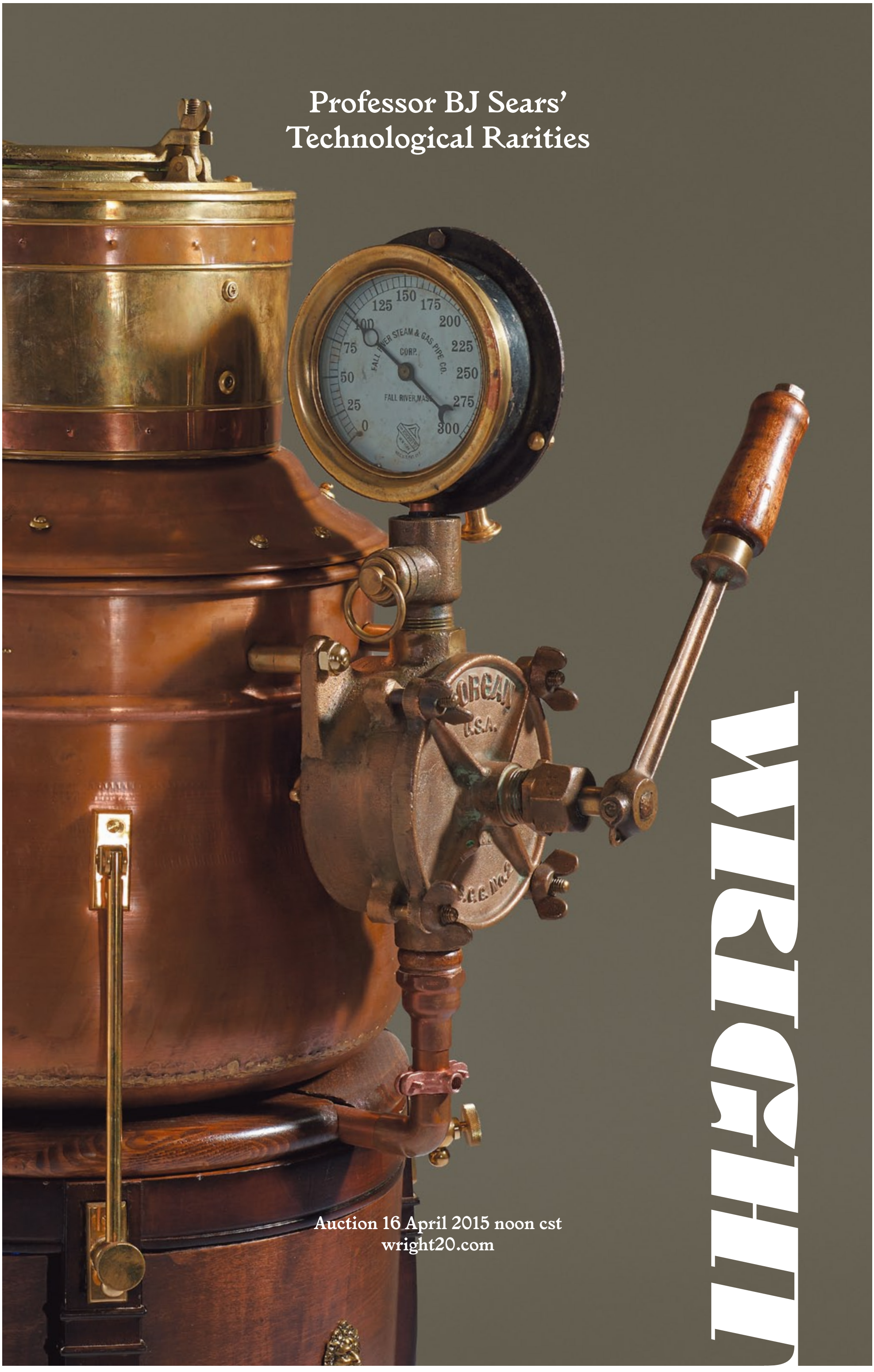
Professor BJ Sears' Technological Rarities



WRIGHT

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Professor Sears' Technological Rarities

HISTORY has its own way of lying to us. Instances of archeological digs unearthing chalices, tablets, coins and artifacts, impossibly found thousands of miles away from original source regions, convincing scholars and novices alike that we were there. Documenting is one thing, proving is another; the whispers from generations of storytellers who have long since vanished from the earth, have echoed off the canyons and castle walls and dissipated into the stratosphere eons ago. As we know, there are many dubious situations and obfuscated allegories that provide insight into the human psyche. The result: a faction of disjointed, misinterpreted tales interwoven throughout the standard format of human history – tales now written in and accepted as bond.

