

Smile Machines

Transmediale 06

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A useless amiable robot reacts awkwardly to the presence of visitors, almost as if it were looking for someone to stroke it. Another starts to get exasperated, the more people try to help it, and a mechanical, ramshackle mobile, made of mundane objects, turns over waste material and moves it around. *Petit mal* by Simon Penny, *Helpless Robot* by Norman White, or *Remue-ménage* by Jean-Pierre Gauthier are just some of the works that members of the public had to deal with on their visit to *Smile Machines*. The exhibition, curated by the art historian and lecturer at the University of Paris I, Anne-Marie Duguet, opened this February at the *transmediale.06. Festival for art and digital culture* in Berlin.

These robotic-handcrafted structures not only question the relationship between man and machine as far as affectivity, rebellion, the seizure of power, or the autonomy of objects are concerned, but also openly declare their opposition to a highly technologised complex world in which there is little room left for DIY". The selection of work in *Smile Machines* offers a critical proposal about the links between technology and art and how these are reflected in everyday life, using humour as a thread: pink humour and black humour; irony and mockery; irreverence and provocation. Humour as a strategy for stepping back from and analysing a society modelled or "modulated" (as Anne-Marie Duguet might put it, quoting Deleuze in *Conversations 1972-1990*) by digital techniques.

Through a historical overview that brings together work from the Fluxus group and the early video-art of the 1960s, including the interactive work and media critique of the 1990s, right up to Internet activism and current video performances, *Smile Machines* brings together a variety of artistic stances that explore the critical, therapeutic and analytical potential of humour.

Black humour is a women's thing in *Smile Machines*. In *Black in Black*, 2003, by Maja Bajevic, a group of Bosnians chew up the consequences of the war by telling impossible jokes about the armed conflict to the camera. The Israeli artist Tamy Ben-Tor shatters the taboo about representing Hitler in her controversial video *Hitler, the Horror and the Horrah*, 2003, by dressing up as Hitler or by caricaturising various opinions about him. Eva Meyer-Keller repeatedly tortures some shiny red cherries with harmless objects in *Death is Certain*, 2004, and Annette Messager embroiders misogynist proverbs on seamed doilies in a deliberately sloppy way in *Ma collection de proverbes*, 1974.

Antoni Muntadas's media critique recreates the cold-hearted glamour of advertising in the video installation, *Slogans*, 1986-87, by bringing the viewer face to face with subtle strategies and commercial illusions. Christian Möller also questions the authenticity of the media in *Cheese*, 2003; he asks six actresses to smile for as long as possible to the camera and penalises them for the slightest trace of seriousness. However, the best way not to lose your smile is definitely what Georges Maciunas proposes with his *Flux Smile Machine*, 1971: this is a device that tenses the muscles in your mouth to create a permanent smile and reduce to a minimum the subtle boundary between expressing a smile and a smirk in a piece that provides just the right name for the exhibition.

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