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Meditations on the Machine

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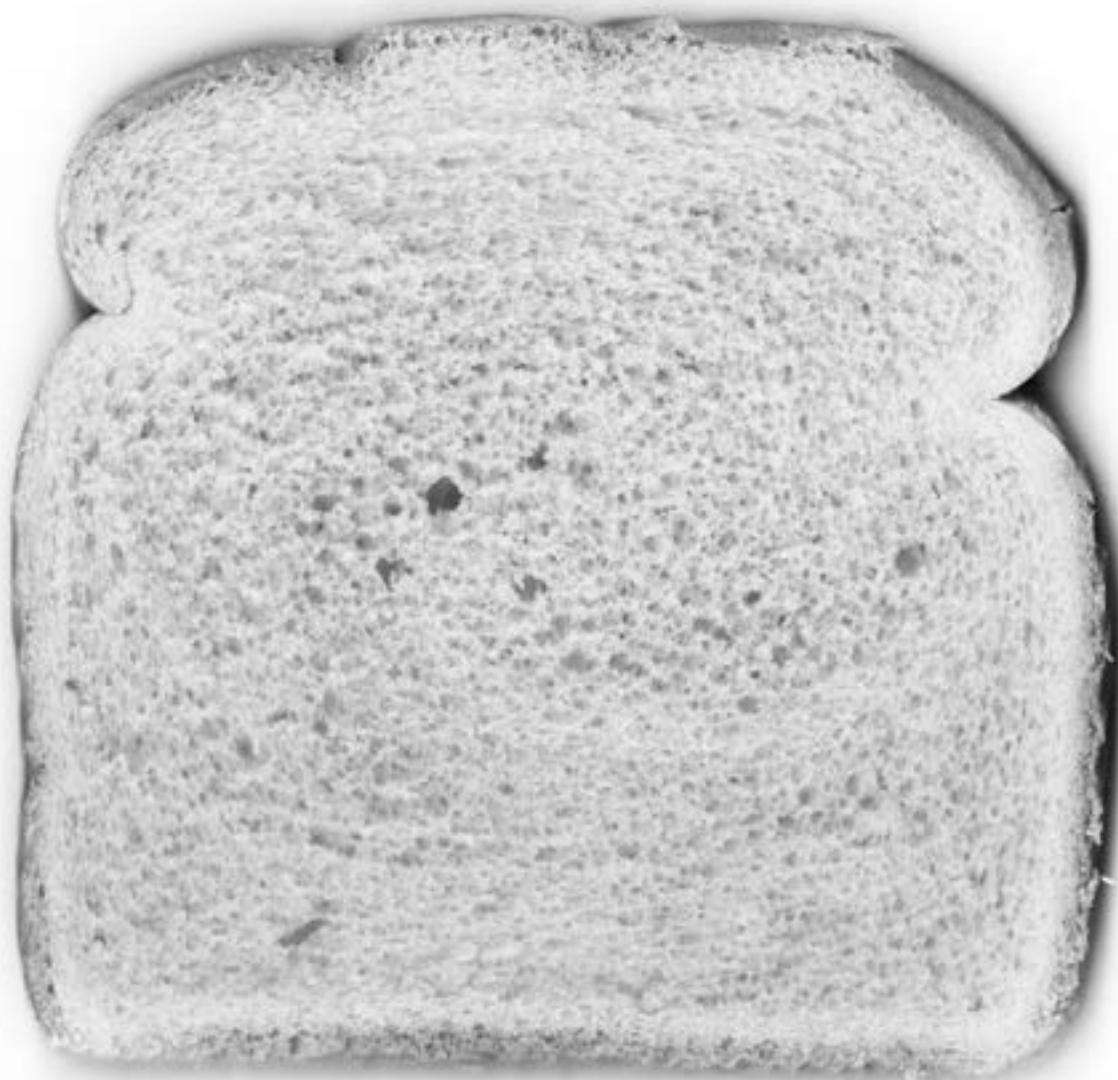
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Meditations on the Machine

