11:06am   Feb 27, 2017

JUSTIN AMRHEIN

Barring a nuclear or environmental holocaust—both of which seem more plausible with each passing day—our reliance on machines will only deepen in the future. Ideologies may reject them; individuals can try and unplug from them; but their place in society, as an example of either human ingenuity or folly, is a foregone conclusion.

One of the byproducts of this recent technological boom—i.e. the computer chip, the internet, and its place in our homes (and in our hands)—is the proliferation of artworks to assess its meaning. Some of it is good; most is not. **Justin Amrhein**'s is of the former category.

He has a new **gallery exhibition** at **Transmitter**, in Bushwick, and it features five works whose pithiness underlines the reductive point he seems to be trying to make. That is to say: the four drawings and one backlit LED print attempt to visually reduce nature and civilization to their machine-like constituents.

I first met Justin in 2014 while working on another story. He was at the **Kayrock Screenprinting Studios** (which was the subject of said article), in Greenpoint, testing out a two-color silkscreen of a diagram he'd created, which plotted the internal anatomy of the carrion beetle as though it were an abstracted machine. To my surprise, when I asked Amrhein how the diagram's legend worked, he said it wasn't scientific and that the image wasn't a diagram at all. It just *looked* like a diagram, and the legend came from his own imagination, internal logic, and/or license.
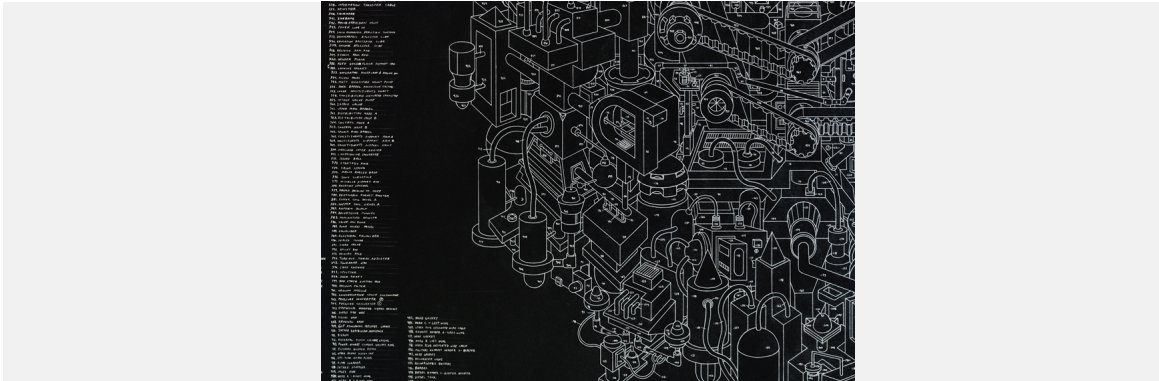
Detail: "Political Engine Diptych" (2017), Justin Amrhein.

Of the new exhibit, the work titled "Political Engine Diptych" is the obvious standout. Mounted in two pieces—hence the "diptych" of its title—each features white print over black plexiglass, backlit by LED lights and mounted to the back wall of the gallery.

To the left is a bendy, twisty horizontal bauble that looks like a car engine gone mad; to the right, a massive legend that portends to interpret the engine-like image, which is apparently a visual representation of the Obama administration's action over its eight years in office, with an additional agglomeration of machinery to the right, which represents the first chaotic weeks of the Trump administration.

