Robot Dreams

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Robots are no longer found just on the factory floor or as highly developed imaginary creatures in science-fiction stories. They are moving into our homes, taking to the water or the air, optimizing artificial limbs, helping autistic children and surveying fields. The exhibition *Robot Dreams* investigates forms of interaction between man and machine, the importance of behaviour on both sides and what intelligence is made of.

Robot Dreams

Richard Kriesche
* 1940 in Vienna (A)
Lives in Graz

Richard Kriesche's *Ein Weltmodell (A World Model)* already caused a sensation at the 1986 Venice Biennale, where it was displayed in the Austrian Pavilion. Even today, this work still fascinates us with its conceptual clarity and utopian visual power: Two robots take turns performing a sequence of dance moves, switching each other on and off and thus embodying the autogeneration of life itself. While one robot performs, the other stands there motionless. The work is thus a model of life beyond any human intervention, alluding to our thoroughly technological world. (KB)

Ein Weltmodell, 1986
Industrial robot with control system and table
Hess Art Collection, Bern

Christa Sommerer
* 1964 in Ohlsdorf (A)
Lives in Linz
Laurent Mignonneau
* 1964 in Angoulême (F)
Lives in Linz

In the interactive work *Life Writer* the touch of a human hand literally breathes life into an inanimate everyday object. Manually entering data into a typewriter, which here becomes an interface between human and computer, sets a virtual evolutionary process in motion in which life is created out of the individual letters – representing a kind of genetic code. Furnished with genetic algorithms, these new formations go into action, conducting their own metabolic and reproductive processes. The text thus becomes a living genetic code, advancing from merely depicting life to actually taking on its own existence. By equating the act of writing with the creation of life, the artists produce what they call an endless artwork, which visualises interaction as the spark behind every form of creation. (KB)

Life Writer, 2006
Interactive computer installation: typewriter, paper, projector, genetic algorithm, table and chair
Courtesy of the artists

Walter Pichler
* 1936 in Deutschnofen (A)
Lives in Sankt Martin and Vienna

Since the 1960s, Walter Pichler has been known for creating visionary works that are located somewhere between art and architecture, proving himself to be an independent-minded crossover-artist and free thinker. One of his most noteworthy early works is *TV-Helm* (TV Helmet), a sculptural object of bizarre shape and size that can be seen as a cynical commentary on what was back then the incipient and far-reaching saturation of society by the new medium of television. As indicated by its subtitle, *Tragbares Wohnzimmer* (Portable Living Room), the object is a head-piece with integrated TV reception that represents a living room as a self-contained viewing-and-listening cabin – as an apparatus for living. The viewer in turn becomes a faceless being, cut off from the outside world and monopolised by the media – half human, half machine. (MK)

TV-Helm
(Tragbares Wohnzimmer), 1967
Polyester, varnished white, integrated television terminal with TV connection
Collection Generali Foundation, Vienna

John Bock
* 1965 in Gribbohm (D)
Lives in Berlin

Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot) is a long-ish narrative film made for the *Robot Dreams* exhibition with various actors. The linear narrative sketches in the triangular relationship between a priest, a scientist and his wife as an android is created and has life breathed into it. All phases of life and emotion are dealt with in the subsequent events. Birth, reproduction and death alternate with euphoria, fear, hatred, greed, love, pleasure, pain and violence. The world theatre is reminiscent of the style of early sci-fi films such as *Franken-stein* (1931), *Metropolis* (1927), and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920). Bock himself takes the part of the priest, and holds a crucifix as an accessory of divine incarnation and symbol of bloody exorcisms. (KB, MHK)

Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot), 2010
Video (PAL), 74 min 10 s
DVD, beamer and loudspeaker
Courtesy Klosterfelde, Berlin /
Anton Kern, New York.
Advised to 18+

Jokob Scheid/Wolfgang von Kempelen
* 1734 in Bratislava
† 1804 in Alservorstadt, Vienna

Irish-Hungarian inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen (Kempelen Farkas) is considered to be the originator of the speaking machine. He became known chiefly as developer of the Mechanical Turk, a fake chess machine that was more of an attraction than a real automaton. It had bellows for a lung, an ivory reed as vocal chords and a rubber funnel as a mouth. This was the "speaking machine" that could be manipulated to produce differentiated sounds. As the first functioning structure for the artificial generation of human speech sounds, it is considered an important achievement even scientifically. (MHK)

Jakob Scheid
Sprechmaschine von Wolfgang von Kempelen (Speech machine by Wolfgang von Kempelen)
Replica model , 2001/
designed around 1790
Öl/Leinwand, 81 × 97 cm
Plexiglas, wood fibre panel, silicone, razor blade, brass, metal needle, rubberised cotton and metal spring
University of Applied Art, Vienna