This is where we encounter the "recently discovered" collection of works by the late Professor BJ Sears. His exploration of the physicality of time and the repurposing of disposed, forgotten technologies has finally resurfaced. Within this serendipitous revelation, the thinkers mind turns to tinkering.

Using found objects gathered from Parisian flea markets, shops and antique outlets, Professor Sears coyly transforms inane, outdated remnants of yesteryear into breathing apparatuses with digital internal membranes geared towards the viewer, asking for interaction and curiosity. At once you are brought back to a time when industrial experimentation was courting scientific breakthroughs, equally applauding the boastful accolades of World Fairs and underground train systems. This irreverent affinity to generate new life into a former shell with a hidden secret sets off this magnificent collection of oddities and rarities.

Professor Sears does not stop there. While the previous existence of an object surely has its own history, should we not then move beyond the framework of so-called fact and add the next chapter? Of course, is the overriding opinion. But the viewer is removed from this facet. For when reading the synopsis of each playful object, you are never quite sure where the history has dried out and where the tale continues. That is the magic of Professor Sears and his Technological Rarities. It is in these brief outlines assigned to each emblematic character that one must pause several times, rereading as needed, to see the humor and grace Sears has imbued on these objects he so dearly cherished.

View Professor Sears' Technological Rarities by appointment at Wright, Chicago. Complete descriptions, videos and additional information available online at wright20.com.
Each work sold with accompanying narrative by the artist.

WRIGHT

100
BJ SEARS
Periscope
USA, 2009–2013
mixed media, found objects & electronics
28 w × 12 d × 49 h inches
$10,000–15,000

ORIGINALLY powered by Leyden jars, this early periscope was converted to alternating current sometime in the late nineteenth century. There seems to be a transmission device on the periscope but unfortunately we have yet to discover where the transmissions are being sent.

The Periscope subtly confronts the viewer with an out of body experience as one's likeness is captured by the gooseneck and projected on the upper monitor, while a video plays below. Leyden jars were added on this artwork as a reference to early incarnations of electronic "storage" apparatuses, and are historically relevant to the development of electronic study.

