

Silke Grabinger
Ludwig Felhofer

Indelibly human

Human Relationship
Towards Robots

Silke Grabinger's artworks and concepts combine contemporary dance with performative art and robotics. Her particular focus is critical examination of social phenomena, artistic paradigms and the function and position of the audience.

Ludwig Felhofer studied Philosophy and German Philology before taking up a position as a lecturer in German at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. Since 2019, he has been collaborating regularly with SILK Fluegge on performance and dance productions, primarily in the area of dramaturgy.

1.

No matter what disaster or chaos unfolds in the natural or political world, a glance into the field of technology seems to suggest only one thing: progress, progress, progress. Not only have human-made devices become increasingly sophisticated in their mechanical possibilities—robots can now lift immense weights and perform extremely precise movements—, but with the rise of different systems of AI (LLM), even the assessment and judgement of reality are increasingly carried out by the human-made tools—robots, therefore are getting more and more autonomous.

In light of these developments, the question arises: can humans keep up with this progress? They seem to be able to. The economy embraces both robots and AI systems for its purposes. However, a closer look at how we treat these artifacts reveals something different. This essay seeks to explore the human relationship towards robots and how it is distorted. By examining both the production and the aesthetic form of the performance *SPOTSHOTBEUYS* by Silke Grabinger, it will be shown how art can portray such an intricate relationship of a producer towards her or his product in a comprehensive way.

2. HUMAN ROBOTS – ROBOTS AND BEUYS

What are humans? Many answers have been given to this Socratic question. Some have given humankind a

specific determination—humans as rational or as social beings—, while others have sought to set it entirely free—understanding the human as a being without a definite essence.

One out of those attempts is the concept of *homo faber*¹: humans as producing, ultimately as toolmaking creatures. Whether one considers this trait as essential for humankind or not, it is undeniable from a descriptive standpoint that humans are deeply connected to tools. They have not only been able to create a single type of instrument but have developed an immense variety of tools—almost as if they have the universal ability to make tools. When one looks at the shape of the world, human artifacts are everywhere. Everything humans consume is mediated through them. Moreover, even the natural world has not remained untouched by human influence—only very few forests in Europe that appear natural, for instance, are actually primeval, most are the result of human intervention. Throughout the history of humankind, the products of *homo faber* have expanded—both in quantity and quality. Early humans first crafted simple tools to improve their ability to obtain food. For thousands of years, their niche seemed to

1 While Max Scheler (1961: 82) regarded the concept of *homo faber* as just one out of many misconceptions about the human being—arguing that it overemphasizes the aspects of life at the expense of human spirit—Hannah Arendt (1998: 136) saw it in a more positive light, considering it one of the three essential human activities. Positioned between animal laborans, who works to secure food, and the human as a political being, who takes action, *homo faber* is not merely a producer for consumption but a creator of a lasting world of artifacts.

be the ability to crack up bones to extract the bone marrow (Harari 2015: 11). Later, they developed various agricultural tools, not only to gather and find food but to actively produce it. With industrialization, productive forces reached a new stage. Machines were invented—mechanical tools designed to manufacture other products and even other tools themselves. Today, the results of this long-initiated progress are omnipresent; the factories of our time are populated by robots. We now seem to be at the threshold of a new era—one in which automation extends beyond physical labour to include intellectual labour as well. In this whole chain of development, one thing remains clear: all these tools, these machines, these robots, as well as these programs are ultimately *products of humans*. It is human beings who create them with their intellect and with their hands. In this sense, there is nothing mystical about them—humans are the conscious beings with the ability, while the tools are merely created objects without consciousness. Humans and their creations are clearly distinct. With the development of robots, it became particularly evident that this relationship is not as simple as one might assume. Even though humans are not robots and robots are not humans, humans show a remarkable trait: in an encounter with a robot, they tend to perceive it as a human or at least as a humanoid. Once the robot moves autonomously, a human spectator is eager to see in it human abilities as well, first and foremost consciousness. We can see the robot, so it also should notice us. It can't be a pure thing, it's not an ›it‹, it seems to be a person which should

also be named. That act has a name: *anthropomorphism*. Something that is not human is understood as having human properties and capabilities.

