

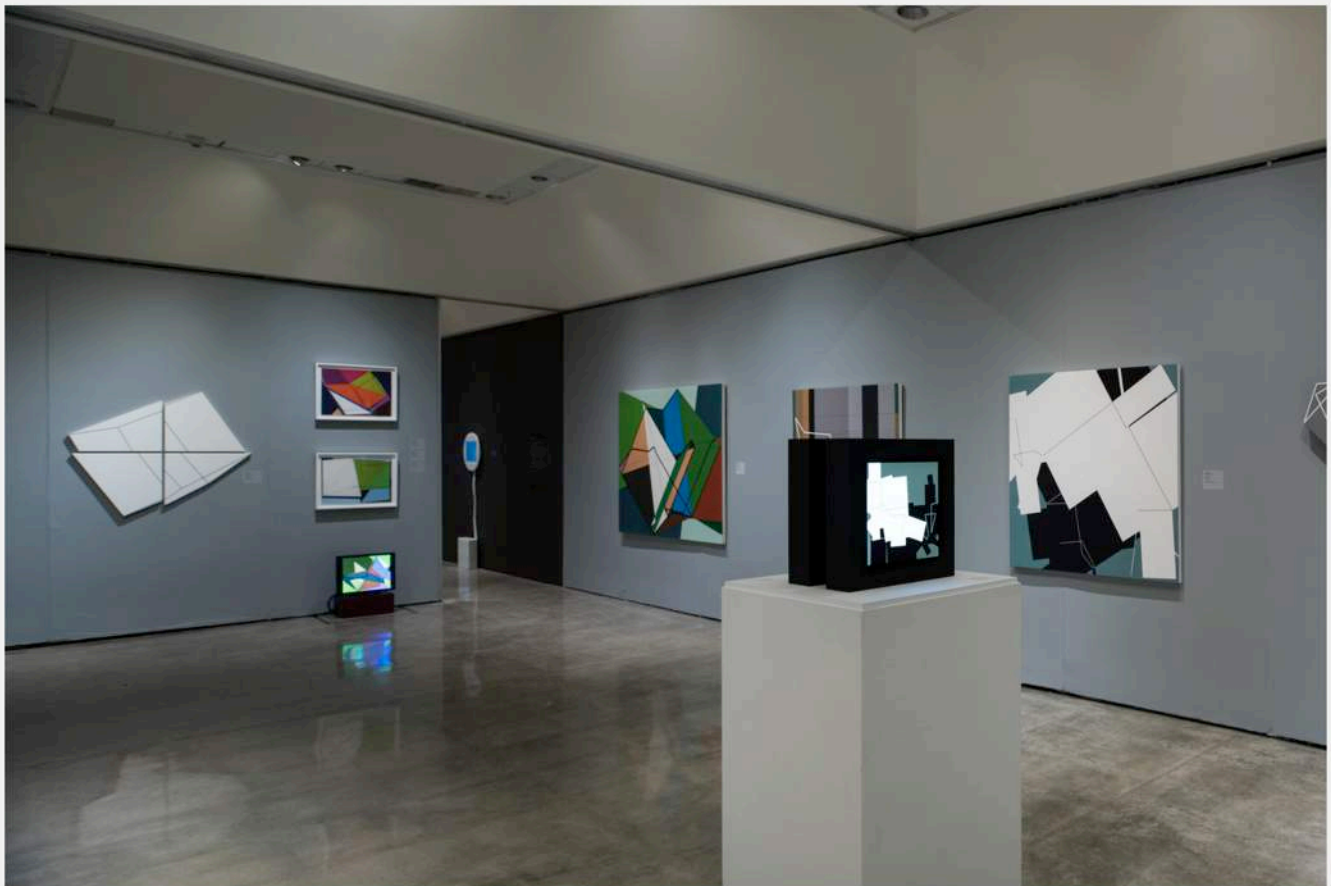


EVENTS

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Rethinking Art & Machine – A Conversation with Marla Wasser

