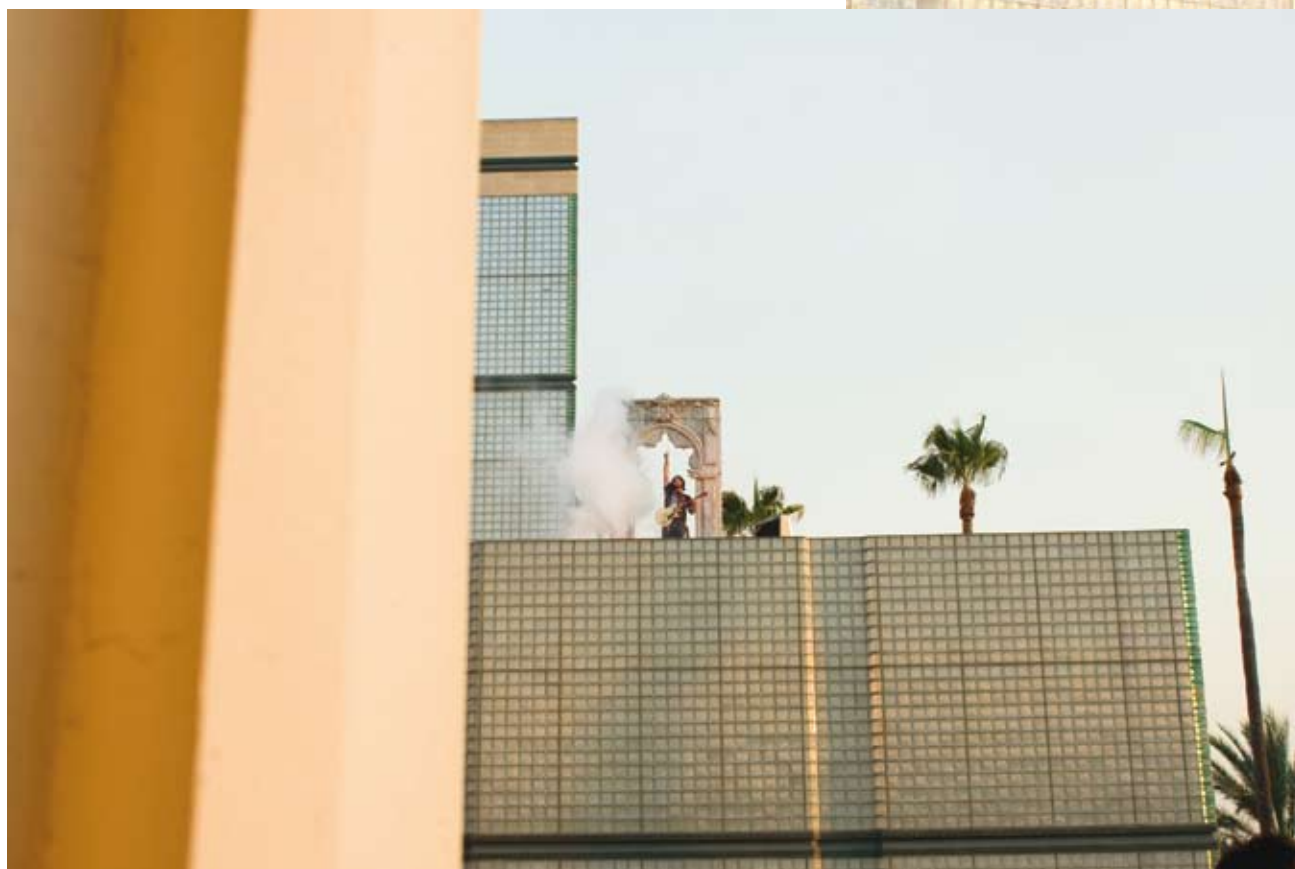


Bringing speed metal recitals, free haircuts and slumber parties to their city's art museums, Los Angeles collective **Machine Project** are developing a new, affirmative approach to institutional critique.