The classic field where those tendencies are brought out is the critique of religions. The gods with their properties are understood as projections of the humans. This critique starts with Xenophanes remarking that Homer's gods consist only in the good and bad aspects of human life,²² and reaches its famous peak in Ludwig Feuerbach's interpretation of the Christian god as the human being's objectification. Humans only project their capacities into this god—it is a purified form of their own theoretical intellect, their practical will as well as their ability to love, which they conceive as properties of their god.

Confronted with robots, humans seem to follow the same pattern: attributing robots their own abilities and properties. The difference is only that it is no longer a spiritual being on which the human characteristics are projected on, but something which is purely physical—only the use of mechanics and electronics make it move in a seemingly autonomous way. So, humans anthropomorphize

2 “But mortals think gods are begotten, / and have the clothing, voice, and body of mortals. / Now if cattle, <horses> or lions had hands / and were able to draw with their hands and perform works like men, horses like horses and cattle like cattle / would draw the forms of gods, and make their bodies / just like the body <each of them> had.” (DK 21 B 14 f.)

robots.³ An act which appears societally when we question how much trust we should place in the decisions of autonomous robots, particularly in safety-critical areas like medicine or public security. As this question is fundamentally flawed. This new entity introduces unique challenges, and human attributes like trust, empathy, free will, and consciousness cannot be directly applied.

If one considers a myth as an explanation which tries to grasp something unknown, something potentially dangerous and frightening, but ultimately an attempt that renders it wrongly, then something alike is created while anthropomorphizing robots. It is so obvious that it seems unworthy to notice that those machines are nothing more than very sophisticated products of human labour. Yet, humans keep on attributing them more.

Filling endless worlds of fiction, now robots and artificial intelligence are receiving humans' capacities—its aggressive and suppressive drive as well as its capability for love. Such myths are the opponents of enlightenment; through reason, enlightenment wants to substitute true theories for wrong stories about the world.

3 Moon and Nass showed already in 2000 in a meta-analysis of psychological studies that humans would overuse human social categories on computers and that they use social behaviours with them. Even though they reject the explanation through anthropomorphism, this is just because they conceive anthropomorphism as an intentional belief—which adult humans generally deny when asked (Nass / Moon 2000). Arientie (2015) argued that the basis for anthropomorphic projection is relatedness not similarity—explaining by that how we also project on artifacts that don't look like us. The fact that humans anthropomorphize robots even led to a research field in robotics, 'applied anthropomorphism' (Damiano 2018; Roesler 2021).

Here one must look closely: as enlightenment is the theoretical basis for producing modern-day technology, enlightenment brings out its opposite, a myth about that same technology. This dialectic of enlightenment was famously apprehended by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002), to deal with the horrors of 20th century. In our relation to robots, that structure appears once more. Humans can't realize what results out of their science—that the robots in front of them are machines—, but mystify it—by ignoring the programming or the remote control of the robots. And the downside here is not long in coming: autonomous robotics become highly problematic in the context of seemingly empathetic social relationships. They cannot replace authentic human connections. In times of labour shortages in caregiving and education, external assistance can alleviate human overwhelm but cannot replace humans. People need people to raise them. The subject of this new myth are *human robots*. Thus, those two beings seem to be in an *immediate unity*.

How to deal with such a unity if it holds in itself something wrongly? In our understanding, art has the special capacity to, on the one hand, make this moment visible as well as, on the other hand, subject it to an in-depth analysis. Therefore, for a moment, we turn to something appearing on first sight as something completely else, but something which is a helpful background for our work with robots: to Joseph Beuys and his performance *I like America and America likes me* (1974).

