



THE AFFECTION BETWEEN HUMAN & MACHINE



Fred Abels and
Mirjam Langemeijer -
Electric Circus,
'Dirk, the homeless
robot', 2010.

The exhibition
'Robot Love' calls for
a loving approach of
robots. Because, from
whatever angle you look
at it: The new, better,
human machine is
coming

BY EDO DIJKSTERHUIS

The word 'robot' comes from the Czech 'robota', with the connotation 'coercive' labor '. Robots are nothing more than slaves, mechanical companions at best. The term was coined in 1921 by writer Karel Capek in the play *Rossum's Universal Robots*. But long before that, humans created automated machines. There are descriptions of artificial birds handed down from ancient Greece, from China and Egypt. Automaton were high on the interest list of inventors of all time. In 1495 Leonardo da Vinci produced a detailed construction drawing of a humanoid robot that could sit, swing and move its head. For a long time, thinking about robots was utopian. The machines would take over annoying tasks and make our lives more pleasant. But since Hollywood got involved the tone has changed, and robotics experience a predominantly negative connotation. In science fiction films artificial intelligence is often depicted as a force hostile to humans.

Such as board computer HAL, which in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) almost kills the entire crew of the spaceship or the ‘replicant’ played by Rutger Hauer who refuses to obey *Bladerunner* (1982). And worse: Agent Smith from *The Matrix* (1999) and the Terminator from the 1984 film of the same name who intend to kill the new Messiah and along the way eliminate all mankind. This negative image has resonated with scientists, entrepreneurs and thinkers in the last few years. Yuval Noah Harari warns in his new book *Homo Deus* that the technology that we have developed will outwit us and ultimately surpass us. Tech emperors like Elon Musk and Bill Gates, who made their fortune thanks to the so-called fourth industrial revolution, now see artificial intelligence as a potential Frankenstein monster. And the American inventor Raymond Kurzweil predicts that human life as we know it will cease to exist in 2045...

THE ULTIMATE OTHER

The doom thinking will hear an opposition voice this autumn in Eindhoven. ‘Robot Love’, an art exhibition with sixty international artists, is based on a more affirmative, loving approach towards robots. It not only presents the image of Artificial Intelligence, but also that of ourselves as people. ‘Robot Love’, in a former Milk Factory, is conceived by curator Ine Gevers, specialized in large, thematic exhibitions that are both

timely and urgent. The first was ‘I + the Other’ (1994) in the Beurs van Berlage, and denounced our desire for uniformity. This approach functioned more or less as a blueprint for the following events, ‘Difference on Display’ (2009), ‘Yes Naturally’ (2013) and ‘Hacking Habitat’ (2016). The starting point is the anomaly. By examining the imperfect or exceptional - the other - and analyzing it, we can learn about ourselves and how the norm is constructed, according to Gevers.

Robots are the ultimate other in that respect. Or in terms of ‘Robot Love’: the new newcomers. Because the exhibition argues for a full-fledged and reciprocal relationship between humans and robots. Not one of use and submission, as if we are dealing with dead things. The homeless robotic wanderer of Electric Circus, with his tangled hair on his computer-controlled skull, helps with this by evoking sympathy. The twin sisters L.A. Raeven created a third sister named Annelies, who is quietly hidden away in a corner but immediately reacts to touch. This machine craves for love. The fact that Annelies is a humanoid facilitates identification. But the connection between man and machine does not depend on human look-alikes. For instance, Driessens&Verstappen’s Tickle Machine is no more than a soft brush made of nylon threads. But the computer – or better: the network of algorithms - that

controls the tickler is able to learn from the body that he has ‘in hand’ and can thus become very personal. As a counterpart to physical intimacy there is the linguistic interaction with PIP, the chatbot of Ine Poppe. It is an advanced variant of automated utilities such as Siri from Apple and Alexa from Amazon. *PIP* goes beyond asking how to help you and declares its unrequited love. And sometimes even such an explicit statement is not necessary to generate emotion. The Kuka robot arm adopted by Zoro Feigl is a straightforward boring tool. But thanks to his unwavering attempts to elegantly keep his balance, the robot knows how to charm and indulge his audience.