written by **Greg J. Smith**



Outside of Montreal and a few stalwart artist-run centres, interactive and media art-focused exhibitions aren't that regular of an occurrence in Canada. This is a little strange given how many established and emerging practices can be found in the 'Great White North', and can presumably be chalked up to a pervasive conservatism in many institutions. But, this is beginning to change and we're finally starting to see *some* of the more forward-thinking contemporary art museums in Canada expand their bandwidth to include more digital and electronic art. So with all of that said, Toronto-based curator Marla Wasser's *RAM: Rethinking Art & Machine* exhibition is a very welcome addition to the Canadian arts programming landscape, as it offers a window into a number of vital practices. Originally staged at Kitchener-Waterloo's THEMUSEUM in 2011-12 and currently showing at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS) in Halifax, the show assembles work from a number of mid and late career media art heroes. Quite impressively, it features a colour-coordinated listening station by Angela Bulloch, Jim Campbell's low-res sculptural light installations, the angular machinations of computer art pioneer Manfred Mohr, Alan Rath's playful robotic sculptures, and interactive imagery by Daniel Rozin.

As a follow-up to a warm conversation that we shared on a cold Toronto day in January, Wasser has engaged in a fairly extensive interview with CAN in which she details the evolution of RAM, her experiences engaging a more general audience when showcasing technology-based artworks, and her art consultancy Pursuits Inc.



↑ From left: Daniel Rozin's Darwinian Straw Mirror (2010), Sharon / West Bank (2003), and Brushed Steel Mirror (2010)

First off, let's get some context: Could you outline the initial line of thinking that inspired *RAM: Rethinking Art & Machine*? How has the show evolved from its first staging to the current one at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia?

I was working with the THEMUSEUM (who were called the Children's Museum at the time) and the Waterloo community on creating the Warhol exhibition over a, very fast, nine-month period. The whole experience from collaborating with the museum staff, to being brought into their community through the Museum Board inspired me to want to work with them again. They were engaged and excited, open to new ideas about art, and just a pleasure to work with all around.

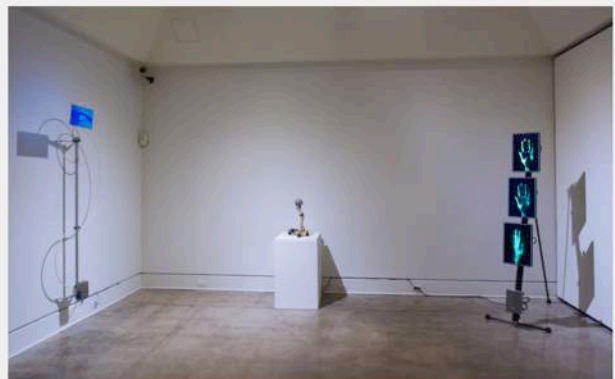
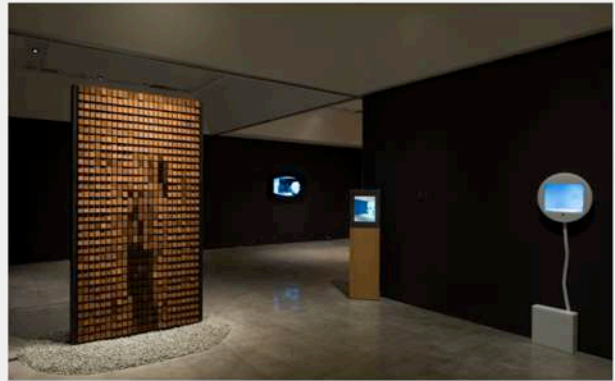
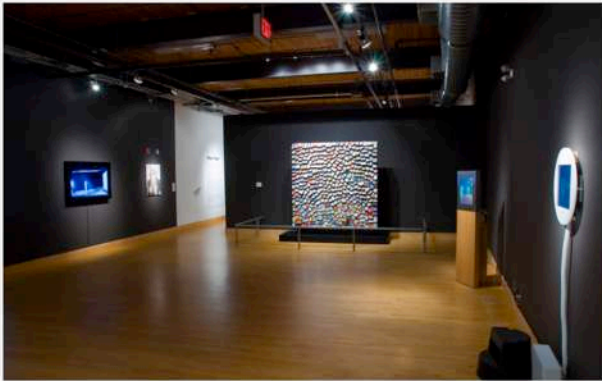
However, the moment the opportunity presented itself to work with THEMUSEUM on a future exhibition—the idea for our next collaboration became clear. Waterloo is a technology-based region, and I love art. The obvious choice was a marriage of the two. Then came the challenge. How you define that? What answers are you looking for? That was the journey, to be inspired by living artists and wanting to share their stories—and so two years of research began.

