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FEEDFORWARD. The Angel of History, LABoral, October 22 - April 5, 2010

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“FEEDFORWARD. The Angel of History”

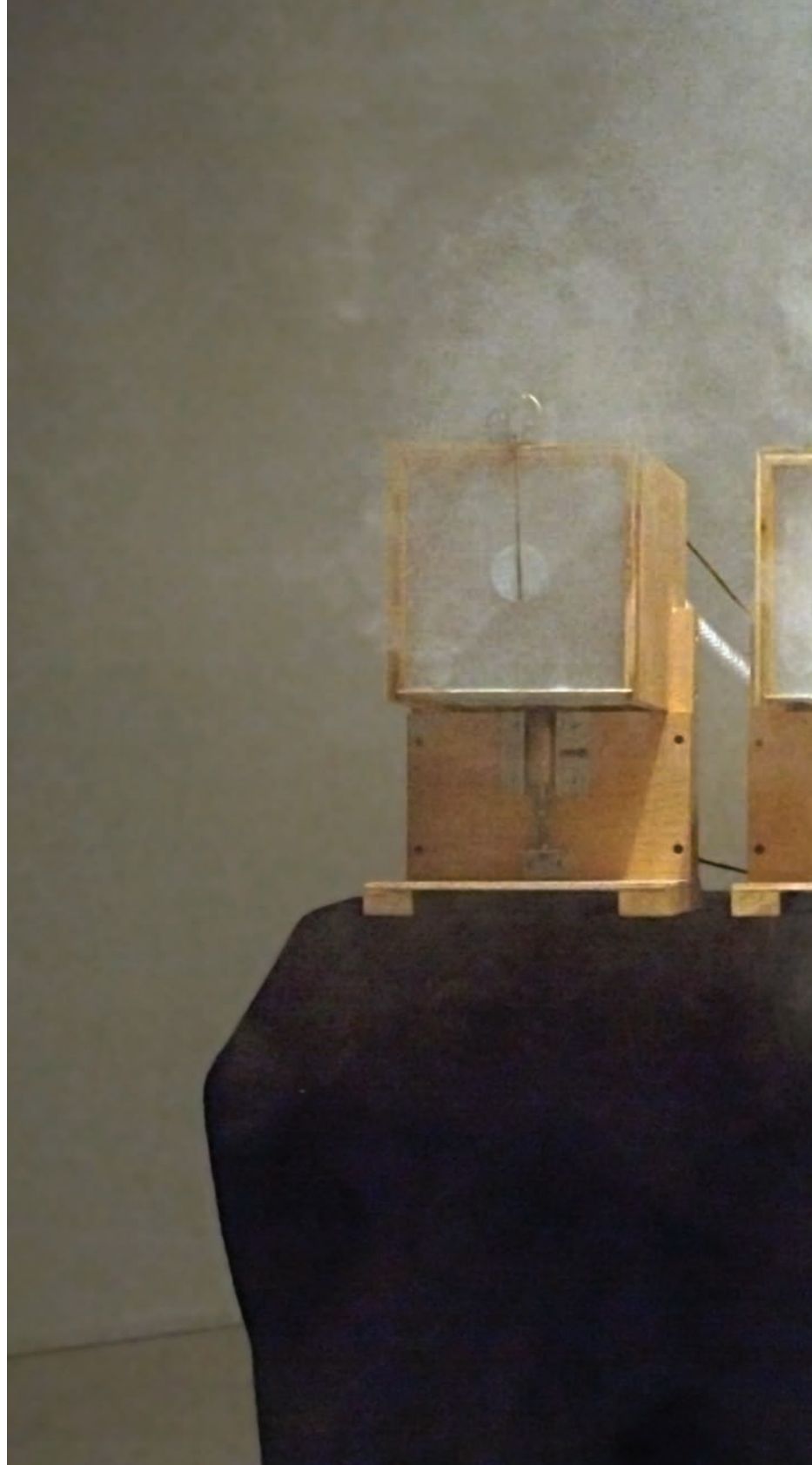
LABoral, October 22, 2009 – April 5, 2010

