

John Furth: Digital Integration and the Inorganic Environment

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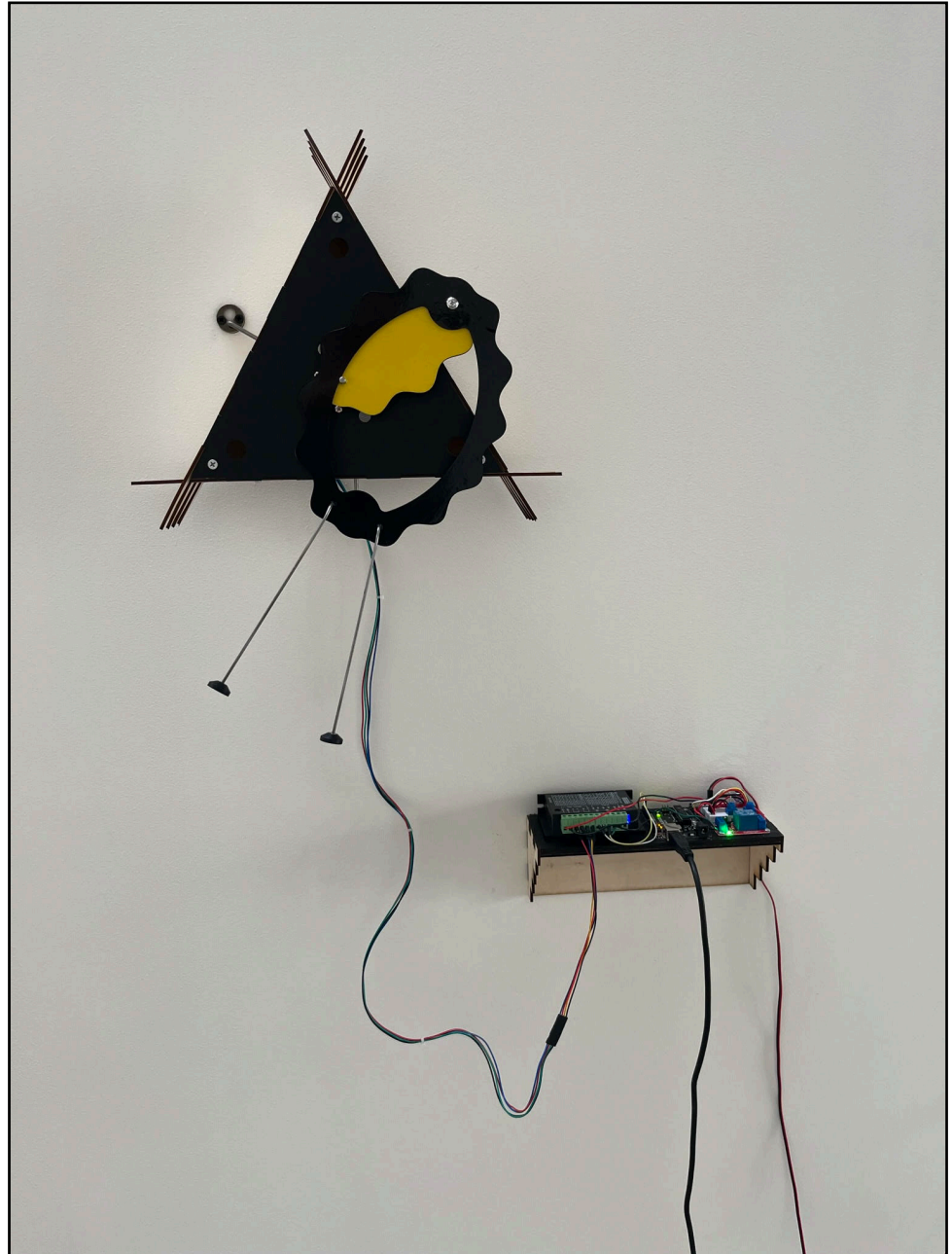
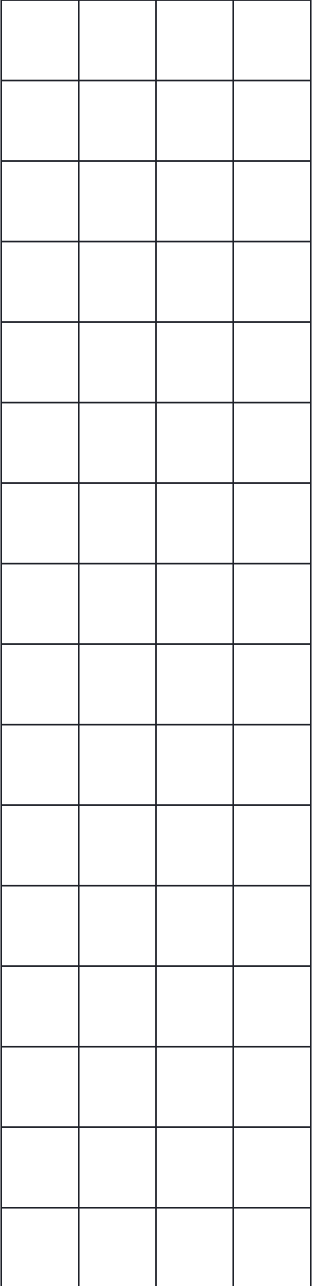
by **Giorgie O'Keeffe DePaolis**



