



Kids Have Everything These Days by Ben Turnbull.

I meet Ellie Harrison in the square outside Euston station, which is dotted with food outlets. She's wearing a **Bring Back British Rail** tee — a nod to one of her many socially minded art projects — which makes her instantly recognizable. Given the nature of the work we're meeting to discuss and her hectic schedule, it makes sense to get together in a nondescript food court.

Since its creation in 2009, Harrison's *Vending Machine* has been on display in galleries, theaters, and cinemas throughout England and is now located in London's Open Data Institute (ODI). The machine is wired up to an RSS feed of BBC News alerts about the global recession. Every time a particular word or combination of words appears — such as “repossessions” and “deficit” — the machine dispenses a free bag of potato chips.

Wherever the work is installed, it has proved especially popular on **national budget days**. It's a contemporary, real-life version of the *homotropic* newspaper-vending robot in Philip K. Dick's novel *The Game-Players of Titan*. Dick coined the term to echo the word *heliotropic*, and in the book, his theoretical machine searches for customers to which it can vend its newspapers. By contrast, Harrison's work entices passersby with food — provided they can stomach the news that comes with it.

I have a slightly nerdy fascination with the strange emotional bonds we develop with vending machines. When I was 18, I was stuck for a weekend in a dilapidated Myrtle Beach hotel after a holiday job at a glow-in-the-dark shop fell through. I couldn't drive, and the heat was too overwhelming for long walks. My sustenance was largely Fritos, three or four times a day, dispensed from a machine until money was wired that allowed me to escape to New York.

More recently, I worked a night shift reading and summarizing national newspapers, gravitating toward the office's deserted canteen and its vending machines in an almost autonomic effort to break the monotony. In my experience, vending machines are inextricably linked with bad news.

The ghosts in the machines

Harrison gestures around us and tells me that the inspiration for her vending machine came from a similar source: watching students interact with canteen vending machines during her residency at the Plymouth College of Art. "I really wanted to customize the existing vending machines and the existing infrastructure — the students' existing food supply system," she explains. "They were used to being able to go to the canteen and get what they wanted, whenever they wanted it."

"I wanted to say, 'No, you're not going to be able to do that. You're only going to

be able to access food when these wider global economic events dictate,” she says. “It was a really literal way of drawing a link between food supply, the economy, and the fact that [because] those things are so intrinsically linked [it] leads to — and has in the past, led to — absurd consequences, like food mountains.”

Harrison has always been obsessed with the concretization of data, as evidenced in earlier work such as *Eat 22* (2001), a photo-based project which documented all of her meals over the course of a year. The piece was startlingly predictive of the way we now log this kind of information using smartphone photo apps.

By contrast, *Vending Machine* moves away from obsessive quantification to ask how we manage the flow of information in daily life. What happens when data related to distant events is turned into something about which it’s impossible to feel neutral?¹

Harrison makes a point of recycling goods for her installation work. After she was unable to get direct permission from suppliers to use their machines in the canteen, she instead sourced one (via eBay) from 1979 — her birth year. That gives her project nostalgic appeal, reminding her of how her father used to reward her with potato chips after childhood swimming lessons at the local pool.

Similarly, Harrison’s installation inspires warm feelings in its new home. Julie Freeman, curator at the ODI, says that the machine subtly modulates the office mood. “The ambient delivery of crisps when fiscal news is reported has had quite an effect on the members of the ODI and their extended family,” she notes. “The work has a kind of nurturing effect — passing out food to pacify when potential bad news appears.

“We’ve noticed associates tweeting expectantly about the impending crisp delivery before a budget announcement, and we’ve seen disappointment when *Vending Machine* is quiet for a prolonged period — interesting in itself when that could be interpreted as good news,” Freeman explains.

Vending Machine also taps into the nature of self-service. Not only do we fail to connect food with global events, but we also fail to connect the distribution of it with producers and sellers. The machines, commonly called “trade stimulators” in the automated retail business, are used to reduce the cost of labor and free up retail space in places where there is human traffic at all hours: airports, offices, and motorway cafes.

Looking at our food court surroundings, Harrison says that we now live in an “overloaded food environment,” where we are pushed to eat, snack, graze, or drink around the clock.

Off-label use

Because they are supposed to function smoothly without requiring us to understand the mechanics of how they run, the very act of noticing vending machines can be subversive. But it’s also their ubiquity that makes them fascinating to artists and designers. This is particularly the case in Japan, which is unsurprising for a country with an estimated one vending machine **for every 25 people**. A blogger named Motomachi launched his blog “**I take a picture of a vending machine every day (or so). I am sorry,**” in August 2005 in which he does just that — the same machine in every photo.

“The groove that comes from something repeating itself while it changes ever so slightly feels kind of like techno music,” he writes on the blog. He has uploaded to Flickr **1,140 pictures of the same beverage vending machine**. The photos, reminiscent of artist multiples, weave a kind of hypnotic spell on the viewer, forcing us to focus on a single detail and see the minute variations on it — such as a gap in the row, or new labels — until we are no longer able to see the whole picture.