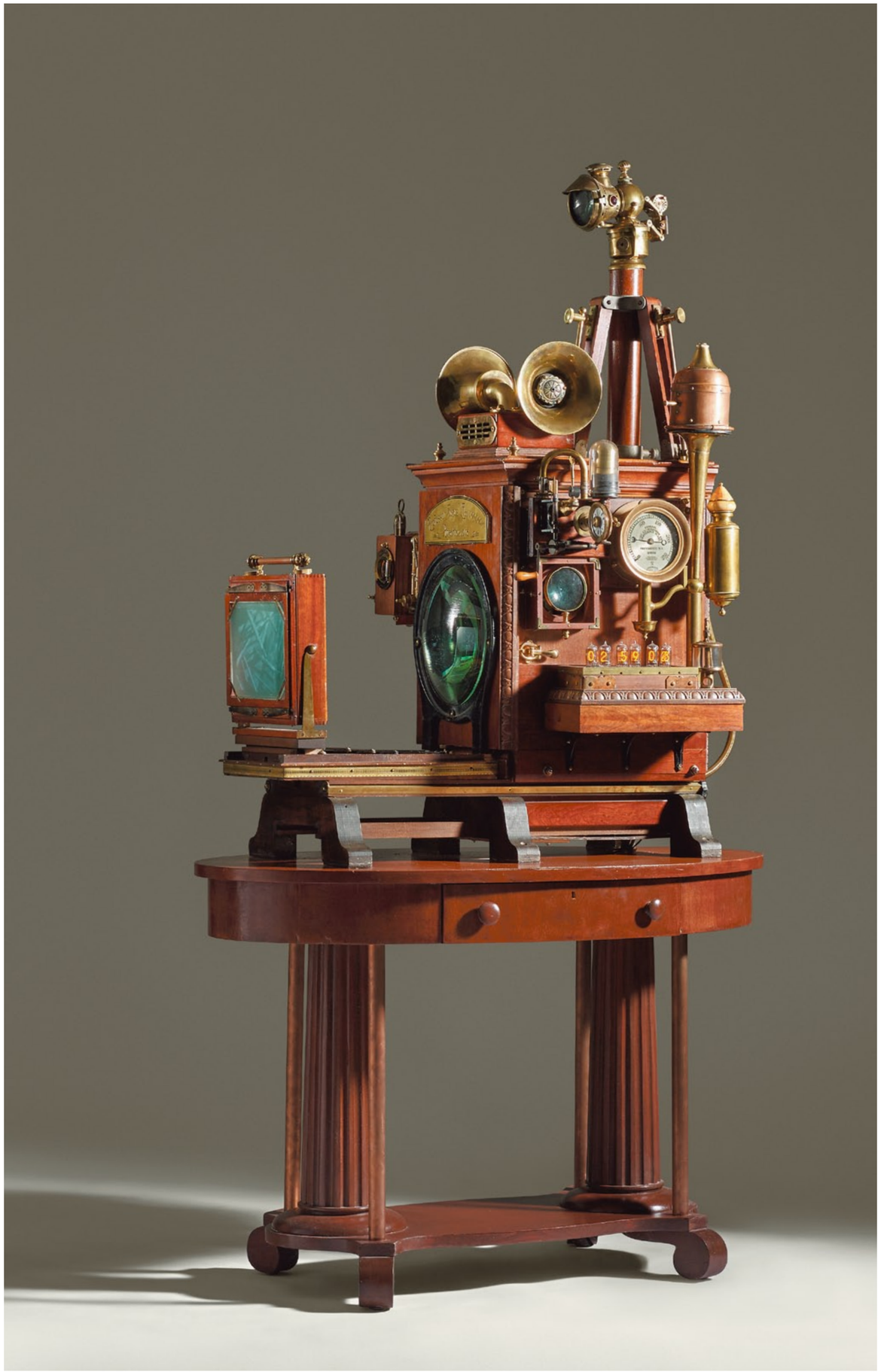
101
BJ SEARS
Electrophonic Anachroscope
USA, 2006
mixed media, found objects & electronics
27 w × 42 d × 78 h inches
$20,000–30,000

THIS particular Anachroscope purportedly was constructed in 1857. The peculiarities in its construction reveal several stages of developmental evolution.

It seems this machine was modified by a series of different inventors over the years. Most notably the device had a poly-phase distribution system added around 1900 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. There are several vestigial, and as yet, unexplained constructions mounted in various places around the machine, whose origins vary remarkably in time, certainly beyond the lifetime of a single engineer. One of the procedures listed in the notes found with the machine could only be interpreted as a time-travel function, which may explain the addition of the nixie tube chronometer. It would appear that this particular addition might possibly have increased the accuracy of the time travel function.

Professor Sears' has, as yet, been unable to access that function with any reliability and thus, the piece is not always available for exhibition.

The Electrophonic Anachroscope shows clips from a film illustrating Henry Adams' musings on the tension between The Dynamo and The Virgin (the struggle of art and industry) at the Paris Exhibition in 1900. The tubes on the side alternate diplay of the date and time. There is a companion piece to this work, the Satellite Monitor, which projects the visual transmissions from the upper periscope. This artwork was BJ Sears' first completed piece from the series.



102
BJ SEARS
Muybridge Experiment
USA, 2013
mixed media, found objects & electronics
20.5 w × 11 d × 33 h inches
$10,000 – 15,000

ON June 15, 1878, in the presence of the press, Eadweard Muybridge photographed Leland Stanford's Thoroughbred "Sallie Gardner" at a gallop to prove a point popularly debated at the time. Stanford purported that for a moment, all four of a racehorse's hooves are off the ground simultaneously. Muybridge's series of 24 photographs proved him right. Scientific American was among the publications that carried reports of Muybridge's groundbreaking 1878 work in motion studies.

At the press of a button, a scrolling series of images by Eadweard Muybridge proves the theory that, while galloping, all four feet of a horse are lifted off of the ground during the gait. On the left side, there is a receiver that features narration by the artist.

THIS wireless satellite monitor is the companion piece to Professor Sears' Anachroscope. At the time of its construction, the video transmission process was not fully understood and the public was warned not to stand between the monitor and the source of the image.

