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NO LONGER TRANSHUMAN: HANDMADE MACHINES BY PAUL GRANJON

The article discusses the projects of Paul Granjon – a French-born artist working in Wales. His works deal with technology and comment on various aspects of hi-tech; yet, use low-tech bricolage to express the artist's ideas. The author focuses on the most important works: objects, low-tech machines, performances and conceptual pieces. The art of Paul Granjon is presented as a fresh, funny and innovative approach to the question of how technology shapes people's lives and influences their everyday decisions. Prof. Andrzej Pitrus compares works by Granjon to some forgotten ideas of Marshall McLuhan.

Key words: Paul Granjon, media art, subversive art, performance

Больше не (транс)гуманен: «ручные» машины Пола Гранжона

В статье рассматриваются проекты Пола Гранжона, французского художника, работающего в Уэльсе. В его работах по разному преломляются различные аспекты высоких технологий. При этом, активно используется lo-tech бриколаж.

Автор акцентирует внимание на наиболее важных работах художника: объектах, низкотехнологичных (lo-tech) машинах, перформансах и концептуальных произведениях. Искусство П. Гранжона представлено как свежий, веселый и инновационный взгляд на то, как технологии формируют жизнь людей и влияют на принятие повседневных решений. Профессор Питрус сопоставляет произведения Гранжона с некоторыми забытыми идеями М. Маклюэна.

Ключевые слова: Пол Гранжон, медиа-арт, субверсивное искусство, перформанс

The term “posthumanism” has now multiple meanings depending on the context it is used in. One of them is ‘transhumanism’ — a technological utopia, inspired initially by science-fiction literature, which will allow us to live happy disembodied lives without any diseases, and ultimately without death itself. In this understanding, criticized by many posthumanist theoreticians, a human being is going to become more than just a ‘human animal’. Other boundaries, mainly between technological and non-technological, will also be erased. This perspective is still popular with artists, and has a lengthy history.

Transhuman art was first recognized in late 70s. In 1979 an independent film called *Breaking Away* premiered. Technically it was a filmed performance by Natasha Vita-More who fantasized about escaping gravity and moving humanity into space. A few years later in 1983, ‘Transhuman Manifesto’ was published giving way to many new projects. Artists, fascinated with new technologies and cyberpunk literature, tried to revitalize selected ideas of dadaism and

futurism and place them in new contexts. The 80s brought home computers — affordable, easy to use, and versatile. New forms of expression were born.

Today technological art, media art, and hybrid art are the most popular formulas in contemporary art in general. The most important art events, including Venice Biennale, Kassel’s Documenta and others feature many technologically oriented projects. Media art festivals and institutions such as Ars Electronica in Linz and ZKM in Karlsruhe attract thousands of young enthusiasts willing to explore the boundaries of art, science and technology. Individual approaches of particular artists of course vary, but generally with each year art becomes increasingly high-tech as necessary technologies become cheaper. Sometimes it is quite difficult to tell an art project from a science project: Hiroshi Ishiguro builds human-like androids to see how we can communicate with them. He speculates about possible uses of artificial life: medicine, military, elderly care? Then he ‘hires’ them to play alongside human actors in a theatrical piece.



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Fig. 1. Animal performance, 2005, screengrab, credit Paul Granjon

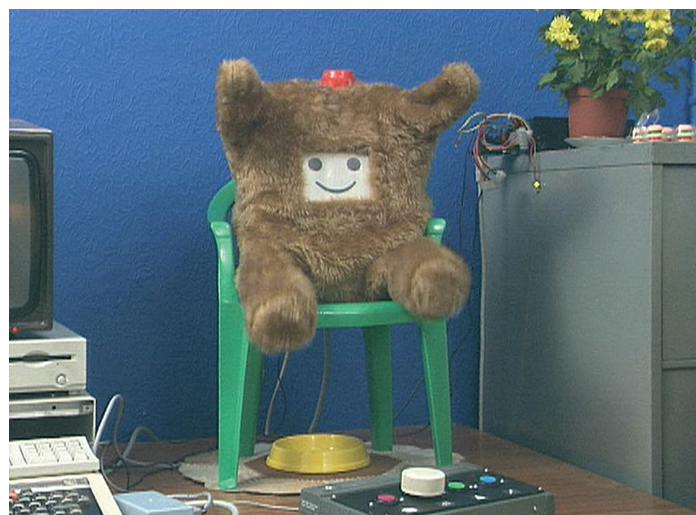


Fig. 2. Screengrab from video Fluffy Tamagotchi, 1998, credit Paul Granjon

The audience has to guess who is real and who is not. Maybe both androids and humans are equally 'real'.