“Bringing this retrospective format to an art and technology exhibition, for me, would allow the opportunity to explore the deeply personal visions of the artists and the impact of the changing world around them—and that intrigued me.”

Creating the platform of how a museum exhibition could look within the huge range of new media art was intimidating at first. I started to reflect on what my favorite museum experiences were—I love museum artist retrospectives, which allow the audience to experience a lifetime of work from an artist and to truly understand their personal evolution. This would include the stories of their mentors, families, and education, and

also speaks to historical events and technological progress in the world around them. Bringing this retrospective format to an art and technology exhibition, for me, would allow the opportunity to explore the deeply personal visions of the artists and the impact of the changing world around them—and that intrigued me.

The Waterloo community of innovators and risk takers really set the bar high. In coming back, I created the exhibition with them in mind, focusing on the pioneers, showcasing the many different ways technology exists in the arts, and tried to share it in an equally innovative and inspiring way.



↑ Daniel Rozin (top) & Alan Rath (bottom) installation views at THEMUSEUM in 2011 (left) and AGNS (right)

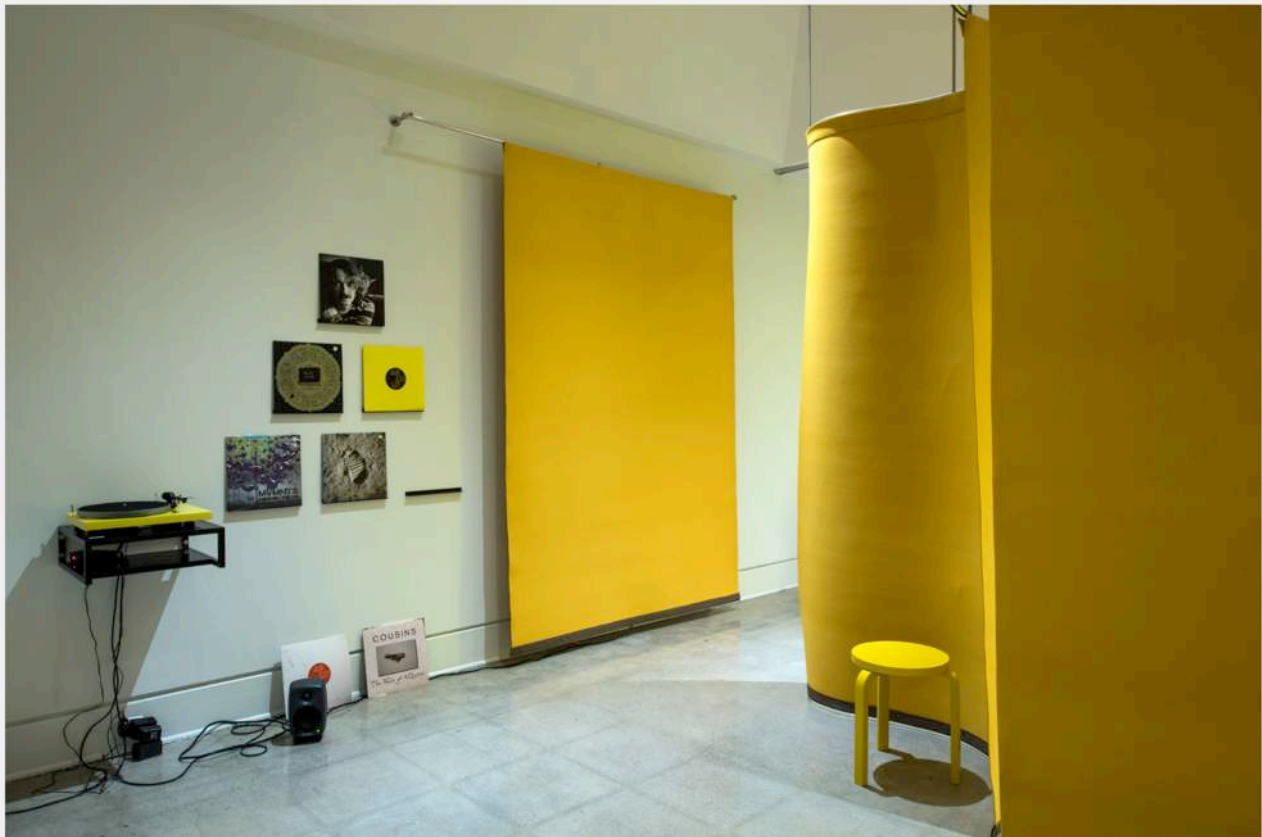
Photos on left courtesy of THEMUSEUM, shot by Derek Weidl

How has the show evolved from its first staging to the current one at AGNS?