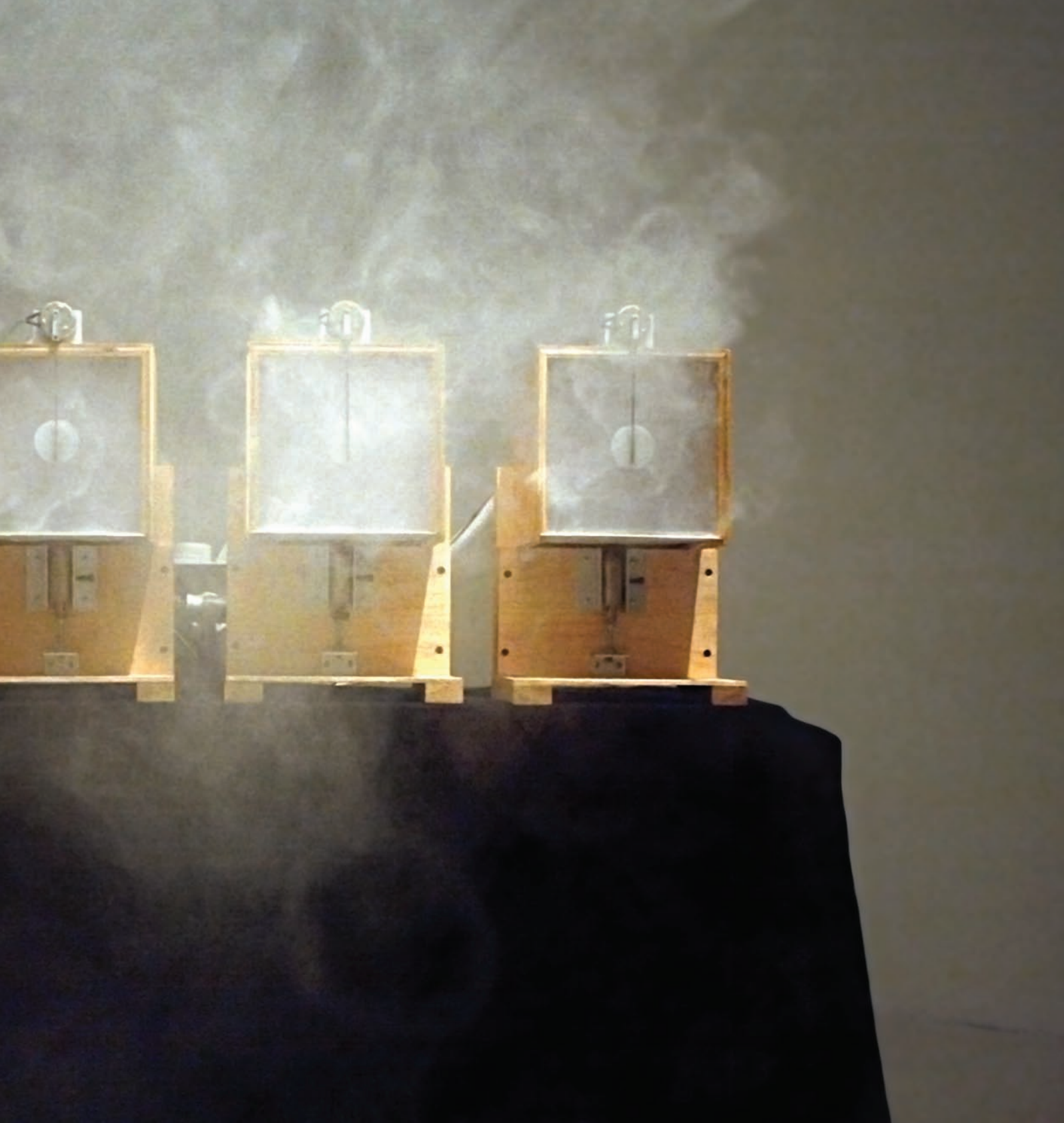
The exhibition “FEEDFORWARD. The Angel of History” took as its starting point a motif from Walter Benjamin’s essay, *Theses on the philosophy of history*, of an angel looking at the ruin of the past while being propelled into the future, facing backwards. This is also the motif of a video projection/installation, *Storm from Paradise*, 1999, by Margot Lovejoy, an elderly stateswoman of the field of electronic art (her book *Digital Currents* is one of the best volumes available concerning the changes wrought by new media technologies on the field of art making). Lovejoy’s video, projected through numerous diaphanous hanging scrims, opens the exhibition, and is slightly quaint for its age (she completed it ten years ago). Made using After Effects video manipulation software, the imagery is catastrophic and dreamily hallucinogenic, which could be said to be the overarching aesthetic of the entire exhibition.

