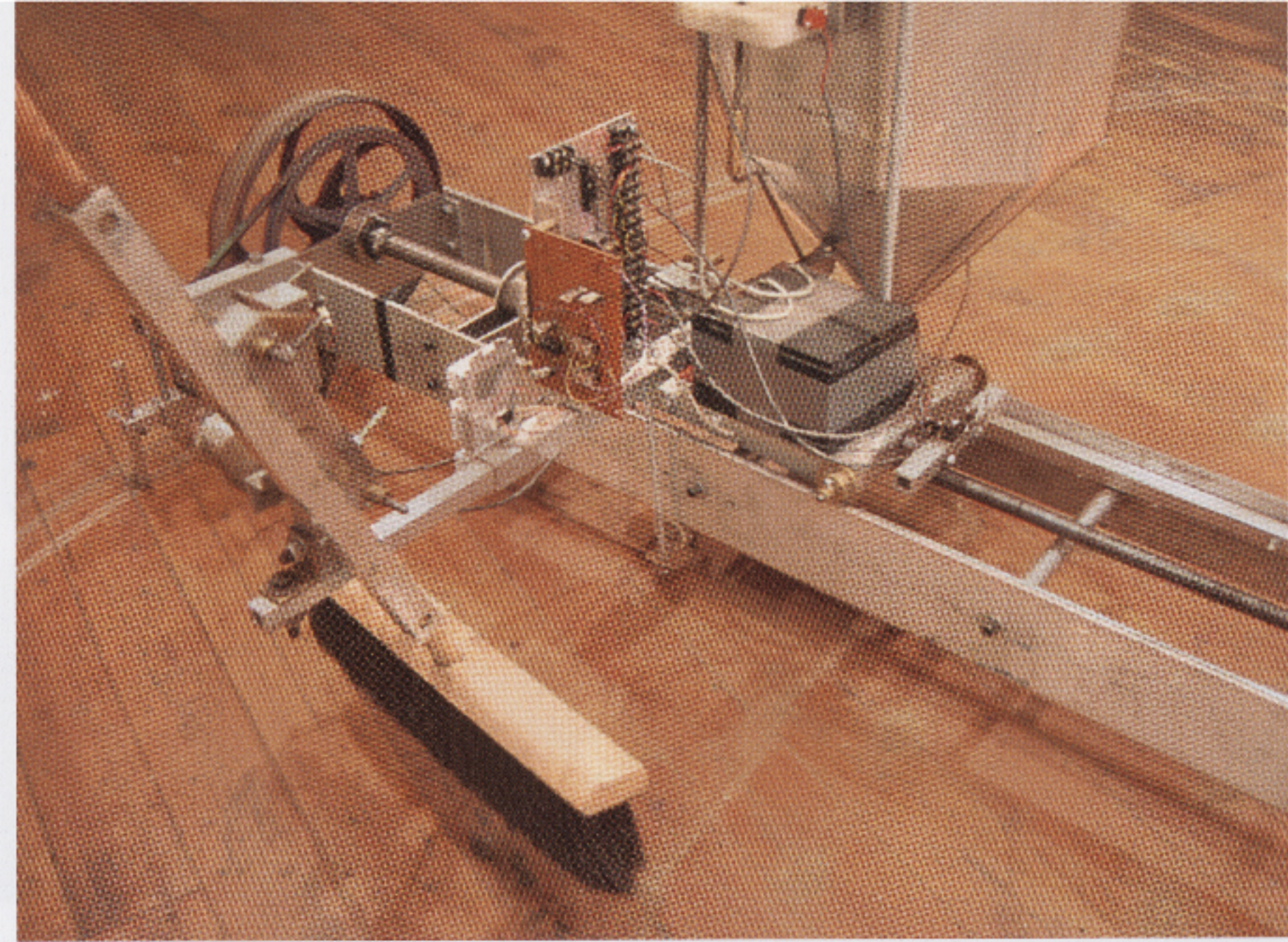