There was a natural evolution that happened within the exhibition between 2012 and 2015. It is really interesting when you're comparing the two iterations, technology is changing so rapidly and to experience this through the visual and tangible medium of art is incredibly unique.

There were two significant ways that I looked at this evolution. From my personal curatorial perspective, I had this incredible opportunity to go back to the artists and rediscover with them their entire body of work. We knew that the curatorial focus would continue to feature historical works and would now include artworks and installations the artists had created up until 2015. That was really important for me, as I wanted to bring together the AGNS and the artists to create a collaboration that would produce a unique, exciting version of the exhibition specific to the museums audience and space.

Within the critical analysis I had done in 2012 of the existing exhibition, it was important to me that I continued to pursue my conversation with Nick Baker at Simon Lee Gallery (London/Hong Kong) on bringing Canadian born artist Angela Bulloch into the exhibition. To be clear, there was no distinction made around gender in selecting the artists for RAM. As part of my critical analysis, this was a huge conversation because having a female artist was paramount to me. Women, Art, and Technology edited by Judy Malloy and published by MIT was a significant resource sharing the history and contributions of women artists working in art and technology. What I also found interesting was that there were a number of women artists that would not participate in this book, as they did not want to be gender categorized in their field. I appreciated and understood that point of view because I, myself, as a female curator had to take the same stand when I defined my curatorial focus. The criteria for the curatorial focus, artist choice and exhibition content was non-gender specific.



↑ Angela Bulloch, *Yellow Music Listening Station RYB* (2014)

Going back to Angela Bulloch—why was it so important for me to pursue the opportunity to bring her into the exhibition? Aside from the obvious of her being female and Canadian-born, there were so many historical relationships where her body of work intersected with the other RAM artists. At the same time her work was much more conceptual, creating a unique and interesting contrast. When Angela and I met during Frieze London 2014 to finalize her exhibition pieces, I couldn't have been happier to complete RAM 2015's evolution with her addition to the roster.

Presumably RAM is the first (or one of the first) new media-centric exhibitions staged at either of the venues it has shown at. What kind of responsibility do you feel when introducing audiences to computer art and interactive works? Furthermore, what kind of understanding or insight would you hope they (might) have in encountering this work?

That is a really important question and introducing any audience to a museum exhibition comes with a huge sense of responsibility. Specific to computer art, I felt RAM was an important opportunity to take this platform and use it to break down the barriers and misconceptions of what 'art and technology' looks like.