With such a weighty premise, that we are witness to the wreckage of the past and what we have wrought — but that, through technology and the process of “feedforward” rather than “feedback”, artists can create the future, or at least change our imagination and perceptions of the future — the show is surprisingly light, bright and airy which contributes to the dreamily hallucinogenic effect (and here I have to insert the obligatory line in any review of an exhibition at LABoral: the galleries are ENORMOUS). For the number of video projections, including sound, in the show, the curators, Steve Dietz and Christiane Paul (one can’t imagine a more talented and expert pairing) and exhibition designers (Angel Borrego and the Office for Strategic Space in Madrid) were very sensitive to light and sound bleed, using parabolic speakers and round carpets to designate each video space rather than building excessive walls or indeed any darkened spaces. The exhibition design also cleverly and serendipitously adopted Lovejoy’s scrims in the dividing ‘walls’ which were made with a simple wooden structure but rather than clad in sheetrock were covered over with material more often found on building sites which is semi-transparent, allowing for a great perspective on the entire show, with images from the video-projected works overlapping each other.

So to the 29 or so works: loosely grouped according to themes such as “globalisation” and “countermeasures”, a number of the pieces were recreations and manipulations of historical material (such as Nonny de la Pena and Peggy Weil’s *Gone Gitmo*, 2007, an accurate rendering of the facility on Guantanamo Bay in the virtual world *Second Life*) or artistic meditations on our technological culture (Christopher Baker has assembled from YouTube thousands of videos in which people introduce themselves — *Hello world!* — and projected them onto a staggeringly long wall). Given the natural tendency of mediated simulations to speak to something of which we have no first hand experience, such as the prison at Guantanamo — or, in the case of the interactive virtual-reconstruction work

of Langlands + Bell, the landscape of Afghanistan and the house of Osama Bin Laden — it was striking to consider projects which are similarly data-driven in form but intensely personal in content. This is the case of San Jose-based artist Hasan Elahi who for years now has undertaken an ongoing ‘performance’ documenting his every movement for the sake of his FBI agents (he was once detained because of mistakenly being identified by databases used in the “War on Terror”, and in the interrogation that followed was asked his whereabouts on the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th of September 2001. He deferred to his electronic calendar and so began his technological dependency on keeping better





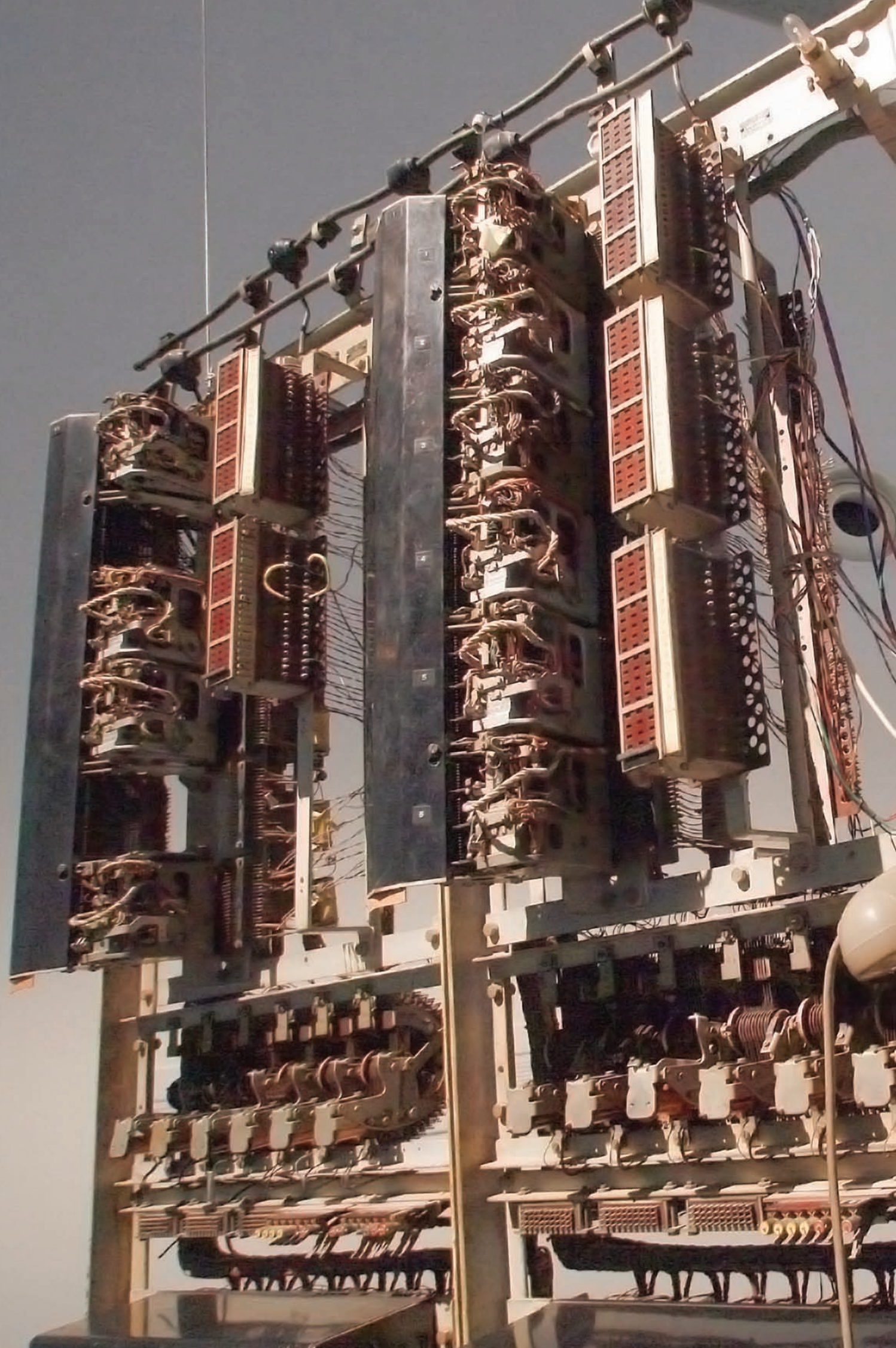
Ali Momeni, Robin Mandel, *Smoke and Hot Air*, 2007-2008. Smoke, electronics, sound. Courtesy: the artists. Acknowledgements: Matt Brackett.