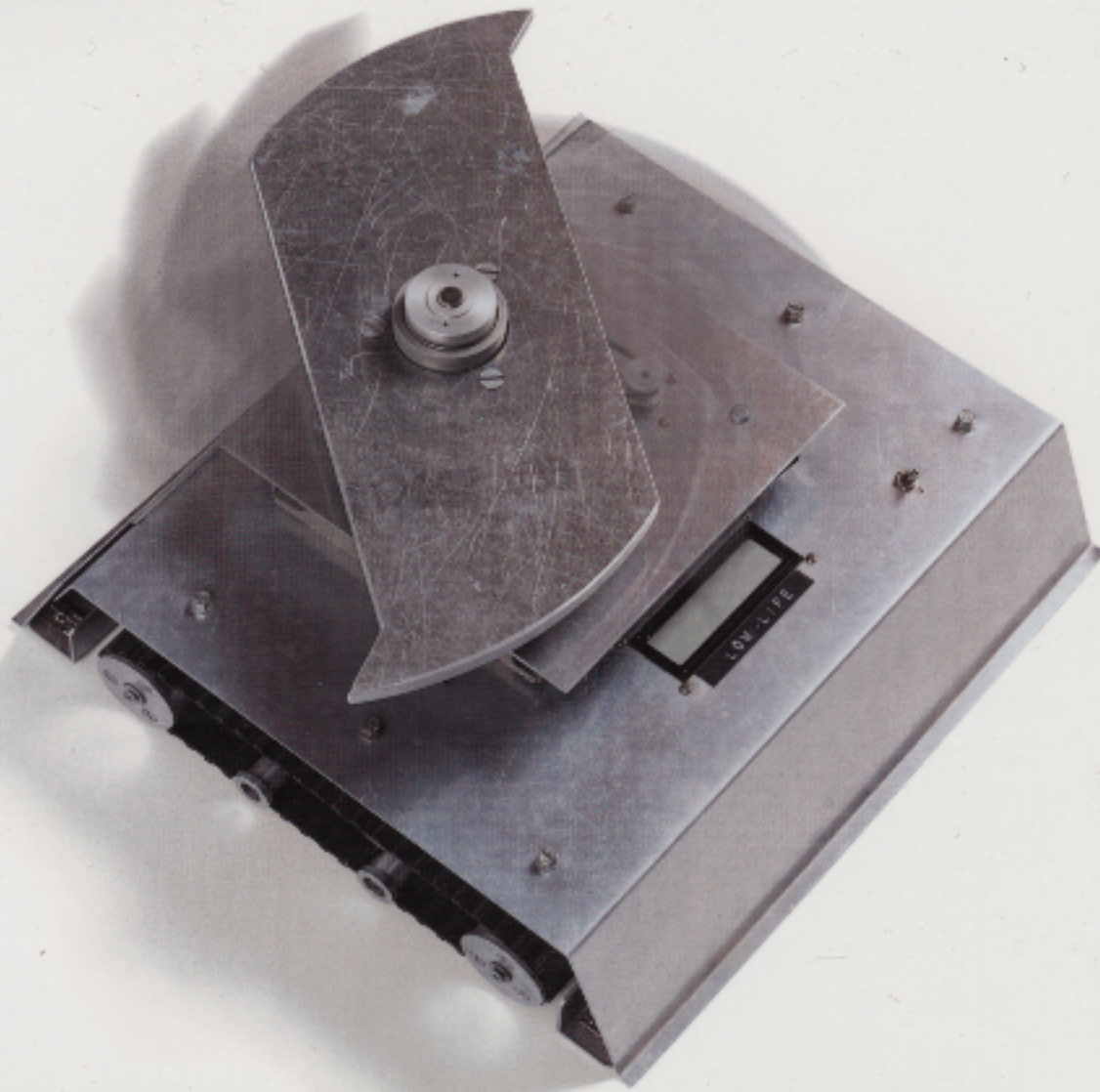