Again, the work is deceptive, because the eye perceives it as a diagram, and yet it isn't. Political decisions are represented by an abstracted, blueprint-like illustration, though their logic seems to be entirely aesthetic (and not representational). And yet the message is crystal-clear: our political system, like the internal system of an automobile, is machine-like and complex. The irony, or perhaps just the statement the artist is making here, is that this particular system is a mess. (Anyone disagree?)
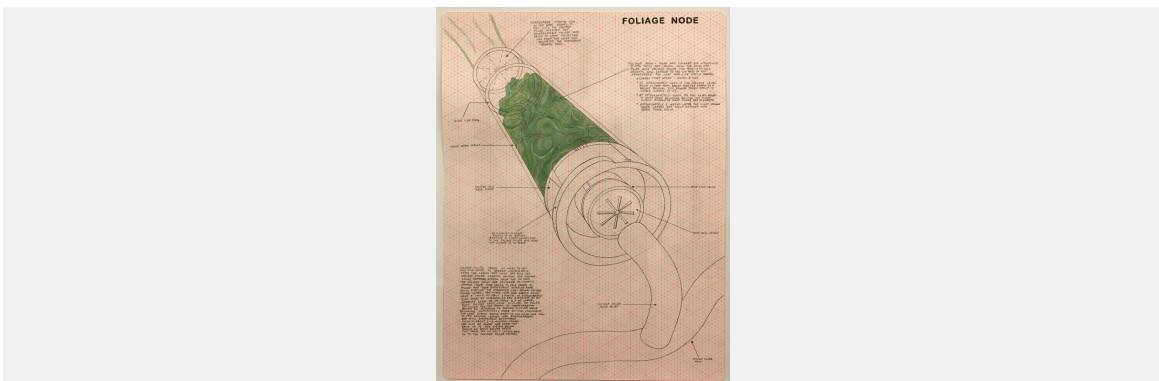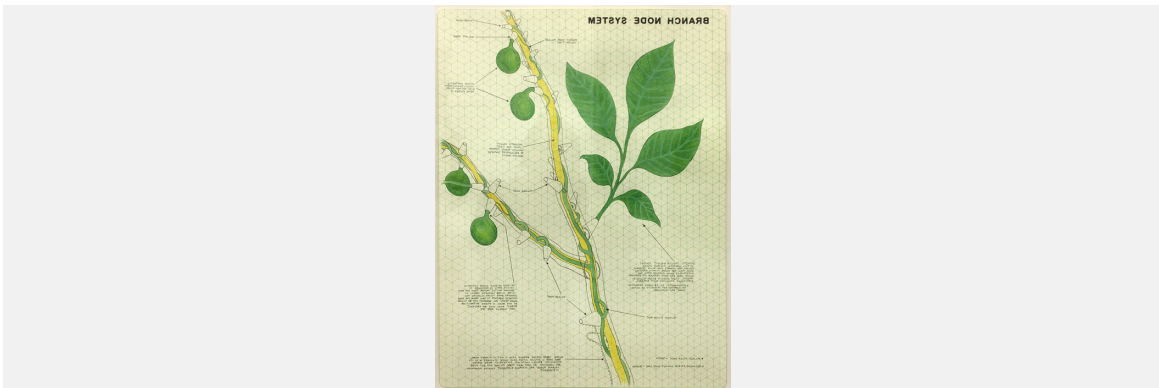

"Foliage Node" (2017), Justin Amrhein.

The other works—titled "Branch Node System," "Foliage Node," "Walnut Node," and "Replacement Walnut Tree"—draw upon the same artistic program, but turn their attention to nature itself. The need to simplify nature to its basic components is an ancient one; yet Amrhein's approach isn't scientific and thus presents a deeper question: at what point does science end and art begin? That the two intersect and seemingly run parallel seems

invariably to say something about the limitations of the human intellect in comprehending the universe.

In science, as in religion, things must be represented symbolically. Even the words I sit here typing work within that basic conceptual system. They represent reality, but are not reality itself. In the same way, Amrhein's "Branch Node System" seems particularly aware of this conundrum. It recalls the many illustrations of foliage in the *Voynich Manuscript*, which suggest an alchemy and deep mystical interplay between the mechanics of the universe and the mind (or minds) which oversees it.

"Branch Node System" (2017), Justin Amrhein.

That same mystery lies at the heart of Amrhein's work; though not that there is somehow an invisible ghost in the machine, per se. But that the machine and the ghost are one and the same. They are information: internalized and externalized, always co-existent.

That this young artist has hit on these questions and found a program by which to express them is impressive indeed. Whether he will repeat that formula ad infinitum, or continue pushing it, taking risks, probing the emotional side, and allowing himself to go wherever it takes him, is the next big question. (Brian Chidester)
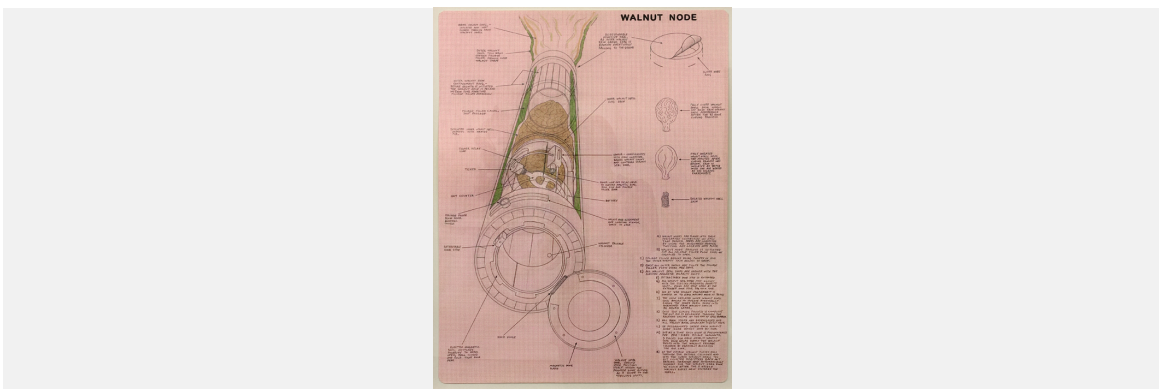
"Walnut Node" (2017), Justin Amrhein.