



ART

Arty Subversives Storm the Museum



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By JORI FINKEL
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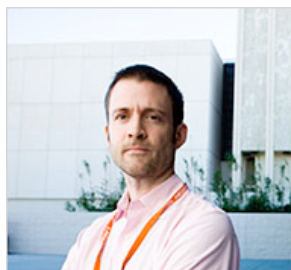
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[The Machine Project](#)



FOR one day this month the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) had the distinct feel of summer camp. In the inner chamber of a [Richard Serra](#) sculpture visitors sat in a circle around two musicians, one drumming and the other strumming. Outdoors some took a workshop to learn how to crochet small fluffy birds. Others helped make what was billed as an army of foals — four-legged wooden structures that lurched under their own power into the crowds.

Mark Allen, the 38-year-old founder of Machine Project, an alternative arts space that staged this mix of performances, workshops and installations, had other metaphors for this meta-event.

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Kevin Scanlon for The New York Times

Mark Allen of the Machine Project, which staged a range of installations, workshops and performances at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. [More Photos »](#)

He called it “A Machine Project’s Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art,” as if the goal were to explore the natural habitat of the museum. And in conversation, Mr. Allen invoked parks. “Los Angeles has so few public spaces where people can gather, we wanted to treat the museum as a sort of park, creating these pockets of social activity,” he said.

“Visiting a museum can be like visiting a very rich person’s house, where you feel pressure to admire the furniture,” he added. “We wanted this to feel more like hanging out with friends.”

Generating analogies for the unlikely workings of Machine Project is one of Mr. Allen’s skills. Another is helping individual artists and rogue arts organizations, which are fast proliferating here, to realize odd projects under his group’s umbrella. Since 2003, when he opened an arts space for Machine Project in a small storefront in the Echo Park neighborhood, he has played host to a wide range of projects, like an attempt to rebuild Rome in a day by the artist Liz Glynn and a workshop on psychobotany (yes, plant telepathy) by the Center for Tactical Magic.

But these days, he said, “we are in some sort of transition from being an art venue to being a collective that works like a theater troupe. It’s like we have this home theater that produces plays there, but we are also developing this ability to take shows on the road.”

And his shows are getting bigger. Two years ago he took over the Santa Monica fair Art L.A. with events and nonevents, like a napping area. Last summer he produced four performances for Glow, an arts festival on the Santa Monica Pier, where musicians were perched in the baskets of a Ferris wheel to form an orchestra.

For the Field Guide he assembled 35 artists to explore and exploit the museum over several months, generating hundreds of ideas. They whittled that down to about 55 projects, like Holly Vesecky’s creating from flowers a copy of a Sam Francis painting; Lewis Keller’s making ambient music from the hum of the museum’s air-conditioning; and Jessica Hutchins and Dawn Kaspar’s staging a campuswide 26-clue murder mystery, beginning with a female corpse, tarred and feathered, found under a Calder mobile.

The variety and complexity of the Field Guide, which is feeding a book to be released by the museum in spring, makes for a strange moment in the short life of Machine Project. How does a low-rent, do-it-yourself organization (whose leading fund-raising model for a while was a pneumatic tube that makes a noisy display of sucking up dollar bills) work with a bigger, more bureaucratic institution without losing its grass-roots soul? And how does a small nonprofit preserve a sense of spontaneity and intimacy in a vast setting?

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“The biggest challenge for me,” Mr. Allen said, “is to make sure everything stays on a human scale. Some people like things that are cool. I like warm, friendly, comfortable.”

For the Field Guide he tucked projects into odd corners of the older buildings to ignite a sense of discovery. “The dusty corners of the museum were our favorites,” he said. (The Broad Contemporary Art Museum on campus proved too “shiny and new” for this purpose, he said.)

Charlotte Cotton, the photography curator who invited Mr. Allen to invigorate the museum for a day, said she was drawn to his sense of adventure. “Mark didn’t want to just become the entertainment for the museum, throwing some sort of quirky, artsy party,” she said. “But this ain’t Hans Haacke either,” she added, using shorthand for the so-called institutional critiques of the 1990s, which posed philosophical questions about the museum setting.

Mr. Allen has been known for a blend of intellectual curiosity and collegiality since his time in Houston in the mid-1990s, when he turned his house into a gallery. One Fourth of July, for instance, he gave a big party so hundreds of people could witness an ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to launch an artist in a lawn chair into flight with helium balloons.

Since then Mr. Allen has developed more of a résumé-worthy career, earning his master’s degree at the California Institute of the Arts and starting Machine Project before joining the faculty of Pomona College. This year he also became a board member of the [Andy Warhol](#) Foundation in New York, replacing the director of the Hammer Museum, Annie Philbin, as a Los Angeles representative.