These are important questions. One cannot say, 'I am not interested in technologies' anymore. Even, or especially, humanists. Bruno Latour puts it like this:

I have sought to offer humanists a detailed analysis of a technology sufficiently magnificent and spiritual to convince them that the machines by which they are surrounded are cultural objects worthy of their attention and respect. They'll find that if they add interpretation of machines to interpretation of texts, their culture will not fall to pieces; instead, it will take on added density. I have sought to show technicians that they cannot even conceive of a technological object without taking into account the mass of human beings with all their passions and politics and pitiful calculations, and that by becoming good sociologists and good humanists they can become better engineers and better-informed decisionmakers¹.

The popularity of technological art also triggers doubt and discontent. Technological enthusiasts sometimes forget that all the gimmicks they use are in fact products, which are designed to make their lives easier but also 'program' them, providing ready-made strategies of use. Thus, for example, the way they communicate becomes to some extent dependent on what kind of device they use.

Among artists who introduce subversive uses of technologies, Paul Granjon is certainly one of the most interesting, innovative and certainly the funniest. Born in France, he has lived for many years in Wales, where he teaches art and makes low-tech or not-so-low-tech devices which deconstruct almost all strategies of human-machine interaction. Combining performance, stand-up comedy, entertainment, social critique, homemade disco, and bricolage he is able to address large audiences. In one of his articles Granjon writes:

After ten years of making machines in a fine-arts context, I can condense the meaning of my work in the following way: I am promoting an engaged attitude towards technological progress, claiming humanity through being a learner-maker instead of a user-consumer. In my opinion, acquiring knowledge of contemporary

technological tools, adapted to personal abilities and interests is a valuable way of appropriating and demystifying some aspects of an environment sometimes described as a 'suicidal technofetishist society', a world where the human with its fragile wetware and irrational software is likened to a virus, getting in the way of optimal technological development. In her book *The Cybernetic Empire*², Canadian writer Cécile Lafontaine describes accurately the culture I am standing against. She describes how the cybernetics model developed in the 1950s by Norbert Wiener and many adopters has spread and contaminated philosophy and humanities³.

Granjon began his career in Cardiff with the video series *2 Minutes of Experimentation and Entertainment*. In a series of short presentations he plays with numerous custom-made objects. His bricolage-style engineering is presented in close-ups, like in how-to-do-it manuals. In *Flying Synthetic Doughnut*, a typical British doughnut is equipped with cardboard wings and launched into a very unsuccessful flight. *Cybernetic Parrot Sausage* presents an experiment in which German 'wurst' is furnished with an engine and a simple digital sampler: from now on it can rotate its head and say simple phrases like 'Ich bin ein Wurst'. *The Antigravitational Vehicle for Cats* has two cats volunteering to test-fly a small aircraft. Finally they have to be replaced by a toy since they both panic before the device is launched into flight. *The Little Square Fish* is an attempt to resuscitate a piece of fish extracted from a burger. The artist returns it to the sea in a small bag fitted with an engine from a toy boat and a light sensor allowing it to swim during the day, and rest by night. *Hamburger Digitizer* is a special device designed to duplicate any commercially available hamburger. The artist constructed it with an old dot matrix printer and a laser pointer. The most elaborate machine presented in the series is the one shown in *The Fluffy Tamagotchi*. Granjon, disappointed with plastic virtual pets, brings back the features of a real animal complete with simple digestive system, excrements, noises, cuddly hair and movements. The toy was controlled by a BBC Microcomputer.

² Lafontaine C. *L'empire Cybernétique*. / C. Lafontaine / Paris: Seuil 2004.

³ Granjon P. *Performing with machines and machines that perform* / P. Granjon // *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 2008. No. 4. P. 45.

¹ Latour B. *Aramis or The Love of Technology*. / B. Latour / Cambridge, Massachusetts, & London, England: Harvard University Press 1996, p. VIII.



