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The Ghost who Worked for the Machine: On Barry Freedland's Signs of Identity

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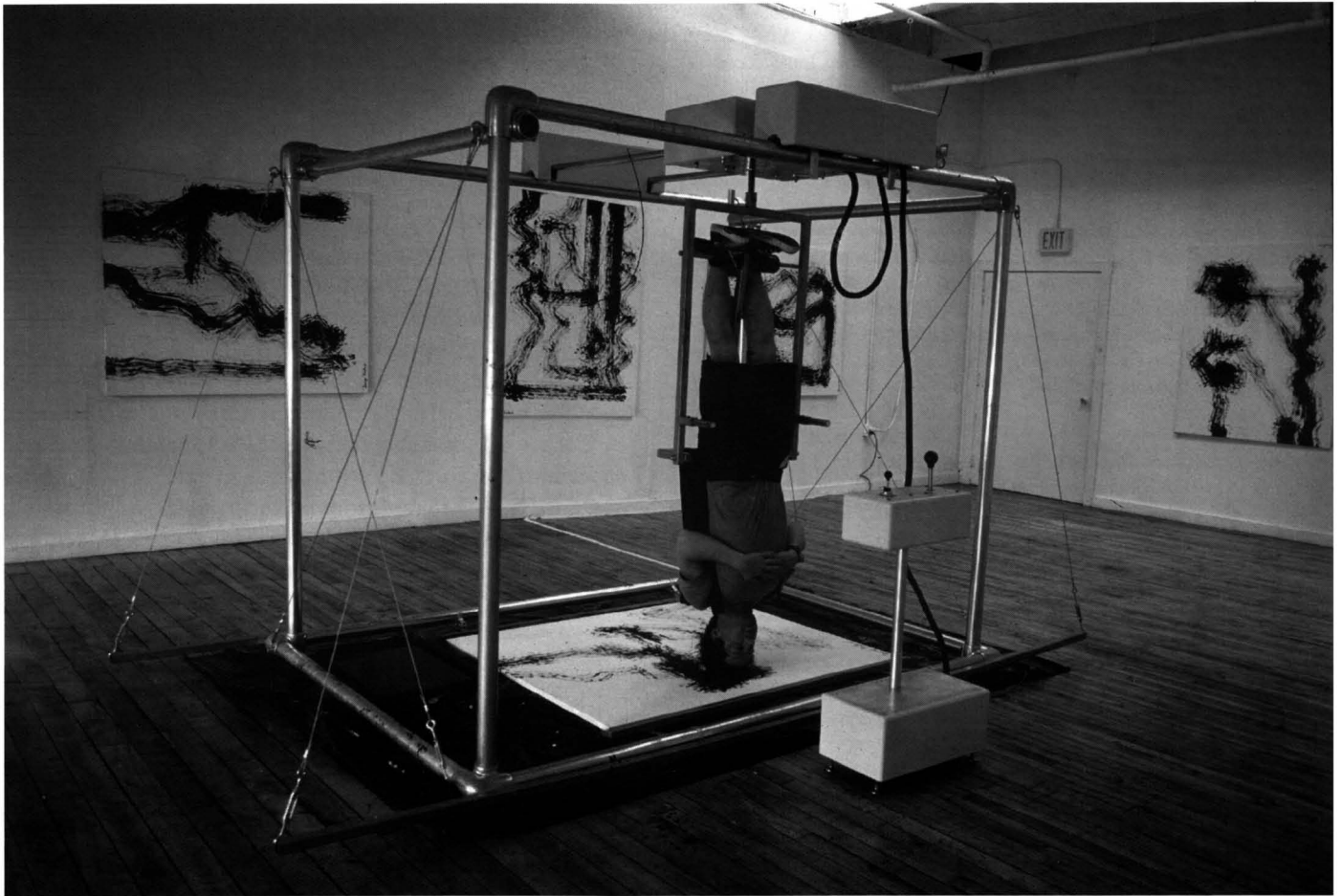