Nam June Paik
* 1932 in Seoul (ROK)
† 2006 in Miami

Nam June Paik is regarded as one of the pioneers of both video art and the use of technological media in the visual arts. The *Andy Warhol Robot* is part of a group of works executed in the 1980s and 1990s, in which he arranged video monitors and other elements into large-format sculptures. Paik's robots here exemplify an ironic view of technology. Although composed of monitors, they nonetheless seem humanoid, appealing to the viewer's emotions with their congenial appearance. *Andy Warhol Robot* thus appears to be a nice robot portrait of an artist friend whose pictures of Campbell's Tomato Soup Cans and Brillo pads have already become historical icons of modern art and which are present here in the form of freeze frames and real objects that conspicuously refer back to their maker. Despite all niceness, however, the viewer soon feels a sense of unease, uncertain just how to read this mechanisation of someone who was after all a very human star. (AP)

Andy Warhol Robot, 1994
Mixed media: nine colour screens, nine old TV casings, original Andy Warhol Brillo box in Plexiglas casing, seven tins Campbell's Tomato Soup, five 8mm film cameras, ten Polaroid cameras, parts of a 35mm film projector, 35mm film, lamp holders, two support frames on wheels, two video players, 34 video clips on two videos and glued pages from the Stockholm exhibition catalogue
Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg

Thomas Baumann
* 1967 in Salzburg (A)
Lives in Vienna

Thomas Baumann makes an anti-robot available. Months before the exhibition opened, he started a discussion in a blog about what the opposite of a robot might be – maybe a nonworking man, a self-determining human, or even God. Baumann puts traits that really are natural into a context where they are operated mechanically in a detached way. The "speech on abstraction" is a pink, apparently self-contained figure that changes externally, gets longer, stretches and wordlessly changes shape. The elaborate mobile displays in the process a sensitive capacity for flirting that is reduced to basics. Apparently endless chains revolve round stones, gliding over them frictionlessly and busily with perfectly invisible guidance, recalling ants who spend their lives in a quasi-military operation. Is the world of anti-robots larger than that of robots? Whose instruction manual is more compelling? (MHK)

An ancillary project by Thomas Baumann for the *Robot Dreams* exhibition is on at the same time at the Styrian Armoury, and exploits the environment of an organised but decommissioned armoury.

Antirobot, 2010
Installation of multiple parts: mobile, photographs, aluminium, carbon, stones and motors
In collaboration with Cool Productions/ Josef Nermuth
Courtesy Nicolas Krupp, Basel, Krobath, Vienna

François Roche
*1961 in Paris (F)
Lives in Paris

Stéphanie Lavaux
*1966 La Réunion (F)
Lives in Paris

Stephan Henrich
*1961 in Würzburg (D)
Lives in Stuttgart

Une architecture des humeurs by French architectural firm R&Sie(n) is reminiscent of a clinical research laboratory. Radiant white, the installation suggests mechanical accuracy of the kind you get in precision engineering. Forms are generated between practice and fiction that develop viscously into crystalline shapes. The research laboratory appears dehumanised, and develops bio-morphic structures from mechanical processes, from which François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux create a great variety of whole buildings. Robots calculate, design, analyse, build and enable growth. The insect-like beings seem as much the product as the developers of this process, being machines and living creatures at the same time. (MHK)

R&Sie(n) with Stephan Henrich
Une architecture des humeurs, 2010
3D Print Modelle/3D print models: Machine pneumatique/Viab02/1:1
Video of process, 30'
Collection François Roche, Commande et Production « Le Laboratoire de Paris »

Yan Duyvendak
*1965 in Holland
Lives in Geneva

In his media-critical performances, Yan Duyvendak works with the means of ironic destruction, disintegration, defamiliarisation and exaggeration. The work *Game Over*, produced in an air-raid shelter with narrow corridors, satirises a video killer game in which Duyvendak takes the place of the joystick-controlled protagonist. His movements are mechanistically precise, limited and repetitive. The duties he has to carry out on his mission seem to overtax him. We are left with feelings ranging from empathy for the human marionette trapped in the labyrinth to irritation about the absurdity of the event. How much do we differentiate between experiences of real and virtual realities? (RW, MHK)

