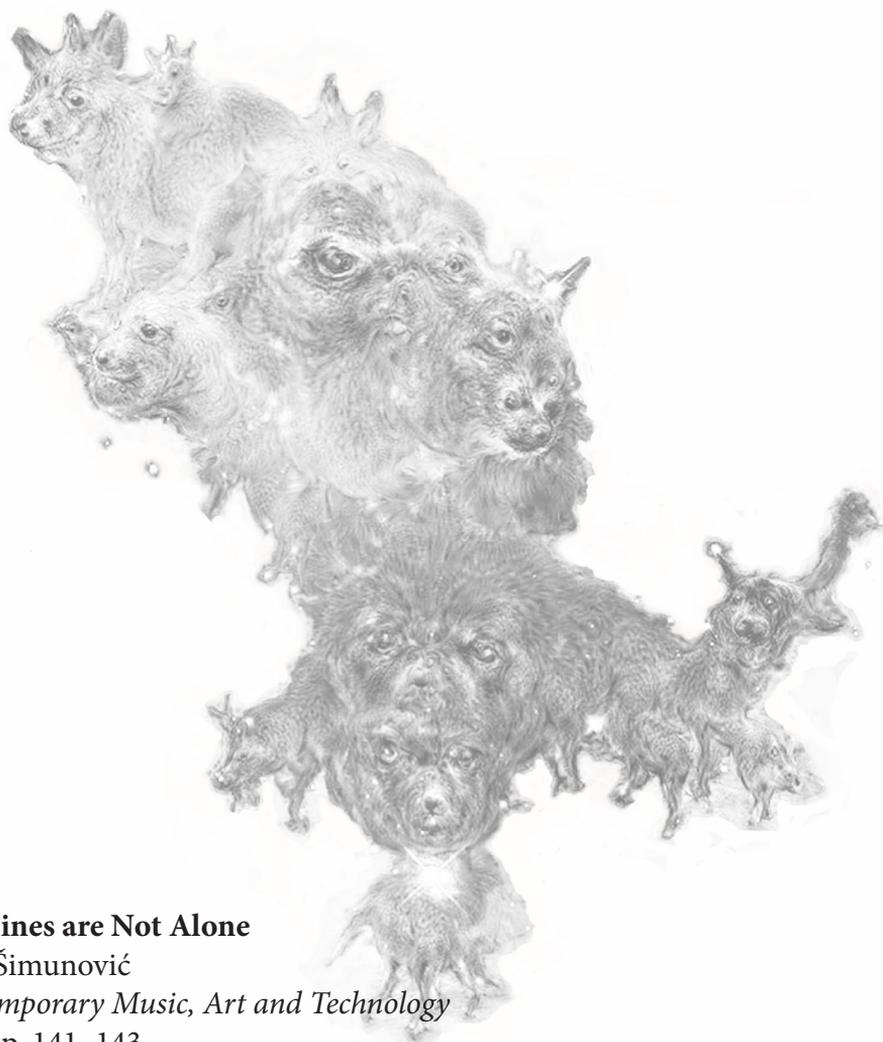


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## **Device\_art 6.018: Machines are Not Alone**

The sixth edition of the triennial festival Device\_art took place from December 2018 to January 2019 in Croatia, with the main exhibition hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. In addition to the exhibition, the festival program included a conference, performances, lectures, and workshops in Zagreb, Split, and Rijeka.

KONTEJNER | bureau of contemporary art praxis was established in 2002 and is the organization behind Device\_art, an international art festival that has taken place every three years since 2004. Device\_art works to investigate the role of technology in art and society. During past editions, the festival has focused on a comparative approach, with a main partner from a specific country (i.e., USA, Canada, Japan, Czech Republic). Both countries showcasing their investigations into the use of technological devices, machines, gadgets, and robots as an artistic medium.

In 2018, Device\_art 6.018 delivered its audience a conceptual turn by inviting renowned curator ZHANG Ga to co-create a thematic exhibition named: *Machines are Not Alone*. The theoretical basis of the concept was derived from works by Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Brian Massumi, Erich Hörl, Gilbert Simondon and Thomas Lamarre, whose selected texts in the festival catalogue support a new, open-plane approach to our understanding of what constitutes a machine or being a machine, agency of subject and object, as well as envisioning a broader, fluid approach to what we consider to be part of nature, and the ecological system that surrounds us.

Should we search for a supporting thread of thought as we ascend the steps of the Museum and begin the exhibition, we should look no further than the opening sentence of the curatorial text by ZHANG Ga: “The world is machinic.” Perhaps this thought is an abbreviation of Deleuze and Guattari’s writings in *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983): “Everywhere it is machines – real ones, not

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figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines with all the necessary couplings and connections.” Asking “who are these machines,” and in a conceptual circuit envisioning a world that transcends categories of nature and technology may be one of the overarching themes one will find while visiting this exhibit. To find the answer(s) to this question it may be best to take a look at works supporting this view.