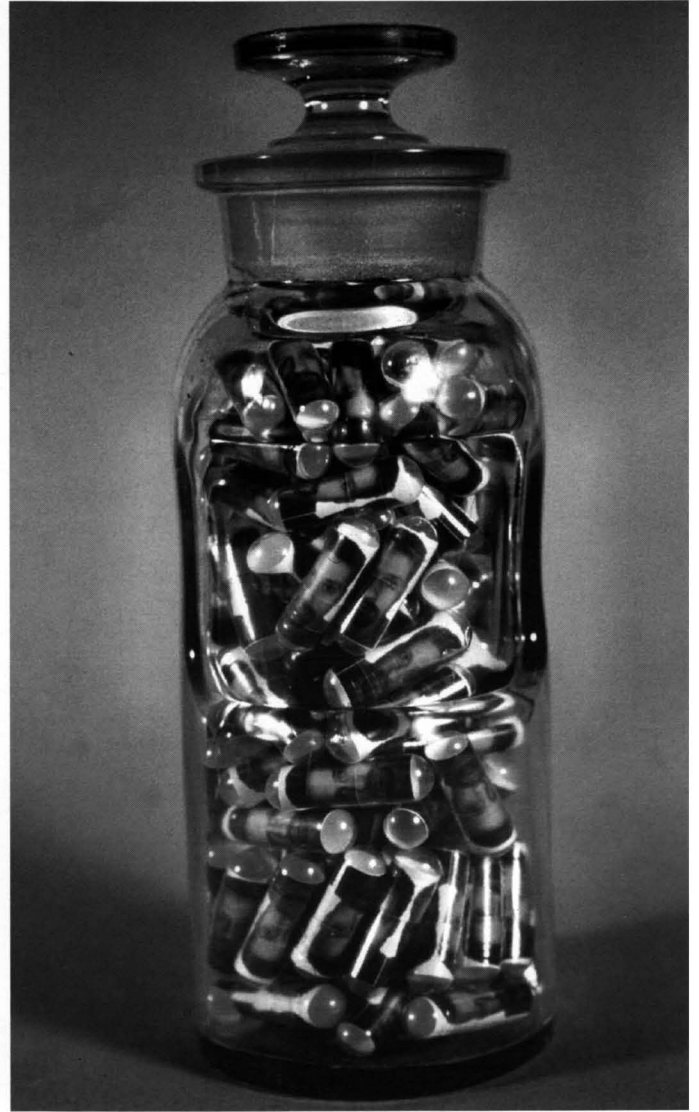
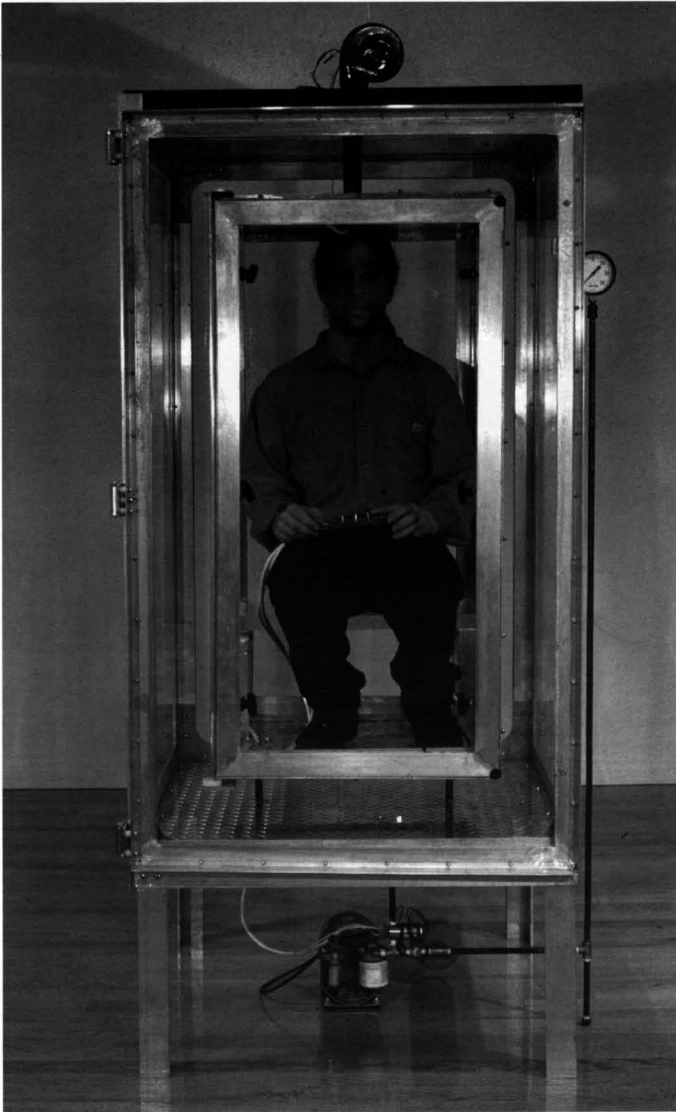
Figure 1. *Painting Machine*, 2002. Artist, steel, rubber, 72" x 72" x 96". The viewer is given the opportunity to compose a painting using the artist head as a paint bush.

