

ArtBots

Robot Talent Show invades the Esther M. Klein Gallery

by A.D. Amorosi

Robots. Rather than seeing them solely as the property of science and policy, teacher/artist/sculptor Douglas Repetto, Director of Research at the Columbia University Computer Music Center, has curated *ArtBots: The Robot Talent Show* to be a sort of symposium of 'bots removing themselves from their norm.

Robots. They're annoyed as

hell and they're not going to take it. For the time being.

Together with a group of artists and selected school children, Repetto and his *ArtBots* turned robots proactive. He's found robot botanists ("The Wildflower Meadow Glacier"), Etch-a-Sketchers ("Drawing Machine"), videographers ("Retrospectrum") and musicians ("Misericordiam"). Repetto even found a few robots, "Neil and Iona," who seem to just babble at each other all day while layered drones of white noise squeal on behind their chatter. Just like you're doing with your pal or lover right now.

After seeing a show of Repetto's in New York City, the Klein Gallery contacted him to create something similar for the Science Center digs.

"The goal of ArtBots in general is to provide a forum for people

working in the very broad area of art and robotics," says Repetto. "It's been difficult to show this kind of work in traditional art venues, so ArtBots tries to create opportunities. And since part of the (Klein) gallery's goal is to present art that's engaged with the sciences in some way, ArtBots obviously makes a nice fit."

With a limited budget for the Klein Gallery show, Repetto

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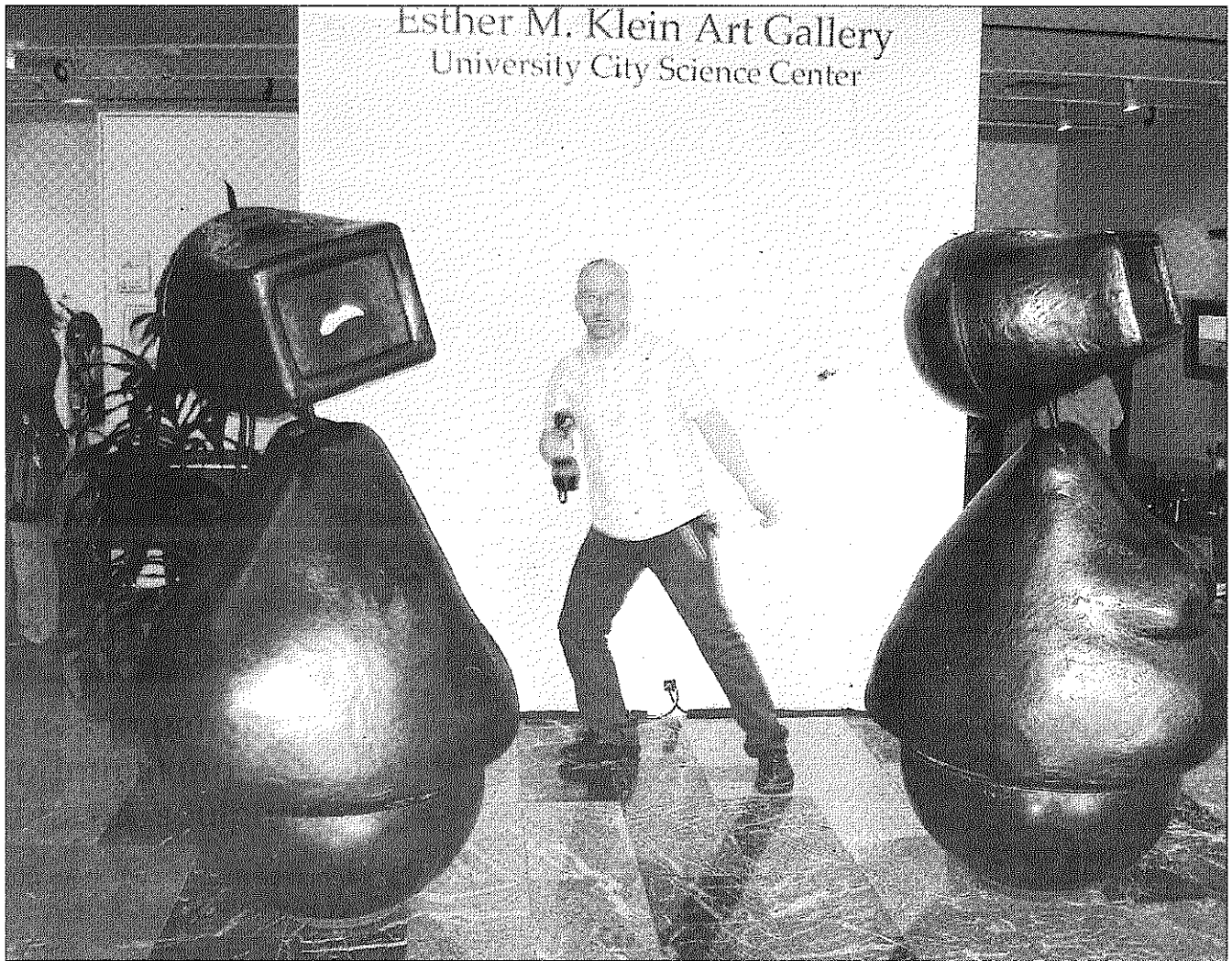
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Douglas Repetto works on installing robots Neil and Iona for the ArtBots exhibit.