The Pursuit of Inner Peace through Sandwich-Making

November 10 - 30, 2016

Stephanie Schapowal

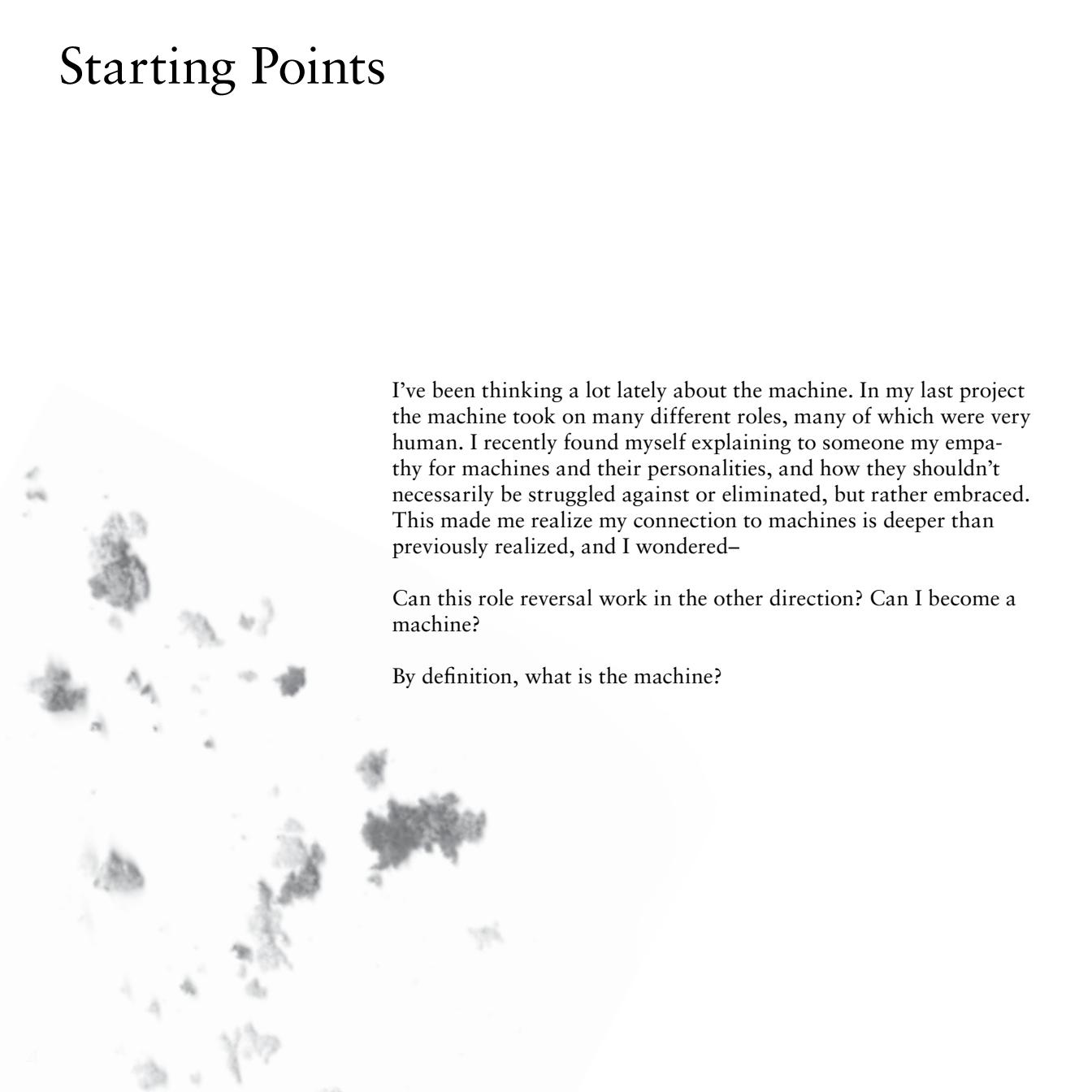
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Starting Points



I've been thinking a lot lately about the machine. In my last project the machine took on many different roles, many of which were very human. I recently found myself explaining to someone my empathy for machines and their personalities, and how they shouldn't necessarily be struggled against or eliminated, but rather embraced. This made me realize my connection to machines is deeper than previously realized, and I wondered—

Can this role reversal work in the other direction? Can I become a machine?

By definition, what is the machine?

According to Wikipedia:

“A machine is a tool containing one or more parts that uses energy to perform an intended action. Machines are usually powered by mechanical, chemical, thermal, or electrical means, and are often motorized. Historically, a power tool also required moving parts to classify as a machine. However, the advent of electronics has led to the development of power tools without moving parts that are considered machines.”

By this definition, it very much sounds like a human could be a machine.