I. Open Circuits

Old arcade machines act like epistemic quicksand. They have the strange property of creating an almost magical aura around them, without ever dissolving their mechanical concreteness. The enchantment that these devices create in us is built upon the slight melancholia that their precarious circuitry and obsolete technology elicits. The bulkier and more rudimentary they feel, the more powerful their other-worldliness. It is precisely their lack of smoothness, the ready-to-crack sensa-

tion accompanying each operation, which forces the user into a particular state of make-belief bliss. Somehow, the more their mechanism is displayed before us, the more we end up trapped by the playful magic we allot to them.

Something similar, in terms of the playful magic paradoxically produced by the concreteness of the machinery, can be said of Barry Freedland's trail of "artifacts" he has been producing over the last years. The more concrete they are, the more poignantly "immaterial" they have



Left, **Figure 2.** *Artist Surrounded by Nothing*, 1994. Vacuum pump, aluminum, Plexiglas, 3' x 3' x 7'. A vacuum pump sucks the air out between the two Plexiglas boxes, leaving a layer of nothing around the artist. This barrier of nothing insulates the artist from sound, reducing any interaction to a visual one; Right, **Figure 3.** *Bottle of Barry Pills*, 1999. Dye sublimation prints, gelatin medicine capsules, glass pill bottle. 6" x 2" x 2". The gelatin drug capsules have a photographic self portrait inside.

become to appear to the spectator. And in this case, just as is the case with the old arcade machines, immateriality does not necessarily refer to the vanishing of the physicality of the devices, but rather to the achievement of a fictional mental state in the spectator—which implies necessarily the acceptance of deviation from the normative—through the careful revelation of their mechanisms. Freedland's personal arcade succeeds insofar as its machines *humor* the spectator into inhabiting a state of ludic exception, one in which the resolve to be playful is the avowal of a state of suspension of disbelief.

The formula of the mix to create such epistemological quicksand needs to be precisely measured because to lift a fictional space from the ground, without resorting to optical illusions or pseudo-mystical gestures (a common currency in late twentieth-century sculpture) is never an easy

task. Indeed, it is an even more complicated task when one tries to do it, like Freedland, against the grain, by appealing to the very physicality of the machines and the omnipresence of technology.

But Freedland is an accomplished alchemist, who knows that the success of the secret formula (which might consist of very little more than a relentless humor) hinges on the need to be revealed to his spectators at every moment, so he makes sure they are always aware of the fictional space they enter by getting in direct contact with a machine. But though it is clear that humor is what makes the heavy lifting in all that Freedland does—it performs the central operation that holds the whole machinery together, by eliciting the sensation of playfulness in the spectator—what is not clear is why exactly each of his pieces is, in fact, funny.

