

SCHEMATIC: THE MACHINE THAT MOVES US

Peter Flemming, Germaine Koh, Joe Mckay, Nicholas Stedman, Norman White
Text by Michelle Kasprzak.

In 1738, Jacques de Vaucanson built what would become his most famous automaton, a duck consisting of over four hundred moving parts. The duck was able to flap its wings, drink water, 'digest' food, and defecate. The duck delighted people who observed it and brought de Vaucanson the attention of some of the most important and wealthy people of his time. While it was remarkable for its technical ingenuity (it was said that de Vaucanson created the first flexible rubber pipe as part of its 'intestines'), it was also amazing for its resemblance to a real duck. It was this very combination of technical ingenuity and resemblance that produced its capacity to entertain with actions that would be utterly banal when demonstrated by a real duck. Vaucanson's duck is a very early version of the sort of work that would now sit comfortably on a spectrum with Disney Imagineers on one end, and new media artists on the other.

Vaucanson's duck, though it was mostly utilised merely to entertain bored royalty, raised complex issues that resonate still today, and that are part of the magic of the works in the Schematic exhibition. As Paul W. Glimcher notes in his book, *Decisions, Uncertainty, and the Brain*, the behaviour and construction of Vaucanson's duck posed many philosophical questions: 'Are the mechanical interactions that occur inside each of us sufficient to generate the complex patterns of behaviour that we actually produce? What is it that defines us as human beings, the complexity of behaviour that we produce or the specific patterns of interacting matter that appear to generate our behaviour?' The works in Schematic also interrogate these notions, through a range of nuanced commentary on human society and behaviour.

Schematic was conceived as an exhibition wherein machines created by artists, which are the descendents of Vaucanson's duck and other amazing feats of engineering and art, be given space to articulate the core ideas that make kinetic new media art compelling. Schematic features the work of five emerging and established Canadian new media artists, and showcases eloquent aesthetic expressions by artists who incorporate invention and engineering in their practice. Technology has come a long way since 1738, but the concerns of representation, and the audience's interaction with objects that have behaviours of their own, are perennial and are explored in depth in this exhibition.

ADB (after Deep Blue) by Nicholas Stedman is perhaps the closest descendant to Vaucanson's duck, though its aims and manifestation are very different. A snake-like object responds to the touch of those who choose to interact with it. Each section of the object has an internal motor and sensors, which react to the presence of human skin. Inspired by the famous defeat of chess master Gary Kasparov by the computer Deep Blue, Stedman addresses the fundamental discomfort underlying our relationships with the machines that we create. Referring to a crushing, nearly unthinkable defeat, Stedman positions his robot as an initial step on the inevitable path that follows such a watershed event in human-computer interaction: will the next generation of computers be able to perfect acts of sentiment and affection?

In Germaine Koh's **Fair-weather forces (water level)**, a larger-scale social world is evoked by the symbolism of velvet ropes on stainless steel stanchions. Commonly used to separate VIPs from the crowd or to define queues, the ropes are instantly recognisable as a method of social organisation. In this work, the ropes are controlled by data being received by a sensor that is monitoring levels in an external body of water chosen by the artist. As the movement of the tides shift and change, the velvet ropes move up and down. Koh uses technology within her work, in this piece and in others in the same series, to take recognisable objects and reshape their use into devices that are able to reflect conditions in our external environment. Koh's work reflects deeply on the utility and design of objects, and the ways in which other messages can be revealed through objects known to have a single function or symbolic purpose.

Utility and design are also key components of Peter Flemming's **Canoe**. The work utilises a symbol that evokes contemporary leisure and also the historical hardships of settling Canada. Normally an object that is designed to be on the move, whether being used actively in sport today, in the Canadian fur trade of old, or being flown through the sky in legends such as the French-Canadian tale of the 'chasse galerie', Flemming's Canoe is inert and static, and has been reversed to hold water rather than to glide through it. This symbol of mobility and trade has been fixed and a mechanical structure moves a paddle through the water inside the canoe on a regular cycle, allowing us to isolate and examine this movement, so regular and perfect, utterly unlike any paddle stroke performed by a human canoeist.

Fixing and isolating movement is central to Norman White's seminal piece of electronic art, **The Helpless Robot**. This robot has no motors, and relies on its ability to seek assistance from gallery visitors to rotate on its base. The Helpless Robot has a voice and a personality, and gallery visitors use the handles on the sides of the sculpture to touch it and respond to its pleas to be turned to the right or left. The robot responds immediately to any human intervention, drawing on its bank of 256 phrases to direct visitors further and extend the interaction. As with Stedman's work, a human participant is required to activate and complete the piece, and it is only through interaction that a gallery visitor can explore the range of expression possible. As White has said, his interest in working with robotics stemmed from '...the possibility of creating some very artificial-looking thing... which might in some small way take on the subtle functional attributes of a living organism.' With the Helpless Robot, it is the human voice that emanates from within it that confounds our expectations for an otherwise sleek and non-anthropomorphic device, but it is ultimately the internal computer's logic that confounds our ability to fulfil its demands.

Joe McKay's work echoes this concern with an endless task or unfulfilled demand. **The Big Job** is a mechanical 'progress bar', much like the progress bars we have become so accustomed to seeing in our contemporary age of personal computing. The progress indicator in this work is connected to a loading webpage, and moved very slowly by a motor. Once completed, the work commences again, revealing a cycle to its movement. The Big Job is unfinishable, and reflects the Sisyphean nature of other tasks taking place in the gallery, such as the Canoe paddling to travel nowhere, and the Helpless Robot continually seeking help and never being satisfied with its placement.

The works in this exhibition challenge our assumptions about the common objects that surround us, particularly in the ways in which they move, require us to move, or oblige us to reconsider movement. Rosalind Krauss, in her classic text *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, noted that sculpture in the early sixties 'was what was on or in front of a building that was not the building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape.' The works in this exhibition, through their unique set of behaviours that they manifest, are what is in the range of human movement and motivation that are not human. Like de Vaucanson's duck, these works create delight but also unease, in the ways that they cause us to ask what the machines we create say about ourselves. Our contemporary context is one of increasing reliance on technology and advances in technology as a result of human virtuosity. In the spirit of our time, these works by artists who act also as inventors will continue to interrogate the spectrum of what is in the range of human expression, but is not human.

Schematic has been curated by Heather Corcoran, Michelle Kasprzak and Gillian McIver.
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