

Machine Life



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Lois Andison

Doug Back

Peter Flemming

Simone Jones and

Lance Winn

Jeff Mann

David Rokeby

Norman White

Jan Allen, Ihor Holubizky, Caroline Seck Langill

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston

The Koffler Gallery, Toronto

Introduction

Jan Allen

Machine Life explores artists' use of robotics through the work of Norman White and the circle of artists he has taught and influenced through the past quarter century. This project examines the aesthetics of interactivity and traces the strategies of the current generation of electronic artists by highlighting the methods, attitudes, and ethical positions that constitute the core of Norman White's legacy and influence.

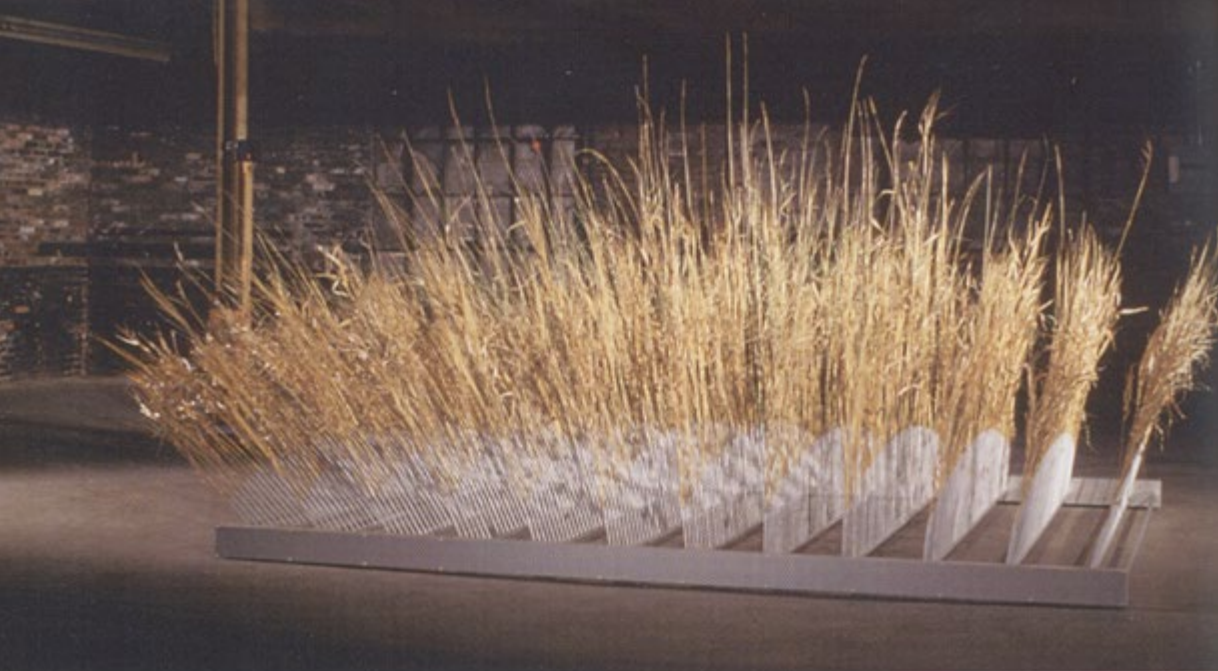
Works by White, Lois Andison, Doug Back, Peter Flemming, Simone Jones and Lance Winn, Jeff Mann, and David Rokeby stage the interface between human and machine-based systems. By mobilizing the poetics of emergent properties and the somatic, narrative, and psychological implications of the mutually formative relationship between human perception and machine behaviour, these artists raise issues at the leading edge of visual arts practice. White's influence exceeds the selective pool presented here, and his impact has further percolated to successive waves of young artists as his own students become teachers. A short list of notable figures includes Laura Kikauka, George Bures Miller, Graham Smith, and Victoria Scott. The quality of White's contribution to the development of media arts in Canada and his generosity as a teacher were formally recognized in 1995 when he received the Petro-Canada Award for Media Arts. *Norm's Robots*, the survey exhibition of Norman White's robotic works curated by Carolyn Bell Farrell at the Koffler Gallery, takes full measure of White's achievements and of the prescience of his grasp of the potential of electronics as an artistic medium at a time when the present profusion of electronics in daily life could hardly be imagined.

Machine Life addresses human experience in a world increasingly mediated and managed by electronic tools and devices. Replete with deadpan humour and unexpected turns, the works in this show variously address technologically prompted tendencies in human behaviour, patterns of communication, the generative potential of surveillance, questions of agency and the integrity of the body, the incursions of science in the natural world, and changing conceptions of labour.