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WORDS: HOLLY MYERS



**MACHINE PROJECT** is a one-room storefront with an uneven floor and a messy basement, lodged between a coffee shop and a nonprofit film centre in the traditionally Latino, now glaringly hipster LA neighbourhood of Echo Park, with two official employees and a handful of interns fronting a loose consortium of artists, musicians, writers, scientists, computer geeks and historians whose collective activities in the organisation's seven years of operation – performances and readings, workshops and classes, offsite projects and the occasional exhibition – have done more to reframe the question of what artmaking means in LA than those of any other single institution. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, by contrast, is an encyclopaedic institution in the grand old style – the largest west of the Mississippi – with more than 300 employees and 100,000 valuable objects contained within a seven-building, 20-acre campus along a shiny stretch of Wilshire Boulevard, not far from Beverly Hills.

One very boisterous Saturday in November 2008, these unlikely bedfellows came together – on LACMA's turf, of course, since major museums aren't, as a rule, mobile – but with unprecedented intimacy. In a show it titled *A Field Guide to LACMA*, Machine Project wound into the museum's deepest nooks and crannies – into passageways and elevators and forgotten galleries and balconies not even the security guards knew how to access – to present more than 60 performances, events and workshops over the course of a ten-hour period. The

artists were mostly Machine Project regulars and the projects, though calibrated to the new, strange world of the museum, were emblematic of its sensibility – which is to say experiential, generally collaborative, adept at bridging multiple fields of knowledge, and inclined toward offbeat pedagogical experiments.

Casey Rentz walked the distance between Machine Project and LACMA (6.4 miles), trailing a very long piece of string. Nate Page transformed the museum's main entrance into a 'Mission Control Bunker' complete with napping areas, constructed from neglected materials in LACMA's storage vaults. Cheryl Cambras led a workshop in the crocheting of birds for the purpose of adorning Chris Burden's iconic installation of lampposts. A speed-metal guitarist played for one minute every hour beneath a full-scale replica of a gothic arch. Haircuts were offered to live accompaniment, and a dance party staged in the museum's 'loneliest gallery'.

It was a remarkable undertaking, for its audacity of scale as much as for its content. Instigated by LACMA's then photo curator Charlotte Cotton, and falling close on the heels of the opening of BCAM, the museum's new contemporary wing, it seemed to bode well for a brighter, fresher Michael Govan-era LACMA. Even more notable, however, was what it revealed, or perhaps affirmed, in Machine: the ambition, integrity, and frankly the power to hold its own in such a context. Furthermore, it packed the house. In a world where success can be difficult to measure, it was undeniable



in this case – and sure enough, an invitation of even larger scale followed for Machine, this one from the Hammer Museum: a consultancy devoted to designing a public engagement residency at the museum, funded by a grant from the Irvine Foundation, of which Machine then became the first recipient. It will remain in residence through the end of this year.

This seemingly unlikely meeting of minds – two of LA's most powerful cultural institutions with one of its most freethinking – is due largely to Machine's unique combination of geniality and determination. The institutional persona it's crafted – a fairly direct reflection of the disposition of its key players, primarily its founder and director Mark Allen – is disarming in its populism, and strikingly clear-spoken in its objectives. While museums and galleries continue to speak in lofty, often clumsily academicised language, Machine's weekly newsletters read like notes from a friend. (All come signed: 'Love, Machine'.) This is not, on the surface – or even, perhaps, fundamentally – a threatening presence. Allen, who studied with Michael Asher at Cal Arts in the late 1990s, would be the first to admit he's putting a soft spin on notions of institutional critique. "All those things are obviously hugely influential in my work," he says, "But because it's a different cultural moment, I have a different agenda, a different mission." (As Anthony McCann, a poet and frequent Machine collaborator, put it in a conversation with Allen that appears in the *Field Guide* catalogue: "It wasn't run wild at the museum day. It's not about critiquing the museum, breaking all the rules that we can break. It was something that burst

forth out of the given ground of the museum's contradictions and out of Machine's just happening to be invited to be there at that time.") What's driving Allen is a fascination with how the museum works – organisationally, socially, spatially, sonically – and, in the case of the Hammer, a tinkerer's interest in making it work better.