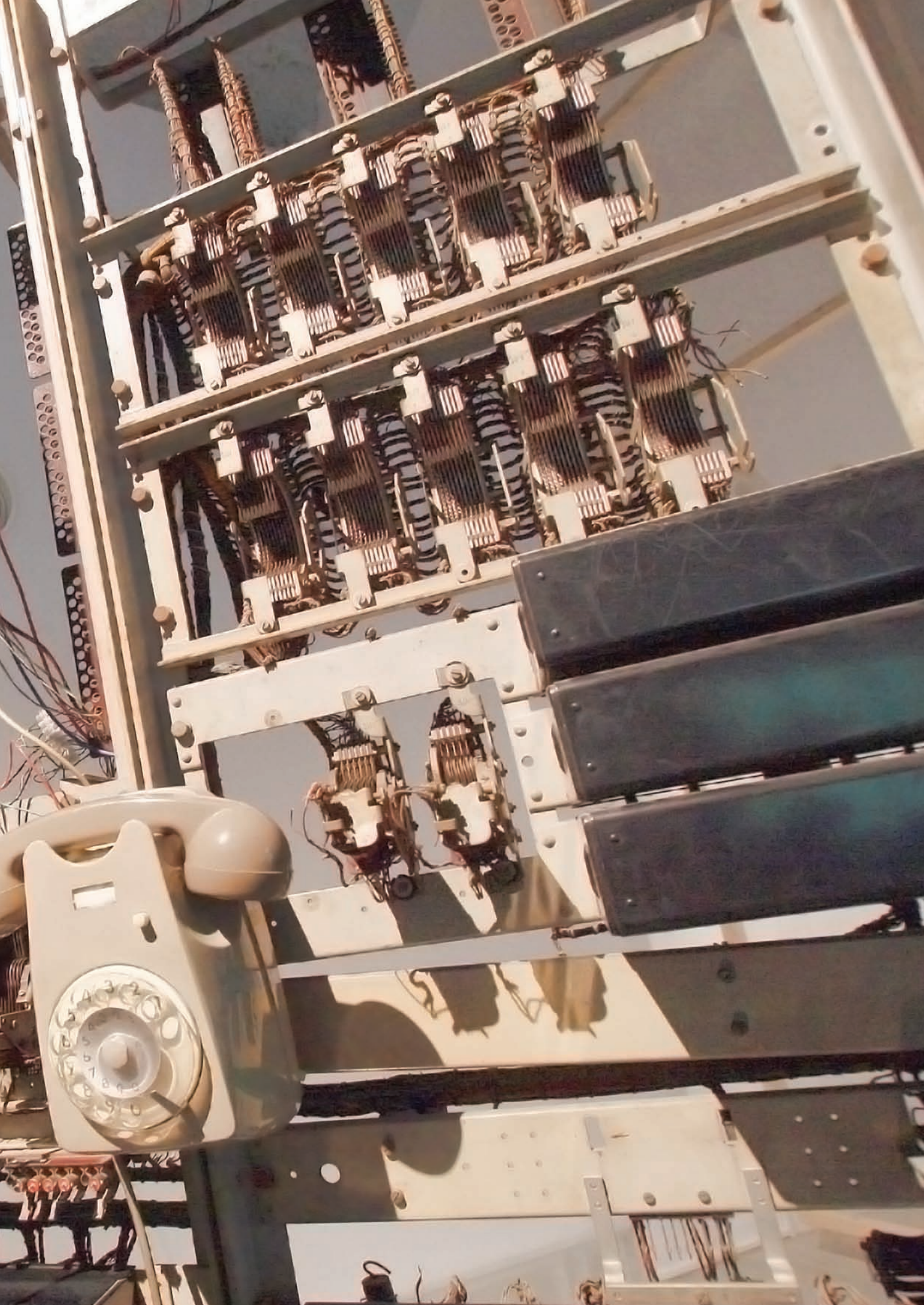
records of his whereabouts than U.S. authorities ever could. For instance, he photographs every meal and the database he has built which is publicly available online records every movement using his GPS enabled phone.) From the hypnotic to the catastrophic, Elahi had two works in the show — one from the *Tracking Transience* project and the other an outline map of the world printed onto Perspex which had been shot by an expert marksman at each point on the world where the US military has used force (*Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2006*). Yet again, visitors to FEEDFORWARD found themselves looking through one work at another, and taking