In three essays, this publication traces tendencies in robotic and interactive electronic art through examination of the motivations and means of White et al. Ihor Holubizky addresses Norman White's early innovations and continuing contributions to the field. Through a chronology of White's robotic works, Holubizky traces underlying impulses in the works' invocation of chaos and conjures the evolving context of its reception. He argues that White's emphasis on

experimentation and transitory phenomena situates him in the company of major innovators from Charles Babbage to Marshall McLuhan and Robert Smithson. Caroline Seck Langill discusses the role of emergence in technology-based art: this from-the-ground-up approach to discovering the qualities of materials, circuits, and systems has been powerfully applied by White and other artists. My essay identifies White's generative methods and effects through discussion of the works in *Machine Life*. I argue that these strategies in electronic media offer viewers an open-ended encounter, one that implies an experiential aesthetics of behaviour.

Many have contributed to the realization of this project. Among these, first thanks are due to David Rokeby for the conversation in early 2000 that led to the conception of *Machine Life*. It has been a delight and privilege to work with Norman White: I am tremendously grateful for his kind support, cooperation, and wit. Thanks are extended to each of the artists for their generous enthusiasm for this project and the recognition it aims to bring to White's contribution to the development of electronic arts. Special thanks go to the essayists – Ihor Holubizky, for bringing a wealth of knowledge and always a surprising point of view to the project, and Caroline Seck Langill for a thoughtful paper and for stimulating exchanges on the nature of electronic arts. It has been a pleasure to collaborate on this project with Carolyn Bell Farrell: I thank her for her insights throughout and her commitment to ensuring the optimal documentation of these exhibitions.



Lois Anderson, *camouflage 2*, 1998

It is a fundamentally optimistic perspective – one that runs through the works in *Machine Life* – that sees automata as fulfilling human yearning for projection, for extension of an understanding of ourselves, or even flirts with the proposition that we bring ourselves into being, or at least into greater consciousness, through machines.

Simone Jones spells out Norman White's influence in a list that includes: invention, beauty in details, the value of observation and humility in relation to nature, hands-on technology, and the use of emergence cultivated through open, as opposed to closed, systems. Works arise from experimentation in the studio, and although implied narrative might arise from the animation of work, it is not explicitly invoked. Conceptual and technical elements are inextricably interwoven; they emerge in tandem.²² The ethic of information sharing is another White tactic: like many of the artists in *Machine Life*, Jones has a history of collaboration. Lance Winn was a colleague at Carnegie Mellon University, where Jones taught from 2000 to 2003.

Lois Anderson's use of movement in electronic automata deploys playful simulation of lived systems. *camouflage 2* (1998) comprises ordered rows of mechanically driven grasses programmed to sway back and forth in unison. This piece arose from her work in computer graphics, in which much effort is expended rendering naturalistic effects. Anderson took on the

challenge of staging the movement of field grasses, a project that derives poetic resonance from its implausibility and inevitable ineptitude. This piece is one of a series of three under the title *camouflage*, an identity suggestive of disguise for military advantage, or evasion of an enemy.²³ The allusion here is to dissembling the truth, to hiding one thing behind another.

In *camouflage 2*, Andison simulates the banal soothing verity of swaying grasses that evoke open space and benign nature; the seed heads suggest plenty, a generalized well being, and the slow passage of real time in nature. Her use of stagy lighting reflects the increasingly remote relationship of city dwellers to what the artist describes as a nostalgic "rural vernacular." The exposed means and mechanical regularity of movement lend it a charm that goes back to the pleasure of the toy-maker/tinkerer aesthetic, an impulse she holds in common with Norman White. The piece poses the idea of artificial life: it is a short step to consideration of the contemporary context of proliferating and much contested genetic modification of food grains.

The *camouflage* works query the incursion of technology into the body and nature, but they are also crucibles of distilled behaviour. Andison's *maid of the mist* (2001) operates in a similar vein: the bronze mannequin bust, when approached by the viewer, emits a fine halo of water from drilled orifices across the dome of the skull. The *maid* is a mechanical surrogate hyperbolically enacting emotional response, blowing off "steam," expression not otherwise permitted by the rigid perfection of its generically symmetrical features. This social gesture echoes the defensive posture or indignation signalled in Andison's *camouflage 1* (1998) and *camouflage 3*

Lois Andison, *maid of the mist*, 2001