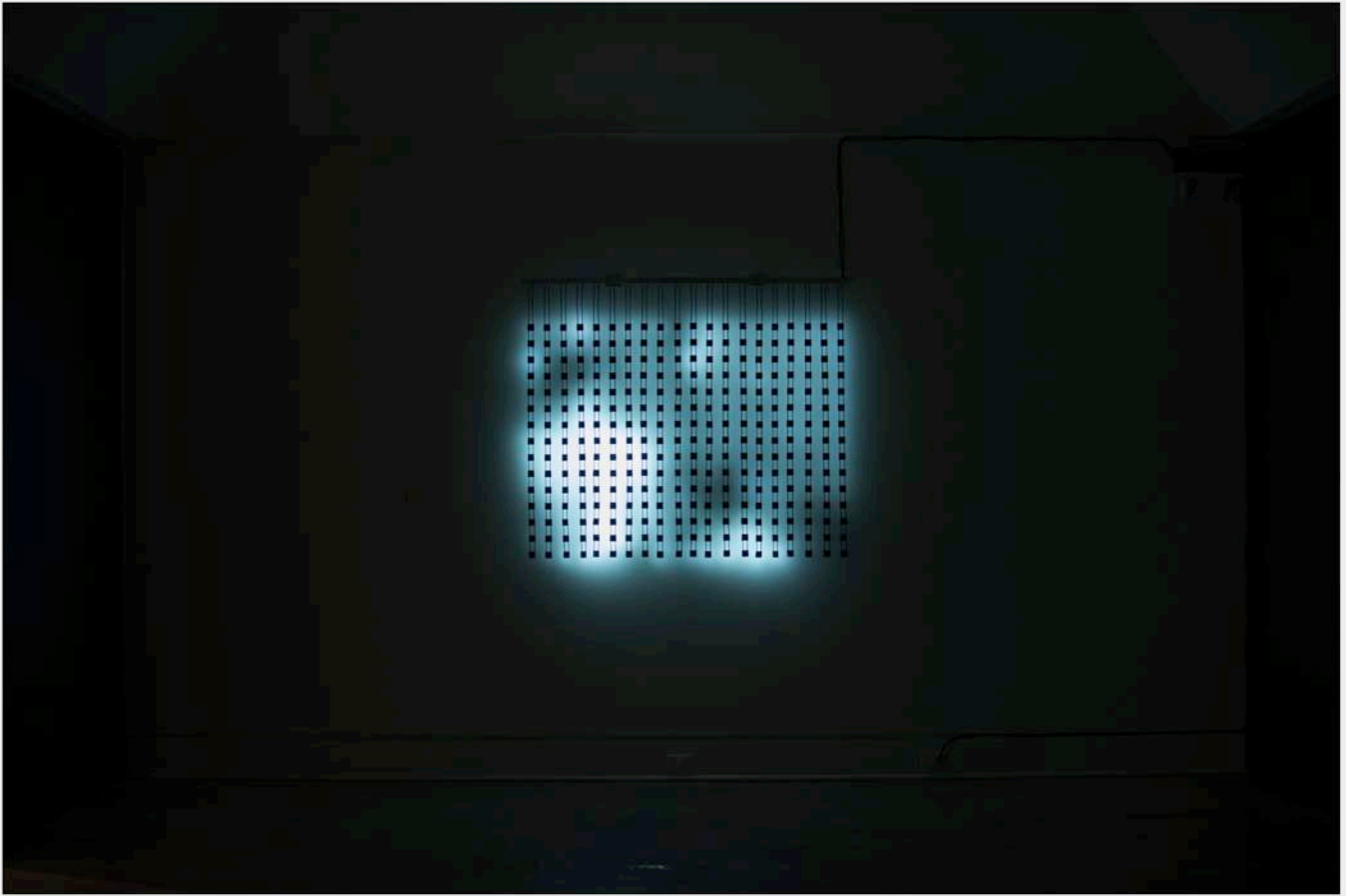
“This would be one of the most common remarks I receive as the curator from people experiencing RAM for the first time—‘this is *not* what I expected.’”

RAM: Rethinking Art & Machine as a title, is a play on words, referencing the interactive nature of the exhibition. Take the word 'rethinking' and let's throw it into the artists' individual spaces within the museum.

Through the evolution of their work the audience experiences first hand

how the artists were continually 'rethinking' the impact of technology in their art over the course of their careers. Then we can also take 'rethinking' and throw it out to the audience participating within that space. The audience has the opportunity to interact with the exhibition, to be awed and, I hope, inspired, but at the same time they have the opportunity to rethink their preconceptions of what an art and technology exhibition would look like. This would be one of the most common remarks I receive as the curator from people experiencing RAM for the first time—“this is *not* what I expected.”

In terms of what the responsibility an independent curator feels and how many hats they choose to wear around their role, it is very personal. An incredibly important one for me was to identify new perspectives and point of views that would allow me to make a connection from my world and passion around art, to find a path into the technology world, and bring them together. Because RAM started off, as I touched on earlier, around my wonderful experience with the Waterloo community, I wanted to create similar relationships within the thriving Halifax technology sector. Using RAM as a bridge to do this, I worked together with the museum community to reach out to the tech leaders in Halifax, sharing the artist stories with them so they too could get involved, be a voice and an advocate for the exhibition.