John Furth (MFA Fine Arts 2024) in his studio

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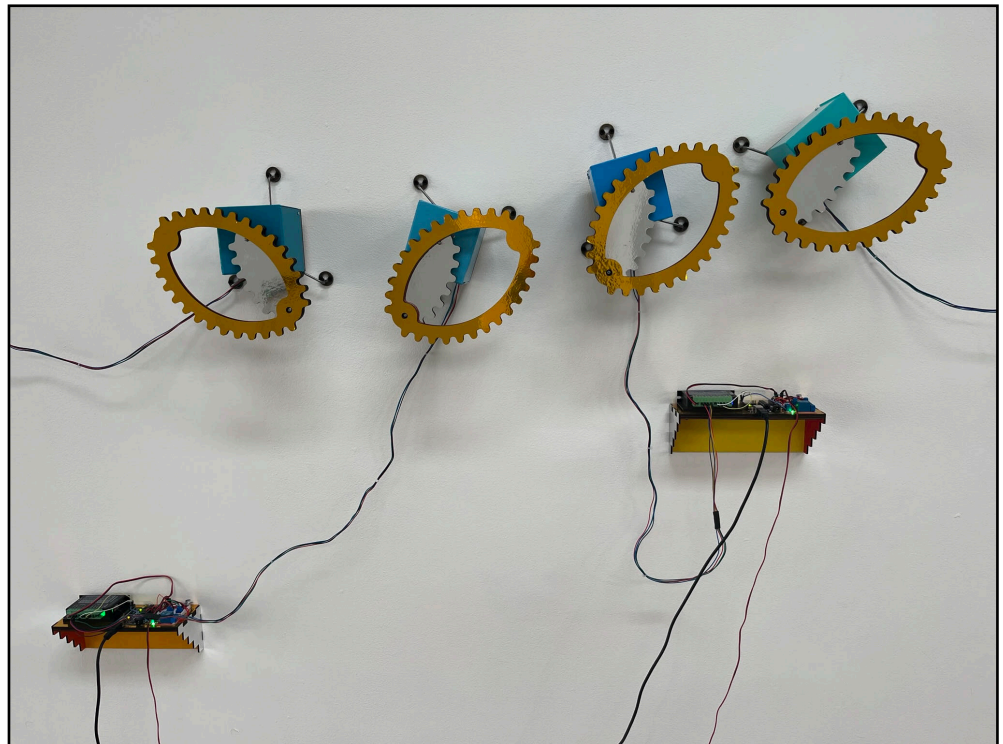
Part of *Motor Animals*, installed at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts.

Photo courtesy of John Furth.

Before stepping into his studio, I knew very little about the art and mind of mechanical sculptor John Furth (MFA Fine Arts 2024). Through our conversation, I would come to understand the relationship between theories of perception, self-awareness, and the digital world.