"How does the museum create physical space for nontraditional projects?" he asks. "How does it create conceptual space? How does it create infrastructure and process? It wasn't set up to do those things. A lot of my work in the first third of the residency has been developing process. So, if you wanted to come and, you know, juggle flaming basketballs in the courtyard and in the lobby and in the bathroom, who do you need to talk to about that? Part of that process is unearthing all the different stakeholders in the museum. Who has to know about the project? Who has to approve it? What impact does it have on facilities, on security, on the registrar? Those roles and what those people have to do are already fairly well defined for these traditional projects and they all have to be looked at again when you try to do something in the hallway. Who owns the hallway?"

The investigation of odd, interstitial spaces and their governance has been a pivotal aspect of both the LACMA show and the Hammer residency. Machine stages concerts and readings in the Hammer's cloakroom – now christened the Little William Theater – for one or two visitors at a time. It's installed ping-pong tables on an unused mezzanine. Working in collaboration with artSpa, it staged a 'Dream In' in the museum's courtyard: a slumber



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party for 180 people. Sound is another pivotal aspect. Experimental music has long been a pillar of Machine's programming, in its own space and elsewhere, and that continues at the Hammer under the curation of composer and sound artist Chris Kallmyer. In addition to concerts in the cloakroom and the courtyard, Machine periodically offers visitors a 'Live Personal Soundtrack' – essentially a pair of headphones with a guitarist attached, to follow you around the galleries. In autumn, every museum visitor will be given a bell to wear – a sound piece “composed of just people walking around”. The interest, as Allen describes it, is as much strategic as artistic. “Museums are really oversaturated on the visual channel and typically undersaturated on the sound channels,” he says. “So it's like a bandwidth that's available. We'd like to try to do things with smells, too.” At root, the spatial and the sonic explorations come down to the same fundamental question, one that cut deeply through most of the LACMA projects as well: how to penetrate those regions – whether physical, conceptual or psychological – that have been abandoned, restricted, or overlooked, so as to jar the perceptions of those who encounter them?

“Something I'm very interested in conceptually is how this project affects the institutional voice,” Allen says of the Hammer residency. “The museum has what I call the God voice. The museum speaks and you don't know who that is speaking but it says something, there's a sign that tells you to do this or tells you to do that. It's like the aggregation of a sensibility. And then you have shows by artists and they articulate their subjectivities. There's no confusion between the two. If you see a bad painting, you're not like, that Hammer Museum doesn't know how to paint. Right? These projects that attempt to change how people experience the museum are experimenting with voice. How does the museum greet you? How can you manipulate or change that?”

It is not, fundamentally, a political project. Indeed, it follows, in many ways, that classic trajectory by which the heated demands of one generation give way to a kinder if potentially more nuanced exchange: institutional critique shifting into institutional interrogation. What seems problematic in such a scenario has less to do with the terms of the inquiry, however, than its necessary limitations. The art museum is a convenient vessel for these kinds of experiments – and Allen continues to field offers for museum exhibitions and other such projects, in addition to keeping up programming in the Echo Park space – but a rarefied world with a particular audience, antithetical, in many ways, to Machine Project's genre-bending, specialty-bridging character.

“I would love to do something for the HR department of an insurance company,” he says. “But they don't really have thousands of dollars to bring in people to do that. I mean, in a way that would be more interesting to me. I don't necessarily feel like what we do is specifically about art museums. It's more about different fields of knowledge and experience and how people use space and relate to each other and that seems applicable towards broader ends.”

Surely someone could underwrite such a grant? The possibilities are tantalizing.♦

*Machine Project's residency at the Hammer Museum continues until the end of the year; Machine will also take part in the Glow Festival, Santa Monica Beach on 25 September*

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WORKS  
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

*Gothic Arch Speed Metal*, 2008, part of Machine Project's *A Field Guide to LACMA*, 2008. Arch replica by Christy McCaffrey and Sara Newey; speed metal performed by Mark Richards and Alexy Yeghikian. Main photo: Dorka Hegedus. Inset photo: Bernard Brunon

Heather Locke and Andrew McIntosh performing within the *Little William Theater* at the Hammer Museum cloakroom, 2010. Photos: Emily Lacy.

Daniel Brummel performing within the *Little William Theater*, 2010. Photo: Ann Hadlock

Nate Page, *Mission Control Bunker*, 2008, part of *A Field Guide to LACMA*. Main photo: Sidonie Loiseleu. Overlaid photo: Scott Mayoral

*all works* courtesy Machine Project