“Machine Life” exhibition catalogue
Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2004
essay by Jan Allen, pages 42-44

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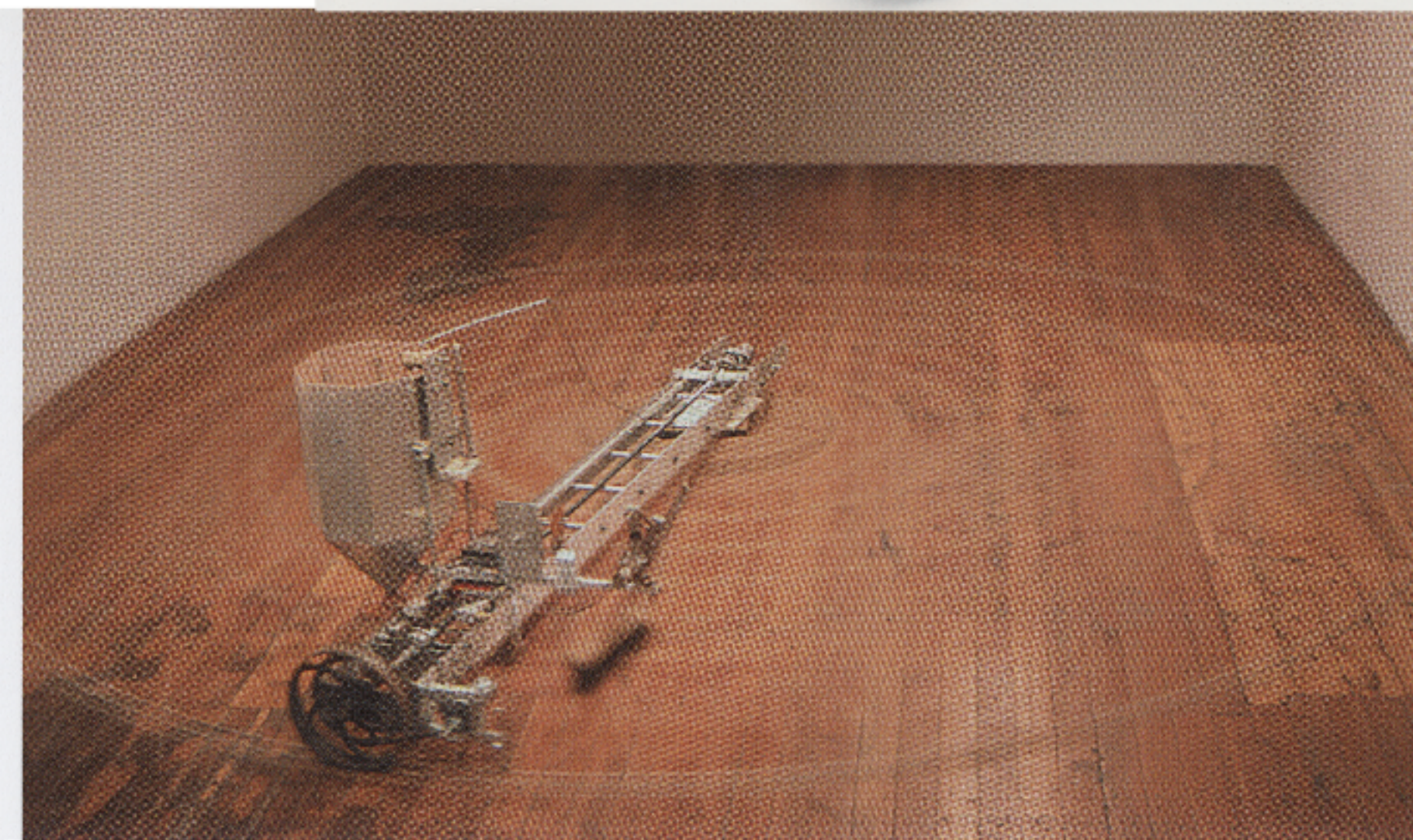


Peter Flemming, *Manual* (detail), 2001

Flemming's wide-ranging interests echo White and Back's preoccupations with electronic phenomena, technological history, and storytelling in a playful amalgam of nostalgia and engagement with current possibilities.¹⁷ Tim Dallett writes about Flemming's use of hand-assembled technologies: "For artists in particular, this is not just about saving money, it's about negotiating a balance between instrumentality and phenomenological engagement."¹⁸ Flemming's work has an emphatic handmade quality: the full exposure of assembly techniques shapes the work's meaning.

Manual is not interactive: it carries out its slow (about 60-minute) cycle, conjuring an almost palpable sense of sisyphian duration. Pathos increases as the sand mixture is re-deposited onto the floor from the feed hopper. The hand is absent, though the inclusion of the broom – like the handles on White's *The Helpless Robot* – introduces a human element. If the person is displaced and the hand taken out of manual labour, questions arise. What is the value of work? How should human labour be directed? If mechanical devices fulfil routine tasks, is human experience diminished? Such questions are further complicated in that *Manual* requires human intervention to keep going: eventually dust accumulates in the centre of the work, jamming the mechanism. In the art gallery, *Manual* exposes infrastructure, the invisible network of activity that maintains the gallery setting and stages visitor experience.

There is a compulsive quality to the unrelenting exercise of a defined activity, especially where it is combined with potential for breakdown. Sometimes, Flemming emphasizes this aspect of his work. *Defective VCR* (2000) pairs mechanical insertion and rejection of a videotape, staging the familiar frustration of technological refusal in a manner that is both humorous and vaguely sexual.¹⁹ Flemming's concoction of elaborate systems of useless robotic labour extricated from prescriptive systems becomes revelatory serious play.



Peter Flemming, *Manual* (installed at eyelevelgallery, Halifax), 2001

Peter Flemming's *Manual* (2001) deposits a spiral of dust heaps on the floor and then sweeps them up in an endless cycle. The methodical repetition of tasks and the mesmerizing elegance of their steady execution is a meditation on the nature of work. *Manual* enacts human deployment of electronic devices and servant robots. In Flemming's performative robotic art, the use of recycled, expired hardware and adherence to the principles of unadorned function do not exclude beauty. An archaic machine aesthetic is harnessed to graceful movement in gloriously emblematic works like *Manual* and *Canoe* (2002).