that leaves one man literally deflated, minimised to a balloon. One chapter, ‘a 17-year-old moulting off the responsibility’, shows a young man stripped of layer after layer of skin-coloured body suits before he bathes. With all of these vignettes Tabaimo advocates a new sympathy for the Japanese male predicament. She has written that she feels society has become a ‘communal bathhouse’ that, while allowing for greater liberties and more autonomy for women, places men in a mesh of submission to financial and family needs, no longer able to direct their lives or express their masculinity. Yet Tabaimo is refreshingly subtle about her social view; she does not shower us with her postfeminist subtext, but rather allows us a good, long soak.

JESSICA KRAFT

NEW YORK: WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
11 February – 29 May
www.whitney.org

LOS ANGELES: L.A. COUNTY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
26 June – 5 September
www.lacma.org

TIM HAWKINSON

For more than two decades Tim Hawkinson has created drawings, photographs, sculptures and installations that explore relationships between technology, human identity and the body. Perhaps best known for his goopy, junk-aesthetic cyborgs – human or animal forms that combine organic and technological elements – Hawkinson captures attention because of the tremendous craft and technical knowledge that he utilizes to make his works as well as the subtle questions they provoke.

As suggested by this retrospective, Hawkinson is interested in bringing technology to bear on the most personal, intimate and creative aspects of human life. Signature (1993), for example, is an assemblage – consisting of a school desk, autograph machine and guillotine – that writes the artist’s signature over and over on a paper roll, chops the signed piece off and then tucks it on the floor like a piece of trash.

Other assemblages use machines and rudimentary computers to speak or make music. Penitent (1994) is a humanoid figure composed of scavenged trash and cheap, mass-produced plastic tubing, plastic bottles and large rawhide dog chews. Keeling in front of the viewer, this lowly cyborg seems to breathe by way of an artificial lung system powered by a pump with an electric motor. Sometimes we can hear it wheeze weakly, perhaps calling for its own destruction. By breaking down distinctions between animate and inanimate, human and machine, process and finished state, Penitent suggests how unstable the definition of human is.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his cybernetic subject matter, Hawkinson is not afraid to tackle elemental themes and myths, content that he often introduces through the materials used to construct these heterogeneous works. Like Penitent, the monumental Überorgan (2000) uses flowing air, with all its connotations of breath and spirit,
to animate inert materials, and thereby simulate life. The work consists of a site-specific cluster of what are largely air-filled bags made of woven polyethylene and nylon net. A control station—a giant optical scroll and player-piano-like reader—produces various calls and clunky musical numbers, which are amplified through cardboard tubes extending from the polyethylene bags. Überorgan also confounds distinctions between living and dead, organic and inorganic. Even more than Penrose, however, Überorgan undermines boundaries between the human and the animal, as well as the individual and collective.

While Hawkinson's representations of contemporary forms of cybernetic life are marvellous, it is easy to criticise him for a certain 'tech-geek' anti-formalism. Hawkinson is a resolute conceptualist: there is always a clear idea or system behind his installations and interconnected artworks. As a formal painter or sculptor Hawkinson leaves something to be desired; and the more static, his works become the less interesting they are. Tom Friedman, who shares Hawkinson's interest in simulating and transforming common household objects, is far more inventive when it comes to stationary works. At the same time, to criticise Hawkinson for his 'crafty' anti-formalism is to miss his importance. He responds to the Dadaist mechanisation of art by creating sculptural figures and environments that use computers and machines to simulate human and animal communication. He reveals how interdependent life is today, and how radically technology facilitates our interdependencies, for better or worse.

MATTHEW BRO

SAN FRANCISCO: CCA WATTIS INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

ANTHONY BURDEN
April 7 – May 14
www.wattis.org

It has been said that art critics are overly concerned with linking contemporary work to the chain of history, as if plugging a piece into the great, multimedia interface of the past is necessary to make it run. Those who point this out know that the virtuality of how art obtains its context is in its very essence, not in how it connects to culture, but in how it differs. With that in mind, it makes sense to focus on the strange new energy that IA artist Anthony Burden’s videos and installations emit, rather than on mapping their lineage through the previous generation of Southern Californian performance and installation artists, which included Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, to the 1960s antipathy and feminist provocations of greasy Los Angeles time-based practice such as Chris Burden, Carolee Schneemann and Martha Rosler.

These artists held that they didn’t give a damn about the viewer, but Burden takes it a step further. The viewer has no stake in these darkened rooms, that is made clear by the few paintings and drawings barely visible in them (it’s too dark to see them, so what are they for?). The point is driven home on the way out by Scum Pirate’s Pass Bottle Reserve (2005) – bottles of what is probably urine stacked up on shelves. The viewer gets no respect, but that’s not to say their presence isn’t desired. In the first of four videos, DESERT-MIX ‘Charcoal’ (2004), one accompanies Burden on a meaningful trek through a dusty grey California wasteland, with a soundtrack of laboured, slowly breathing young children interspersed with dirty little phrases that don’t stick to the memory but leave a mucky film on it.

Moving through the next three chambers one doesn’t so much delve into Burden as get sucked in to him. Further works in video continue the first person narrative, and all are equally as bleak and manic. We must ride along as Burden cruises LA by night, singing along to his mixtapes; and we must watch as he plays a relentless drum beat against old (in the tight quarters of his car (in which he has lived for a decade, off and on). Eventually, we begin to feel something strange inside, something vaguely supernatural, or so we might guess at its foreignness. That is Burden’s guidance; like a nomadic shaman, he leads the viewer through a journey of musical rituals that provoke ecstatic vibrations of the spirit, rather than profound understandings of the mind.

ABRAHAM ORDEN