Questions* and thoughts re:Wikipedia's definition of the machine:

Can a human be a tool if the human is also directing the tool?
Brings up concerns of the operator.

Is my hand a tool? *Yes.*

Bodies use energy that is chemical, which can be traced back to photosynthesis in the plants we directly or indirectly eat.

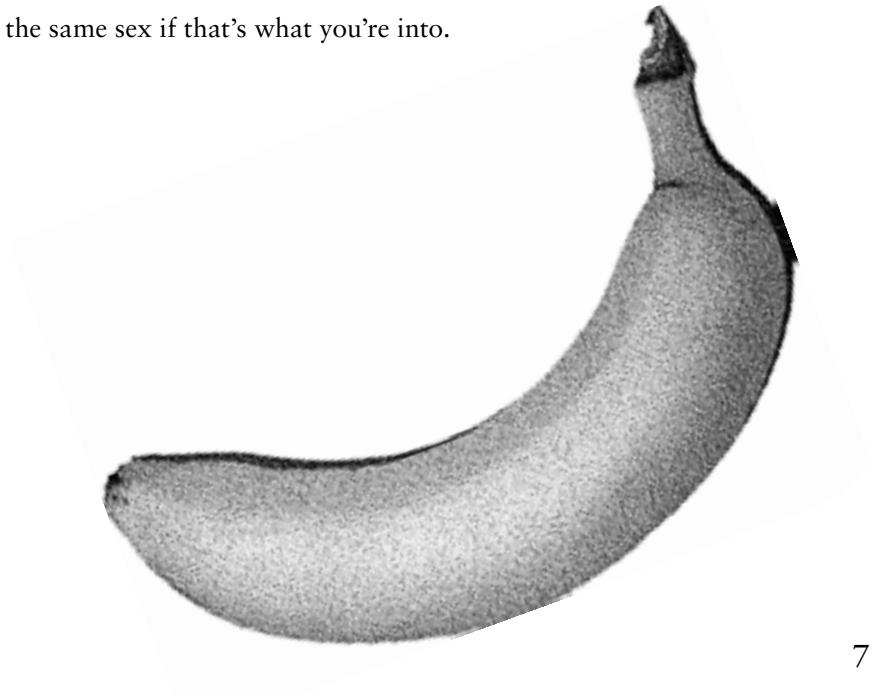
Bodies have many complex, interlocking moving parts.

*I have already begun noticing that my mode of questioning will hinder my quest to become the machine. Whenever I ask a question, my expectation is that it will be answered eventually, by me or by others. A machine may ask a question, but will exist in stasis without any preference for whether the question is answered or not.

According to Urban Dictionary:

“an extremely attractive member of the opposite sex”

I assume this may also reference the same sex if that's what you're into.



Keeping these definitions in mind, as well as my own preference for thoughtless, repetitive actions, I am considering the machine in terms of these principles:

Performing without emotions

Performing set tasks

Looping or drawing

Turning on and turning off

Action/Inaction

Input and output

No decisions being made autonomously

Only focused physical and mental processes

No excess process/efficiency

Psychological Motivations



The thought of becoming a machine has always appealed to me. In art-making, my own aesthetic preferences often give me anxiety. I constantly question the role of my own likes and dislikes in relation to the world at large, and a majority of my practice involves struggling with those preferences and eventually eliminating them from the work I present. Maybe I lack intuition and need justification for everything. The avoidance of aesthetic preference should result (ideally) in self-contained systems that cannot be argued—they do not reference anything besides what is contained in their loop.

Where do these feelings stem from?

A. I would like to avoid conflict, and deeper down, disapproval. If the work's subject matter is bland and avoids a statement in one direction over another, can it be argued with?

B. If a work is a self-contained system, it precludes the necessity to talk about it. Talking about my work reveals a preference towards it, or against it.

C. I find it difficult to talk about the intellectual implications of my work, or others' work, for that matter. My mind works very mechanically, and I am much more

interested in “How?” than “Why?” (unless “Why?” feeds directly into “How?”). Materials, structures, and established systems are much easier to navigate than emotion. (It has recently come to my attention that my spatial memory is stronger than my other memories, which may play a role.)

Machines do not have any of these feelings or drawbacks. Machines perform, and they can be turned on or off. A machine cannot protest ideologically. A machine does not lack personality per se, but all quirks are expressed through mechanical means (most often disruptions to these processes). Increasingly, I've identified machine as the ideal state of being. In determining how I could become a machine, I thought back to previous instances of when I was performing actions that put me at peace—in which I was only focused on the task at hand and experienced no distress over subjective purpose. The joy stems from the actions themselves, and their straightforwardness, not necessarily the goal they intend to accomplish.

