



BIO *kinetic*

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Wendy Jacob
Gary Justis
Michael Paha
John Pakosta
John Ploof
Thomas Skomski

October 10-November 19, 1989
University Galleries
Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois

January 12-February 10, 1990
Western Gallery
Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington

BIOkinetic: Poetry Through Motion

"Perhaps we need to be much more radical in the explanatory hypotheses considered than we have allowed ourselves to be heretofore. Possibly the world of external facts is much more fertile and plastic than we have ventured to suppose; it may be that all these cosmologies and many more analyses and classifications are genuine ways of arranging what nature offers to our understanding, and that the main condition determining our selection between them is something in us rather than something in the external world."

— E.A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*¹

"Nature they imitate no less than did Masaccio. But where the Renaissance had turned to nature's display windows, and to the finished forms of man and beast, the men of our time descend into nature's laboratories."

— Leo Steinberg, "The Eye is a Part of the Mind"
Partisan Review, New York, 1953²

In the best sense of the word, the fifteen works that constitute this exhibition are hybrids. Any attempt to discuss or describe the products of these six artists must account for the acts of synthesis performed by them, and account as well for the state of their objects and subjects *prior* to synthesis. Thus Wendy Jacob, Gary Justis, Michael Paha, John Pakosta, John Ploof and Thomas Skomski might be seen as modern-day alchemists, plying their artistic/scientific/mystical trade in a world desparately seeking a coherent voice, and where the willful separation of Man and Nature often seeks a unifying antidote in Art. The objects and subjects of these artists have their counterparts in the environment and in our own bodies. Their unique and unquestionable skill is revealed through the manner in which these works all succeed in bringing us closer to the poetry of nature, which is all but lost in a techno-world mesmerized by its *own* production. The skeptic will, of course, always question the efficacy of art in countering even the most obvious of our ills. The skeptic needs always to be reminded that art never buys an answer, but that its poetry is to be entertained as a suggestion, an incitement to betterment, and as a platform on which we might rest, however briefly, in co-feeling with all that moves ceaselessly around us.

The common appearance of kinetic elements in these works differs significantly from those employed by earlier artists such as Vladimir Tatlin, Jean Tinguely and Naum Gabo. The interest of these early twentieth century artists in kinetic movement paralleled the dominance of the world by machines. Motors, gears, magnetic forces, propelled objects, projected images, and a host of new man-made materials were co-opted by artists, and the movement *implied* by Cubist and Futurist painting and sculpture suddenly became *actual*. Where industrial, scientific and commercial spheres employed machines for their own obvious and self-interested purposes, artists were charged with the ominous task of poeticizing (and therefore justifying) the machine. As industrialization pulled human hands and minds out of nature, the artist was called upon to urge them back in, and art very quickly came to be equated with a "pseudo-nature." Nowhere is the task of the early twentieth-century kinetic artist stated more clearly than in Bruno Munari's "Manifesto of Machinism," an essay which accompanied the 1952 exhibition *Le Mouvement*:

The world today belongs to machines. We live among machines, they help us to do everything, to work and enjoy ourselves. But what do we know about their moods, their nature, their animal defects, beyond arid and pedantic technical knowledge?

Machines are multiplying much more rapidly than human beings, almost like the most prolific insects. They already force us to consider them and spend a lot of time looking after them. They have spoiled us, and now we have to keep them clean, give them food and rest, and visit them continually to make sure they have everything they need. In a few years' time we shall be their little slaves.

Artists are the only people who can save us from this danger. Artists must take an interest in machines. They must give up their romantic brushes, dusty palettes, canvases and frames, and get to know the anatomy and the language of machines, they must learn to understand machines and distract them by making them function irregularly thereby creating works of art with those same machines and with the means they offer.

Today's machine is a monster! The machine must become a work of art!³

What was true of kinetic art at the beginning of the twentieth century, and what is still true of it as we quickly move into the twenty-first, is that it represents a point of thoughtful and positive human control over technology; a control which is all too easily lost when technology is employed as