The outline of Joseph Beuys' performance *I like America and America likes me* (Schneede 1994) is simple. However, this led to different and complex interpretations of that work. A gallery in New York, a man and a coyote, and three days. At that time and in that space, Beuys encountered the animal and vice versa.

Beuys himself understood his relation to the coyote implicitly as his relation to the suppressed indigenous people: “Da habe ich ein Tier genommen, das für die amerikanische Psyche eine große Rolle spielt, den Kojoten. Er steht als ein Repräsentant für die unbewältigte Vergangenheit des Mordes an den Indianern und wird von den Amerikanern deswegen bis heute noch gehaßt⁴” (Schneede 1994, 334). In a sense, he tried to heal that relationship by taking the role of a shaman. In his words: “Sondern ich benutze diese alte Figur, um etwas Zukünftiges auszudrücken, indem ich sage, daß der Schamane für etwas gestanden hat, was in der Lage war, sowohl materielle wie spirituelle Zusammenhänge in eine Einheit zu bekommen” (Schneede 1994, 336).

In our understanding of the performance, there is even more at stake: The performance departs from a certain relationship between humans and nature in society: Humans can control nature and are in doing so hierarchically definitely on a higher level. A view which

4 “There, I took an animal that plays a great role in the American psyche, the coyote. He stands as a representative of the unresolved past of the murder of the Indians and is therefore still hated by Americans to this day”. All translations are from the authors.

was expressed in the attempt to exterminate the so-called *archpredator*, the coyote, in the United States at the beginning of 20th century (Flores 2016).

Beuys takes the basic constituents of this view by confronting himself with a coyote. One could say he appears as a representative of the predominant humans⁵, as well as the coyote takes the place of the wild and untamed nature. However, his artistic performance can be understood as a way to make this unquestioned relationship visible, or even more: to cast doubt on it. The relationship is exhibited, therefore this invisible ground can be grasped, and, as possibilities of this relationship are performatively acted through, this relationship and its inherent human violence is called into question. As Beuys didn't try to suppress the animal during their three days together, one could say that he even tried to develop another relationship, a peaceful relationship. In this sense, the aesthetic approach in Beuys' performance is in itself a method to analyse and criticize a relationship that is taken for granted.

3. PLAYING WITH ROBOTS, PLAYING WITH HUMANS, AND STILL HUMAN ROBOTS – POETICS AND AESTHETICS OF *SPOTSHOTBEUYS*

Yet, it is unclear what a way of art dealing with the ongoing anthropomorphic projections on robots can look like.

5 “Rather, I am using this ancient figure to express something future by saying that the shaman stood for something that was able to bring both material and spiritual connections into a unity.”

Therefore, we now turn to the piece *SPOTSHOTBEUYS* and have a look at how it operates in that field. To fully grasp the artistic work, it is essential to first clarify how we perceive performance: for us, choreography is not the mere arrangement of movement or the pursuit of aesthetic dance, but rather a transfer of intention. Therefore, the bodies moving through space in a performance are always intertwined with ideas.

The point of departure for *SPOTSHOTBEUYS* was the aforementioned relationship between humans and robots and the insight that by transforming Beuys' constellation one could deal productively with this relationship – this was especially the case as Grabinger could work with Spot of Boston Dynamics and therefore had a robot dog in contrast to Beuys' “natural” dog. To provide an insight into such a way of dealing with the interaction between humans and robots, the means how that performance was created shall briefly be explained – in a sense a *poetics* of *SPOTSHOTBEUYS*.

