

edition: 'Angewandte'

NIKI
PASSATH
Thinking
Like A
Machine — An
Artists
Journey
Into
Robotics

DE GRUYTER



Conversation Bast — Reder — Weibel — Passath

W Could one say that VOLKER is a second, exogenous skeleton? Should one think of him, in a way, as a supplementary aid, and if so, is he settled on the anatomic level or on the level of the central nervous system? Is VOLKER a robot without a body, or does he have organs, and if so, what is their purpose?

P Fundamentally, VOLKER is self-sufficient. He has all the necessary elements for an existence independent of the "human". And yet his body is designed in such a way that the human body represents an unconditional necessity as his environment. The union arises through the sharing of architectonic space.

W In other words he is a technological creature without a body, with only organs and legs, which climbs up and down the human body. What benefits does a person have from being together with VOLKER?

P You could compare the benefit to that of a pet. Bodily contact, experienced for instance in VOLKER's embrace, stimulates feelings of closeness.

W So the individual has at least the feeling or the illusion of having a brother or a sister, and then enters into a symbiosis that to a certain degree strengthens the ego.

B Is that really it? That here the illusion of an exchange of feelings is supposedly being awakened? It is, after all, evident that VOLKER has no feelings.

W Yes, it is evident that VOLKER has no feelings, rather that the emotions take place only on the part of the homo sapiens, and not on VOLKER's part. A machine has no emotions when you use it, of course, but you can

use it to produce emotions. Shouldn't we more be asking why the artist is doing this? Why does Niki Passath construct robotic creatures that execute social bodily contact? Is it a matter of creating a medium, in other words an interface, that actually provokes ruptures, ruptures in relationships, in their patterns, and then makes them readily apparent?

P Really both of these factors are applicable. Regarding the first, to return to the comparison with pets: characteristics are attributed to them that force me to ask myself whether they do in fact possess the characteristics that we assign to them. Is it not more the case that human beings project their own emotions onto their pets and, having done so, interpret their behavior accordingly? On the other hand, people most certainly do have emotional bonds to technological artifacts, when you look at the way some of them relate to their cars or their mobile phones.

B What is, from your perspective, the difference between VOLKER and a Tamagotchi, which is an industrial, profit-oriented product? The Tamagotchi, which in the meantime has become a retro product, was more or less designed to create the illusion of feelings, to stimulate certain emotions in human beings. One had to feed the Tamagotchi digitally, to keep it alive. But it was a purely commercial product, and it was positioned accordingly. What is the difference between the commercial product Tamagotchi and your artwork VOLKER?

R The interesting thing about VOLKER is that Niki Passath built this thing, which reacts to contact, himself, and that he knows how it works. This doesn't necessarily mean that he can understand it. Oswald Wiener never ceases to emphasize that we can only understand that which functions like a machine. Anything beyond that remains diffuse. Passath has created a device for the purpose of reflecting on unpredictability – particularly with regard to technology.

P Obviously there is a difference between me, who created VOLKER, and a person who merely consumes or observes VOLKER. This is why the idea of performance is so important in this context – the framework of presentation, in other words. It makes a difference if it is me who straps on VOLKER, since I designed him for myself. It would make no sense to claim that every other person can develop the same relationship, or whether empathy or antipathy can arise at all.

R When I have built something myself, I can repair if it malfunctions. The utopia: Robinson on his island.

Technological development, however, is forcing us into a state of dependency that is increasing with startling rapidity. When the computer systems break down, everything stands still. Despite all the advantages technology brings, because it makes us quicker and more interconnected, knowing that there is always the looming threat of a crash puts us on edge.

P Complexly networked systems do, of course, lead to dependencies, particularly when they serve a wide range of functions. For example, when private and commercial use merge. This is not so true in the case of things that are self-built, although there is the danger that their tendency to be less durable can lead to a constant need for repair, which supersedes function.

W I would like to return again to the issue of emotion, to formulate it more sharply: would you say that one aspect of your work could be described using the concept "emotional prosthesis"? Is it not true in the case of VOLKER, and in the case of the tattoo machine as well, that it is a matter of skin contact, of an embrace, for instance? A special robot that tattoos you touches you in a real sense. The Tamagotchi is not conceived around skin contact. What is it that you are interested in? Are you inclined toward the robot as an emotional prosthesis, in the sense that the robot stimulates certain emotions in the human being, or do you want to give art a new level, that of empathy?

P Both, whereby my primary focus is on the stimulation of emotions. The materiality and the operating noises make it very difficult to conceive a robot that stimulates emotions. The question arises of what you have to do to give it just that element of liveliness that in the end stimulate emotions. It is very much a matter of perceptual mechanisms: which patterns, which processes, which defects in the system allow emotions to arise? Is it precisely the defects that are the key, and the extent to which I can conceptualize them?

