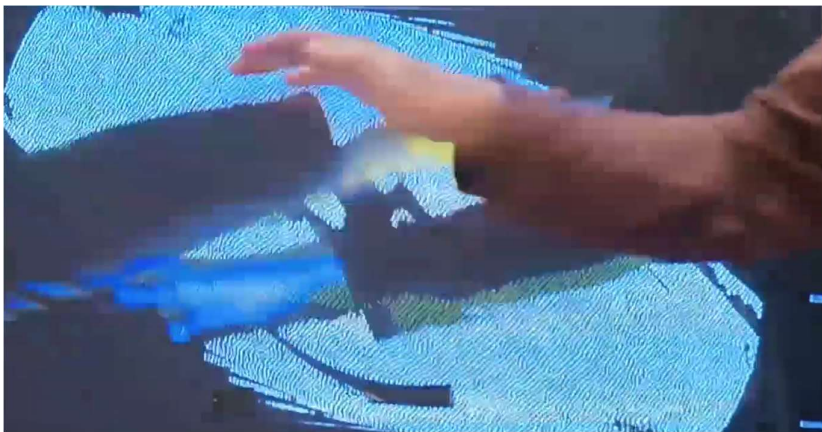
<sup>45</sup> Hyperphysics. "Rods and Cones". Accessed September 8, 2018. <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr-gsu.edu/hbase/vision/rodcone.html>, also

Arizona State University, Ask a Biologist. "Rods and Cones of the Human Eye". Accessed September 8, 2018. <https://askabiologist.asu.edu/rods-and-cones> and

Lamb, T D, "Why Rods and Cones?" US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health. Eye (London) 2016 Feb; 30(2): 179–185. Last modified November 13 2015. doi: 10.1038/eye.2015.236 PMID: 26563661. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4763127/>

<sup>46</sup> Seven Senses Foundation, "What are the 7 Senses?" Accessed September 8, 2018. <http://www.7senses.org.au/what-are-the-7-senses/> The seven senses are: Sight, Smell, Taste, Hearing, Touch, Vestibular (movement & balance) and Proprioception (space & bodily awareness).

the soot from oily smoke captured on glass (**Fig. 18**). All these pigments were too powdery and wafted too far causing a great amount of mess. Experimentation was extensive, considering and testing numerous pigment types, substrate materials and fixatives that not only behaved (splattered/collected/set) as required but also resonated with documentation as a concept (**Fig. 19**). The expense was mounting, so it was decided to use paper in the interim. It was the paper that offered an epiphany - it is used for a lot of documentation! From there the of choice of pigment immediately narrowed to charcoal. Willow charcoal proved too fine, so charcoal gathered from open fire places was settle on because the pulverising process was easier to control, and the grittiness of the powder made it ideal for this application.



**Figure 17.** Video looping and feedback test.  
Photo: Paul Cooper



*Left:* **Figure 18.** Suspended speakers over canvas and pigment splatter test. Photo: Paul Cooper



*Right:* **Figure 19.** Splatter check. Charcoal, silver enamel on canvas. Photo: Paul Cooper

***Charta Sacculi*<sup>47</sup> - the participatory performance**

Visitors will be prompted to participate in this third part of the work, *Charta Sacculi*, 2018 through signage. The work will comprise of two stacks of paper bags inscribed with different instructions on each side.

One side of the bags read:

**If you do not wish your visit to be documented**

Take this bag,  
Read the passage below  
Blow into the bag and pop it

*From goulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties*

*And things that go bump in the night*

*Good Lord, deliver us!*<sup>48</sup>

Disclaimer: This does not really have any bearing on whether your visit is documented or not

The other side reads:

**If you enjoyed this work, then please**

Take this bag,  
Blow into it and pop it,  
Thank you!

Many organisations, particularly those with a strong online presence have turned data collection and digital documentation into an art-form<sup>49</sup>. The popping of the paper bag should offer the participant no more assuredly than would ticking an opt-in/opt-out box.