Such actions include:

Performing mathematical calculations with large sets of data

Knitting

Chopping defined amounts of vegetables

Swinging (on swings)

Scanning a lot of documents at once

The ultimate goal is to perform without worry—worry for the end goal or decisions to be made along the way. In the infamous words of my friend Matt Johnson: “Don’t think, just act.” Thinking and feeling can be a hindrance to good making.

On Mindfulness

I spoke to Brittany about this, and my desire to emulate a machine. She recommended one of her favorite books, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh. It is a manual for meditation* and practicing mindfulness in your everyday life.

Mindfulness is being aware, moment-to-moment, of one's actions.

*I must note that I am hesitant to take up meditation. I have participated in meditative breathing sessions and yoga before, and I always feel as if I am temporarily adopting a culture that I do not belong in/I have such little context for the actions I am performing. I realize that meditative practices are common throughout the world and do not necessarily have to be culture-specific.

“What’s more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink.”

from *The Miracle of Mindfulness*



One of the principles that resonated most with me was the idea of doing things to do them—placing full focus on these tasks and being completely present.

With this in mind, I practiced Thich Nhat Hanh’s mode of doing the dishes. He argues that you can do the dishes to have clean dishes, or you can do the dishes to do the dishes. The premise is that everyone always has better things to do than the dishes, therefore, if you are thinking about all of these other things while at the sink, instead of the dishes, then are you really living?

In regards to my dishes this week, I tried to see it as an essential task, as opposed to an unavoidable burden. Because I have to do the dishes, there is no reason to avoid doing the dishes. The physical act of washing, by these means, was not unpleasant—it was certainly more visceral than it typically is. Washing dishes became a respite from my everyday life because at that time I would only be washing the dishes.

If I can be mindful of each task without worrying about

any of the other tasks I have to do, is this not a way to become a machine? Machines themselves have little sense of subjective time, only what we impose upon them. If I can slowly eliminate my bearing on everything that happens before or after what I am doing right now, through mindfulness, I believe I will be one step closer to becoming a machine.

Much of the language in the book is very self-referential, “doing something to do the thing,” resulting in contained loops that are very machine-like. I will keep this in mind during my study.

Despite this wording, large scale, the end goals of each practice seem nearly incompatible. Mindfulness is bent toward a path to higher enlightenment, while the machine intends to accomplish a specified task. Despite the focus on the machine, it is important to consider that I am, ultimately, a human being seeking to mesh these mindsets for my own benefit.

Are the practices of being mindful and being the machine mutually exclusive ways to achieve the same goal?

Or can these two mental states be combined?

Daily Practice/Experiments

Why Sandwich?

Sandwich production is representative of the machine and all of its quirks. At its core, sandwich-making is a set of semi-varied processes performed with a common end goal. Sandwiches are the fuel of the 8-hour work day.

When asked to practice the imperative, elementary school students' first task is to provide instructions on how to make a sandwich. Thus, learning the sandwich machine is a mindset taught at a very young age, universally ingrained in the American psyche. It is an activity which lends itself to practicing mindfulness, yet one rarely does (due to factors such as hunger, making it to school on time, customer demands, etc.)

Operator Involvement

When discussing the machine, we must be aware that in order to function, the machine must also have an operator. In some cases, the operator might merely push a button and the machine carries out the rest of the operation. In other cases, the operator may be more involved, providing directional or quantitative input, or physical energy.

The concept of the machine and the operator being one is essential to a human becoming a machine. The aforementioned characteristics distinguish anyone exercising mental faculties to control tangible tasks and someone acting as the machine.

In an effort to achieve a deeper sense of peace while making through the modes of mindfulness and the machine, I have set up two exercises.



I hypothesize that when the operator is mindful, the operator and the machine become indistinguishable.

01 One can make a sandwich in order to eat the sandwich, or one can make a sandwich to make a sandwich. In this exercise, I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich following my own instruction, and did not eat it.

02 Using specifically formatted instructions given to me by friends, I would make a sandwich under their direction. The directions were given to me one step at a time through a Powerpoint, so that I could only focus on the current task, and not any that were to come. I would then eat the sandwich.