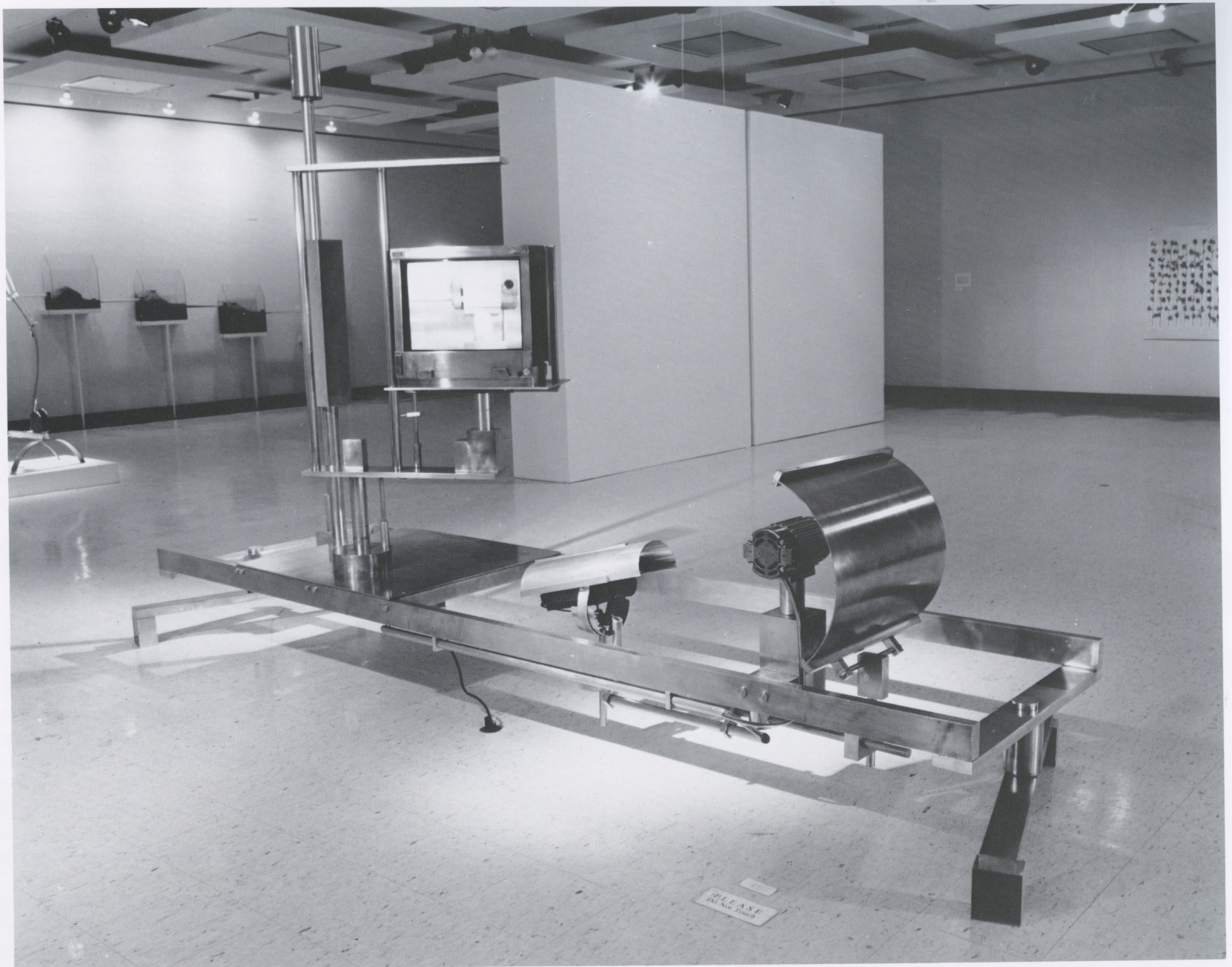
a means of (non-art) production. What clearly separates the artists in **BIOkinetic** from their industrial age predecessors is a move away from kinetic art as a means of poeticizing the machine, to its use as a means of explicating, celebrating and focusing attention on the unseen mechanics of nature. To achieve this end, these artists do not feel obligated to employ state-of-the-art technology, but more often combine lower levels of technology with natural and found materials. They do not, by any stretch of the imagination, form a "school" of kineticism or define a cohesive movement in contemporary art. Their inclusion here is instead predicated on an interest in their *various* approaches to both kineticism and biological or human processes. Be they gross or subtle, observable or merely indicated, the motion — and often the materials — employed in these works take their inspiration, if not their actual substance, from objects and events in the natural environment. The social function of art, a well-documented goal of the Futurists, was lost on the post-WW II generation of artists who imagined an "art for art's sake." This function is being sought once again by these, and other artists of all persuasions, whose efforts are effective because they are able to offer more than the usual cynical critique of a human-overrun world at odds with itself.