103
BJ SEARS
Satellite Monitor
USA, 2006
mixed media, found objects & electronics
20 w × 22 d × 61 h inches
$15,000 – 20,000

The Satellite Monitor projects the visual information transmitted to it by the Electrophonic Anachroscope. Though a companion piece, it is an independent work that can accept transmissions from alternate sources.

104
BJ SEARS
The Mills Device
USA, 2008–2010
mixed media, found objects & electronics
21.5 w × 13.5 d × 45.25 h inches
$15,000–20,000

This device was found in the summer home of Connecticut Senator Tristram H. Mills several years after his death in 1852. His grandson, Lowell R. Mills discovered the device. Apparently at some point during the Senator's tenure it had been updated and converted to electrical power. It was operational at the time of its discovery and continues to update itself to this day. Lowell remembers his grandfather, who considered himself a liberal pluralist, using it to "take the pulse of the nation." Senator Mills never revealed who invented it or how it operated. The initials "TD" are found on several parts. This may point to Thomas Davenport, a well-known inventor of the day and early adopter of electrical power.

BJ Sears found a film taken by Thomas Edison of Paris in 1900. In 2006, Sears traveled to Paris and shot film of the same places from the same locations as Edison had over 100 years earlier. The Mills Device, formerly known as The Moving Picture Recursive Distillation Apparatus Series A, features these two films superimposed and projected on one of its ocular components.

105
BJ SEARS
Reddington's Phonelescope
USA, 2012
mixed media, found objects & electronics
41.5 w × 15 d × 34 h inches
$15,000–20,000

WHISPERING Jack Reddington graduated from the Colorado School of Mines in 1899 and began his career as a mining engineer. His real passion however, was the transmission and amplification of sound waves. Jack, being a religious soul, believed the dynamic range of the human voice to be divine and he never left that precious insight out of any of his experiments in the caverns. The scientific beliefs of the day were that light waves, like sound waves, needed a medium for transmission and Jack spent all his off-hours trying to alter what was called the luminiferous aether ("aether wind") that carried them. This was in complete contradiction to the early Michelson-Morley experiments. Jack's belief was that using different wavelengths of light in the presence of the divine sound could slightly alter the aether itself and thus produce sounds never heard by man before. After several catastrophic experiments resulting in cave-ins, Jack was relieved of his duties and barred from the mines. Reddington's Phonelescope is the only surviving machine from Jack's ill-fated experiments. His 1912 patent remains his only legacy.

In this animated artwork, a pierced ball or compass slowly rotates while light beams are refracted through a sphere, creating an eccentric light show. Reddington's Phonelescope also whispers through a solitary speaker, the audio component can be altered by the user.

WRIGHT

106
BJ SEARS
Sinehouse Archive
USA, 2009
mixed media, found objects & electronics
28.75 w × 18 d × 65.75 h inches
$20,000–30,000

PICTURED here is a replica of a device made in the summer of 1860 by Dr. Wolfous Sinehouse. Dr. Sinehouse had, some years earlier, begun an experiment in communal living on a four hundred-acre farm situated approximately five miles south of Chillicothe Ohio. Two hundred eleven men, women, and children, lived there in what was to become a highly controversial utopian society. Unique among separatist communities, Sinehouse Farm welcomed all races and nationalities into their flock. To better bathe in the glow of their creator's majesty the members kept clean-shaven heads and never wore hats of any kind. This tonsured community, however, embraced modern technology and Dr. Sinehouse had a willing base for his experiments.

Superseding the Daguerreotype process that utilized copper plates, Dr. Sinehouse created a new medium that not only captured images of his followers but reportedly allowed them to be projected as well. Described by Sinehouse as a "Mirror with a memory," this device apparently used pressurized double glass plates treated with silver iodide in an electrical field to reveal the subject. This process was meant to momentarily freeze the soul of the participant in silver iodide and archive the humanity of his flock.

Dr. Sinehouse died unexpectedly in 1862 during an influenza epidemic and with him died his photographic process. The device you see here was recreated from accounts described in one of the survivor's journals.

Alternating stoic portraits morph and change on the screen of the Sinehouse Archive, a work that claims to steal the soul of each sitter. A vertical arrangement of illuminated diodes flank the case, flickering during operation.