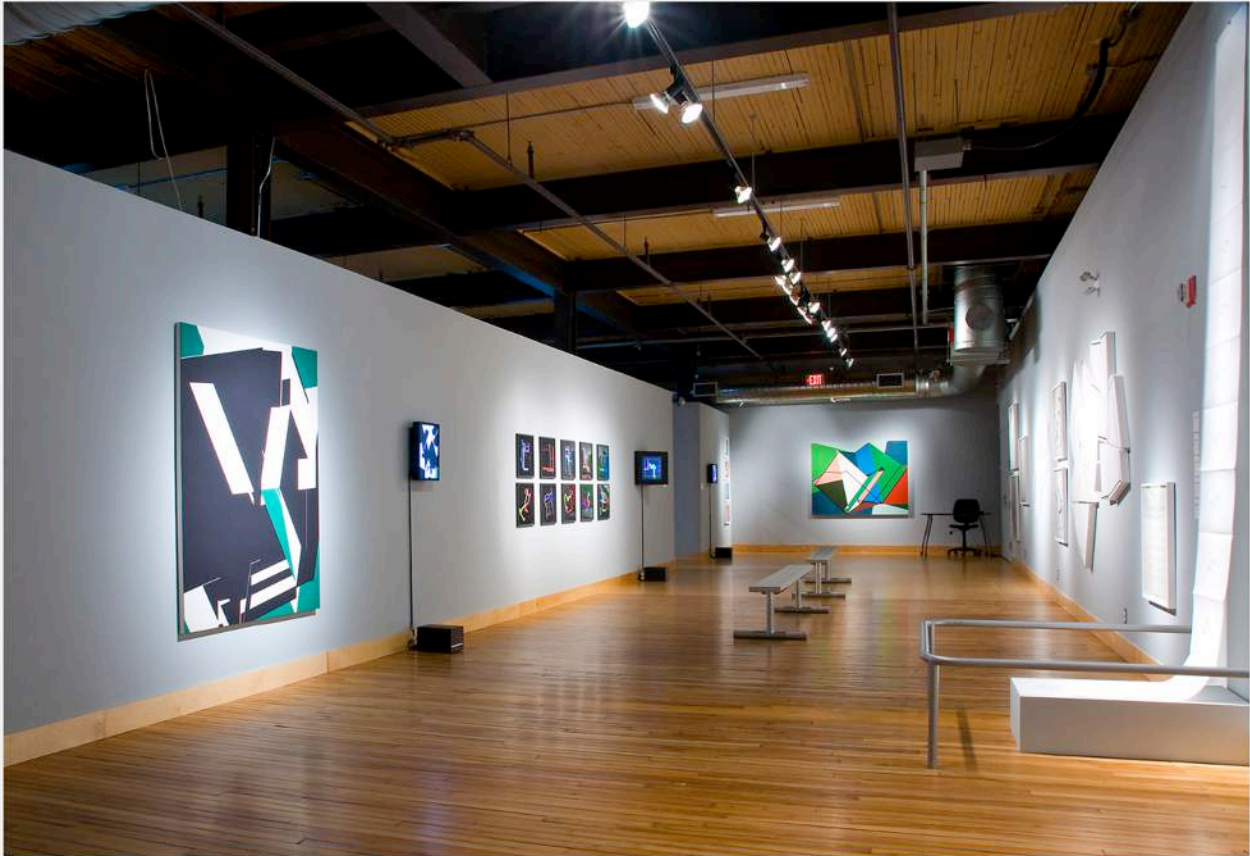


↑ [Jim Campbell](#), *Home Movies 300* (2006)

How did you find that process of outreach and connection with leaders from Halifax's tech sector?

The major outreach we did was through an event hosted by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in October. In partnership with the AGNS, it was really important for me to take this opportunity to introduce the exhibition RAM through building bridges and sharing the intersections of art and technology. The event was a coming together of industry leaders in the Halifax tech, education and arts communities to discuss all areas of the exhibition. Bringing these key people together started through many conversations with Leslie Tinkham, Director of Development at the AGNS, and Malcolm Fraser, CEO of ISL and Governor of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, on how to extend our outreach to the Halifax technology community. Prior to the AGNS event I was also put in touch and met with the President and CEO of [Digital Nova Scotia](#), Ulrike Bahr-Gedalia, who has really supported the exhibition by sharing it with her network and through Digital Nova Scotia.

In addition to working with the AGNS I did independent research around the Halifax technology sector to identify potential crossovers to the arts. I immediately discovered the work of Julia Rivard, Co-Founder of [Eyeread](#), Senior Partner at [Norex](#) and Vice-Chair of the Board of Governors at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Knowing that Julia would be a fantastic resource to speak with on our shared passions around art and technology, I reached out via LinkedIn. She was also really responsive and following our initial correspondence we had a number of calls and strategy sessions on how she could help us share RAM's message with the local technology sector. Through shared initiatives working together with the AGNS, Pursuits research and making personal connections we have opened new doors for potential future collaborations.