While both exercises focus on both machine and mindful thinking, each is designed to place more emphasis on one over the other. My intention is that as the exercises progress, the integration of the two become more seamless. What follows are links to video documentation of each sandwich-making exercise. I made one of each sandwich once per day from November 19 - 27, 2015 (with the exception of Thanksgiving Day).

01 - Mindful Sandwich



01
November 19, 2015
[01:57](#)



02
November 20, 2015
[01:33](#)



03
November 21, 2015
[01:54](#)



04
November 22, 2015
[01:26](#)



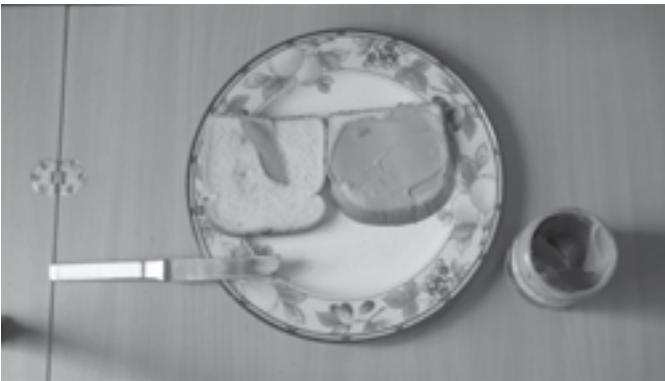
05
November 23, 2015
[01:38](#)



06
November 24, 2015
[01:34](#)



07
November 25, 2015
[01:07](#)



08
November 27, 2015
[01:09](#)

02 - Mechanized Sandwich

Each sandwich in the following section was made in which the formal operator was given a blank Powerpoint presentation with the following instructions*:



Machines are tools that use energy to complete an intended task. We, as humans, can be machines, given that we stay completely focused on the process at hand.

In an effort to be completely mindful of only the current action being performed, I require step-by-step instructions from you. Please use this Powerpoint presentation to provide simple directions on how to make a sandwich, and include only one directive per slide. If you require more slides than provided, please duplicate the given slides.

Please only require items I have in my kitchen, which include sliced white bread, peanut butter, strawberry jelly, mustard, ketchup, individually wrapped American cheese slices, bananas, butter, a toaster, plates, spoons, and knives.

*Appendix A transcribes all collected instructions.

Slowly squeeze one slice of bread.

Release bread

Watch it unfold before your eyes as it somewhat reverts to it's original flatness

Roll a banana like a rolling pin on your kitchen surface

Squeeze banana with both hands while reciting all the foods you ate/will eat today

Throw away banana

Place squeezed bread on plate

Drizzle the letter "S" in ketchup overtop bread

Compliment sandwich

Thank you to Anya Shcherbakova for this sandwich (03).

01
November 19, 2015
[13:06](#)



02
November 20, 2015
[10:19](#)



03
November 21, 2015
[06:39](#)



04
November 22, 2015
[08:46](#)



05
November 23, 2015
[07:04](#)



06
November 24, 2015
[13:00](#)



07
November 25, 2015
[11:36](#)



08
November 27, 2015
[13:13](#)



Conclusions



While making all of these sandwiches, I tried to be present for each step of the process. The mindful approach, overwhelmingly, made me appreciate the more tactile elements of sandwich-making that are often forgotten. Spreading peanut butter feels similar to spreading paint. A toasted piece of Wonderbread is so fragile yet so solid. I think that because the motions have been so ingrained in my psyche, and that the individual decisions to be made were so insignificant and unconscious, it was relatively easy to be present for each action. When applying mindfulness to more complicated projects, I think it would be more difficult, but everything begins small. I have found other activities that lend themselves to mindfulness—walking home,

for example—and will continue to practice and evaluate.

Exercise 02 was a true test of the machine in terms of accepting, or not accepting, operator input. The instructions for sandwich 02/02 contained equipment that was not on the list, and I hate to admit that there was a human element (a very brief panic) in the decision of how to act. (A decision itself is a very human thing.) Logically, when asked to perform a task that is not within its capacity, a machine will stop, or it may carry out the process, missing an important junction, and create an unintended outcome. The human part of me knew that I had a fork and a bowl in the kitchen, but the machine, according to the instructions, did not.