107
BJ SEARS
Sevastapol Travel Clock
USA, 2011
mixed media & found objects
18.5 w × 12 d × 38.5 h inches
$10,000–15,000

SURVIVING the Siege of Sevastopol, this “travel clock” seemed to have been abandoned by Major General Adolphus Tull of the Grenadier Guards and was found on the battlefield, in September 1855. Contrary to Florence Nightingale’s reports of horrendous living conditions in the Crimea this clock may be evidence that some in the officer corps soldiered on. The clock doubled as a tea pot.

The central body of this artwork is a repurposed tea kettle, which Sears' deft hand transformed into a clock and time travel device; as a lone mantle piece, the Sevastapol Travel Clock is a beautiful object.

108
BJ SEARS
The Cartesian Kiosk
USA, 2012
mixed media, found objects & electronics
23 w × 11 d × 43.25 h inches
$15,000–20,000

THIS device was found in the basement of a modest home in West Orange, New Jersey some time after the turn of the century. It’s notable because it seems to be self-referencing. The Latin motto, exertus ergo sum, is printed on the underside of the copper enclosure. This phrase has given the device its present day name, The Cartesian Kiosk. Its film program points to Mr. Edison’s invention of the lightbulb but the humor may well place its origin with Tesla.

The Cartesian Kiosk displays a brief video relating to Thomas Edison's invention of the lightbulb, but the historical reference suggests that Nikola Tesla deserves more credit for this world-changing opus.

109
BJ SEARS
Lyndhurst Unit
USA, 2007
mixed media & found objects
14.5 w × 14.5 d × 72 h inches
$10,000–15,000

THIS unit (number 3 in the series) was discovered standing alone in the hallway outside the upstairs library of Lyndhurst, Jay Gould's country house on the Hudson. Gould was chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad from 1874 to 1884. His daughter Anna Gould, Duchess of Talleyrand-Perigord, donated the house to the National Trust in 1961. Unique among the series, this unit was entirely self-contained and operated apparently undisturbed for the better part of four decades following the Great War.

A free-standing object, this work demonstrates the keen eye of Sears and his willingness to let the materials form their own dialogue. The reference to Jay Gould's Lyndhurst Mansion and the smallish scale of the interior rooms is obfuscated.

110
BJ SEARS
Kipling piece
USA, 2014
mixed media, found objects & electronics
29 w × 23 d × 43.5 h inches
$10,000–15,000

WHEN the flush of a newborn sun fell first on Eden's green and gold,
Our father Adam sat under the Tree and scratched with a stick in the mold;
And the first rude sketch that the world had seen was joy to his mighty heart,
Till the Devil whispered behind the leaves: "It's pretty, but is it Art?"

Wherefore he called to his wife and fled to fashion his work anew—
The first of his race who cared a fig for the first, most dread review;
And he left his lore to the use of his sons—and that was a glorious gain
When the Devil chuckled: "Is it Art?" in the ear of the branded Cain.

They builded a tower to shiver the sky and wrench the stars apart,
Till the Devil grunted behind the bricks: "It's striking, but is it Art?"
The stone was dropped by the quarry-side, and the idle derrick swung,
While each man talked of the aims of art, and each in an alien tongue.

They fought and they talked in the north and the south, they talked and they fought in the west,
Till the waters rose on the jabbering land, and the poor Red Clay had rest—
Had rest till the dank blank-canvas dawn when the dove was preened to start,
And the Devil bubbled below the keel: "It's human, but is it Art?"

The tale is old as the Eden Tree—as new as the new-cut tooth—
For each man knows ere his lip-thatch grows he is master of Art and Truth;
And each man hears as the twilight nears, to the beat of his dying heart,
The Devil drum on the darkened pane: "You did it, but was it Art?"

