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An Eponymous Festival
Ars Electronica 2009, Linz, Austria. 3 - 8 September 2009

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Hiroshi Ishiguro & Geminoid, Featured artist 2009. Geminoid was developed by ATR Intelligent Robotics and Communication Laboratories. Source: rubra.
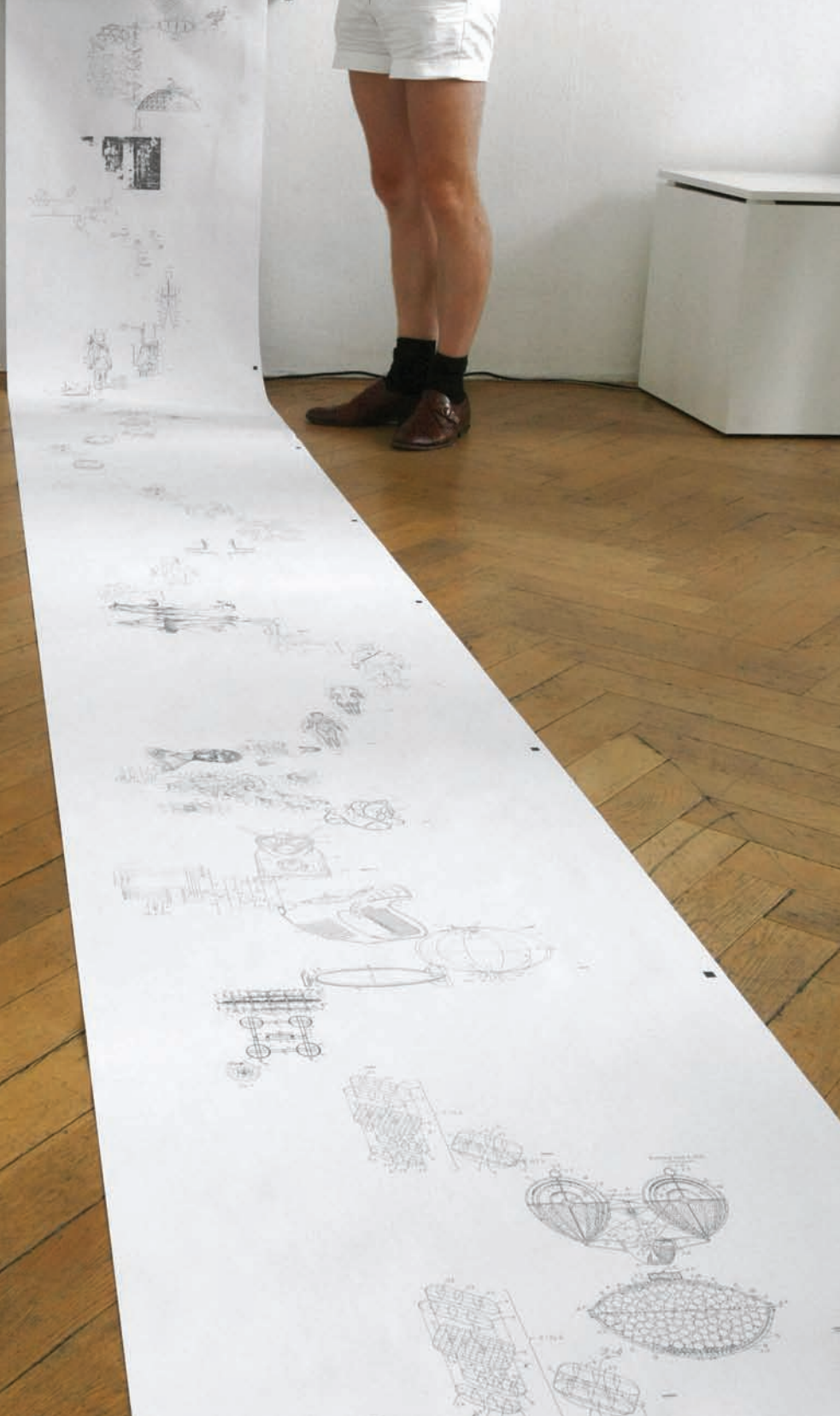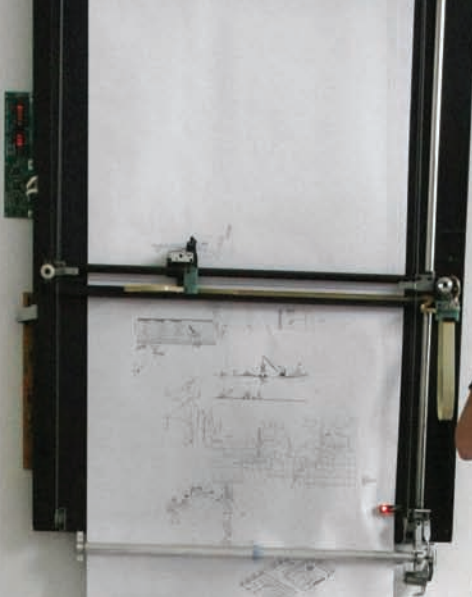
Linz, Austria