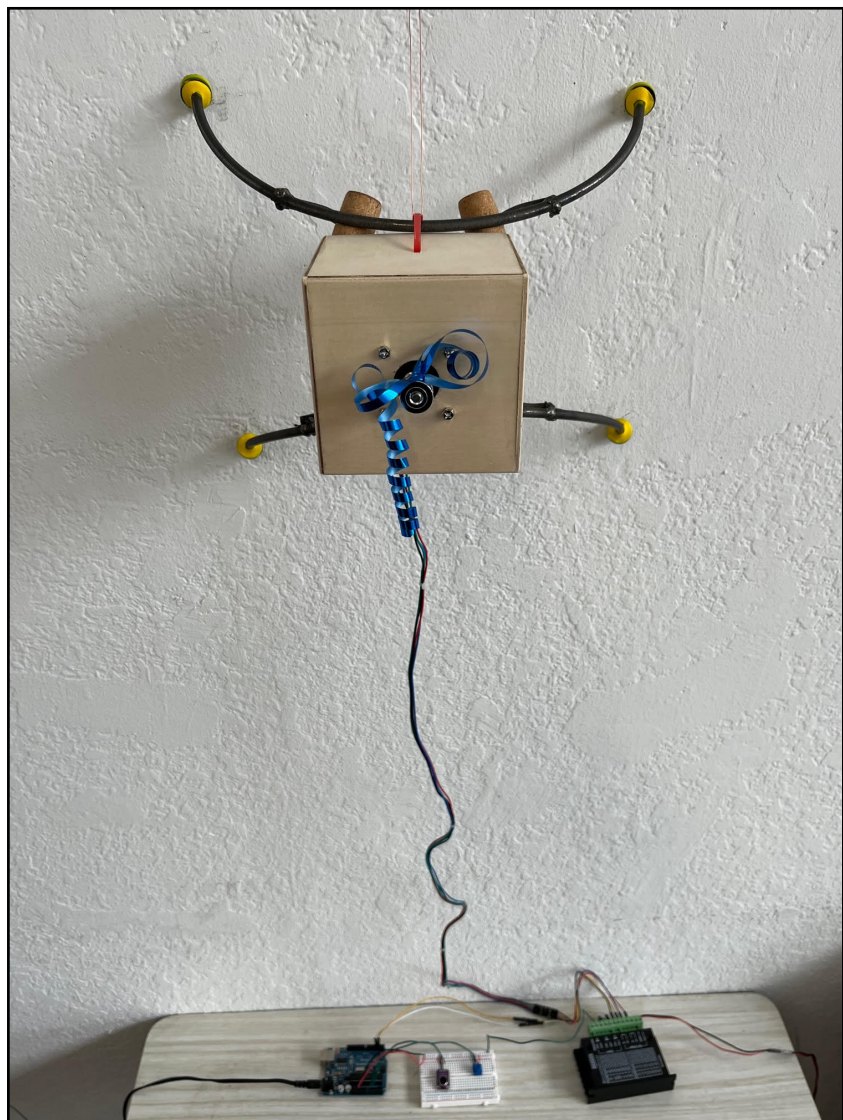
In his studio, Furth's work clings to the sides of the walls—whirring motors hidden in little wood boxes, decorated with ribbons and sparse paint, attached to metal feet. Furth describes his work concisely at three different levels of understanding: "It's wood and metal and electronics. It's electromechanical art that makes sounds. It creates an immersive experience, an installation of *organisms and environment*."

"Organisms and environment" describe the primary recursive subjects of Furth's body of creative work. Furth began making games as a child with his father—games of path-building, piece-laying, and, ultimately, map-making. As he grew older, and his affinity for table-top games developed, so did his interest in the creation of physical settings. Furth's early work consists of game pieces, tessellating tiles of a map that fit together to form different path combinations. He has since adapted his concepts of design and space-making into site-specific sculptures that confront audiences with the dialogue between ourselves and our surroundings. Inspired by his career in the contemporary tech industry, Furth makes advances in his latest work that mirror the increasingly digital landscapes subtly and constantly affecting humankind.

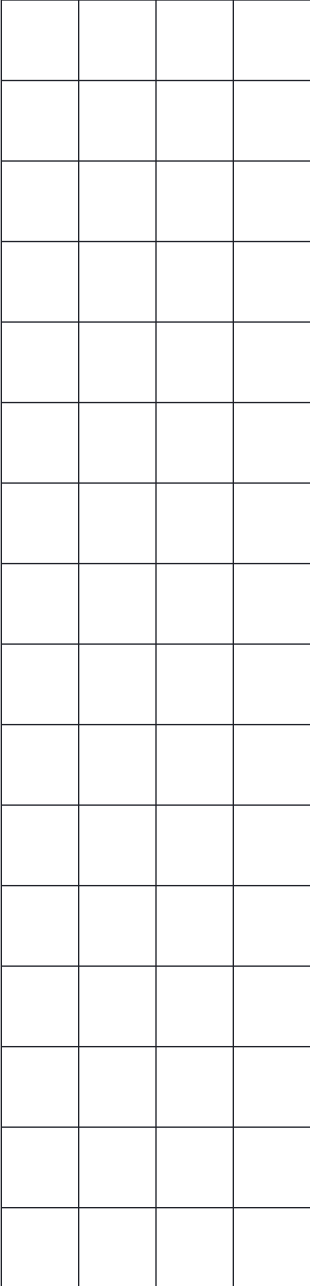


Part of *Motor Animals*, installed at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts. Photo courtesy of John Furth.

