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Snail's Pace

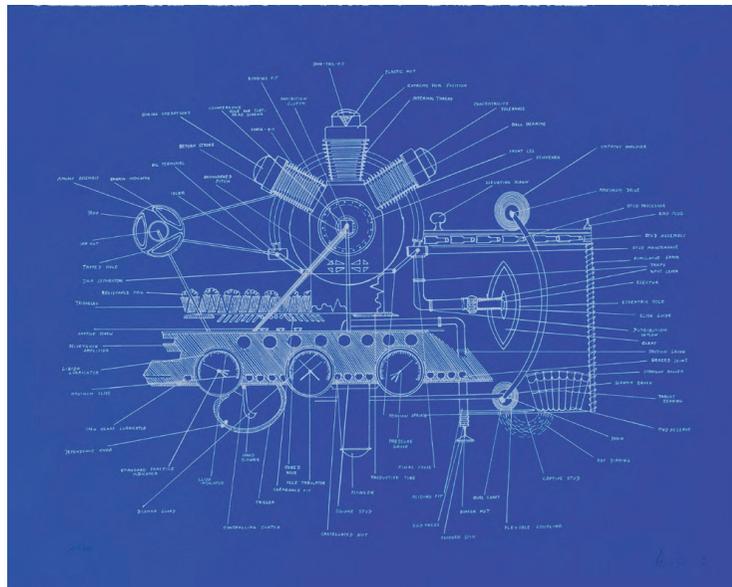
"NATURE OF ROBOTICS: AN EXPANDED FIELD" EPFL PAVILIONS 11 DEC 2020 – 16 MAY 2021

Is it possible to make an exhibition about robots and art without falling into either techno-triumphalism or dystopianism? Any show about robotics tends to run into the question of nature. And, regardless of whether the robots are vilified or valorised, it is almost impossible for their collision with nature not to exaggerate the robot's agency. In part, this has to do with our

understanding that robots, given their animation and autonomy, abrogate something from nature, but also with the theology of nature we've inherited.

An example of this is largely apophatic, which is to say, we cannot say what nature is, but only what it is not. Nature is not artificial, not technological, not abstract. Furthermore, nature is only "at home" where the world is not constructed, not abstracted, not monetised. Even as our knowledge of nature increases, nature always appears to us as being in a state of withdrawal. The word itself is wrapped in a curious nostalgia, as if we are talking about a children's story, a dead language, or an archaic religion.

Imagine then, instead of forceful robots – the usual mobile monsters with arms ending in mechanical drills or steel pincers – a new science fiction emerges: two perfectly realistic rainforest snails, slowly schlepping their way across a polished concrete floor. Made of resin, gum, and small motors, they look like fragile gastropods, even leaving behind a trail of synthetic slime. They too are robots, but like nature, and like art, we are not their masters. They do nothing, successfully. The snails are a work by Urs Fischer (*1975) titled *Maybe* (2019), and they serve as a counter-example to our usual presumptions about robotics, and indeed, those of nature's nature.



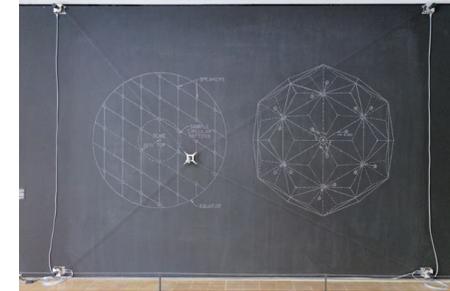
Agnes Denes, *Liberated Sex Machine*, 1969–70/2013, Hand-pulled lithograph on blue Plike paper, 48.3 x 63 cm

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Fischer's small robots are perfectly placed, with their slow, gravid, positively graceful circular progress, to reverse this sense of the retreat of the natural world through human invention. They reveal what might be possible if we rethink the narrative of robotics from the margins, and this seems to be curator Giulia Bini's agenda for the show. Soft robots, self-effacing, and wounded, occupy these rooms filled with machines of love and grace at EPFL – the elite engineering school of Francophone Switzerland. For students here, the binary logic of robotic temperament (efficient or deficient) would most likely be rejected out of hand.

Bini's curating sets such critical contemporary positions against recent research by EPFL scientists, in what becomes a sophisticated game of point-counterpoint. Occasionally, the show seems like a debate between the curator, with her background at the ZKM (Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe), and the EPFL, known for some of the most sophisticated robotics research in Europe. For example, Jürg Lehni's (*1978) *Otto* robot (2014–) does not perform tasks as much as it reflects on its own history. The small robot, literally chained to the blackboard, scribbles compulsively with chalk, like a manic mid-century lecturer attempting to describe a thrilling problem. Yet, *Otto's* drawings are taken from canonical projects in the history of robotic and art's interactions, like the Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) developed in part by Robert Rauschenberg in the 60s. The Reconfigurable Robotics Lab at EPFL, led by Jamie Paik, created modular origami robots in 3D models (*Modular – Origami Robots*, 2021) that fold, gently respond, or rearrange themselves, exploring their own almost limitless geometric possibilities.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of the show is a series of prints by Agnes Denes (*1931). Her *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space – Map Projections*



Jürg Lehni, *Otto*, 2015, Motor modules, stainless steel ribbon coils, automated chalk holder, controller and software

(1973–79) plays with the ambivalent relationship between the image of the Earth as a picture and maps of the globe as claims to dominance. In Denes's projections, she deforms the globe in order to defamiliarise and denaturalise its hold over us. The confrontation with the actual prints reveals just how *glamorous* they are – stunning metallic lithographs that reimagine the

humble blueprint as a kind of sacred text. One hopes there would be a second episode of this exhibition, perhaps one about programming. After having redrawn the boundary between robots and nature, it would seem only reasonable for Bini to now study the relationship between programming and thought.

ADAM JASPER



Urs Fischer, *Maybe*, 2019, Motors, gears, aluminium, plastic, battery, brass, silicone, magnets, two-component urethane casting resin, acrylic paint, xanthan gum, gum arabic, ethanol, charging station, 6 x 13.3 x 5.4 cm and 6 x 14 x 5.4 cm

Courtesy the artist

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