

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Our Robots, Ourselves

by Allison Meier, December 4, 2012.

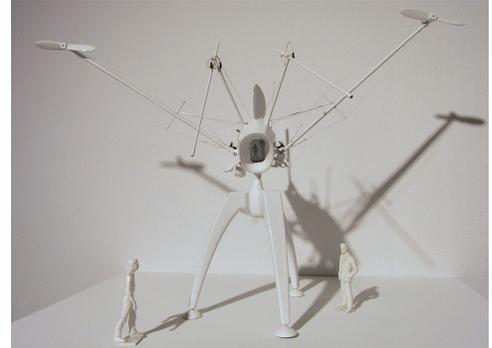
Despite our intense familiarity with machines, there's still something a bit foreboding about our increasingly sophisticated mechanical creations. Generally they are not evil natured or programmed to destroy us (like those pink robots after Yoshimi), but sometimes there's a feeling of not being entirely in control of our docile electronic devices, an undercurrent creators have long fed on in iconic ways, whether it's HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey* or the seamlessly human-like replicants in *Blade Runner*, all reflecting back our own insecurities about robots in our lives.

I had two recent robotic art experiences charged by our interactions with machines, with both examining how we simultaneously humanize and dehumanize robots, and how the potential for losing control of our creations is a source for their independent identity. The first was *Sans Objet*, a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the other was Björn Schülke's *Luftraum* exhibition currently at bitforms gallery.

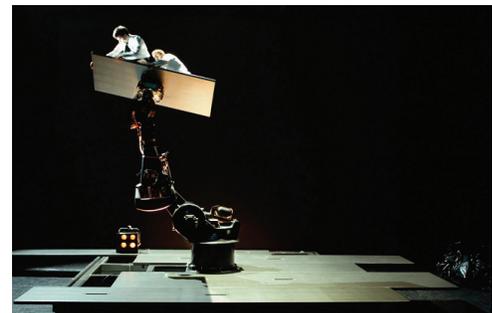
Early in November, BAM hosted two nights of one of the most curious and oddly beautiful performances that I've seen on its Howard Gilman Opera House stage. While two men in suits (performers Olivier Alenda and Olivier Boyer) seemed to defy gravity and had the clever and silly physical humor of the French nouveau cirque, it was the monolithic industrial robot arm that was the star of *Sans Objet*. The metal behemoth started out draped under what was basically a giant trash bag, but the way it moved was powerfully expressive, twisting the heap of plastic into shapes both ominous and friendly, until its mechanical form was revealed and an intricate sort of dance with the unsettling and playful robot followed. At points the men soared up clinging lightly to the arm that had surprising organic grace in its movements, and at other times it was a foreboding presence pulling up the boards of its stage with chilling precision or swallowing a performer's head and guiding him in a robotic dance. Through it all, the machine, which was originally built in the 1970s for car manufacturing, felt alive.

*Sans Objet* was directed by Aurélien Bory, who relishes in mixing stage genres with his Toulouse, France-based Compagnie 111, involving circus performers in pieces like the sci-fi, circus tent-manipulating *Geometrie de Caoutchouc* in 2011 and *Les sept planches de la ruse* in 2007 that interpreted geometry with acrobatics. While the performance of *Sans Objet* at BAM was its US premiere, it was originally staged in 2009, but I was reminded of something further back: Edward Ihnatowicz's 1970s piece of early robotic art, the "Senster," a robot that, like that in *Sans Objet*, explored its environment with the eagerness of a freed animal, although unlike *Sans Objet*'s robot, it was built from the beginning as a work of art that reacted to sound. Unfortunately for the lively "Senster," it was a little too distracting and potentially dangerous with its lunging and massive body for its home, the Evluon museum in the Netherlands, and it was taken apart. Now its once lively body is slumped and frozen outside an industrial complex.

In contrast to *Sans Objet*, Björn Schülke's *Luftraum* at bitforms is much more intimate, relying less on the potential for destruction balanced with beauty for impact, and more on a personal connection with the strange, mechanical "creatures." The German artist exhibited a previous group of interactive sculptures back in 2008 in *Ueberschall*, and these continue his experiments with sound and movement. But that experiment can only happen if you approach the machine and start to listen and move yourself to discover its behavior. (There's also an exhibition guide in the gallery if you want spoilers, but I recommend walking through first and reading after.)



Björn Schülke, "Space Observer" (2010), model for San Jose airport, wood, brass, wire, plastic figurines, paint (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless indicated)



Scene from *Sans Objet* (photo by Aglaé Bory/courtesy BAM)

In contrast to *Sans Objet*, Björn Schülke's *Luftraum* at bitforms is much more intimate, relying less on the potential for destruction balanced with beauty for impact, and more on a personal connection with the strange, mechanical "creatures." The German artist exhibited a previous group of interactive sculptures back in 2008 in Ueberschall, and these continue his experiments with sound and movement. But that experiment can only happen if you approach the machine and start to listen and move yourself to discover its behavior. (There's also an exhibition guide in the gallery if you want spoilers, but I recommend walking through first and reading after.)

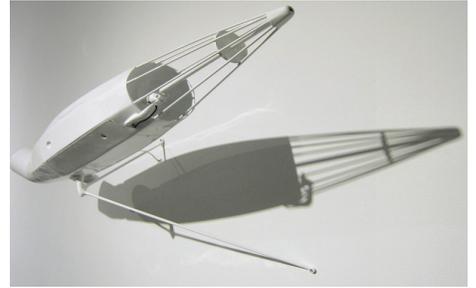
What is one of the most interesting aspects of Schülke's creations is that he gives each a type of flaw or something "emotional," in effect making these aliens more like us. "Supersonic #3" and "Supersonic 5" both contain theremins that howl softly and mutter their electronic vibrations to visitors from their sleek contours, but despite their resemblances to dirigibles, are doomed to be immobile. The "Luftraum #1" in the middle of the room, on the other hand, spins kinetically like a disjointed helicopter, but for all its flapping efforts goes nowhere.

In a corner is "Spider Drone #2," a sort of skittish surveillance camera that trains its screen on its visitor to show it sees you, and then punches its weak arms with harmless aggression. Like the *Sans Objet* robot arm, Schülke's robots have convincing personalities, but the programmed movements fall away when we move to another corner of the gallery. As with our computers and phones and other daily used machines, they respond to us and, unless they are dreaming of electric sheep or short circuit nightmares, they lose that humanizing effect when the humans go away.

Both *Sans Objet* and *Luftraum* are centered on how we project ourselves onto, well, everything, but robots in particular when we build them to mirror our behavior and serve our needs. Although this relationship to robots has been discussed as far back as the building of the chess playing Turk automaton in the 18th century, rarely is it done so elegantly as in *Sans Objet* or invitingly as in *Luftraum*, and it's always worth taking some time to contemplate our ability to at once recognize that these machines are unaware, and yet feel our lives somehow sentiently possessed in the power we've programmed into them.

*Björn Schülke: Luftraum at bitforms gallery (529 West 20th Street, Second Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 22.*

*Sans Object was November 9–10 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Howard Gilman Opera House (30 Lafayette Avenue, Fort Greene, Brooklyn).*



*Björn Schülke, "Supersonic #3" (2008), fiberglass, plywood, steel, motion sensors, theremin, woofer, tweeter, amplifier, paint*



*Björn Schülke, "Spider Drone #2" (2012), wood, carbon fiber, two cameras, tft video display, motors, motion sensors, custom circuits*