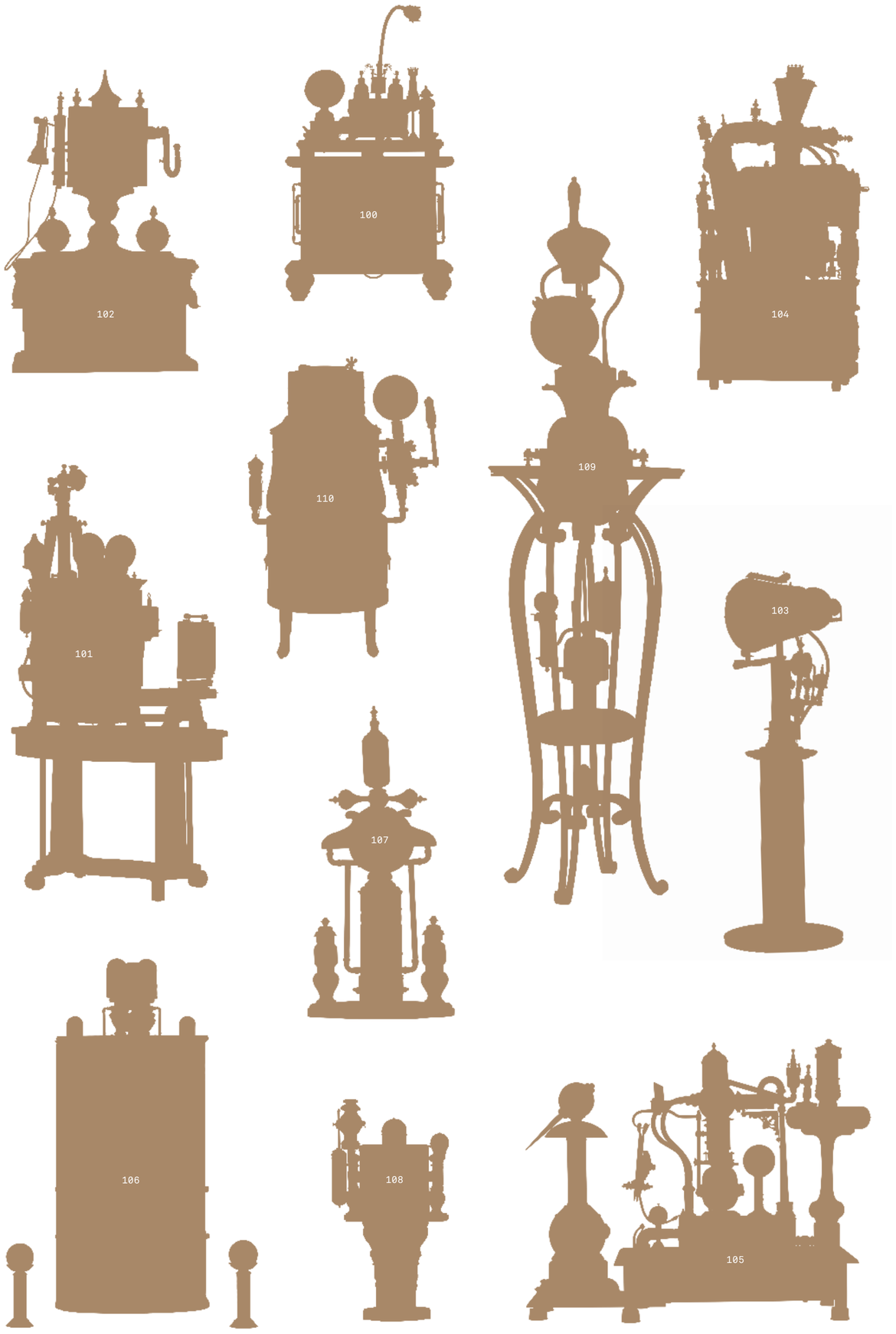
We have learned to whittle the Eden Tree to the shape of a surplice-peg,
We have learned to bottle our parents twain in the yolk of an addled egg,
We know that the tail must wag the dog, as the horse is drawn by the cart;
But the Devil whoops, as he whooped of old: "It's clever, but is it Art?"

When the flicker of London's sun falls faint on the club-room's green and gold,
The sons of Adam sit them down and scratch with their pens in the mold—
They scratch with their pens in the mold of their graves, and the ink and the anguish start
When the Devil mutters behind the leaves: "It's pretty, but is it art?"

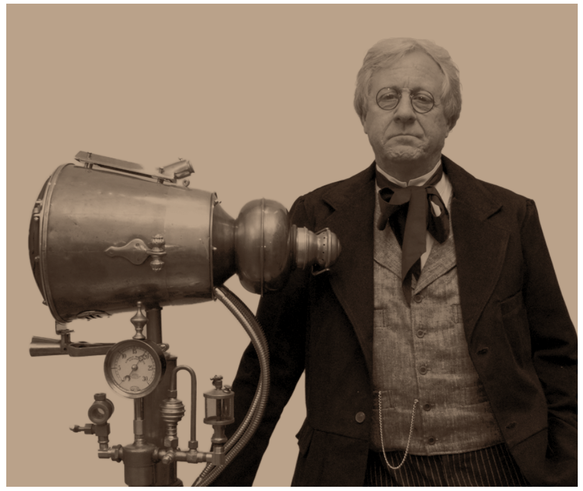
Now, if we could win to the Eden Tree where the four great rivers flow,
And the wreath of Eve is red on the turf as she left it long ago,
And if we could come when the sentry slept, and softly scurry through,
By the favor of God we might know as much—as our father Adam knew.

