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Artists and robots at the Grand Palais: can a robot be an artist?

English translation of the complete available article text, prepared with local machine translation and checked against the source. The original PDF remains the reference.

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It is impossible today to escape robots or artificial intelligence, especially in the entertainment. What about the world of art? This is what the Grand Palais wanted to explore with its new exhibition Artists and robots. Through about 40 works, some of which were specially made for the occasion, the museum examines the evolution of the robot and its relation to the world of art. An exhibition between past, present and future that gives us to reflect on our world shaken by technology.

The robot: a machine to create

In its first part, the exhibition focuses first on the elementary robot, "the one that has no imagination, and that acts according to the will of the artist who operates them," explains Commissioner Laurence Bertrand Dorléac. The public is invited to discover the very first artistic robot created by Nicolas Schöffer in 1956. "This robot is invented at the very moment when scientists begin to speak of artificial intelligence, that is, all the theories and techniques aimed at realizing processes that simulate human intelligence," adds Laurence Bertrand Dorléac.

Nicolas Schöffer, considered one of the pioneers of robotic art, laid the foundations of this new era by stating: "From now on the artist no longer creates a work, he creates creation". The various works exhibited thus give us to contemplate the mechanism of the creativity of robots.

Nicolas Schöffer, CYSP 1, 1956 © Photo Aldo Paredes for the Rmn-Grand Palais, 2018 © Adagp, Paris 2018

One discovers Nicolas Schöffer's famous robot, CYSP 1, "the first cybernetic sculpture in art history".This sculpture contains an electronic brain that reacts to variations in sound, light intensity and colour in particular.

Robot Art, created in 2017 by Leonel Moura, gives us to see a set of robots making large paintings. They are equipped with a "small" brain that executes algorithms using simple rules copied from behavioral models observed in a colony of ants.

Robot Art © Leonel Moura / photo Rmn-GP - Thomas Granovsky

The robot: a programmed work

Little by little the robot disappears and leaves room for forms generated by new techniques. The computer gives birth to shapes, images, which transform according to their will – thus questioning the authority of the artist who delegates to the machine a part of his power.

Raquel Kogan's immersive Reflexão #2 work is destabilizing. Parallel luminous lines made of figures move slowly on the ground of space. Everyone can enter this digital space, and thus become an integral part of the work of art.

Reflexão #2 by Raquel Kogan © Photo Aldo Paredes for the Rmn-Grand Palais, 2018

Another work is intended to be particularly intriguing. For the exhibition, artist Jacopo Baboni Schilingi has made Argo, a generative and interactive musical composition. The installation reacts to the composer's real-time breathing, which has been carrying a breathing sensor since June 2017, 24h24 and 7j out of 7. His breathing is based on musical trajectories written by the composition and disturbs them. Every day the music is different and recomposes to infinity.

© Untitled, 2018, Peter Kloger, © Photo Aldo Paredes pour la Rmn-Grand Palais, 2018

Solicity throughout the exhibition, the visitor is also invited to cross a computer-generated maze. This installation created by Peter Kloger for the Grand Palais gives us the opportunity to reflect on "optical illusions and hypnotic and manipulating qualities of new hypercomplex technologies".

The robot: at the time of emancipation

"Today we wonder if an artificial intelligence can create from any room and even if it can have a consciousness, or even if it can give eternal life. This dream of seeing artificial creatures capable of overcoming us, or even replacing us, is old as the world. (...) Could the artist be doubled by the machine?" asks Laurence Bertrand Dorléac in this third part.

The interactive video installation, Portrait on the fly by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau shows for example a swarm of virtual flies buzzing on a screen and forming the silhouette of the watchers and viewers in real time, but the portrait never reaches a stable state. The artists question here the cult of selfie in particular.

Another surprising work: a short film of science fiction imagined by Oscar Scharp but written entirely by the artificial intelligence of a robot named Benjamin – who fed himself and shelled a dozen science fiction scenarios to create a completely surreal story.

Can the robot replace the artist? "Until proof to the contrary, no", chooses to answer Laurence Bertrand Dorléac. "The artist is always master on board and delegates only part of his power to his robot. In other words, his robot remains his slave."

An immersion that shows the importance of the robot as a co-author of the work. However, "Will it make us more human, more artist or more robot?" The question remains open.

Exhibition Artists & Robots Grand Palace From 5 April to 9 July 2018 More info