This process can be understood to be two folded: on a theoretical examination followed an experimental phase, where we played with all the involved elements. The act of finally arranging the results of the former two is dealt with afterwards, as this way of giving the work of art a definite form coincides with the description of the piece itself. The preliminary work started off similarly to this essay: with a conceptual approach to the relationship towards robots, as well as Beuys' performance. Out of this, first artistic images were developed, as well as an initial sketch of the

dramaturgy of the piece. By doing that, it became clear that the relationship would have to go through an analysis. Especially, as the human control of robots is often hidden in performances with artificial beings and the robots therefore become a surface to project subjective intentions on. However, to become an artistic piece and not to remain a mere theoretical consideration, the artistic work must enter time and space, it must get its own form of sensuality. For this, we experimented with each one of the components as well their encounter. We were playing with robots, playing with humans and playing with their interactions. And by doing so, we subjected the anthropomorphizing approach to robots an analysis.

Several details resulted from this, only two pointed out. The robot dog seemed to encounter a problem when meeting himself. If he'd stepped on a mirror, for instance, his object recognition failed, he couldn't identify the image as himself, instead he seemed to comprehend himself as another object and acted as if it was a step. On the other hand, it became ever clearer: even when knowing that this is an artificial robot and that is the person controlling it, we just can't stand the urge to project human properties on it. As if we wished that there was something more to it, as if there should be another one with them, we could get into touch.

While working through this relationship, the reference to Beuys and his performance also had to undergo many transformations. The core of these changes was the

insight that hierarchy is inverse now. Before being the symbol of culture in contrast to nature, the human now is nearer to nature than the artificial dog. Therefore, the roles of human and dog are—compared to *I like America and America likes me*—reversed in *SPOTSHOTBEUYS*.

Even if there are many moments which played a role in the process of *SPOTSHOTBEUYS*' creation, as a work of art, it had to take definite shape. A process by which the work itself becomes detached from its history. Thus, this final section examines the performance's particular form and can be understood as an *aesthetics* of this performance. The performance starts with the facts as they are.

Grabinger is on stage and—mirroring the beginning of Beuys' performance—the robot dog, Spot is brought to the exhibition and performance space. It is also her who activates the robot. One could think: a human, a robot, the former started the latter; so, everything is as it should be: humans created their sophisticated tools. But the moment, the robot moves, it can be, and it is perceived as a living creature. The audience is eager to ascribe the robot consciousness and might pose itself questions regarding Spot's will. So, the act of anthropomorphism starts right away, and the immediate synthesis of robot and human is present at the beginning of the piece. This illusion is facilitated by the fact, that the person directing Spot with a remote control is not shown in this first part. The robot can be perceived as an own entity, possibly with human traits.

To underline this, Spot's movement seems to imitate mine. Nonetheless, the work doesn't stop here—it would only be a simple play with the audience's need for an understandable counterpart and therefore leave everything open to its subjective projections. At once, the investigated relationship between the machine and the robot reveals itself as an attempt of approaches as well as conflicts with another human being: the remote control enters the stage in the hands of a second human. Everybody can now see me dancing with Spot, which is controlled by Gergely Dudás-Simó. The spectators come to realize the circumstances of Spot's movement. This is the phase where the audience is confronted with their possible anthropomorphism. "Reality" is shown, the machine is just that—a machine. Spot can be turned on and off, or have its batteries removed. The analysis of the relationship of human and robot, which preceded the piece in its creation, finds its place on the stage. This holds true for the audience as well as for me. As a performer, I now interact with the robot but at the same time referred to the other performer who is ultimately responsible for the dog's movement. When I now imitate the dog's movement the difference between the two of us becomes clearly visible. The spectators are in the same position as I am, only in a

“theoretical” instead of a “practical” sense.⁶

Finally, another shift is made. In a third and final part, it is no longer either nobody who is controlling Spot or another person. It is me who takes over the control of the robot. On the one hand, the anthropomorphic projection is taken back through that act. In this sense, Dudás-Simó’s presence would have only been understood as a symbolic outer representation of the human traits that are ascribed to the robot dog. Now it is once more clearly visible, that it is just the human who is leading. Nonetheless, on the other hand, the whole process starts over once more: While intimate encounters between the human and the dog, the audience can once more follow its tendency to forget the remote control, to see in Spot a real counterpart of me. This even though the remote control is on the floor between us two and visibly manipulated by me. For the audience, it therefore seems as if it was the two of us in a changing interplay, where one cannot tell who imitates whom. In this last part the piece brings a mediated form of the anthropomorphic projection on stage. Everybody is confronted with the fact, that there is nothing more in front of them than an artifact created as well as manipulated by