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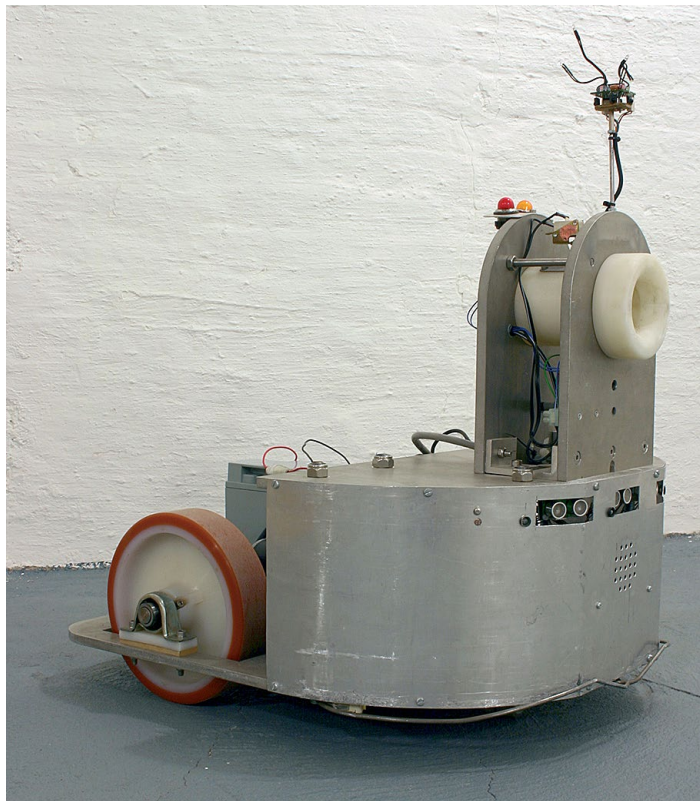


Fig. 3. Female Sexed Robot, 2005, credit Paul Granjon

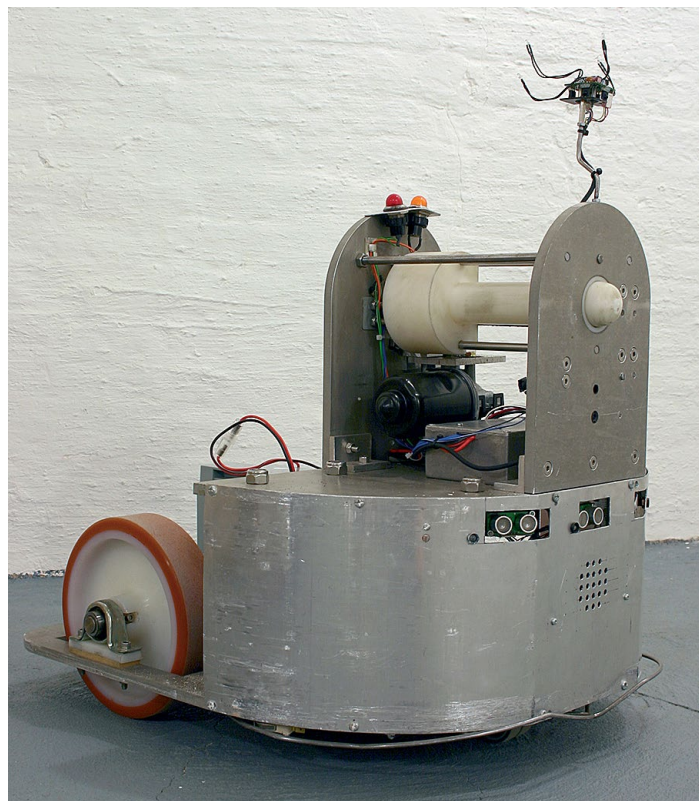


Fig. 4. Male Sexed Robot, 2005, credit Paul Granjon

Granjon's playful experiments presented with deadpan expression are reminiscent of John Baldessari's video performances of the early 70s. Baldessari encouraged his cat to eat carrots, tried to teach a plant the alphabet, and attempted to make conceptual art more accessible by singing Sol LeWit's words. All in vain. While Baldessari's works were focused on the problems of an art object and its role in conceptualism, Granjon's videos are intentionally critical. They deal with the issues of consumerism, stereotype and people's belief in the powers of technology.

After successful experiments with objects made for video presentation, the artist decided to perform live in front of an audience. This was a new challenge. Unlike the artefacts used in videos, where editing was possible, machines made for public presentation had to perform well every time they were needed. Granjon had no professional training in IT, but when he discovered an old BBC Microcomputer he was able to learn basic programming. The machine fitted with a user port also allowed him to control custom-built external devices: lights, motors, and miniature sound generators.

In the late 90s Paul Granjon developed *Z Lab Presents*, a performance with *RobotHead*. The audience was encouraged to test a wearable robotic mask (made with a readily available welding mask and some electronics) which could be programmed to control its user for the execution of a variety of tasks. The work not only touched upon the issues of control and empowerment, but also provided an interesting critique of possible functions of technology. A technocrat's dream became a horrifying nightmare.