—Rudyard Kipling, *The Conundrum of the Workshops*

Although slightly unassuming at first, this artwork compels the viewer to peer into the porthole from above. Inside a video monitor, activated by pulling on a handle, displays a film of Orson Welles reciting the first stanza from Rudyard Kipling's poem, The Conundrum of the Workshops, begging the question "It's pretty, but is it Art?".



"I liked the idea of the confluence of art and science. I liked the idea of craftsmanship. I liked the idea of repurposing, remixing, assembling two disparate objects that result in some third medium. I like not knowing where I'm going until I get there."



PROFESSOR Sears launched his investigations as an exploration of concepts first outlined in "The Education of Henry Adams," the biography of a distant relative who was a historian, and later explored by the great novelist Thomas Pynchon. In the late 19th century, Adams had lost faith in the veracity of historical narrative sequence. Spurred by two historical events of the time, the showing of the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900 and the discovery of radium, Adams realized the alternative to sequences in time was two opposing energies felt by all: the Virgin and the Dynamo. The Dynamo was mechanized force, technology, and order and the Virgin was a radiant artistic spirit, chaos, and the "occult, super sensual, irrational."

Adams looked to determine each of these forces' effects on human progress, and Professor Sears picked up his torch. Referencing Pynchon, who had built upon these concepts developed by Adams, Sears wrote that the form of Pynchon's fiction may in fact be an example of the entropy of information theory—where equiprobability permits maximum choice in constructing a message. As one of his characters says, "the only thing you can do with the totality of facts is finagle." This necessarily increases the involvement of the reader and demands that he imposes his own meaning.

Here Sears launches his experiments into art, mechanics and contemporary digital technology. Creating his narrative through historical facts that run just alongside the truth, Sears builds concrete homages to the Dynamo that in fact perhaps, secretly, work in service of the Virgin. —Kelsey Sundberg

BJ SEARS (1948-2014) Born in 1948, Burton J Sears earned his BA from DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana and his MFA from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles where a distinguished film program advanced his career in media and editing. After moving to California, Sears worked on numerous films, including Amadeus, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Jacob's Ladder and Henry & June among many others. His next venture took him to Georgia where he taught at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). Under his tutelage, the SCAD film program has become one of the preeminent and top-ranking curriculums in the country.

An excerpt from BJ Sears' speech at Savannah College of Art and Design

TAKE an ice cube for example. If you watch it start to melt on a flat surface, you can imagine, pretty easily, what the resulting puddle will look like. The mechanics are fairly straightforward. However if you look at a puddle of water and try to imagine what the ice cube looked like that caused the puddle you may find it more difficult. Probably because there are an infinite number of ice cube shapes that could have caused that puddle. The first direction, from ice cube to puddle, is called forward process. The second direction, the backward process, is much, much more complicated. The forward process is generally used in physics and engineering; the backward process in non-repeatable, non-experimental historical approaches.

BUTTERFLY

Next let's take a less linear example of what could be called "the butterfly in Africa" paradigm; that is, a small input in a complex system can lead to nonrandom large results depending on very special conditions. A single butterfly flapping its wings in Cote d'Ivoire may be the certain cause of a hurricane in North Carolina, though the hurricane may take place a couple of years later.

ATLANTIC HURRICANE PATH

However given the observation of a hurricane in North Carolina, it is dubious that you could figure out the causes with any precision: there are billions and billions of small things such as wing flapping butterflies in Timbuktu and sneezing wild dogs in Australia that could have caused it. The "cone of probability" that you have all seen on the weather channel pointing to where the hurricane might possibly make landfall has, invariably, a point at the other end. That alone should tell us something about complex systems and the reliability of the historical method.

Historians undertake to arrange sequences—called stories, or histories—assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect. These assumptions hidden in the depths of dusty libraries, have been astounding, but commonly unconscious and childlike; so much so, that if any captious critic were to drag them to light, historians would probably reply, with one voice, that they had never supposed themselves required to know what they were talking about.

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