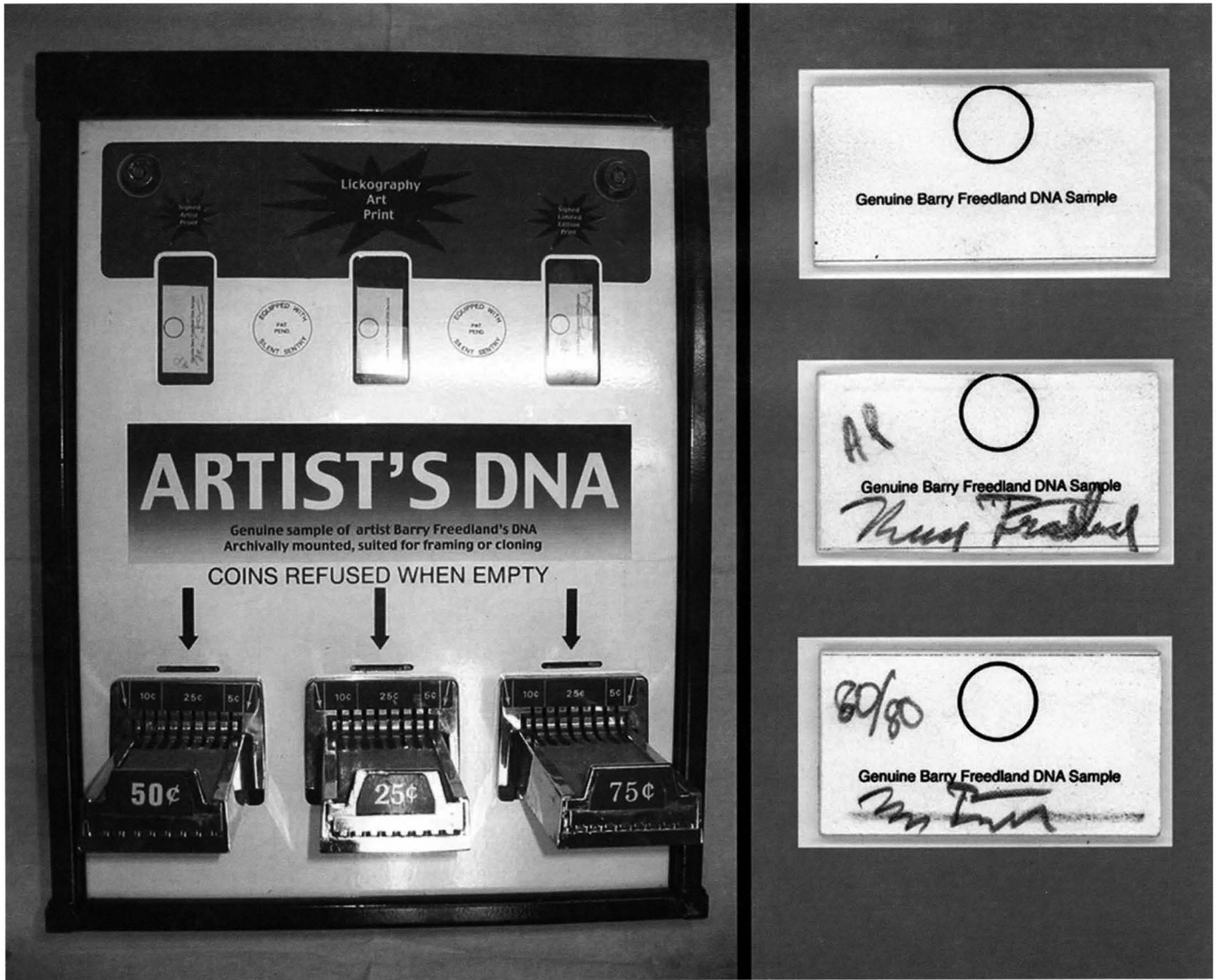


Figure 4. *Artist's DNA Vending Machine*, 2004. Steel, enamel, paper, artist's DNA, 18" x 24" x 8". The machine vends small prints containing samples of the artist's DNA.

To try to answer that question, which amounts to disentangling the internal circuitry of Freedland's pieces, I resort to a cherished personal anecdote with the artist, not so much in the hope of drawing out a moral, but rather the oh-so-elusive punch line.