It is clear that simulating or appropriating nature in a work of art differs from appropriating any form of (high or low) culture; we can survive without culture and expect it to change, yet nature rightfully impresses us as something immutable, upon which we depend. When we attempt to control nature, the results are disastrous, at best. Even our "scientific" explanations of it are learning to live within certain bounds, beyond which empirical proofs give way to quasi-spiritual explanations. The Gaia hypothesis, fractal theory, the theory of Chaos, all developed by our most competent physicists, indicate a point of indeterminacy, beyond which "scientific" explanations must admit their ultimate inadequacy. It is also no secret that organized religion has also failed to supply us with a satisfactory explanation of our role in nature. As we learn to recognize and accept these limitations, it is art, as much as science, which allows us to live comfortably within them, and allows us to once again exercise a celebratory and respectful voice in, and as a part of, *it all*. Now more than ever, society needs both the artist and the environmentalist to campaign for awareness and action on the behalf of nature.

While it must be understood that they are not producing from a single, unified stance or thesis, neither are the six artists in **BIOkinetic** simply an isolated group who just happen to work with natural objects, entities and systems. Instead, it is helpful to view them as straddling two significant (and by now well-documented) tendencies in contemporary art. One of these is a return to the "romantic." Mark Innerst, Judy Ledgerwood, David Deutsch,

Joan Nelson, Michael Zwack, Tom Brazelton and April Gornik are all contemporary practitioners of a landscape tradition that reaches back to the mid-nineteenth century. Despite the cynicism with which we are forced to view their works, there remains a note of nostalgia and commemorative sincerity in such efforts, if for no other reason than the welcome relief these images provide from the theory-bound works of neo-conceptualism, or the frequently overwrought critique of late capitalism that appropriationist art offers. Another reason these neo-romantic works ring true today is the extent to which they define the degree of our removal from the environment; they locate us very precisely outside of nature, but still yearning for it. While they might be descendants of a microscopic, rather than a macroscopic view of nature-derived art, Terry Winters, Susan Doremus and Joe Andoe also deserve mention in this category, as do artists such as Rebecca Purdum and Therese Oulton, whose paintings demonstrate a renewed interest in the natural-sublime.⁴ There is no doubt that Wendy Jacob, Gary Justis, Michael Paha, John Pakosta, John Ploof and Thomas Skomski share in the spirit, if not the traditional realistic enterprise of depicting nature and the contemporary landscape. This spirit, which is grounded in nostalgia for a pre-Cartesian and pre-technological world-view inarguably states our position outside of nature, and urges us to reconnect human experience with the non-artifactual environment, the technological with the biological, and the conceptual with the sensual.

Another, perhaps stronger precedent for the works in **BIOkinetic** is found in their use of and reference to natural materials and systems, which is certainly not limited to this group of artists or this particular moment in art history. In recent sculptures and installations, Meg Webster, Vito Acconci, Mark Thompson, Helen and Newton Harrison, Mary Miss and Mineko Grimmer, to name a few, have also exploited the metaphorical and sensual presence of living organisms. In turn, the works of these artists are preceded by a rich tradition of *arte povera* and earth art. Both movements incorporated natural materials into the process of art-making and presented an alternative to sculptures as autonomous objects, which are in the world but severed from it *because* of their art status. In particular, earth art, or "land art," presented the work of art and the process by which the artist created as something which evolved and existed alongside of nature. Thus Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim and Michael Heizer were able to create key works of environmental art which challenged accepted notions of sculptures as discrete objects, explored alternatives to the museum or gallery setting, and most importantly, rediscovered ways in which artists could interact with the natural world. Another sign of the important influence of both *arte povera* and earth art on the artists here is