W In other words, the core statement is that you are not producing industry robots, or would you be ready to produce a whole series of them? Or are they going to remain individual robots? It is the question of the one-of-a-kind piece: are we dealing here with a design reserved for a single human being?

P Yes, they are always one-of-a-kind pieces. Although VOLKER has been followed by a VOLKER RELOADED an improved version. But I see that in more of an evolutionary sense.

W Okay, evolutionary improvements, and one piece made for one person. To return to Oswald Wiener once more, he stated, as was mentioned earlier: "I can only understand that which I can build as a machine." Are you interested in this approach?

P Confronting it was unavoidable. It is in fact true that the form only developed within the work process. Through building the robots I learned which elements, when combined, yield which results. It was not until I really got down to building them that I recognized problem areas and, since they are functional, came to understand their structure.

B Is it completely off base to see these things somewhere within the tradition of Surrealism? Akin to the painting by René Magritte, who paints a pipe and must write below it that this is not a pipe. Are you seeking to create a stuffed animal, in other words an emotional prosthesis, where it is nonetheless fully clear that it cannot fulfill this function, since it is in some respects completely antithetical? It is not soft, but rough and sharp-edged, and thus it can't really stimulate any pleasant feelings, rather the opposite. Although, of course, the nature of its movement at first suggests the archetypal movement of embracing. Really the situation that is being offered here is completely surreal.

W I would say that Rector Bast is right. The entire history of the Dadaists and the Surrealists was "machine made". Just think of the relationships between the sexes. For example Duchamp's "Bachelor Machine", this was an attempt to depict the human, the inter-human, in machine form, and there as well, emotions were of central importance.

R In this work I also see an unwieldy intervention against the feel-good society. People even keep rats or poisonous snakes as pets, but a useless robot demands a completely different kind of attention. Spaces for the artificial have long since been expanding exponentially, for instance in the worldwide communities around computer games. A dissertation I just supervised, by Aldo Tolino, successfully shows that the games, game rituals, clothing, gadgets and aesthetic objects developed by these communities are the expression of cultures which fulfill a need for social affiliation, but which are highly transient and subject to continual transformation. Their code of honor makes them to a large extent non-commercial, so that they can remain independent of industry and stake claim to free space, even though such innovations are usually swallowed

by the industry in the end. Here contentions related to art don't play much of a role either, because they would also impose certain limitations.

P The fact that these robots don't fit directly into the so-called "art market" has been confirmed by various discourses. Due to the long production phase and the highly inexact final results, these are more what might be termed temporary artworks. And yet, in contrast to the commercial field, you have this certain freedom of experimentation here. It would be very interesting, for example, to do an experiment with mobile telephones, to cross them with a robot and see what could be triggered by a phone call. To find out if one can communicate via the body. Experiments like this are not possible in either a purely commercial or a purely artistic setting.

R Does this artificial "creature" also do things that surprise you as its creator – as if it were a being that had taken on a life of its own?

P That is exactly what is so great about things that are generative, algorithmic. Even as their constructor, I cannot predict what will happen next, or when. And then there is the fuzziness of the actual building process, which gives rise to a further level of complexity.

W I would like to raise a question regarding what Christian Reder was speaking of earlier. The discussion turned to the topic of the art market, and it was said that these creatures are not fully capable of being art, since they are at the moment not on the art market. Now I have to ask you, Rector Bast, what kind of a school this is, which produces such works that are not capable of surviving on the art market? The robot could just as well have come out of the design department as from the media department. We know that it is from the media department, but since you, Mr. Rector, are publishing it, aren't you making a very problematic statement in doing so? I would like to know what interest our school has in supporting such projects – which I am, of course, very happy about – although they cannot be easily subsumed under the art vocabulary or the industry vocabulary. Do we see a viable option for such a school here?

B Yes, this is truly the function of an art school. To not primarily serve the art market, that is the collateral damage that an art school can cause when it primarily sets out to serve the market, or industry, or the economy. The real function of an art school is, after all, to produce transformations. Not primarily transformations in products, but transformations in worlds

of the mind. And that is working excellently here, and in other areas as well. What particularly fascinates me about this development – Christian Reder already hinted at it – is the link to social reality, to the realities that we experience and perceive, that reception and consciousness are raised onto a sort of metalevel in this work, in order to sharpen the gaze again. It is pretty clear that you are not just making these robots for your own use; otherwise you wouldn't go to the trouble of photographing them or presenting them in a context outside of the mainstream art market. It is, however, readily apparent that it is already an artifact in the best sense, in other words an artwork, which has not, or not yet, been noticed by the art market. But it most certainly does perform the function of broadening the frontiers of art and opening a new dimension.