Game Over, 2004
Video, DVD, 5' 54"
Courtesy videoart.ch

Maria
1927/1988

Maria (a replica built by the German Film Institute in Frankfurt) is the heroine of the recently restored silent film classic Metropolis by Fritz Lang, and was the first robot to figure in a film. She is considered as a source of inspiration for robot figures and stories from *Star Wars* to *I, Robot*. In *Metropolis*, the utopian city of the future, there prevails a strictly two-class society in which a love affair develops between worker Maria and Freder, son of the sole ruler of Metropolis. Her popularity in the lower town and with Freder result in her appearance being given to a manipulative and destructive robot. Humanity wins out in the end, and the robot is burnt at the stake. The costly film, which was a box office flop when it came out in 1927, is legendary for its Expressionist-influenced film sets, its technical wizardry and the stop-motion editing technique. (KB, MHK)

Maria, 1927/1988
Replica of the robot figure from *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang, Fibreglass, silver
Deutsches Filmmuseum – DIF, Frankfurt

Niki Passath
*1977 in Graz (A)
Lives in Vienna

Zoe is based on the view that machines as programmed calculators are neither intelligent nor have feelings. Nonetheless, they reveal patterns of behaviour that could trigger off feelings. Robots reminiscent of limping spiders, insects or turtles are capable of reacting to the public. If you approach them, they swarm, and take up a viewer-oriented stance. Sometimes a robot steps out of line and breaks with the group dynamics. It remains a misfit, and does not conform with the behavioural pattern. Human social mass structures display similar group dynamics. It is precisely these social structures that interest Niki Passath. She shows us Zoe as a zomboid, plug-in automat, an example of an animate but not only human life. (MHK)

Every day around 3 pm, the beings in the installation go walkabout. They explore the room, organise themselves, lead and are led.

Zoe, 2010
Ten robots (each 15 × 30 × 15 cm), control technology and pedestal. And five other robots in the room (15 x 30 x 15cm)
Niki Passath

Jon Kessler
*1957 in Yonkers (USA)
Lives in New York

The Prison, 2010, is an immersive installation that addresses the significance of the Internet and mobile devices in our lives while simultaneously examining the role of the viewer in the installation. The idea for the piece came to me on a recent New York subway ride when I realized that at least half of the riders were speaking on their cell phones, sending text messages, playing video games, or otherwise immersing themselves into their networked mobile devices. It was a reminder that the boundaries between inside and outside, private and public, inclusion and exclusion, are no longer physically delineated, but porous and dislocated; immaterially determined. While *The Prison* conceptually foregrounds the role of networked technologies and our dependence on them, it is in many ways a tribute to direct experience with the viewer engaging with the uncovering of spectacles being created in real time. (Jon Kessler)

The Prison, 2010
Installation, mixed media
Courtesy of the Artist

Kirsty Boyle
*1975 in Tamworth (AUS)
Lives in Zurich

Australian artist Kirsty Boyle uses very different procedures to investigate the importance of robots in various cultures, thereby questioning and cross-referencing apparently immutable concepts of artificiality and naturalness. She is particularly interested in karakuri, the tradition of Japanese mechanical dolls, who provided entertainment and help at tea ceremonies even in the 18th/19th centuries. They are still used in traditional theatre. In *Tree Ceremony,* a female robot – produced strictly according to Japanese rules and therefore "animate" – acts as ceremonial hostess. Standing on a tatami, she communicates with the tree by means of expressive gestures against a backdrop of Shintoist sounds, her job being apparently to protect and explain the tree. Her delicate Japanese facial features are touching, since they have a moving quality to them. At certain moments, how-

ever, they lay bare the artificiality of their design and origin, and display their marionette-like structure. (KB, MHK)

Tree Ceremony, 2010
Installation of multiple parts: Robot (electronics, linden wood, walnut, vintage textiles), bamboo tree with computer, bonsai trees containing infrared sensors, Tatami mat, genetic active loudspeakers, netbook and microcontroller
Sound design: Iris Rennert
Technical assistance: Urs Gaudenz
Assistant: Effi Tanner
Presented by the Australian Network for Art and Technology and the AI Lab, University of Zurich in association with the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.
Courtesy of the artist

Ed Kienholz
* 1927 in Fairfield (USA)
† 1994 in Hope
Nancy Reddin Kienholz
*1943 in Los Angeles (USA)
Lives in Hope, Houston and Berlin

Object and concept artist Ed Kienholz worked with his wife Nancy from 1972, and she was significantly involved in the genesis of his installations made of scrap and waste materials. *The Same Old Shoe* (1984) fashions a screen monitor from a suitcase.