Other artists in Japan have explored the ubiquity of the vending machine and

reason that the growth of automation might begin to inform our attitudes toward people — if it hasn't already. After Tokyo-based experimental clothes designer Aya Tsukioka read about a supposed crime wave across Japan, she too **made international headlines** by inventing a skirt that the wearer, hoping to protect herself against sexual harassment, can zip over her head as a (not very convincing) vending machine disguise.

While the costume was intended to be funny, Tsukioka trenchantly points out that a vending machine is likely to receive less unwanted attention from strangers than a woman on the street.

Moral panic

It's fitting, then, that vending machines have become a sort of receptacle for moral panic. From the initial ban on cigarette machines to ongoing campaigns against child obesity, the easy accessibility of goods inside vending machines has made them a target for public health activists.

British artist Ben Turnbull's 2009 installation *Kids Have Everything These Days* — a vending machine stocked with toy replicas of Berettas and Magnums — was intended to be a “social project” highlighting the wide availability of illegal weapons in London. A camera would capture reactions.

Though the project seemed doomed from the start, given that he began his work at the height of public concern about rising crime in the city, Turnbull spent months scouting suitable locations in London. “I had no intention of getting any kind of publicity,” he explains. “I worked out the areas where to put the vending machines. [Each] had the underlying theme about easy access, but it was also to see how interested children were. We were happy for [the machines] to be tagged up or whatever.”

But the project was scrapped after a reporter for the city's *Evening Standard* newspaper **alerted the police** to Turnbull's plans, and he was warned that he would be arrested if he went ahead with the project.

Instead, *Kids Have Everything These Days* made its first (and only) appearance at Turnbull's first London solo show, held in a conventional gallery. But Turnbull decided to abandon the project after the media spectacle, during which he **came unexpectedly face-to-face** with the co-founder of Mothers Against Murder and Aggression on a BBC Radio 4 discussion show.

For Turnbull, the most frustrating aspect of the fuss was that no one had noticed his craftsmanship. "The machine didn't work. You couldn't get the [guns] out unless you took it apart with tools," he explains. "It was ironic that it caused all this hassle, but no one asked the fundamental question of whether it actually worked."

The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction

If vending machines can be used as art, why can't art be produced from vending machines? It's an idea the roots of which stretch back to the 1960s and which has now reached a sort of apotheosis in modern museum gift shops. **Robert Watts** created the *Stamp Machine*, which was featured at the famous *Yam Festival* mounted by **Fluxus**, an international art collective. An engineer, Watts modified a postage stamp machine to deliver **stamps of his own creation**. Another machine created by Watts dispensed branded pens so people could buy a small piece of art while participating in a performance at the festival.

American artist Clark Whittington says he had not heard of Fluxus when he decided in 1997 to restore a retired cigarette vending machine and put his own

art in it to be purchased for \$1 a piece. He installed **the Art-o-mat** in a café in his hometown of Winston-Salem, where it proved so popular that the café owner asked to keep it.

Whittington knew he needed more work to distribute if the machine was to become a permanent fixture. He called on other local artists, eventually forming a collective called Artists in Cellophane. There are now around 100 machines across the United States, in places as dissimilar as the Cosmopolitan Casino in Las Vegas (which has eight) and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. It's not surprising they're popular: the machines are gorgeous and sleek, display pieces in their own right.

Modern museums have brought in a different sort of vending machine, too: compact print-on-demand kiosks that let a visitor order a high-quality print but that require neither the square footage nor the inventory of a store. (Rather than being made on the spot, prints are shipped to the buyer.) Some of these systems, found at the Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Modern, among other places, “stock” work from the museum's collection. Others carry only famous works, like Van Gogh's *Starry Night* or Picasso's *Weeping Woman*.

Please make another choice

When the familiarity of a vending machine is combined with an unusual result — whether potato chips, guns, or art — it sets up the tension of the unexpected that many artists strive for. Confounding viewers forces them to question the basic nature of the thing they took for granted, and requiring their interaction with the vending machines makes them part of the art.

But patrons of the arts and passersby on the street become inured to shock, too, and the less that vending machines of the present resemble their iconic form — and the more that such devices hand out all manner of things (like iPods and

custom-mixed sodas) — the less profound the artistic statement that can be made.

Julia Robinson, a professor at New York University, has written extensively about the Fluxus movement and sees the revival of the vending machine concept as hackneyed. “I am one for artists using the tools of their time,” she says. “Vending machines were everywhere in the 1960s, so it was utterly relevant to place art in one as a statement and an intervention into the very system as it operated in daily life.

Their use today “seems a little bit fetishistic to me in the same way as one feels an old-school projector used by a young contemporary artist is cashing in on nostalgia and the texture of the old technology,” she says. Artists may need to turn to the closest modern equivalent for inspiration, just as Philip K. Dick did decades ago. The age of the ironic robot may be at hand.

1. Unless, of course, you happen to dislike every variety of potato chip. ↩

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