There is another project related to a dream in Granjon's *oeuvre*:

One morning of summer 2002 I woke up from a strange dream: a large humanoid creature covered in fur from head to knees with

no visible arms and inhumanly big spiky hair on its legs was karate kicking in the air. I scribbled a drawing of the creature in a notebook and gradually came to the idea of trying to build the thing, which by then I had named *Furman*. Not unlike members of the surrealist movement who sought inspiration from their dreams, I was curious to witness a figment of my subconscious being transferred to the physical world. After several months of development and construction I demonstrated *Furman* in a live performance. The six-foot high pneumatically powered robot was programmed to deliver a karate side-kick. Fitted with a helmet and a kickboxing practice vest, I received the kick in the chest and fell onto a gym mattress. I, creator of the machine, was kicked and felled by my own creation in a live enactment of the Frankenstein complex⁴.

The performance with a life-size humanoid robot was inspired not only by the artist's dream. Another source of inspiration could be a Japanese android called *Asimo*. This robot, manufactured by Honda, was designed to imitate a human being in every possible way, while being more efficient. It was equipped with artificial senses, an ability to communicate with people, and navigate in an unknown space. *Asimo* also became famous for his ability to walk, run, dance and climb the stairs. Yet, during a few performances *Asimo* did not live up to his makers' expectations. To counterbalance *Asimo*'s versatility, Granjon decided to create a robot with only one functionality — to kick a person standing next to him. *Furman* is unable to perform any other task, but, on the other hand, is highly reliable. Granjon also manufactured a modern version of Frankenstein's monster — a violent machine willing to punish its creator for being so imperfect.

⁴ Granjon, op.cit., p. 48.



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Fig. 5. Sexed Robots, 2005, credit Polly Braden

Furman was the last machine controlled by a BBC computer. Afterwards Granjon started learning how to use microcontrollers — simplified computers which can be pre-programmed, placed on a small chip, and used independently as stand-alone controllers. With the use of this new technology, Granjon could design more sophisticated machines and portable devices that were able to operate without any connection to a computer. Some of them were used during his musical performances. By building a pair of remotely controlled animalistic ears and a mechanized tail the artist made an ironic comment on the concept of the ‘human animal’. While the ears were furry, the tail was made of a solid piece of shiny nylon to correspond with ‘hairless’ animal toys children play with. This funny disguise was used while Paul Granjon was playing his electric ‘zitare’, a custom-built instrument made from found materials from a 60s television set and a handcrafted fretless wooden neck.

Sexed Robots (2005) is probably Granjon’s most ambitious project to date. It was specially commissioned for the Venice Biennale where the artist represented Wales. Instead of another low-tech machine, he designed and manufactured two high-tech robots (they look low-tech, but in fact feature many state-of-the-art technologies) ready to explore their environment, sometimes entering “in-heat” mode, where they look for a mating partner. If located, the robots will attempt to have sexual intercourse.



Fig. 6. Electric Zitare, 1992–2003, credit Paul Granjon

Granjon wanted to use mechanical feet to move the robots, but due to technical issues decided to replace them with wheels. Finally, the sexed robots are autonomous platforms performing independently. They move in all directions, they are able to recognize objects and other robots and of course copulate using vinyl genital organs, male and female respectively. The only thing a human has to do is to replace their batteries: normally the batteries provide more or less five hours of operation. The artist decided to show them as animals in a zoo. The robots perform in a specially designed enclosure in an installation called *The Robotarium*. The presentation also features another small robot called *Smartbot*. This simple mechanical animal lives on a table fitted with tiny borders. It moves in a straight line until it hits one of them. Then it swears in English and French, and after few attempts to overcome the borders starts to cry, and falls asleep. After a while the process starts all over again.

Unlike *Furman*, *The Robotarium* does not aim at creating ironic one-function-only mechanisms. Instead it touches upon the problem of a machine as an independent being. Today’s robots, especially those which feature nanotechnologies, can only be manufactured by other robots. In other words we have created technologies that can proliferate themselves and potentially create alternative parallel societies.

Many artists working with IT refer to Marshall McLuhan’s works. His ideas seem to never expire. What’s more, some of them correspond better with contemporary technologies than with 60s television. His famous ‘the medium is the message’ can be considered as one of the key formulas of the age of simulation. One of the most important concepts of this Canadian thinker is the one in which technologies are described as an extension of man. It can be understood as optimistic vision: people look for inspiration in nature, define their needs, and create technologies able to amplify their abilities. Those technologies are not detached from nature, they become part of it, and thus can be further developed. On the other hand, technologies tend to become more and more self-contained, they can improve themselves, learn and define new independent goals. In the end, the original purpose is lost.