The works of Marnix de Nijs, Saša Spačal and Mirjan Švigelj, Ida Hiršenfelder, and Tin Dožić all deal with a more somber and anxiety-ridden side of this concept in which the *machinic* works as a proposed “way out” for the artist’s concerns of excess and global pollution and the ways we deal with inevitable (self)destruction. In Dožić’s *GoldRush* we encounter obsolete technologies, that were once an inherent part of the Earth, transformed to serve humanity and in the process became toxic to the source they came from. This inherent chemical interconnectedness reveals itself in the possibility of gold extraction from used up processors and graphic cards proposing the question of how we value gold in a depleted world.

Spačal and Hiršenfelder, on the other hand, deal with the depletion of the Earth through the idea of the oil shortage. Their *Sonoseismic Earth* tackles the task of visually representing the seemingly minute, but realistically unnatural, tectonic changes in the Earth’s crust caused by fossil fuel extraction. The pale globe sits helplessly on a pedestal filled with bones and polluted water which ooze an unpleasant odor into the surroundings, the globe shivers as humans approach it. It fears further abuse. The peril of Earth is contrasted with the idea of human lunacy in De Nij’s work, situated so it can be viewed from the gallery where the *Sonoseismic Earth* trembles in silence. De Nij imagines a world where humans have brought their need for natural luxuries to a level of absurdity. The *Autonomous Oil Reserve (AOR-200)* is a consumer system that protects a personal oil reserve and self-destructs if someone enters the surrounding space where the barrels are held. The system works so that it feeds its own alarm, burning itself out until it ultimately destroys itself so that nobody can have the precious, stored liquid.

Not only humans will suffer the consequences of their own deeds: the species often forgotten at the “top of the pyramid,” the slimy, the delicate, and the endangered organisms living in ocean shallows are put under a magnifying glass in Gail Wight’s *Pool*. We must think of the natural balance in nature that we are destabilizing, and Wight urges us to look at it head on.

How will we ever get out of this “postmordial” swamp? Can the subjectivity of the machines help drag us out of the inevitable? A lone crane stands limply on a sand colored wooden base. Topped with a decorative plastic leaf, it stands as a deserted island amidst the other works in the space. Titled *I will be back sometime*, Dorial Gaudin’s work evokes empathy with the structure’s glitchy motions, a giant waiting to be used once more, as if it had lost its life purpose in the absence of functionality. Artists such as Dorian Gaudin, Ralf Baecker, Adam Donovan, and Katrin Hochschuh all deal with attaching emotionality to the physical behaviors of artificial

intelligence. In Adam Donovan's and Katrin Hohschuh's *Empathy Swarm* the robots try to understand us and emotionally reflect our behavior by following, gathering, and running away. Ralf Baecker's *Interface I* strays from the need for humans as it is autonomous. In the encapsulated space, stripped of anything relating to our everyday surrounding, the strings, playing a very sophisticated game of seemingly random tug-of-war, serve as a perfectly austere structure investigating complex interactions in general.

Among these works concerned with ecology, and those with an almost decidedly pessimistic outlook reflecting the Anthropocene, and the artists creating potentially autonomous, random machines and robots we also encounter works that use technology as a medium to relay history, intimacy, and the mystical, spiritual qualities of physics. Such works are those by Mirjana Vodopija, Navid Navab and Martin Howse.

Vodopija's installation *Vibrating Landscape* serves as a visualization of a mind trying to grasp conflicting needs, a game of shifting from open spaces to those most intimate thoughts, trapped in our memories. *Test Execution Host* by Martin Howse tells a converging tale of a man's history and its relationship to geology. It is a conceptual machine, one conceived by Alan Turing, with tubes dripping cyanide on rocks and books, a screen monitors it all, relaying a story of a person's death, but also the story of the decay of the world in an ecological sense. Aptly named *tangibleFlux  $\phi$  plenumorphic* ∴ *chaosmosis*, as the title itself evokes an alchemic, mystical condition, Navid Navab's installation comprises of three pedestals, a triptych of altars each carrying a small metallic ball levitating, turning, jumping from one side to the other, dependent on the magnetic field installed below. A simple physical phenomenon delivered in a sacral, exhilarating way.

"Everything is machinic" is the poignant phrase that served as the motto of Device\_art 6.018. The solidarity, autonomy, companionship, and relationships of machines and life was deeply thought upon, researched, and discussed among artists and curators so a series of possible outlooks on the present and future place of the machines' in the world could be presented to the viewer. In the words of KONTEJNER's curators: "The artists showing their work (...) reveal to us in various ways this machinic nature of the world and reality; the machine that surrounds us and that is in us, the universal machine and the machinic connections that determine our very existence."

Beside man's need for destruction, there is a force more powerful which ties together the strings of thought generated throughout the exhibition, and that is creation. From human ingenuity comes the machine, as a predetermined idea in the human conscience, consisting of man-made physical components, as well as the essence of the human being as its creator. The machines are not alone; they are intrinsically a part of a greater mechanism in which everything is inherently *machinic*.

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