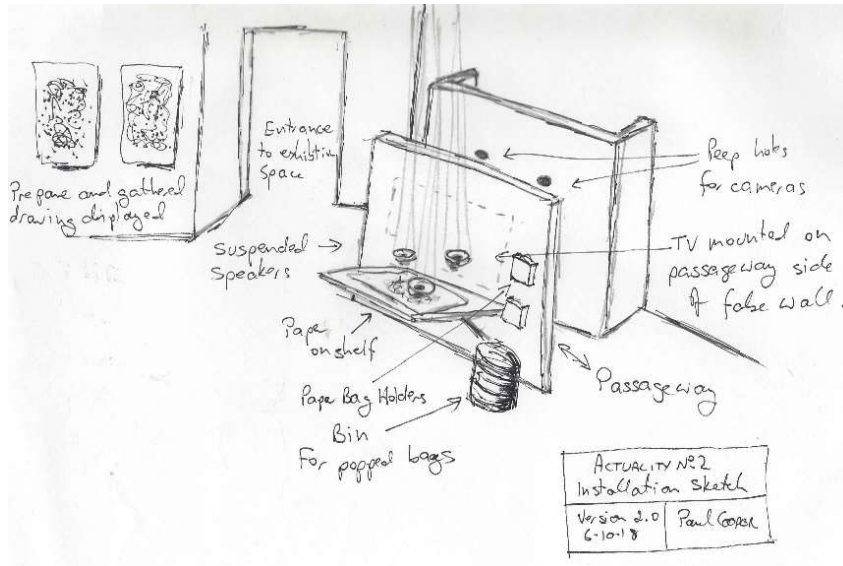
The sound of the popping is picked up by a microphone which in turn influences the drawing (documenting/recording) process.

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<sup>47</sup> “*Charta Sacculi*” is Latin for “Paper Bag”.

<sup>48</sup> *Anon-Scottish Prayer*, recorded in *The Cornish and West Country Litany*, 1926, but it quite likely to be much earlier.

<sup>49</sup> Google. “My Activity”. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://myactivity.google.com/myactivity>  
Google collects and displays all your Google/Chrome. You may be surprised/concerned/interested in what Google knows about you! Follow the link once logged into your Google account.



**Figure 20.** (Proposed) Installation room layout sketch for Paul Cooper's *ACTUALITY No.2*, 2018. Ink and pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

The work being presented, *ACTUALITY No.2* (**Fig. 20**) achieves its goal of documenting visitation by sensing viewer presence through CCTV cameras. Any interaction the viewer has within the space enhances feedback through oscillation caused by a video loop. The video data is converted to an audio signal to produce sounds relative to movement captured by the cameras. The noise generated causes charcoal, which is stored on the speakers' cones, to spray out onto paper, thus creating marks and recording the viewer's presence. In addition, the idea of documenting personal information and its security is explored with the inclusion of a further participatory component. The audience is invited to provide feedback of their own by popping a paper bag. The sound of the pop is fed back into the system to affect the recordings in yet another convoluted loop within this contraption.

## Conclusion

Nothing is sacred. Objects, materials or even descriptions are all fair game when it comes to my art practice. If there is an alternative view-point, an unconventional method or unexpected combination, I will be there. Turning a camera from a device that *takes a picture* to one that *makes a picture* feels comfortable to me.

Throughout this paper, consideration towards the possibilities of defining terms that could be used to better describe a combination of existing art practices was explored. The recording of events that were stored as self-contained new artworks was defined as *documentation art*. The term *contraption* was reimagined from the pop culture version of an improbable time-saving device into a kinetic sculpture with a connection to assemblages whose purpose is to produce a drawing or some other stand-alone artwork.

Documentation was reviewed through the writings of Philip Auslander and Nicholas Bourriaud together with artworks by Yoko Ono, Roman Onkak and the collaborative artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. Documenting art becomes particularly important with the advent of the ephemeral artworks in the fifties and sixties. This documenting process also led to the suggestion that engagement (Auslander's idea of *Relational Aesthetics*) was an integral component to artworks that were immersive, temporal and often site-specific.