From its interior a real shoe grows. One could scarcely depict the medialisation of daily life more directly. The aesthetics of the objet trouvé, the superannuated semblance-reproducing machine, reveal human traces of passing time. (AP, MHK)

The Same Old Shoe, 1984
Suitcase, metal fittings, metal knobs, chain of lights, antenna and wooden shoe
Galerie Klaus Benden, Cologne

Jessica Field
* 1978 in Pickering (CDN)
Lives in Oshawa

SICB consists of a theatrical robot production in which the main characters, Clara and Alan, embody differing worldviews and communicate these to each other. Two auxiliary automatons translate this information for the viewer, who finally comes to realise that he is the subject of their discussion. Like in an endless loop the machines are here interpreting man and the human beings the machines. Equipped with sensory perception and the ability to respond interactively, Clara and Alan are programmed to observe their environment; the results of

their analyses are then fed back directly to create changing frames of mind. Field uses these mood swings, which range from self-assurance and arrogance to irritation and paranoia, to cast a satirical light on the way human social life depends on external factors, and on how we let ourselves be guided by prejudices about a world we are in fact unable to predict. (MK)

Semiotic Investigation into Cybernetic Behaviour (SICB), 2004
Robotics installation of four cybernetic machines:
metal, plastic, motion sensors, computer, two data walls and software written by the artist
Collection of the artist

Stelarc
* 1946 in Limassol (CY)
Lives in West Melton Victoria

For more than 30 years, Stelarc has focused on the relationship between man and machines. In his performances and videos of mechanical prostheses, which extend his body in highly diverse ways, he analyses concepts and links between man and machines. In the process, he often puts the physical limits of his own body to the test. *Third Hand* is not a traditional prosthesis compensating for a physical deficiency. It is a case of Stelarc extending his classic bodily functions by technological means. Controlled by the leg muscles, the Third Hand allows the artist an extended field of action, thereby becoming a cyborg, a man/machine hybrid, anticipating what modern medical technology is trying out and indeed putting into practice. (KB, MHK)

Third Hand, Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, 1980
Stainless steel, aluminium, acrylic, two Mini-Copal motors, electronics and electrodes
25 × 40 × 15 cm
Stelarc

Virgil Widrich

* 1967 in Salzburg (A)
Lives in Vienna

Austrian multimedia artist, film-maker and director Virgil Widrich is known for his conceptual precision montages, with which he has won numerous film prizes and also been nominated for an Oscar. In collaboration with film critic and catalogue author Joachim Schätz, he has compiled a selection of key sci-fi scenes in film history for the *Robot Dreams* exhibition and made them into a surreal montage and unique epic about the image of robots. For the exhibition, the end result is a historical reference work as much as a film. Its persuasive autonomy is derived from the precision and narrative force of the visual compositions. (KB)

make / real, 2010
Film collage, DVD, 5'
Virgil Widrich Film- und Multimedia-produktions GmbH

Sibylle Hauert

* 1966 in Basel (CH)
Lives in Basel
Daniel Reichmuth
* 1964 St. Gallen (CH)
Lives in Basel

There are three stands in the room with outsize, futuristic-looking earphones placed on them as an unmistakable promise of an audio experience. There seems to be life in them. They move, react to the presence of nearby humans, and turn towards them. *V.O.C.A.L.* was conceived as a speech interaction between man and machine, and draws visitors into conversation, raising the question of the basic differences between man and machine. The game of questions and answers revolves around philosophical concepts such as consciousness, the self, knowledge, thinking and feeling, and in the process challenges conventional thought patterns relating to "soul-less" machines. Based on the view that humanoid robots are already a thing of the past and the future lies in incorporeal information networks and communications systems, *V.O.C.A.L.* acts as an illustration of these new kinds of communication. (MK, KB)

V.O.C.A.L., 2010
Interactive installation, In collaboration with Volker Böhm (software), Suzanne Zahnd (text), Michael Egger (technics), David Johnson (translation), Jan Voellmy (graphics).
With the generous support of Kunstkredit Basel-Stadt, Sitemapping/ Mediaprojects Bundesamt für Kultur
Courtesy of the artists

Luc Mattenberger

* 1980 in Geneva (CH),
Lives in Geneva

Booby Trap is a suicide bomber. The spare tank of a Northrop F5 Tiger jet fighter of the Swiss air force can be used as a jet ski with a hydraulic jet of for killer purposes. The cool technoid missile is directed threateningly at all visitors who enter. Military applications require the development of robotics for the perfected, externally controlled warrior it to be deployed regardless of losses. Even so, bombs are controlled by humans, who are increasingly capable of operating in the shadows as motors of hostile attacks. How does the meaning of "loss" change in times of emotional, anonymous, totally technical fighting machines? (MHK)

Booby Trap, 2010
Aluminium, tank F5-Tiger, two-stroke engine and turbine
Collection de l'artiste