R Everywhere it is considered more important what the competition is doing than what actual needs are. The way opportunities are used is determined by the predictable "return on investment". Projects like Niki Passath's which developed from tinkering around in his workshop, stake claim to a certain free space, and thus to dimensions of self-reflexive humanity as well. Experimentation is done on the level of interest and query, whereby market demand is an eventuality.

B That is precisely the difference between the Tamagotchi and VOLKER. The former is positioned in purely economic functionality, while the latter has a functionality that is intended to serve the further development of art, in the sense of art as a system. Here Passath is playing with emotions in a very interesting way, not on a banal level, rather on a surreal level of perception and reception. I think the reason that art often sinks into arbitrariness or irrelevance is the belief that emotion can be struck from the agenda, ignored completely. But if we think about art history, then we see that emotions, and play with emotions, have always been a part of art. And that is just what is happening here too, but not on the level that we are drilled to react to, that of the market, which follows patterns of reception that are preproduced and steered by industry and mass media. Here the theme of emotion is reflected on a level previously unknown in art, in that emotions, in an archetypical sense, are played on so directly through these creatures, or artworks. But like I said, not on the level of kitsch, and also not on the level of fantasy or in the way that newer painting tries to play with emotions, rather on a completely different

level, which reflects our social reality and confronts us with it. Christian Reder has stated: We must meet the technological challenges of our world and remain human in doing so. Then we have to ask ourselves the question: What role do emotions still play in this bare, cold, smooth world? Which functions do human beings fulfill in such a world, and how are they to position themselves?

W I think you are making the right point here, and I would like to tie in with what you are saying by once again returning to Oswald Wiener, since his thinking relates so closely to it. What we are dealing with here is the issue of emotionality in the age of automata theory – that is what is new, and again it presents a possibility for art to explain to us, in our highly technologized, highly industrialized world, what role emotions still play. And that is precisely what Niki Passath is describing here. When the automaton or the device behaves in such a way that it runs away but you don't know why, then this stimulates emotion. That means that emotion is a persistence, a sort of hypotheses. If you can't do without something, if you don't have any rational explanation for why you are waiting for the robot, that is where emotion appears. Here we see a new theory of emotion in the making. And yet this emotion is not a kitschy one. Basically you can say that emotions are hypotheses: one time it is fear, another time it is joy or pain, but emotion always relates to interpretations of behavior, regardless of whether it is my own behavior or that of others, which I also cannot interpret. To sum it up: emotions are interpretive hypotheses, and that is something new.

B What's more, there is the factor of unpredictability in a system that allegedly on a technical level is very predictable. This is more and more the dilemma at an art university: we are facing this continual message that everything must be made more objective, measurable, verifiable. And of course this makes no sense at all in art, this system of which we are a part.

W And that is where the human element reappears, the things that mean nothing to an industry robot. The human element appears as the possibility of an interpretation, as an interpretive hypothesis, which we experience as emotion, you could say.

B This is something that also influences the development of the art system, of course. If one says that everything must be objective, objectifiable, measurable, decidable, verifiable, then the result is that art is defined in a way that thrusts it into the function of a stock. As

soon as it is given a commercial value, art becomes measurable. It is inevitable, however, that such developments will break down when the market becomes irrational, and no one knows anymore why this or that art object is worth so much. It is obvious what happens when a system like the art market development we have seen recently suddenly becomes unstable and the bubble bursts. Then the artwork is suddenly worth less, or perhaps nothing at all.

W To return once more to automata theory: when automata take over auxiliary functions, to a certain degree, what does this mean for the psychology of thought and for the interpretive hypotheses? If I say, on the basis of the theory that we have sketched out here, that I can learn to understand something about my behavior from automata, can I only understand that which I can verify on an automaton? Here it becomes apparent that even interpretive hypotheses, in other words suggestions regarding how one should behave, contain emotions. Here you can see this very well in the tactile aspect, the contact with the material. Lastly, I would like to underline the relationship of dependence, what you might call the master-slave relationship. Something that we are also confronting in the school, with students and in art. And this brings me to an ambivalence: Is VOLKER my slave, or can he also assert dominance?

P Since VOLKER is based on algorithms and is self-sufficient, unlike a remote-controlled car, he can also develop an assertion of dominance. For example, if he is under your arms and, through his mechanical power, forces you to react, then he is controlling human behavior, because otherwise you can expect to feel pain.

W Does this mean that something like a sado-masochistic relationship also exists between VOLKER and the human being? As you describe it, the sensation of pain is also associated with this artwork – and the tattoo robot in particular is strongly sado-masochistic.

R Mediatization transforms everything into a world that breaks down into discontinuous messages, without tangible pain. Appeals are made to pity, which is a gaze downward, but not to sympathy, which would presuppose a relationship of equality. The fact that Niki Passath's thing can hurt you seems to be a plausible reaction.

W He shows us a world in which pain is present – in a master-slave relationship, in a way. He does not act as if it were nonexistent.

P Thank you for the conversation.