But Mr. Allen said his mandate at the Warhol Foundation was “to represent scrappy, storefront, noninstitutional institutional spaces,” and he still operates intuitively. He rented the storefront for Machine Project before knowing what he wanted to do with it, and programming remains unpredictable. Just about anything goes, except for those six-week rotations of paintings that dominate the art market.

On the roster for December is an “on-call poetry-delivery service” offered by the poet Joshua Beckman, who vows to deliver poems door to door within a two-mile radius of Machine Project with “postmanlike courage.” The holiday season also brings food — a pie-baking lecture and practicum by Jen Bervin and the annual Fry-B-Q fund-raising event, where anyone can deep-fry meat or candy for a small fee.

“At Machine we use the gallery as a sort of shell,” Mr. Allen said. “We use the form of an art gallery to do whatever we’re interested in.” He compared his approach to that of a magazine like *The Believer* or a Web site like [Boingboing.net](#).

“Machine is like a blog come to life,” he said. “It’s like I just looked at a Web page on carnivorous plants and then looked up [Rick Springfield](#)’s first album

and want to talk about it. I think the gallery space ends up fulfilling the same function, but physically.”

Technology is a central theme for Mr. Allen, who has worked odd jobs as a computer programmer and game designer. But he is not thrilled by robotics-based art. And he often finds himself drawn to analog technology, better known as craft.

“Craft and technology are interchangeable for us,” he said. He pointed out that even the age-old technology of pickling might seem foreign to shoppers accustomed to buying their sour dills at the store. “How do you program a computer, and how do you make a bar of soap? Don’t both seem equally mystifying to you?”

One workshop at Machine that he singled out was the Institute for Figuring’s “Crocheting the Hyperbolic Plane,” where hyperbolic refers to an unruly form of non-Euclidean geometry. The form is made naturally by sea sponges and coral, but mathematicians struggled for years to model it until Daina Taimina seized on crocheting as a solution about a decade ago.

Mr. Allen loved the mix of participants: young artists, mathematicians and “these older women who would drive three hours to learn a new type of crocheting,” he said. “That opened my eyes to the idea that you could use workshops to bring different audiences together.”

For the Field Guide, Mr. Allen invited the Institute for Figuring to set up a related workshop as part of a mission to crochet a massive coral reef out of plastic bags. He also reached out to other collectives. Fallen Fruit, a group of urban foragers, mapped the location of fruit in the museum’s collection, while the Public School at Telic held weekly courses inside the Serra sculpture on subjects like shipbuilding, complete with knot-tying lessons and “Moby-Dick” readings.

“Mark runs Machine Project, but it’s really a network of people like us,” said Margaret Wertheim, co-founder of the Institute for Figuring.

“I don’t know of any city other than L.A. with so many feral groups,” she added, using her pet name for those fringe, hybrid organizations known for collaboration and participation, art market be damned. Mr. Allen and Ms. Wertheim both named the Museum of Jurassic Technology as an inspiration for such collectives, which have flourished here for the last five years.

“It’s also about breaking down the wall between artist and audience,” Ms. Wertheim said. “We don’t want to pontificate from on high. We believe that everyone can make art.”

Machine Project shares this democratic ideal, which in programming corners would be called open-source and in art circles sounds a lot like Dada. “What I do best,” Mr. Allen said, “is to take every idea seriously, no matter what someone says. I do not prefilter them by judging: Is it too expensive? Is it too dangerous?”

Even when barriers arise or projects lose steam, he does not lose interest. This means that when curators at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art did not like the idea of his planting a speed metal guitarist beneath a carved Gothic doorway (“some curators, let’s be frank, thought it was stupid”), he opted to make a model of the arch and move the show outside.

And this means that one of his favorite projects for the Field Guide took place after the fact. It’s a sestina composed by Machine’s assistant director, Jason Brown, that lists all the projects that didn’t get made. The poem, now for sale as a limited-edition print at the museum store, begins: “Garden on top of the elevator. Student driver parking valets.”

Mr. Allen also shared a few rejected — but not forgotten — titles for the Field Guide project. “I remember two big contenders: ‘Failure Is Always an Option’ and ‘Someone Said We Could Do This.’ ”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 7, 2008

An article last Sunday about the Machine Project, an alternative arts group in Los Angeles, misidentified the location of the Andy Warhol Foundation. It is in New York, not Pittsburgh. (The Andy Warhol Museum is in Pittsburgh.)

A version of this article appeared in print on November 30, 2008, on page AR27 of the New York edition.

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