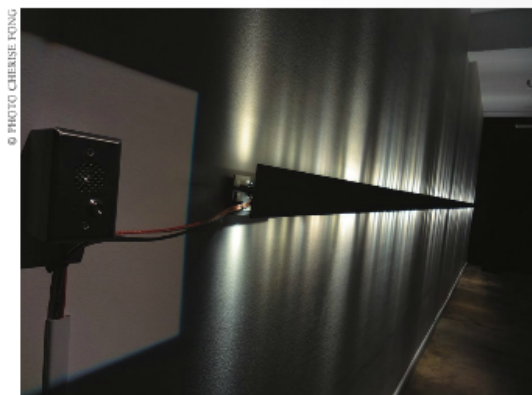


NEWS FROM NEW YORK

MECHANICAL GHOSTS

From the first vocal synthesizer to kinetic art and new audio, visual and biometric technologies, two exhibitions expose the relationships (and interfaces) that persist between machines and human perception.



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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Voice Array*. Courtesy: BitForms

It's rare to see in a little museum on the Bowery known primarily for its temporary exhibitions of avant-garde, experimental and alternative art by living artists, an authentic antiquity of contemporary life. And yet, the New Museum's thematic and largely historical exhibition *Ghosts in the Machine* invites us to contemplate the first patented vocal synthesizer, which was presented at the World Fair in New York in 1939. With the assistance of a trained operator, this pioneering machine was capable of producing intelligible phonemes. Indeed, its "vocoder" (voice encoder) technology, developed by Homer Dudley for Bell Labs, unveiled to the public for the very first time a completely disembodied voice. If one New York journalist initially described the invention with giant speakers as the "terrifying metal man", it also engendered a budding esthetic sensibility for the synthesized voice. (We would hear it three decades later in the film *A Clockwork Orange*, but it wasn't until Kraftwerk that artistic voice synthesis went internationally mainstream.)

Each exhibition piece is contextualized within the development of other seminal artworks under the influence of new media. On beyond phonics and into mechanics and optics, we find the kinetic sculptures of Jean Tinguely and an entire floor dedicated to 1960s op-art, with its calculated geometries creating the rather disorienting illusion of movement or (infinite) depth.

But the op-art piece de résistance is no doubt Robert Breer's *Floats*, which premiered at the World Fair in Osaka in 1970: two smooth, white cylinders, standing on the floor like two halves of a giant capsule. At first sight, they appear to be modern sculptures, immobile, abstract and conceptual. But upon closer observation over time, we notice that each piece moves independently and randomly, almost imperceptibly. The troubling truth is that these "floating" cylinders, perpetually adrift, are absolutely unpredictable. Such is the trend of these new artworks that tease our perception, whose conception has evolved from empirical to digital. More recently, it's the juxtaposition of media, combined with the confusion of styles, that disorients and intrigues. Among the New Museum's selection of trompe l'oeil experiments, two in particular literally jump off the screen. Seth Price's *Untitled Film Right* (2006) consists of a silent six-minute corporate video loop of ocean waves in slow-motion close-up, which the artist colorized and converted into 16 millimeter film. The result, reminiscent of vintage experimental film where the source material is almost unrecognizable, is projected onto a transparent screen suspended in a narrow corridor in a corner of the gallery, to the hypnotic, buzzing soundtrack of the antique film projector. In an annex exhibition on the ground floor dedicated to holograms made by artists, Ed Ruscha's *The End*

(1998) recreates in dynamic depth the granulated texture of film "rolling" according to the angle of view, alternating the words "the" and "end". On the other side of Manhattan, in the BitForms gallery in Chelsea, Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's exhibition somberly echoes the New Museum's mechanical ghosts. His *Voice Array* presents itself like a carnival game disguised as a mural artwork for a techno-cosmopolitan salon. Like an audio-visual update of the vocoder with autonomous encoding, this formidable machine with the intercom interface reproduces, translates into light signals and remixes into a cloud of sound the voice of each person who dares to confide his or her vocal improvisations, intelligible or not. But the artist's most troubling, if not most moving, work resides in the adjoining entrance of the gallery. Titled *Last Breath*, it's a biometric portrait of the Cuban singer Omara Portuondo. The robotic installation is designed to measure, record and indefinitely circulate the individual respiration of a human being, between the mechanical bellows and a brown paper bag. The robot "breathes" 10,000 times a day, representing the typical frequency of an adult at rest, and "sighs" 158 times in the same period, wherein the physical rustlings effectively simulate the rhythmic cycle of human respiration. But will this external pacemaker for a paper lung only truly come to life once its living model has expired its titular last breath? ■

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FURTHER INFORMATION:

Ghosts in the Machine, 2012.07.18-2012.09.30
New Museum (www.newmuseum.org)

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, 2012.09.06-2012.10.13
BitForms (www.bitforms.com)