A student operates an aquatic robot that moves in a 100 gallon tub of water and has an underwater camera attached. Students from local schools built their own artbots as part of the exhibit's outreach component.

focused on East Coast artists and works that could function over the course of a ten week show. "When we do large international shows they're over a weekend and all of the artists are there the whole time — it can be difficult to get these pieces to run reliably," says Repetto. "Each of the pieces has a very different take on what that can mean and what kinds of ideas and questions can come out of that combination."

Because Klein Gallery deals with various organizations working in the local schools, that meant interaction with area grade and high schools. One organization, iPRAXIS, took the lead on getting local kids involved. Many schools now have robotics programs of one sort or another, but they're usually pretty task-oriented (follow a line, put out a candle, kill your opponent).

"It's a nice idea to try to refocus some of that energy onto more creative applications of robotics and technology in general, rather than straight up problem solving," says Repetto, who was impressed enough with The Shaw Middle School's Lego world of trains, planes, and automobiles ("A City Sleeps, A Hero Reflects") and Overbrook High School's Plexiglass-enclosed sandbox where a robot derrick scoops and tosses colored balls ("Clowning Around"), amongst others, to include them in the bold cold setting.

With the exception of the room that currently houses the vertical "Misericordian" and the long, sliding horizontal "Retrospectrum 3.0," the ArtBots remain in the light of Klein's large windows, allow-

ing the autonomous "Wildflower Meadow Glacier" the necessary sky to play in the sun, plant flowers, and monitor local climate change and CO2 levels. It allows for the proper noise so that Fernando Orellana's "Drawing Machine 3.1415926.v2" can accept the randomness of volume so to vary its sketching levels and colors. Jason Van Anden's "Neil and Iona's" round, bulbous bodies and black and white-running video monitor "lips" tilt, spin, and whirl in the light as if sun bathing as they interact with the audience and themselves.

That doesn't mean Ranjit Bhatnagar's wheezing "Misericordian" or Yoav Bergner and his partners in LoVid's "Retrospectrum 3.0" aren't getting attention. Far from it. You're drawn to their room to press buttons to make the accordion sing and find yourself followed by the all-thinking/all seeing "Retrospectrum 3.0" that flails its arms as it operates.

"That room is extremely fun," says Repetto. "We were very happy that those two work so well together."

"Retrospectrum" (the watchful bot) is indeed sight sensitive; it has three cameras and it switches between them depending on which one it thinks is most interesting. One of the cameras is on "Misericordian," the accordion piece, which helps set the lonely, moody mood.

That loneliness is one of the most marked aspects of ArtBots, and not just because the human-like creatures are in the dark when the lights go out.

While Ellen Lake & Chris Green's "String Ball Collector" may seem to drive in a circle mindlessly collecting and losing balls, it is actually a form of monitoring successes, failures, and disappointments. Ranjit Bhatnagar's "Misericordian" plays its sad songs only when you touch it. Even though "Retrospectrum" often reacts to "Misericordian's" tone, "Retrospectrum" and "Drawing Machine" only truly light up when you're near. And though the swiveling, sputtering pear-shaped humanoid "Neil and Iona" have each other, they seem to only embrace when people are talking to them.

Are they lonely? For Repetto, one of the most interesting aspects of robotics in general — art plus robotics in particular — is anthropomorphism.

"It's really difficult to not read various emotional states into these things. 'Retrospectrum' and 'Neil and Iona' are explicitly about the internal states of the bots," said Repetto. "For others it's a bit less clear. I can get really caught up in what the string ball collector is doing, even though it's about as simple a mechanical system as can be. These are the kinds of questions and ideas that make it exciting to work with robotics and art. And there are no clear answers, which keeps everyone on their toes."

Toes? They *are* human.

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