Furth refers to his current creations as *mechanical organisms*. Akin in many ways to a simple robot, but functionally distinct, they have programming that allows each one to receive and respond to sound. The artistic result is a whole environment, rather than any one machine. In response to sensing noise, the machines activate. The space becomes alive with sounds, little beeps, and hums. Their pitch and dissonant concert aim to excite or rouse the audiences' aural senses. It calls attention to the viewer's sense of self and place as an organism itself (one that perceives, receives, and responds), in relation to an external world made of other active bodies. To stand amid three or four



One of Furth's mechanical organisms, affixed to a wall in his studio, showing some of the computer parts attached to its system.
Photo courtesy of Georgie O'Keefe DePaolis.



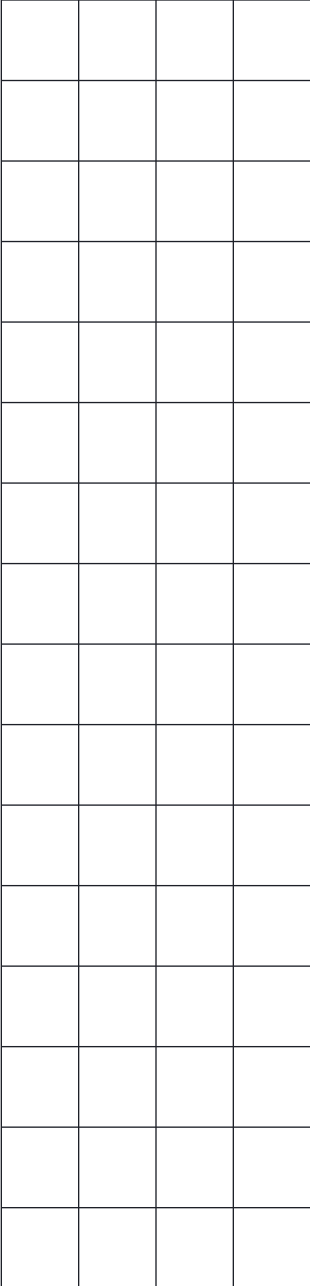
machines that react so vibrantly to the sounds we make represents the dissolution of boundaries between an organism and its environment, the perceiver and the perceived. Confronted with the multiple acting components of the exterior world, the experience also blurs the lines between exteriority (the environment) and interiorities beyond the self (other organisms) for the viewer, suggesting the monistic quality of external perception.

Technology of the digital age factors heavily into the themes and materials of Furth's works. Contemporary conditions inspired him to apply such theories of world-making and perception to our modern dependency on a digital world. During his career in coding user interfaces, he observed a tendency to mimic "real-world" (non-digital) interfaces to make their use more intuitive. He suggests that in this mimicry, we both distort the full potential of digital appliances and create an illusion of seamless-ness between the digital and non-digital worlds.

It's perilous, it's a modern peril that we're not aware of the degree [of] the decisions that are made for us as far as [digital] integration and the social-cultural, or, conversely, the social-cultural in the digital.

—John Furth, February 20, 2024

Our world becomes more and more a hybrid of the digital and non-digital worlds. Furth's machines themselves appear, aesthetically, neither digital nor organic, rather as analog artifacts with no screen. In practice, however, a tiny computer acts as their heart and head. The computer converts analog sound input into digital code, and that code tells the mechanical organism which noises to output. The sensors and speakers that absorb and project noise mediate between the external analog and internal digital of Furth's creations. Enter the viewer, and the installation at large exposes three layers of interaction: the digital, analog, and organic. As independently acting parts of a larger composite environment, Furth's fleet of hybrid analog-digital mechanical organisms builds a situation for a viewer to reflect on their position in these environments and their relationship to other positions. By subjecting ourselves to this situation, we might find solid ground in the shifting and sloping landscape of 21st century digital immersion.



Having developed the foundational model for such an environment, Furth's next steps are to evolve the physical build of his mechanical organisms. Currently, he employs prototypical methods to build the organisms. He quickly renders their bodies out of laser cut wood and adorns them with ribbons and paint in primary colors to add character and distinction. Just as the visuality of digital interfaces creates illusions of seamlessness, and the analog of Furth's creatures indicates their artificiality, the aesthetic directions that Furth takes next will ultimately decide the next layers of meaning in his project.

Giorgie O'Keeffe DePaolis (MA Visual & Critical Studies 2025) received an interdisciplinary degree from Western Washington University (2022) and has a professional background in arts education and nonprofit administration. Currently, they strive to apply their academic and field experience in curatorial and editorial capacities at CCA.