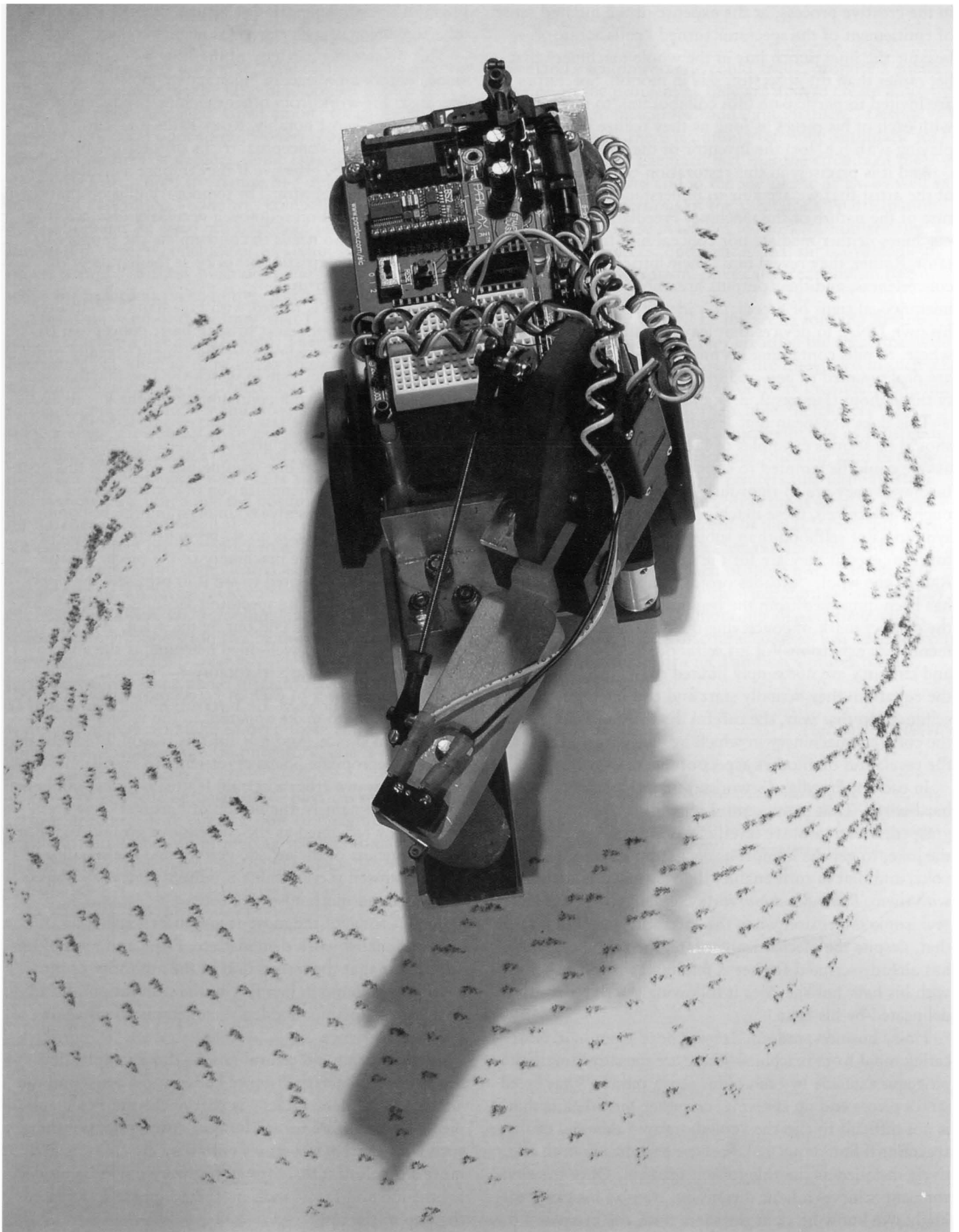
The first time I met Freedland, I had the unsettling pleasure of dunking him in a tray of paint, head first, and using his hair as a brush on a canvas. In *Painting Machine* (Figure 1), he was flipped upside down, suspended from a harness, dangling inside a box set of steel that resembled a good old toy-claw machine (those that you can still enjoy at some honky-tonk eating venues). Spectators lined up in front of the control box (a set of joysticks) in order to maneuver him around, dip him in an out of the paint tray, and sketch a couple of more inspired strokes on the canvas.

I must confess that though I was not very crafty with my unusual brush, I managed to paint what I considered a

pretty decent abstract landscape. The canvas was then signed by the artist and hung on the adjacent gallery walls. I thought I was going to get credit for such magnificent displays of wrist talent at the joystick, but the only register that was taken about my collaboration was a picture with him, while we both held "his" work in front of us, which I couldn't even keep.

