

Tommy Hartung and R.U.R.

Patrick Rolandelli | July 9, 2018

Last June Eazel attended the private closing reception for R.U.R., Tommy Hartung's inaugural exhibition at C24 Gallery in Chelsea. Several times that month we had passed by the ominous display in the gallery's window featuring colorful masks reminiscent of the 1980s horror movie genre. The display had piqued our curiosity and we were surprised when we learned the exhibition was addressing power relations in society and related issues of male dominance.

Upon stepping into the gallery we turned to look closer at the vinyl masks, set at eye-level atop two black tripods—one painted bright yellow with dayglo orange hair, the other with pastel purple skin and blueberry hair—they stood before a screen showing a series of new media figurations amid the likeness of our faces as captured by cameras inconspicuously observing us through the eyelets of the masks. In the background we could hear Olympic Gold medalist Aly Raisman reading her court statement to recently convicted former USA Gymnastics National Team doctor, Larry Nassar—the pitch of her voice downshifted slightly. The experience had this DIY surrealist aesthetic to it—to borrow language from the exhibition's press release.



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After checking in with the front desk we wandered around the gallery taking in the broad range of the exhibition's featured artworks—from traditional sculptures, to painted theatrical props, to interactive digital screen art featured on a row of monitors down the center of the gallery.

As Hartung would later explain, the themes of Karel Čapek's 1921 play, *R.U.R.*, served both as the inspiration, as well as the conceptual basis for his exhibition in three acts—*The Viewer*, *Touch*, and *Silent Siege*—with the front, center, and back sections of the gallery dedicated to exploring these themes, respectively.

We were in the back of the gallery where *Silent Siege* consisted of video feeds embedded around a large viewing area as part of a performative work about data collection and the nature of consent when we noticed one of the gallery assistants beginning to gather the group and direct us toward Hartung near the entrance of the gallery where he was to begin his talk.

During his presentation we learned the imagery of the exhibition was meant to counter the modern era's romanticized concept of technology—that it was alluding to a dystopian future disillusioned with modernism. And true to Čapek's play, Hartung unpacked how through his use of multiple mediums—from stop-motion animation, to digital photography, to traditional sculptures—he was seeking to question the degree to which the spirit of modernism has truly served the greater good.

There wasn't enough time to sit down with Hartung after his talk, so we arranged for a follow-up conversation with the gallery director and catch up with him a week later.

Eazel: Tommy, congratulations on your solo exhibition. We spent a couple hours with it last week and found much to explore. It was fantastic! Perhaps you could start us off by speaking to how you got to where you are in your career, as well as to your overarching project as an artist.

Tommy Hartung (TH): Thanks for checking it out. Regarding your question, I'm originally from Akron, Ohio, and ever since I was young I've always enjoyed telling stories and building things—from terrariums when I was child, to sets for my high school's theater as a teenager. I attended high school in Silver Creek, NY and in 2000 I went to art school in upstate New York to study sculpture,

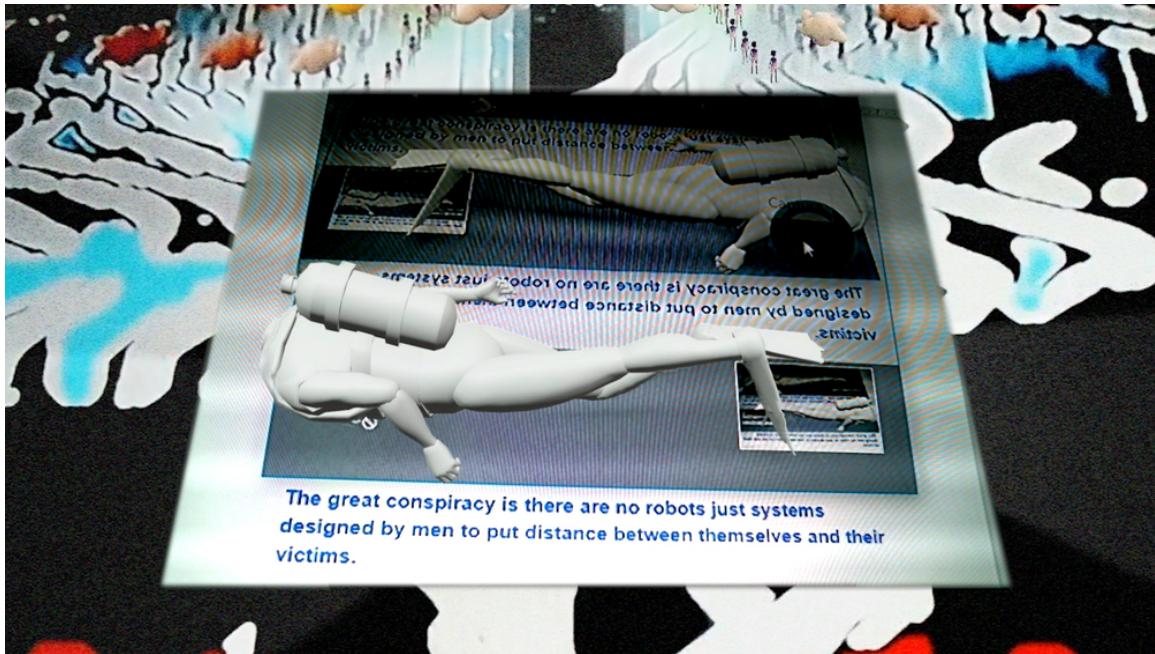
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eventually moving on to complete my MFA in New York City. Since then it has been a series of exhibitions and shows exploring various social narratives through my work. I'd say my overarching project as an artist is oriented around telling stories about the relationship between technology and society.