In many respects, this exercise was almost as much about the instruction givers as it was about me, the machine. It had the potential to be sadistic (some of them were). I debated using a machine to generate instructions (such as Excel), but any machine would be characterized by operator input, and I would know what I had input, even if I did not specifically know the next direction. A machine will usually only accept a direction from a predetermined set, but it does not know what these directions are beforehand. It accepts, or it doesn't accept. I believe the external operator was a good source for these directions, and at the very least made things more interesting.

As I made more and more sandwiches, I found that the

integration of the two mindsets became more seamless. Despite there being no set order for the steps of the mindful peanut butter and jelly, I found that I was performing them repeatedly in identical succession. This was partially by design—both processes were conducive to each mindset. Reflecting on the process, I question whether both exercises were necessary. Could one have captured the spirit of both mindset? The given directions were actually an important exercise in mindfulness—in trust that everything will be okay, and that each action is worth its own worth. I also believe autonomous action was important in exercising my ability as operator.

Ultimately, I've come to tentatively support my hypothesis:

that if an operator is mindful, the operator and the machine become one. Many of Thich Nhat Hahn's teachings put forth that if one is mindful of their environment, the individual and the surroundings will commune to form one whole being. He says, "The mind experiences itself directly within itself," and I believe this can be applied to integrating machine processes into your mind.

I think, in terms of broader applications, predetermining a system is imperative before action. The system is what will support the machine, and the mindful attitude that I can assert in its application. Even the routine act of setting up the camera was a strict system. This repetition helped me to become more mindful of my actions—to

embrace them because they would happen in or out of my control. The system will allow me to create within a container—not concerned with any other ideas besides the ones contained in the walls I've built. These practices felt really good, and I anticipate further thought and creation in this direction.

Appendix - A

Instructions from Exercise 02

01 (Davis Scherer)

1. Peel one banana.
2. Slice the banana into rounds, about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick.
3. Toast two slices of bread.
4. Butter the slices of bread.
5. On one slice of bread, spread peanut butter to the edges.
6. Place one spoonful of strawberry jam on the center of the peanut-butter'd bread, and spread evenly around.
7. Arrange banana rounds on top of the jelly.
8. Close the sandwich.
9. Cut the sandwich into triangles.

02 (Isabel Lee)

1. Butter two pieces of bread, one side only on each.
2. Mash a banana with a fork, in a bowl.
3. Mix in two tablespoons of peanut butter into the banana mash.
4. Spread peanut butter/banana mixture onto bread slices.
5. Assemble sandwich so that buttered sides face outwards.
6. Place entire sandwich into the toaster slot.
7. Toast sandwich on medium heat.
8. Remove sandwich and cut into 2 triangles, put on plate.

03 (Anya Shcherbakova)

1. Slowly squeeze one slice of bread.
2. Release bread.
3. Watch it unfold before your eyes as it somewhat reverts to it's original flatness.
4. Roll a banana like a rolling pin on your kitchen surface.
5. Squeeze banana with both hands while reciting all the foods you ate/will eat today.
6. Throw away banana.
7. Place squeezed bread on plate.
8. Drizzle the letter "S" in ketchup ovetop bread.
9. Compliment sandwich.



04 (Hannah McKalips)

1. Get out a cutting board, a butter knife, a spoon, a jar of peanut butter, and a jar of strawberry jelly.
2. Open the jar of peanut butter.
3. Insert the knife in the peanut butter and extract a substantial amount.
4. Use the peanut butter to draw an oblong ellipse on the cutting board.
5. Open the jar of strawberry jelly.
6. Insert the knife in the strawberry jelly and extract a substantial amount.
7. Use the strawberry jelly to underline your ellipse in an exclamatory manner.
8. Gather a banana.
9. Unwrap the banana and dice.
10. Sprinkle banana over the oblong peanut butter ellipse.

11. Take a single piece of pre-sliced white bread toast as desired.
12. Using a spoon, relocate anything on the cutting board onto the surface of your toasted pre-sliced bread slice.
13. Consume.

05 (Katelyn Lacey)

1. Remove bread from packaging.
2. Place into toaster.
3. Toast until lightly brown.
4. Retrieve peanut butter.
5. Open peanut butter.
6. Retrieve jelly.
7. Open jelly.
8. Remove bread from toaster.
9. Spread peanut butter onto one piece of bread with a butter knife.
10. Spread jelly onto the other piece of bread with a butter knife.
11. Place both pieces of bread together, peanut butter and jelly sides facing each other.
12. Use butter knife to slice sandwich in half from corner to corner.