6 By showing this constellation, the piece reveals the truth about many other performances with autonomous entities. They try to make the audience believe that it is just those machines who decided to move in that particular way, but very often the direct programming—the remote control in a figurative sense—is only hidden. Hence, robotic art is a simulation or illusion because it lacks lived experience—it is based on recorded and reproduced data. A fact which reduces the performances to a magic trick with very sophisticated means.

humans. In this sense, the relations between humans and robots should be enlightened at that point. However, even on that basis, people are eager not to grasp the difference between humans and robots, but to understand the latter as a human robot. The performance brings about the new myth, humans are eager to see more in robots even if they know that it is nothing more than their tool. As this situation blends fiction with reality, one could speak of a *real-time robotic fiction*.

This oddly situation manifests itself in the performance in a semilucid mirror Spot and I are playing with. While I can see the robot through it—therefore the difference between us two is recognized—, I also see myself in it at the same time. This mirroring reflects the projective behaviour of humans: this other entity is just perceived as constituted by one's own properties.

The three parts of the performance are three different *images*. Three images expressing the relationship of humans and robots: the immediate projection of human traits on a robot, the revelation of that projective behaviour by showing the human in control, and finally the mediated form of that projection. With a montage of one of them after each other, the human urge to anthropomorphize finds a portrayal.

4. SPOT SHOT BEUYS – CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we set out, humans have a paradoxical tendency:

They seem to be irresistible against their enlightenment, even if it is, they themselves elucidating their errors. The relationship between humans and robots is just one more case where this appears. Humans can't let go of anthropomorphizing their products, their autonomous creatures seem to them to be human-like regardless of the known fact that it is modern mechanics and electronics that make those heaps of matter move. In the face of such constellations, art has the possibility to make them visible and question them. Joseph Beuys' *I like America and America likes me* is an example of such attempt dealing with the relation between human and nature, in the end even trying to reconfigure the relationship and thereby healing it. By outlining the production and the final form of the Grabinger's performance *SPOTSHOTBEUYS*, we tried showing a way of art dealing with the new myth humans are creating on top of their enlightened science. Dealing with such an intricate relation cannot consist in singling out just one of its moments—showing either on the one hand that humans always conceive robots as human robots or on the other hand that it is humans who create and control robots and those are therefore nothing more than robots. Through a montage of three different images connected with the immediate projection, the enlightenment of that misconception, and the reappearance of the projection despite the knowledge, *SPOTSHOTBEUYS* brings the whole process on stage and makes it graspable. One could ask: in what sense can this still be associated with Beuys' performance and the philosophy we saw in it?

While in Beuys' performance the relationship between humans and nature is shown and thereby the attempt is to heal it, the relationship from Grabinger to Spot is different. The analysis of the elements only leads back to the first unity and not a new, entirely different constellation. Hence, Spot is in a sense 'stronger' than Beuys' method and the relationship cannot be healed by the performance it can only be deconstructed. It is Beuys therefore who is "shot" by Spot. Precisely to this extent, *SPOTSHOTBEUYS* is humbler or more than its predecessor, not convinced to produce a human-robotic utopia. However, this is the case exactly because we understood the relationship between the two in its full complexity and exhibited it that way.

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This contribution is part of the focus research *Relationships, Autonomies and Connections*. The series is dedicated to what lies between things: between concepts, between disciplines and between spaces, both physical and theoretical – albeit distant – between cultures, and between the ideation of a project and its realisation. The concept of ‘relationships, autonomies and connections’ is thus fundamental in the humanities, as it offers a framework for understanding the complex interaction between individuals, cultures and texts.