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rs Electronica, the eponymous festival celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year, has shaped the concept of the new media festivals. Where technology meets art was once an experimental and rarefied endeavor reserved for academic and underground research labs, it is clear that, three decades in, new media is increasingly entering main stream practices of art (from architecture, cinema, music to design practices) pushing this iconic festival to investigate emergent horizons from within the field of technocentric creativity.

Pursuing parallel agendas for the event with: a thematic exhibition: HUMAN NATURE; highlights from the Prix Ars Electronica; a timely retrospective on the history of the festival: "30 years of Ars Electronica Festival" along with topical conferences by Friedrich Kittler, Derrick de Kerkhove and Hiroshi Ishiguro, to name a few; the event was aimed at positioning both

Benjamin Maus, Julius von Bismarck, *Perpetual Storytelling Apparatus.* CyberArts Exhibition 2009. Source: rubra.

past and present directives in electronic and computational media. A quick overview of works, conferences and performances presented clearly outlines the shifting nature of media arts as it becomes increasingly entangled with issues of biology, ecologies, social economies and political agendas. As such, media hybrids are invading the natural sciences, political spheres and social fields at such a rate — that, to reference Latour, these "monsters" are now an intimate and irrefutable part of the very fabric we inhabit, and certainly, taking a futurist view, the horizon towards which we are positioned. Hence, it comes as no surprise that some of the more engaging works utilized scientific models borrowed from the laboratory as opposed to the artist's atelier which are markedly influenced by recent trends in STS (Science, Technology and Society) research as well as social/performative strategies.

Human/Nonhuman Enunciations

Bruno Latour has proposed that the modernist conception of the humanities have turned a blind eye to the growing overlap and interdependence between disciplines and between the shared agencies of human and nonhumans systems. Of interest, in particular, is his investigation of the proliferation of "monsters," or hybrids, through two interdependent set of practices: that of translation and purification. Utilized to shuttle back and forth between the divide that separates exact knowledge and the exercise of power (or nature and culture) translation propels a set of network-based admixtures of nature/culture, resulting in "monsters". The second set of practices, purification, creates two entirely distinct ontological zones separating human beings from nonhumans. Where purification, corresponding to the modern critical stance, propels translation (i.e. speeds it up, expands it), translation in its turn legitimizes purification, thus rendering it essential.

Since to be modern is to believe in time's irreversible arrow and consider translation & purification separately, Latour signals this no longer tenable practice of modern asymmetry, leaving us unable to (re)claim the divisionist modernity stance all-the-while forcing us rethink exclusionary notions of the nature/culture and human/nonhuman.

Many of the works in the Prix Ars Electronica point to this impossibility of maintaining this modernist divide as outlined by Latour and repositions media artworks within the greater ecology of practices related to the natural science, environments and social transformations — thus aligning the human and nonhuman once again. As example, Eduardo Kac's Hybrid Art/Golden Nica winning "Natural History of the Enigma" features a transgenic Petunia flower expressing the artist's DNA (sequenced from his blood) which is predominantly visible in the flowers' own red veins. The project proposes new strategies for the merging of the nature/culture (or science/aesthetic) asymmetry, thus exemplifying post-humanist (post-anthropocentric) modalities of negotiating nature. In a similar vein of research, David Haines and Joyce Hinterding's "EarthStar," a poetic experiment highlighting the sun's electromagnetic/vibrational energies via sense perceptive media (footage of the sun's chromo-sphere captured by the artists' hydrogen-alpha telescope in Australia; solar noise recorded by custom made antennas tuned to the star's radio bursts; and olfactory cues derived from synthesized molecules mimicking ozone smells) redefines the exteroceptive senses in relation to the cosmos within the context of an immersive art experience.