Out of the comic-strip drawings by Rube Goldberg came competitions and exhibitions showcasing complicated machinery that achieve mundane tasks. This idea of the machine along with the suggestion of complexity for complexity's sake is seen in artworks by the likes of Cameron Robbins and Roman Signer. Their approach to artmaking often results in the addition of further mark-making by their machines/sculptures and it is this combination of events that suggest they are some sort of contraption.

The playfulness associated with interactions that Robbins and Signer incorporate with their works encourage me to be less respectful towards materials, objects and technology and become more open to possibilities and adaptation. There are certain aspects within the foundations of my practice, however that seek out and preserve little known, or perhaps hidden technologies and traditional methods. Making a feature of seemingly small or obscure achievements will continue to be a part of my work.

The rollercoaster-ride that was this year's research has ended in somewhat of a pleasant surprise. Juggling the need to produce a plausible artwork that was also feasible to make and one that reflected my interests certainly played a part in narrowing my field of inquiry. This narrowing and the need to focus on just a few of the vast possibilities required constant questioning and rejection. Rejection through inquiry was an important reminder that while possibilities are great, don't just look, listen and assume but use assessment and association to see things as they truly are. In view of this inquiry into the changing of states, looping, feedback and recordings, future research could be used to further develop the notions of fluidity and confines.

## Appendix 1

### **There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly**

Written by Alan Mills, lyrics by Rose Bonne, Copyright: ©1952 Peer International (Canada)Ltd.

There was an old who swallowed a fly,  
I do not know why she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die.

There was an old lady who swallowed a spider  
That wriggled and giggled and tickled insider her.  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly,  
I do not know why she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die.

There was an old who swallowed a bird,  
How absurd to swallow a bird.  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider, that wriggled and giggled and tickled insider her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly,  
I do not know why she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die.

There was an old lady who swallowed a cat,  
Now fancy that to swallow a cat.  
She swallowed the cat to catch the bird,  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider, that wriggled and giggled and tickled insider her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly,  
I do not know why she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die.

There was an old lady who swallowed a dog,  
What a hog, to swallow a dog,  
She swallowed the dog to cat the cat, she swallowed the cat to catch the bird,  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider, that wriggled and giggled and tickled insider her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly,  
I do not know why she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die.

There was an old lady who swallowed a goat,  
She just opened her throat and swallowed that goat  
She swallowed the goat to catch the dog, he swallowed the dog to cat the cat, she swallowed the  
cat to catch the bird,  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider, that wriggled and giggled and tickled insider her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly,  
I do not know why she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die.

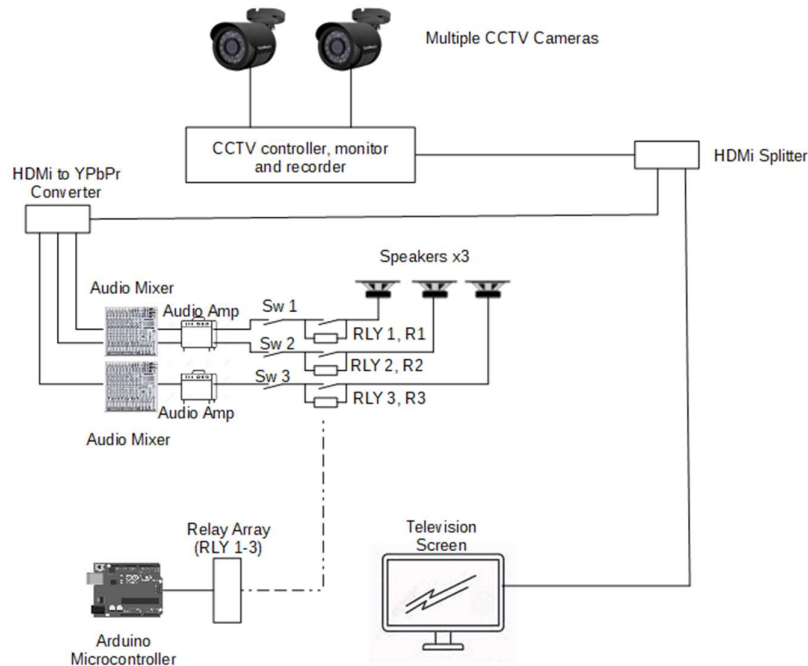
There was an old who swallowed a cow,  
I don't know how, she swallowed that cow  
She swallowed the cow to catch the goat, she swallowed the goat to catch the dog, he swallowed  
the dog to cat the cat, she swallowed the cat to catch the bird,  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider, that wriggled and giggled and tickled insider her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly,  
I do not know why she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die.