L. R. Rutsky proposes the use of the term “fetishism”:

So long as technology was conceived as a matter of instrumentality, as a means for achieving practical ends, any noninstrumental value attached to it — such as an aesthetic or stylistic value — was necessarily auxiliary, supplemental. To the extent that this supplemental value came to be seen as having a value in its own right, it was viewed as a kind of fetishism. Thus, high tech’s increased emphasis on the aesthetics or style of technology leads to the increasing sense of technological fetishism associated with it. In fact, the

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fetishism of technology seems to be inherent to very notion of high tech; in other words, high tech is, by definition, fetishistic⁵.

Fetishistic technologies are no longer functional. What's more they encourage their users to enjoy the surface only, without any attempt to understand how they work. Back in the 80s when personal computers were first introduced, the user had to acquire certain skills to be able to communicate with them. Their interface was based on a natural language, but both its semantics and syntax were very precise. Contemporary interfaces are not only visual and intuitive, they also conceal their inner structure, and offer transparent strategies of their use. This makes technology more accessible, but at the same time produces the effect of a second-degree illiteracy.

Paul Granjon criticises technological fetishism in all of his works. His artefacts are never 'nice'. Instead, he explores junk aesthetics, kitsch, and constantly 'recycles' both ideas and objects. He realized that a contemporary human is helpless without technological prosthetics. We are no longer able to navigate in the city without GPS devices. What's more, we do not even know how to light a fire without matches or a lighter. This is why Granjon decided to master the difficult art of making fire using the simple bow-drill technique, and has been demonstrating it to his audiences since 2003. Just in case there are no matches at hand.

Marshall McLuhan, paradoxically, can also be considered a major influence on Paul Granjon's work. Discussing his concept of the extensions of man, we tend to forget about another one. In one of his interviews Mc Luhan said:

(...) the new electric technology is retrogressing Western man back from the open plateaus of literate values and into the heart of tribal darkness, into what Joseph Conrad termed 'the Africa within.'⁶

The tools we shape, shape us. Our bodies are transformed into Cronenberg's new flesh — limbless entities with disappearing organs. In 'Understanding Media' McLuhan notes that any extension of the body is always also a kind of self-amputation. The process started with the introduction of print, which facilitated access to any kind of ideas. It helped circulate trash, but it also spread the word of the Bible. Now it only goes quicker and quicker, since the access to media is simply faster:

With the arrival of electric technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desper-

⁵ Rutsky L.R. High Techne. Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman. / L. R. Rutsky / Minneapolis — London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 129.

⁶ 'Playboy' Interview: Marshall McLuhan, 'Playboy' (March 1969). P. 64.

ate and suicidal autoamputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism. It could well be that the successive mechanizations of the various physical organs since the invention of printing have made too violent and superstimulated a social experience for the central nervous system to endure⁷.

Paul Granjon is certainly very far from being a technoenthusiast, but also far from being technophobic. He really enjoys the possibilities of technologies. That is why his performances are so joyful and lighthearted — to promote technological literacy, to replace a society of users and consumers with a society of makers. Only by being literate can we hope to control technologies we create and use, but we also need to remember why we create and use them. Here is another of Granjon's stories:

In October 2005 I saw on television a Philip K. Dick android having a conversation with a member of the public who was asking it why *Bicentennial Man*, was its (K. Dick's) favourite film. After an alarmingly long gap, the android blinked and repeated the question, before starting to buzz and stutter in an alarmed fashion words that sounded like 'Bugs, they are all around us, they are all around us!' Obviously the programmers had opted for the android to jump in a K. Dickian schizophrenic response loop when caught off guard. Placed in parallel with the technical and psychological complexity of Philip K. Dick's simulacra, claws and replicants, this example illustrates how far robots still have to go before they match the science-fiction-fed public's expectations. I regularly face disappointed faces when I explain that no, Furman can't walk...⁸

Probably Paul Granjon's biggest nightmare is that one day *Furman* WILL walk...

Paul Granjon was born in Lyon, France, in 1965, but has lived and worked in Cardiff, Wales for many years. The artist has worked for Cardiff School of Art & Design since 1995. He is a worldwide recognized media art and performance artist working with self-made low-tech machines. He represented Wales at the Venice Biennale in 2005. In 1988 he created *Z Productions* before graduating from *Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Marseille* in 1990. Granjon has exhibited internationally, including a major solo exhibition in 2011. It was commissioned by Chapter Arts Centre and travelled to seven countries. Other solo presentations of his art include: 2011 — Oriel Factory, Oriel Davies, Newtown, UK; 2008 — Hand-Made Machines, G39, Cardiff, UK; 2006 — Sexed Robots, Lighthouse, Brighton, UK.

⁷ McLuhan M. Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man. / M. McLuhan / London: Mit Press 1994. P. 53. First published in 1964.

⁸ Granjon, op.cit., p. 56.