Eazel: *R.U.R.*—Karel Čapek's 1920 play, and the inspiration behind your solo exhibition—is remarkably prescient in exploring critical narratives that would take hold much later in the twentieth century. How did you initially encounter this work?

TH: I initially encountered *R.U.R.* in my high school library back when I was really interested in theater and I would read through plays looking for interesting ideas. I had been wanting to work *R.U.R.* into my artistic practice for years, so once the current conversation about social media's role in our politics—how this would connect the male-dominated culture of the tech industry with the #MeToo movement—took hold, I thought now was the perfect time to realize the concept.

Eazel: It would seem that addressing power relations in society is at the core of the exhibition.



TH: Yes. I believe the #MeToo movement was representative of a societal shift in the values that inform our culture. The exhibition is about bad behavior finally being held to account. With my exhibition I wanted to create a dialogue around the

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social aspects of the technology our society has come to take for granted as I believe the online space that today's social networks create are public spaces that should be treated as such—by our government, the media, and the social constructs these systems engender. To me, it would seem that as a people we have become used to going about our lives with this blind faith that the private sector operates with the public's best interests in mind. At this point, after everything we've learned in the past two years, this just seems misguided to me, and I believe things need to change.

Eazel: In light of the current socio-economic ramifications of automation, what are your thoughts on society's relationship with technology today?

TH: I believe that as a people we need to reevaluate the moral implications of the technologies we're so quick to embrace. Rather than focusing on the marginal benefits they yield, we ought to be examining how the companies and the private interests they represent are reshaping the values of the public sphere, effectively taking power away from our public institutions and changing the economic landscape and culture. I think of a company like Facebook as a public space, and I believe it ought to be treated as such. That is, just like any other public good, our democratically-controlled government and legal system should have a means of regulating it.

Eazel: In the press release for *R.U.R.* there is mention of your work exploring the "robot myth" as a blameless system. What does this mean?

TH: I view the legal system, and any other formalized social construct as technology that those in power—typically men—use and adapt to execute their agendas. In exploring the robot myth as conceived of by Čapek and elaborated over the course of the twentieth century, I believe that as a people we need to give more consideration to how our government regulates not just the aforementioned technologies that engender these social spaces, but the actual social spaces themselves.

Eazel: As of late the term 'transhumanism' would seem to be taking hold in conversations around artificial intelligence and machine learning among technologists and entrepreneurs. What are your thoughts on the art world's exploration of this narrative?

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TH: I'm familiar with Ray Kurzweil's literal interpretation of the concept, as well as extensions of the idea that point to our increasing psychological dependence on our technology as part of the next phase of our evolution. I agree with the spirit of this thesis as we all have computers in our pockets these days, and it would seem these devices have been getting progressively closer and closer to our bodies over the past fifty years. Going back to my remark about how I view the legal system and the formalisms the stewards of our society have developed to codify various social constructs as technologies in their own right, I would say there is certainly an aspect of the human condition that would seem to be evolving in confluence with our society's technological progress.

Eazel: The play, *R.U.R.*, makes an interesting statement about the relationship between creator and creation, alluding to certain limitations of technology in simulating the human mind. As an artist, what are your thoughts on artificial intelligence?

TH: I believe creativity becomes even more important in the wake of artificial intelligence. Art is created by artists' emotional reactions to aspects of the world. It's their sensitive quality that drives their artistic process. Until machines are able to have emotional reactions to things, I don't see them as being capable of producing art. I can't even predict how I will express myself through my art until I start creating, so how will an artificial intelligence—really just a formal set of instructions—be able to grapple with this fundamental uncertainty? In my view, art is a human function—perhaps even a biological phenomenon—the one thing machines will never be able to automate.

Eazel: Your artistic expression—namely the media/mediums you employ and adapt—range from the tangible to the abstract. It would seem your exhibition is saying something about the artist's exploration of new media/mediums. Is this the case?

TH: I approach my work with a sense of urgency to use all my senses as an artist, and in so doing, one medium would feel limiting. There's a certain sense of reality I'm trying to express in my work, and as mentioned before, my practice as artist is largely informed by combining disparate elements—from the semantic to the textural. One of my first jobs was working as a cook. Today I view my practice as an artist as comparable to this in the sense that I am combining a wide range of elements to create something larger than the sum of the parts. I don't like to feel constrained, so my work tends to incorporate the broadest range of elements

available to me. And fortunately, in this day and age the technology that is used to create new media art has improved enough to democratize production so you don't need a massive crew to be able to execute high quality work.

Eazel: What other subject matter are you interested in exploring with future exhibitions?

TH: I'm not sure yet. I'm always open to how chance informs my practice as artist, as well as trying new mediums. I'm curious about further exploring VR and 360° animations to tell stories. And I'm also interested in further exploring political narratives, as well as becoming more engaged on this front.

Tommy Hartung has exhibited at Museums throughout the United States, including most recently The Whitney Museum's Whitney Biennial 2017, curated by Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks; The Rose Museum, Waltham MA; The Jewish Museum, New York, NY and MoMa PS1, Queens, New York. His work is in the collection of: The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA; Dimitris Daskalopoulos Collection, Athens, Greece.

Hartung was the recipient of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award in 2015 and the Painters and Sculptors Grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation in 2011.

You can read further about the artist through [Tommy Hartung's page on Eazel](#)