↑ A selection of [Manfred Mohr](#) works, installed at the THEMUSEUM in 2011 (photo courtesy of THEMUSEUM, shot by Derek Weidl)

All of the artists you're featuring are mid or late career, and you've curated works from across each of their respective bodies of work. Given that media art shows are often focused on 'latest and greatest' what kind of challenges come in presenting practices that have yielded decades of output?

Yes, I agree—it is always about the 'latest and greatest' especially in the technology sector, and while this may be true for most industries intersecting in the technology world today, that's not necessarily the most valued in the art world. For me as a curator, I wanted to pay homage to the origins of art and technology. Where did it all begin? How has that progression impacted and influenced other areas? What motivates these artists?

“An exhibition like RAM, which focuses on sharing the artists' personal life stories, as well as the technology they used to create their art, necessitated important documentation.”

With that as the backdrop, educating people on the history of art and technology became critically important. An exhibition like RAM, which focuses on sharing the artists' personal life stories, as well as the technology they used to create their art, necessitated important documentation. This led me to create extensive supporting materials

and these resources were shared through many different accessible platforms such as social media, an [interactive website](#), video, catalogue, and exhibition material. The feedback from both museums was that these educational resources were extremely helpful in conveying the many layers of important content, especially for the docents and educators working within the museum and educational community.

One of the most important points I wanted RAM to convey was the relationship the artists have with technology. Technology can be viewed as utilitarian and cold, which is why the focus of this exhibition is the humanization of machine. Technology is a tool for the artists, often in the background—it is an extension of their practice, and thus their creative output is extremely individual. The challenge became the opportunity, and I am very excited to continue the evolution of the exhibition with new museums and new audiences.



↑ From left: [Jim Campbell's Exploded View: Commuters](#) (2011), [Motion & Rest #5](#) (2002), [Fundamental Interval \(Commuters\)](#) (2010),

It sounds like you've gone to lengths to foreground the artists' relationships with technology—both for the audience and as a curatorial strategy. Could you talk about a specific work from each of the artists exhibited as part of RAM 2015 that you have a personal connection with, and feel really encapsulates each of the featured practices?

I want to share my thoughts with you on the 'pick a work from each artist' question. It is tricky for me; let me tell you why...

The historical works are crucial to the exhibition in understanding how these pioneering artists began to use technology in their artwork. These works will always be part of the foundation of the exhibition, as it continues its evolution to new institutions and audiences. They define the RAM artists as risk takers and innovators through experimenting, creating algorithms, sophisticated software and humanistic machines. This history has paved way to the artists' present projects and installations.

At every step of the way they encapsulate the evolution of the artists' entire body of work up until the moment of creation. Each piece is an accumulation of the artists' life experiences and their experimentation with technology. As I mentioned earlier, this evolutionary record of their work and technological advancement through art is highly unique. For this reason, choosing just one work from each artist seems impossible as there is no one place in their timeline that warrants special attention—they're all remarkable in their own way.

Ok fair enough, so it's about bodies of work versus individual pieces—got it. So speaking of evolution, what is next for RAM and Pursuits Inc.?

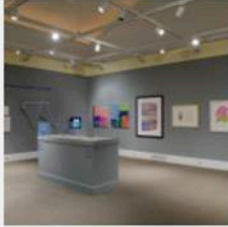
I am constantly looking for new opportunities to extend projects and relationships in my dual role as an independent museum curator and art advisor. Right now we're looking at potential collaborations within the local and international art and technology communities around RAM, as well as developing the RAM Version 2.0 online interactive catalogue, and putting it into a hard copy. I am looking forward to how RAM grows conceptually and where the next iteration will open. The landscape of art and technology is changing rapidly and it's an exciting prospect to imagine where it might go in the future.

RAM: Rethinking Art & Machine | Pursuits Inc.

RAM is showing at AGNS (Halifax, Canada) through March 22, 2015

All photos courtesy of AGNS (shot by Steve Farmer) unless labelled otherwise

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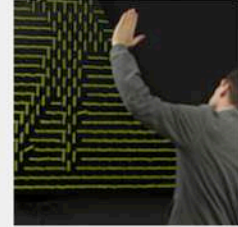
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