There was an old lady who swallowed a horse,  
She's dead, of cause.



## Appendix 2

### *ACTUALITY No.2* Technical Information



**Figure 21.** Paul Cooper, *ACTUALITY No.2*, 2018. Single line connection block diagram. Digital Image courtesy of the artist.

#### Notes:

- 1 Resistors R1, R2 & R3 = 8R, 20W
- 2 Audio Amplifiers ~20WRMS Stereo
- 3 Audio Mixers require pre-amp inputs for the YPbPr video signals
- 4 Sw1, Sw2 and Sw3 are pressure sensitive switches located under a mat to detect people entering the space. The speakers are connected only if someone is present.
5. RY1, RLY2, and RLY3 are relays operated at random by the Arduino micro controller. Together with the resistors, R1, R2 and R3 they control the volume.

<i>ACTUALITY No.2</i> Block Diagram	
Version 1.1 25-09-18	by Paul Cooper

### Circuit explanation and notes for *ACTUALITY No.2* (Fig. 21)

Switches Sw1, Sw2 and Sw3 are triggered by audience presence and enable sound which trigger the spraying of charcoal onto the paper. The switches are pressure sensitive mat that are walked on when entering the space.

Relays RLY1, RLY2 and RLY3 will randomly energise in any sequence. This function adjusts volume.

Between the three pressure switches and the three relays are twelve volume settings.

The vibration of the speakers caused by the noise signals generated by the camera makes the charcoal dust, which is loaded in the speaker cones spray out and onto the paper that is sitting under the speakers.

The Arduino micro-controller is programmed to be a random timer.

It is the intention of this work to be as “analogue as possible” with no synthesising of sounds and allowing the drawings to be generated autonomously through the presence of the audience.

## Appendix 3

### *ACTUALITY No.2 Artist's Notes*

- The space is setup with a desired outcome that is somewhat guided by chance
- Failure is however, one possible outcome, undesirable but plausible
- There are no written instructions, hints or examples
- The space is activated by anyone, it does not discriminate
- The space allows for some interaction, but that interaction is mostly ephemeral and largely quasi.
- The mark-making is substantially a result of presence
- The mark-making is a document of visitation, a

The work is an elaborate and somewhat unintelligent head counter offering banal documentation that is hopefully aesthetically pleasing.

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## Images of the contraption installed in the SCA Gallery



**Figure 22.** As installed.

*ACTUALITY No.2*, 2018  
AV equipment, timber,  
rubber, metal  
Dimensions variable

*File, Ready or Not*, 2018  
Charcoal on paper  
Dimensions: 72x56cm

*Charta Sacculi*, 2018  
Ink on paper bags, plastic  
holders, waste paper bin  
Dimensions variable

Photo: Paul Cooper



**Figure 23.** Installation  
view showing motion  
caused by microphone.

*File, Ready or Not*, 2018  
Charcoal on paper  
Dimensions: 72x56cm

Photo: Paul Cooper



**Figure 24.** Opening night participation and interaction

Photo: Paul Cooper



**Figure 25.** Opening night participation and interaction

Photo: Paul Cooper

Images 22 – 25 were added after the paper was submitted to show the final work, participation and interaction.

For more information, including videos you may visit [www.paulcooper.net.au](http://www.paulcooper.net.au)