Posthumanist Performance

Karen Barad's posthumanist approach, a move away from social constructivist approaches of the past, proposes to focus on "enactments" of "performance" — engaging the material and discursive; the social and scientific; the human and nonhuman;

and the natural and cultural elements. Building upon previous panoramas of performativity from British philosopher J. L. Austin's speech act theory, which relates "saying" to/as "doing" and Judith Butlers' conceptions of identity "performance" construction, Barad's critique moves away from a linguistics-centric belief in the "real" towards performative alternatives, challenging previous representational ontologies, and shift the focus from "questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g. do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practice/doings/actions."[1] These proposed methodologies of "enactment" — staged as modalities of knowledge gaining — step away from normative representationalist models utilized in science and art — and become increasingly important in parsing out the ways in which humans and nonhumans come to *produce* scientific and artistic effects through a series of at times oblique or direct collaboration and confrontations. This performative turn, articulated around media choreographies, is indicative of the strategies employed by many of the Prix Ars Electronica artists. Steve Lambert (Member of Because We Want It) in his tactical artwork "The New York Times Special Edition," a large-scale collaborative work presenting a highly authentic-looking "fake" edition of the NYT containing everything a Liberal American (and Liberals world-wide) would like to see transformed in American policies and politics (from the end of the Iraq war, to the indictment of George W. Bush).

Meanwhile, !Mediengruppe Bitnik's "Opera Calling" similarly posits an interventionist "event" via the live phone dissemination of the Zurich Opera through audio-bugs placed within the Opera house's auditorium. Calling individuals at random, the artwork/system sought to create a commentary on arts funding structures versus access to culture — the public funds invested in the Opera contrasted to the prohibitive prices — all the while retooling the phone as a distributed, and free broadcast system.

The twinning of human/nonhuman is never more present than in the field of robotics, aiming towards human-like (or more) intelligence, mobility and memory as exemplified in, for example, Robotlab's "bios [bible]," a robotic scribe calligraphically reproducing the Bible on rolls of paper, or "Perpetual Storytelling Apparatus" by Benjamin Maus and Julius von Bismark which culls online patent images and draws then in succession with the aims of "writing" a (scripted, but not revealed) narrative. Utilizing traditional craft technologies, "the idea of a tree" is an autonomous — and hence unscripted - representation of ambient solar energy readings, which, via traditional yarn spinning on a mold, produces design artifacts (lampshade, bench etc.) correlating the integrated production, design, and the environment factors. Finally, featured artist of the festival, Hiroshi Ishiguro presented his Geminoid HI-1, a robot modeled to his likeness which he uses as a distance "presence" of himself to study Artificial
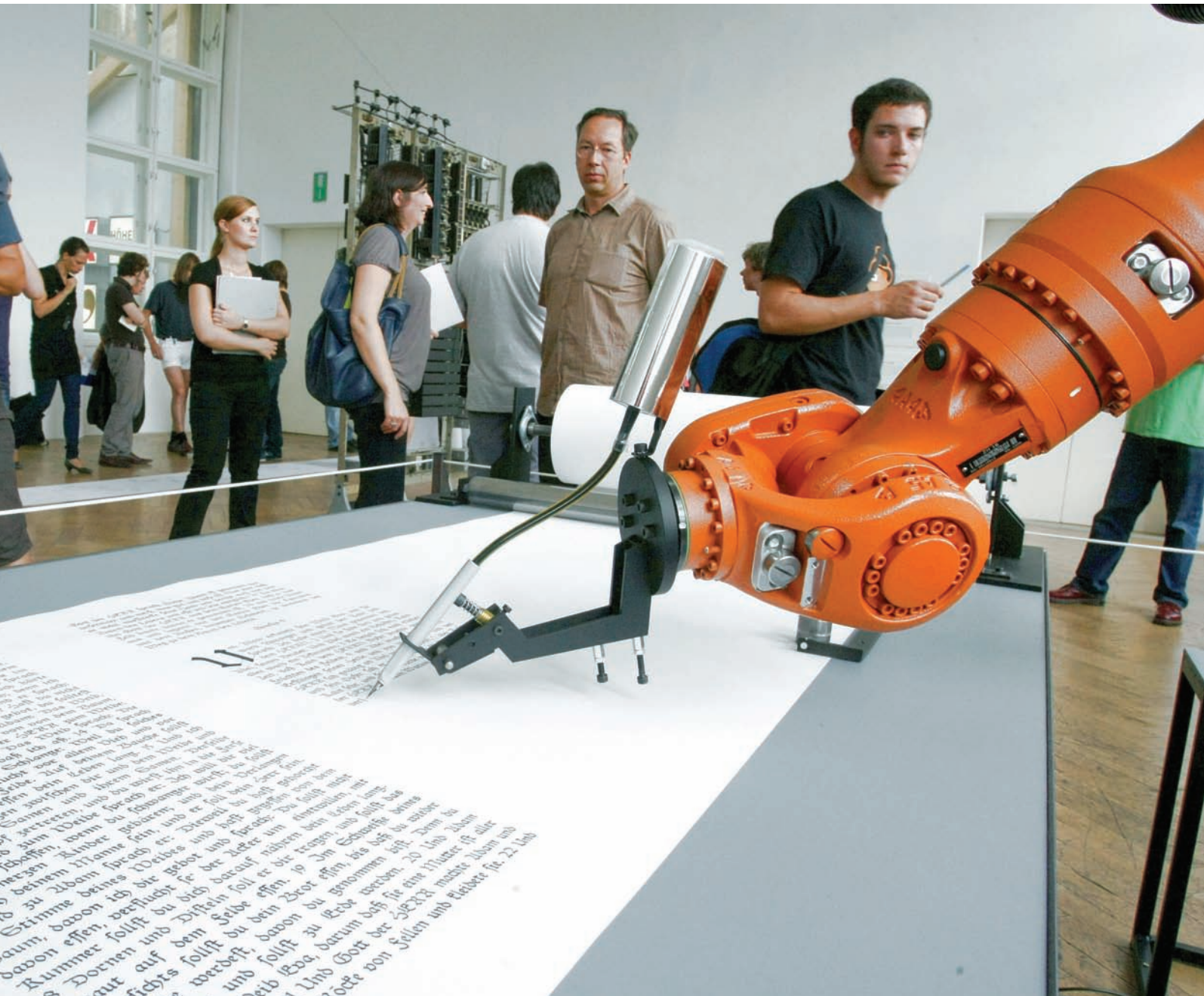
Intelligence, robotics and the social parameters under which a synthetic "double" can acquire social acceptance. Unfortunately (or perhaps more interestingly), interactions with the Geminiod HI-1 remained firmly anchored within the uncanny valley of science fiction.[2]