the place of Benjamin's angel, looking through the 'wreckage' of an object, at another pile of debris, another accumulation of events in history.

Harwood/Wright/Yokokoji's piece *Tantalum Memorial — Residue*, 2008, holds a similar sculptural presence in the show to Elahi's shattered world map, and is equally suggestive of the catastrophic global effects which can emerge from our increasingly technologized engagements with one another. A 1938 telephone exchange has been lovingly restored to 'switch' when people within the Congolese diaspora in London ring in to the *Telephone Trottoire* (another project by the same team). The

Harwood, Wright, Yokokoji, Tanihara Memorial – Residue, 2008.
Installation, telephone exchange, sound. Photographer: Enrique G. Cardenas.







Barbara Fluxá, *Car project, excavating XX century's end*, 2009. Car, single-channel video, text archives. Produced by LABoral.

Congo region is the site of the mining of the metal tantalum, which is used in the creation of mobile phones, and the so-called “Coltan Wars” have been ravaging the region for over a decade.

Also lovingly restored is the hulk of a wrecked car found in a river in Asturias by Barbara Fluxá, one of the two artists from this northern region of Spain commissioned to make a new work for FEEDFORWARD. A video documents its removal and conservation and text archives illuminate that model of car’s special place within the cultural iconography of Spain. We are left wondering about the other detritus of our societies, which don’t have the loving care of an artist at hand to sort it out, filter it, recycle it, and represent it.

Seeking to make a reference to embedded histories of place, and the marks we leave upon them, recurs in a number of works in the show and is most explicit in the hypnotic video work *Pacific Washup*, 2003, of Rachel Rakena, Fez Fa’anana and Brian Fuata, showing Maori and Pacific people washing up on Bondi beach in Australia in the ubiquitous “Made in China” plaid, plastic laundry/storage bags. This work is installed next to Cao Fei’s also mesmerizing video *Whose Utopia?* 2006, of dance-like performances on the assembly line in a Chinese light bulb factory (OSRAM).

With entire other sections of the show (indeed other entire gallery spaces at LABoral) not addressed here, such as that dealing with the global economic situation and the labour market, what remains a powerful thread through the exhibition are those works which seem less important as exhibited art objects than as interventions, and which consist primarily of attempts by artists to give others a voice — be they Spanish shepherds (in the

case of Fernando Garcia-Dory’s commission to create a union for these itinerant workers), student revolutionaries (in the case of Naeem Mohaiemen’s documentary film and photos from Dhaka), or Latin American pedestrians (hundreds of whom were asked by Carlos Motta to comment on U.S. interventionist policies in his video archive). Even fictional detectives investigating an imaginary offshore company (in the case of the enigmatic work by Goldin + Senneby) are accounted for.

FEEDFORWARD is an exhibition that can be read on many levels, and as the exhibition design stresses, it seeks to make those levels or layers visible, so that viewers are left with a sense of accumulation or sedimentation, of media, events, and ideas. It is a show for looking at, for considering, more than for acting within. Like Benjamin’s Angel of History, we are left transfixed, asked by these powerful art works to consider our choices in how we want to live in this mediated world we’ve made.

SARAH COOK

Sarah Cook is a curator and researcher at the University of Sunderland, UK. Her book, *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media* (co-authored with Beryl Graham) will be available from MIT Press in 2010.