TRIAL PROCESS

Gevers’ previous exhibition in 2016, ‘Hacking Habitat’ in a former prison in Utrecht, largely focused on the negative aspects of the digital revolution, such as loss of privacy, abuse of big data and unrestrained control by a few multinationals. Even ‘Robot Love’ is not blind to possible pitfalls, despite its positive starting point. In the installation awkward moving robots can be seen. It is clear: the new world order that is promised to us is still to come. The achievements of robotics are systematically overestimated and that results in disappointment. Immediately after entering, as we have passed through the scaly doors of Adams Ponnis which look and feel like living



Hito Steyerl, 'Hell Yeah We Fuck Die', 2016, Skulptur Projekte, Münster, 2017



Erwin Driessens & Maria Verstappen, 'Tickle Salon 2.0', 2018, robotic installation, Next phase of the artwork commissioned by Niet Normaal Foundation. (all works: courtesy of the artists)

curtains, we encounter *Hell Yeah We Fuck Die* by Hito Steyerl. The rather blunt title of the work - the five most used words in English music of the last decades - can be read as one giant neon sculpture, an enlargement of stupid statistics.

The achievements of robotics are systematically overrated...

The fifty mechanical dolls of Felix Burger sing Bach’s *Matthäus-Passion*, one of the most emotionally charged pieces of music, but the passion is lacking in this interpretation. It is perfect but hollow. Sensitivity is also lacking in *Conversations with Bina48*. Artist Stephanie Dinkins is in conversation with the humanoid Binna who has the features of a young, black woman. However, it turns out that Binna is completely unaware of her skin color and its implications. This is not an independent thinking entity but the creation - and thus a reflection - of a bunch of white, male nerds. ‘Robot Love’ does offer alternatives for the Western perspective that is so dominant in the world of robotics. Iranian artists and writers are especially well represented in the exhibition. This is not surprising when you consider that many arithmetic principles were originally formulated by Persian scientists. Interesting fact: the word algorithm is derived from the name of the Persian mathematician Al-Chwarizmi. But more than

possible ethical issues we need to solve with robotics, the positive effects of human-machine relationships are central to ‘Robot Love’. Typical is the trial process that is held during the exhibition between a brothel holder and a sex robot. The question is whether the

female robot prostitute is entitled to her own experiences beyond the limits of her programmed behavior. It is a first step towards an overall equalization of rights - and thus status- of humans and robots.

MACHINOCEEN

‘Robot Love’ wants us to think about the automatism with which we make ourselves, humans, the center of everything. We have to get rid of that anthropocentric view. And the dichotomy that sets us above robots must also be removed. The exhibition ends significantly with Beings by Roger Hiorns. These creatures are composed of jerry cans, hoses and car parts. Obviously, a collection of plastic, but at eye level, those sketchy bodies with angular heads, producing spume, get something recognizable, something human. Identification is the first step towards love and in many other artworks the relationship becomes even more intimate. Patricia J. Reis invites visitors to take a rest on a kind of bean bag and

bury their faces in a hollow space. The required position is highly sensual and the presence of interactive sensors makes the experience extra tactile. The ultimate form of interaction is to overcome oppositions and actually merge. Several artists on ‘Robot Love’ present the kind of cyborgs that may result from this. Bart Hess has been working for years on an oeuvre in which plants and objects are enriched with human characteristics. And the creatures by Margriet van Breevoort, intersections between humans, walruses and mega-brains, would not be out of place in *Star Wars*’ intergalactic café. In this way, ‘Robot Love’ takes a new course and presents technological progress as part of human evolution. After the anthropocene we are sliding into the machinoceen. The distinction between artificial and natural disappears and the new, better machine-human can continue for centuries. That may sound like science fiction but look at the way we have already grown into our beloved smartphone. This vision of the future is less far-fetched than imagined.

Edo Dijksterhuis is art critic

‘Robot Love’, 15 September t/m 2 December, Campina Milk Factory, Kanaaldijk-Zuid / Hugo van der Goeslaan, Eindhoven; Tues - Sun 11 p.m. - 6 a.m., Thursday 11 p.m. - 9 a.m.; entrance € 15,00; publication € 34,99 (publisher Terra); robotlove.nl



Look for a review at museumtijdschrift.nl



Felix Burger, 'Shell Shock Syndrome', 2014, installation, coll. Joep van Lieshout