Too bad, but also all too clear: the preciseness of the final gesture (the photo, the signature, the immediate hanging up) revealed the way in which Freedland's machines carefully revealed the fine line between collaboration and participation of the spectator. It revealed the way in which the restoration of the artist as the final source of authority

Opposite page, **Figure 5.** *Thumbprinter*, 2006. Delrin, aluminum, electronics, 12" x 6" x 6". The robot moves around creating drawings with the artist's thumbprint.



in the creative process, at the expense of the inflated sense of entitlement of the spectator turned “collaborator,” became the final punch line in the whole machinery that he, rather than the spectator, sets in motion. Spectators are invited to participate (not collaborate), to interact with each of his pieces as long as they realize they are playing with (i.e. for) the inventor of the game.

And it is precisely in this restoration of the authority of the artist that we are able to understand a central feature of the nature of the machines Freedland produces: *his* machines neither mediate nor conceal him from the spectator. Rather, they reveal him. Their intricate circuits, the concreteness, and their outputs are, more than anything, unequivocal signs of Freedland’s identity. From samples of his own DNA, to devices that leave his thumbprint everywhere, to pills containing his image, Freedland’s machines are programmed to be—and to leave—traces of his identity throughout (Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5).

This does not mean that Freedland’s arcade machines should be seen as examples of “technologies of the self” as one could be tempted to conclude in a first reading. Insofar as they are so rigorously planned, and so thoroughly conceived, these machines are much more accurate symptoms of selfhood than subjectivity-producing devices for him (even if they are for the spectator nonetheless). Rather, the whole “arcades project” in which Freedland has been immersed from the beginning of his career has the distinct mark of conceiving the machines as instruments (i.e. extensions) of his selfhood. The mechanism and circuitry are not simply limited to the machine side of the equation: they actually start and end in Freedland’s selfhood. In that way, the careful disclosure of circuitry in the concrete machinery in which he engages is, necessarily, the revelation of another aspect of his identity.

In each of Freedland’s works, self and machine are hard-wired. That is the central tenant that needs to be grasped, on an intuitive level, in order to be able to get the joke, to get the humorous enchantment his pieces provoke, and that in turn enables the viewer’s interaction with them. *Paint Machine*, for example, only reveals its real ironic dimension when the spectator is finally aware that, despite the mechanical fanfare, the role Freedland has already scripted for her is minimal: she might paint with his hair, but she does it following a script already delineated by his head.

Hairy business, indeed. Teasing head from hair, extricating mind from machine—these are the surprisingly simple requests made by each of his clever pieces. What Freedland’s pieces end up showing, one after the other, is that it is not difficult to clip the “collaborative” demand of the spectator if humorous make-believe has already been effectively installed as the rule for engagement. Once the environment achieves a ludic dimension, we play his game willingly. We know he is, at the same time, the brain and the

brush of the machine; we don’t mind becoming his operators. Something of such cleverness might very well brush off.

This disquieting capacity of masking a contemplative stance within an allegedly “interactive” position is what sets apart his work from other machine-producing artists of these days—most notably, Roxy Paine and Tim Hawkinson.¹ The conceptual tricks of these celebrated artists can only be effective if they impose a critical distance from the spectator. The temporary illusion that their sculptures is based on requires a necessary distance from the spectator, who needs to contemplate the (apparent) debunking of the artistic authority at the hands of the machine’s automatism.

Luckily, no one is fooled with Freedland’s sculptures because they do not resort to such basic conceptual tricks. In fact, seeing them wholesale, they might actually provide an alternative model, one in which the fine line that separates participation from contemplation—the key dialectic of spectatorship in the last century—is teased out relentlessly until completely blurred. The beauty resides in the paradox enabled. On one reading one could see this operation as the “instrumentalization of contemplation”: insofar as the spectator is able to understand the beginning and end of the artistic process, her participation is effectively inserted into the machinery of the piece. On the other hand, one is invited to see it in precisely the opposite way: only when the spectator becomes a willing participant in the process laid out by the artist, as if she were another piston in his well-oiled machine, is she able to contemplate it, to grasp its totality.