06 (Ryan Schultz)

1. Dice two slices of bread into cubes of about 1 cm³.
2. Place all diced bread onto a paper plate.
3. Spread peanut butter over the entire surface of each diced cube of bread.
4. Place a dollop of strawberry jelly over the middle of the pile of diced bread cubes.
5. Eat your pb+j salad with a spoon.

07 (Rachel Lee)

1. Get out a plate, a knife, the butter, the bread, jelly, and peanut butter, and banana and put on the table.
2. Put the two slices of bread on the toaster, set to the toaster to 4 and toast.
3. While the toaster is going, slice the banana.
4. When the toaster pops up, take out the bread and butter the slices.
5. Add peanut butter on top of the butter on one slice and jelly on top of the butter on the other slice.
6. Place the banana slices on top of the peanut butter.
7. Put the jelly/butter slice face down on the bananas/peanut butter/butter slice.

08 (Gretchen Mull)

1. Unwrap two slices of cheese.
2. Place slices on plate.
3. Cut each slice into eight equal pieces.
4. Place one slice of bread on the plate.
5. Cut the piece of bread in half, hot dog style.
6. Arrange the pieces of cut cheese on one half of the bread.
7. Close the sandwich.

Appendix B

Collected thoughts on other food-based machines

1. Chipotle

I took a research trip to Chipotle in order to investigate another food-based machine. All fast- and fast-casual food establishments are machines, but Chipotle is arguably the most transparent in their process. In this particular system, the customer is the operator, providing input, and the Chipotle employee is the machine, using the tools to achieve an intended result: burrito. Operator error is a very real issue. One who has never been to Chipotle before and does not know how the machine works will very likely clog or back up the machine. I doubt the Chipotle employees practice mindfulness (or at least, the one I have spoken to certainly does not) because so much endurance is required in order for the machine to remain running, and sources of distraction are abundant and immediate. As a whole, the machine seems harried. I predict that if the cogs in the machine practiced mindfulness, Chipotle would be more efficient, less stressed, and more profitable.

*Thank you to Davis and Brittany for urging me to go to Chipotle after class.

2. Nick's International Market

The Deli Man at Nick's can also very much relate to the principle of operator error. But in this case, the machine is much smarter than you and will let you know that you are making a mistake. To this end, I have made a concerted effort to learn to operate this machine efficiently, by memorizing my sandwich, mostly in order to avoid shame. As a result, the machine and I have achieved an affectionate rapport, as one does with any machine treated with care and respect. I have learned how to achieve my desired result* without a hitch.

3. The Subservient Chicken

In 2004, Burger King released a webpage for their Subservient Chicken "Have it Your Way" campaign. On the webpage, (supposedly) a webcam was trained on a man in a chicken suit, hanging out in his living room. Visitors could type in a command, and the chicken would perform it. Essentially what happened, was that based on keywords, the site would play one of the chicken's over 300 pre-recorded activities (one of which was to "make a sandwich"). Unfortunately, the website in this form no longer exists.

The webpage functioned as a machine, by taking commands from visitors—a very smart machine, being able to filter the English language into its pre-programmed commands.

(As a 10 year old visiting this website, I did not know the activity was pre-recorded, and disregarding the previous thoughts I will continue to assume that the chicken was live.)

*A 6-inch tomato & mozzarella sub on white bread, toasted, with everything except mayo

4. [Alison Knowles' Identical Lunch](#)

A hallmark of the machine construct is being able to perform the same task over and over again, with identical (or at least very similar) results. In her Identical Lunch performance, Alison Knowles is constructing the machine from many angles. One must ask: is Knowles the machine, by eating the same lunch* everyday? Or is Knowles merely the operator of the machine that functions within her regular deli? Or the operator of her own sandwich-eating machine? And by inviting participants to eat her lunch, is she creating an army of secondary operators, or an army of machines? Or temporary cogs?

These questions contribute to the discussion of whether the operator and the machine can be one. When eliminating the role of the deli, and treating the sandwich as only raw input, I believe Knowles fits the role of a mindful machine—the operator and the machine are one. It certainly raises interesting points of the machine feeding itself in order to continue being a machine. (Although we cannot know for sure whether Knowles was practicing mindfulness while eating.)

*A tuna fish sandwich on wheat toast with butter and lettuce, no mayo, and a cup of soup or a glass of buttermilk.