Gary Justis
Untitled (Video Piece), 1988



John Pakosta
Intuition, 1987-1989

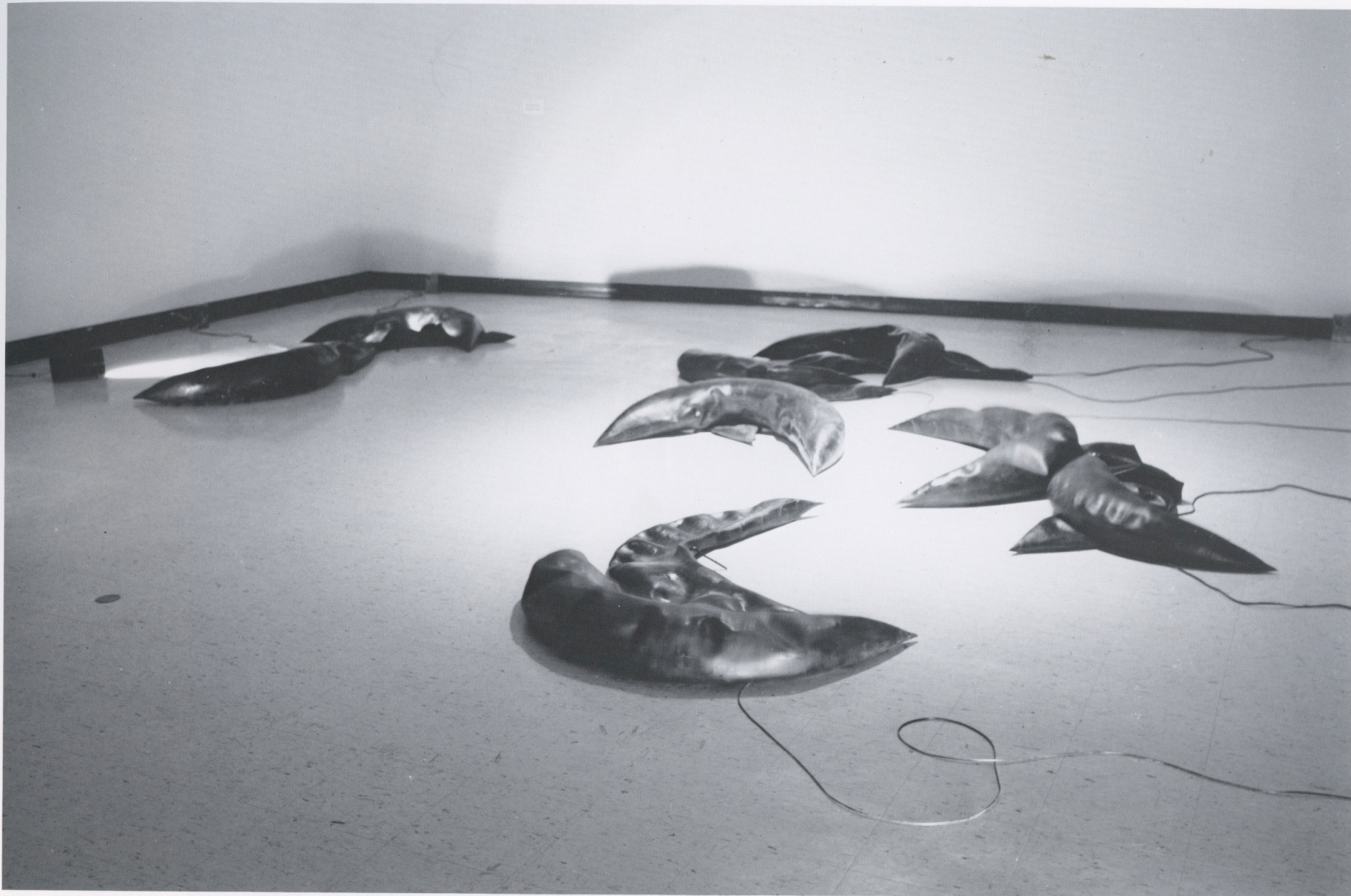


Michael Paha
Nature's Detail, 1988



John Ploof
Reader, 1989





Wendy Jacob
Untitled, 1988

Thomas Skomski
De Stijl (detail), 1986

Catalogue of the Exhibition

Wendy Jacob

Untitled, 1989
mixed media
120 x 192 x 14 inches
collection of University Galleries,
Illinois State University

Untitled, 1988
mixed media installation
10 x 14 feet
courtesy Robbin Lockett, Chicago

Gary Justis

Controlled Stamen, 1986
mixed media
82 x 28 x 33 inches
courtesy CompassRose, Chicago

Untitled (Dual Motor), 1989
mixed media
62 x 37 x 35 inches
courtesy CompassRose, Chicago

Untitled (Video Piece), 1988
mixed media
102 x 163.5 x 42 inches
courtesy CompassRose, Chicago

Michael Paha

Nature's Detail, 1988
mixed media
216 x 84 x 168 inches
courtesy Perimeter Gallery, Chicago

John Pakosta

Field Drawing, 1989
mixed media
50 x 36 inches
courtesy of the artist

Five Wedges, 1987-1989
mixed media
28 x 72 x 68 inches
courtesy of the artist

100 Lemon Cell, 1989
mixed media
48 x 48 x 8 inches
courtesy of the artist

Intuition, 1987-89
mixed media
60 x 60 x 68 inches
courtesy of the artist

John Ploof

Lamb, 1989
mixed media
34 x 18 x 20 inches
courtesy of the artist

Reader, 1989
mixed media
34 x 40 x 45 inches
courtesy of the artist

Loser, 1989
mixed media
96 x 78 x 18 inches
courtesy of the artist

Digger, 1989
mixed media
36 x 58 x 42 inches
courtesy of the artist

Thomas Skomski

De Stijled, 1986
mixed media
144 x 144 x 16 inches
courtesy of Pascal de Sarthe Gallery,
San Francisco