The achievement of each of Freedland’s pieces is based on their ability to make apparent to the viewer/user this paradoxical stance. And it is for this reason, precisely, that the most appropriate points of reference to Freedland’s work should be drawn from a certain features of post-minimalist sculpture: namely, the notion of “artifact” has been consciously redefined as the contentious ground between the uniqueness of the artistic gesture and the seriality of mass produced (i.e. machine produced) everyday objects that surround our landscape.

Just as some of the most accomplished examples of post-minimalist work demonstrate, Freedland’s sculptures make clear that the restoration of the authority of the artist comes, hand in hand, with the restoration of traditional spectatorship. Suddenly, contemplation is again seen as experience.

Rediscovering old central tenets—for example, that the critical, necessary distance between the artist and the viewer is still there, intact—is part of the fun Freedland pieces have in store for us. Indeed, dusting up, polishing such rock-bottom structures until they are shiny, is the most difficult of tasks. Strong hardware might be needed for the job and Freedland’s machines appear to be more than up to the task.

II. Automatic for the people

Within artsy discourse, false dialectics are as abundant as the false but sophisticated solutions they elicit. Chief among them: the supposedly dialectical opposition between “body/mind” has produced, in the last decades, some curious conclusions, to say the least, about the nature of “feeling,” as oppose to that of “cognition.” One was compelled to follow the dotted lines left by good old Cartesian ontological dualism, and pushed to conclude or feel (choose one or the other) that one of these functions is not *bodily* enough, while the other has no cognitive bearing whatsoever.

This is the kind of dichotomy that Freedland’s “hand-made” machines like to feed from. They eschew a silly binarism by tackling its most intractable offspring—“automatism”—head on, as they successfully are able to dispel, through a maze of circuits and steel, the view that minds, subjectivities, are entities alike ghosts inside machines.

To invoke Gilbert Ryle’s celebrated “ghost in the machine” metaphor on ontological dualism is a risky business: it might show how untenable the position is, but also begs for an alternative ontological model. And to come up with a model that will not surrender to a flat mechanism has proven as elusive and complicated as ontological dualism has proven unsatisfactory. On the way to monist ontological bliss, the notion of “autonomy” is always the first road kill. Philosophers too can be unconscious drivers; they just run over it.

But even if at some point, it might feel as shifting and as fragile as a line in the sand, for metaphysics, autonomy, is the Alamo. Once bulldozed over, there is no way back from physicalist determinism purgatory; one is just left to rage against the machine.

How to reconcile autonomy and physical reality, how to fuse structures with circuits, how to integrate hardware with software—without producing specters to haunt the machine, nor reducing human beings to soulless devices?

Freedland’s sculptures, one could argue, propose a subtle solution to the problem as they are able to create a distance between “machines” and “automatism.” Despite their technology, there is nothing remotely automatic in their functioning. The hard fact that the circuits of the machinery start and end in the self of the artist, as well as the calculated insertions of the spectator’s “participation,” does not allow these machines to work “automatically.” In Freedland’s pieces, ontological dualism is overcome by a measure of automatism, physicalist reductivism by an appeal to autonomy.

And that might as well be the secret formula for the epistemic quicksand effect they create in the spectator. With the circuitry and hardware structure integrated in such a tight way, and with the artist’s body as the juncture point, one ends up realizing that the whole “machinery” does not work as replacement of subjectivity, but as prosthesis of the artist’s self. Paint-machines, chewing gum barrels, DNA dispensers, thumbprint printers: the ultimate trick that Freedland’s arcade pulls off is the revelation of selfhood through the arrangement of metal, cables and steel.

Skeptical spectators are especially encouraged to visit the arcade, to play with each of these pieces. In the process, they might lose their chewing-gum, get stumped by a robot, or leave with thumbprints all over their shoes. But they should not be discouraged, they just need to keep in mind that in some of Freedland’s sculptures one is allowed to double dip.

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1. Roxy Paine’s *Paint Dipper* (1997) may be viewed at <http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/exhsolo/exhpa197.html>. Tim Hawkinson’s *Signature Chair* (1993) may be viewed at <http://www.art-net.com/artwork/424253128/423775681/signature-chair.html>.