Works from the HUMAN NATURE exhibit sought to re-map materiality in relation to the human (flesh, biology, evolution, cyborg) with works such as Shen Shaomin's "Bones of Contention," imaginary skeletons of human/mammal/insect origin question evolution and scientific "proof" as well as the current and future culture/politics of genetic modification. Future Farms' bio and nanotech inspired video narratives re-imagine the body as host for the farming of stem cells suggesting new economies and aesthetics of the body. "Drink.Pee.Drink.Pee.Drink. Pee," Britta Riley and Rebecca Bray's urine-based plant fertilizer DIY kit, invites the public to consider new uses for their personal waste liquids more in line with eco-conscious practices.

As technologies cross the divide into, and become further imbricated within, the fabric of the everyday (human, environment, nature), one may postulate that future areas of investigation for Ars Electronica will be further posited in consort with scientific doctrines (the embrace, critique, subversion of scientific models and practices) as well as social/performative schemas foregrounding what French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari called "collective assemblages of enunciation" aimed at reformulating human (and possibly nonhuman) engagement and action.

VALÉRIE LAMONTAGNE

Valérie Lamontagne is a Montreal-based performance/digital media artist, freelance art critic and independent curator. She regularly writes about new media art and culture in: *CV Photo, ETC, Parachute, BlackFlash, HorizonZero, Rhizome*. Curatorial projects have been featured at: The New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York City), the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (Quebec City), OBORO (Montreal), Images Festival (Toronto), CYNETart (Dresden), Columbia College A+D Gallery (Chicago). Her technology-based works have been showcased across Canada, the United States, Central and South America and Europe. She is a Special Individualized Program PhD candidate at Concordia University investigating "Relational and Ubiquitous Performance Art" where she lectures in the Department of Design and Computation Arts. Her research explores the resonance of embodied somatic presence co-structured with technological apparatuses expressed via live performance or networked environments.

NOTES

1   Karen Barad "Postshumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, 2003, no.3: 801-831.

2   "The uncanny valley hypothesis holds that when robots and other facsimiles of humans look and act almost like actual humans, it causes a response of revulsion among human observers." Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny_valley, consulted December 4, 2009).

robotlab [Matthias Gommel, Martina Haitz, Jan Zappel, bios [bible]. CyberArts Exhibition 2009. Source: rubra.

Shen Shaomin, *Unknow Creature No.2 Cockroach/Unknown Creature No.18 Multiped.*
Human Nature Exhibitions 2009. Source: rubra.