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Reviews

'Ghosts in the Machine' at the New Museum

New Museum
235 Bowery
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Since the early years of the 20th century, artists have routinely flaunted the boundary separating art from technology-from the "engineer's esthetic" embraced by Le Corbusier to Andy Warhol's famous blague, "I want to be a machine." With "Ghosts in the Machine," co-curators Massimiliano Gioni and Gary Carrion-Murayari cast a retrospective view on the techno-euphoria of the 1950s and 1960s, when information technology was still in its infancy. Though not a survey per se—the curators call it a cabinet of curiosities—the show had the breadth of one, comprising over 70 artists and nonartists from the 19th century to the present, and claiming three floors of the museum.

One of the exhibition's key achievements was to reposition Op art, the popular precisionist movement helmed by painters Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley (accompanied here by Richard Anuszkiewicz and Julian Stanczak), in the context of postwar technophilia. An austere selection of Op canvases anchored the museum's fourth floor alongside two affable floats (minimalist, motorized sculptures) by the late kinetic sculptor/filmmaker Robert Breer; taken together, these works provided a fitting introduction to the show's esthetic universe. Viewers seeking engines and gizmos would have been disappointed: the machines in "Ghosts in the Machine" were mostly simple generators of optical effects-at least, simple by present-day standards. By 1966, modernist mechanolatry had been shorn of any ambition "to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness," as F.T. Marinetti put it a half century prior. For these artists, the point was not to hymn the automobile and airplane but rather to astound the eye with lights, motion and illusions galore.

At least, that is how Op and kinetic art have long been understood. Not all artists in those camps were so eager to satisfy the spectacle-seeker, however: in the work of a handful of lesser-known collectives, including Japan's Jikken Kobo/Experimental Workshop, Germany's ZERO, the U.S.'s Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) and Italy's Gruppo T, electronics provided a way of confronting and retraining the viewer's perception. In an installation of works by ZERO cofounder Otto Piene, a timer switched rotating lights and apertures on and off, immersing visitors first in disco-ball dazzle, then in magic-lantern darkness. Nearby, Gianni Colombo's room-size installation, Elastic Space (1967-68), a black-lit environment of elastic string arrayed in a tensile grid, created a glowing coordinate map in real space. Every so often, motors tugged the cords, subtly changing the shape of the grid-small magic, but disorienting nonetheless.

Though they abounded, optical effects were only half the story; for many artists, the body took precedence over the eye. In Richard Hamilton's installation Man, Machine and Motion (1955/2012), which documents the rise of machine-powered transportation in a freestanding lattice of photographs, the artist highlighted the precariousness of the body piloting each car, airplane and submersible, as if to suggest that the machine would just as soon be rid of this human operator. Vita nuda was central to filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek's vision of machine-aided humanity as well, though in a more heroic vein. Facilitated by the artist's estate, the curators reconstructed VanDerBeek's legendary Movie-Drome (1963-66/2012), a kit-built silo converted into a multimedia projection hut. Among the varied imagery, the artist's animations of nude men and women appear alongside representations of classical sculpture, throwing viewers into a sort of neoclassical, pre-digital Lascaux.

In the information age, "nudity" is the price of our machine-made society: though we rely on technological systems in every aspect of our lives, we cannot really say how they work, or what we would do if they stopped working. This sense of vulnerability-the fear not of machines but of our nakedness before them-pervaded "Ghosts in the Machine" and was, arguably, its primary content. Much of the show's trove of nonart objects stemmed from the clinic: as in the case of Swiss mental patient Robert Gie, whose drawings depict a chain of bodies connected to an imaginary "influencing machine" that he believed controlled their movements. Equally menacing was the 1970s reconstruction of Franz Kafka's "Harrow," the torture apparatus described in his story "In the Penal Colony" (1914), which tattoos the law directly into the offender's skin. Kafka perceived what the technophiles of his day (and ours) could not: the meaning of technology is made not in dreams, but in a fragile conjuncture of power and flesh.

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