

Beyond the Cube: A Curatorial Reflection on the Portrayal of Humanoid Robots

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Abstract—In the visual arts, we are taught that critique is a crucial part of the artistic process. Once the work is created, it takes on the characteristics, histories, and cultural implications of the viewer. The act of curation further forms public perception and understanding. Curation exists in all fields, and the current portrayal of humanoid robots in the media resembles the exclusionary practice of the western gallery space.

I. REMOVAL OF EXTERNAL CONTEXT: DEFINITIONS OF THE VIEWING SPACE

What are the intentions of the white cube gallery? In Brian O’Doherty’s iconic 1976 essay *Inside the White Cube* [1], he establishes the modern gallery primarily as a place to judge artwork independently of external context. A place where light, smell, touch, and sound are hyper-controlled to provide and encapsulate a sacred viewing of the art object.

The portrayal of humanoid robots in the media resembles the exclusionary practice of the white cube gallery space. The current way of displaying advancements in robotics, particularly in regards to heavily anthropomorphized, humanoid robots, follows a similar look-but-don’t-touch white-glove model.

A. The Museum

In its purest form, the museum is created by the people for the people, to serve as the heart of and mediator for the “natural and the artificial, the real and the imaginary, and the ordinary and the extraordinary...” [2]. However, the roots of the public, institutionalized viewing art space are from and continue to exhibit private, highly exclusionary behaviors [3]. The museum was originally a domestic servant to one person—primarily male—long before it began to serve the people. Originally a hyper-masculine, exclusionary space, it took until the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford opened in 1683 for the notion of museum to become public [2].

Although the museum was birthed from longstanding ideas and cultural practices, the term itself was—and continues to be—an impressionable, temporal one, as museums are “peculiarly susceptible to the cultural strategies of its creators” [2]. Oftentimes, issues of ownership and exclusion are justified with “...adherence to a cultural and institutional logic” rather than community-based practices [3].

B. The Gallery

The contemporary western gallery space is a continuation of the museum practice in a superficial sense. However,



Fig. 1: Installation view of Cy Twombly’s *Eight Sculptures* (2009) at the Gagosian Gallery in New York City.



Fig. 2: Toyota’s T-HR3, introduced in 2017. Its sterile, compartmentalized aesthetics without background resemble an minimalist sculpture in a gallery.

unlike the museum which promotes a linear—albeit often politically tampered with—timeline, the white cube attempts to eclipse the past while simultaneously enchanting the viewer with a controlled narrative of the future [1], [4].

The modern western art gallery has been and continues to be a place void of externalities [4]. It is physically impossible to remove the viewer from the artistic gallery experience, and yet everything about the gallery attempts to do so [1]. The viewer is and always will be trespassing in a pristine space. Like art, robotics presents as a space that is only truly welcome to the makers of the objects it contains. The viewing is always formal, never personal[4].

II. HUMANOID ROBOTS AND THE GALLERY

O’Doherty argues that the relationship between the artist and the audience is a relationship that challenges the pre-

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scribed social hierarchy, and even goes so far as to create a framework for contemporary society [1]. Similarly, the portrayal of humanoid robots in the media has already begun to and will continue to create a relational or transactional framework between humans and humanoid robots.

The trust between human and art object or human and machine is a bond which is often reliant on external portrayal of the object [5],[4]. Robots are often aesthetically presented as if they are entities that exist outside of the culture or researchers that formed them. The reality is that robots exist because of the messy complexity of their socio-cultural context [6]. Henceforth, the "consideration of human behavior and expectations is fundamental, and not an afterthought" in the presentation of robots [7].

Humanoid robots have become priceless art objects, and there is an ethical responsibility to disrupt and examine the reinforcement of the historically exclusionary curated gallery space [3]. Humanoid robots are not presented to the public with natural context despite research efforts to break the barrier between human and machine.

How can something be perceived as human if it is presented in an inhuman context? This clinical presentation often results in a hierarchy created between the robot and the public, similar to that exhibited by the gallery and the public [4]. The preciousness and inaccessibility that is exhibited prevents the convergence of personal and collective memory, and by an extension, authentic connection between viewer and viewed [2].

The museum, and by extension, the gallery space, has never been a neutral place. The act of curating in and of itself cannot be extrapolated from a political or social context. Similarly, the creation of humanoid robots is not neutral, and cannot be removed from context [5],[6]. Unfortunately, the majority of people will not get to experience the real-life dimensionality of such robots. Because of this, we have a responsibility to take an anti-curatorial perspective on the presentation of robots.

A. A Direct Comparison

White, stark, clean, precise. Am I describing the inside of New York Gagosian Gallery or a humanoid robot? I have included two images: an installation view of Cy Twombly's Eight Sculptures at the Gagosian Gallery in New York (Fig. 1), and a photograph of Toyota's humanoid robot, the T-HR3 (Fig. 2). Both are objects that pique human curiosity and wonder; however, the presentation of these objects is antithetical to this.

Although Twombly's sculptures exhibit rough qualities alluding to the aged beauty of cultural artifacts, there is an unspoken agreement that these art objects are not to be touched. They are placed on pedestals, there is no cultural context around them, and no visitors in the photo. This artwork is meant to be and only ever will be displayed as a singular entity that exists outside of the human world. The pieces are rough, unpolished, organically inclined, but never vulnerable, as vulnerability is directly correlated with presentation.

Similarly, Toyota's T-HR3 is not on a literal pedestal, but its impenetrable, rigid posturing disallows the viewer from creating a narrative that encompasses their personal or cultural context. Not only is all context of robot's origin removed, but any possibility of the robot inheriting and being enveloped in the viewer's external context is removed as well.

III. FORMING THE CANON

In art, perpetual curation forms the canon. The canon is historically an exclusionary and extremely limited portrayal of the "greatest hits" of a field determined by a few that claim to represent the majority. The problem with this is that the objects presented in said canon become ephemeralized, even godly [4]. They leave all grounding in reality, and become a kind of cultural icon [4]. Already, the canon of humanoid robots are being assembled. In the eye of the majority, robots reside perpetually in a digital gallery space. They are confined to the virtual reality of speed reads, reductionist articles, online videos, and catchy titles. As robots become integrated into everyday life, there is a social responsibility for roboticists to recognize the iconic status that their machines evoke to the public.

One year ago, The American Society of Mechanical Engineers released an article titled "10 Humanoid Robots of 2020" [8]. It featured Toyota's T-HR3, Hanson Robotics' Sophia, SoftBank Robotics' Pepper, and others with varying degrees of human aesthetic and mechanical features. This article is just one of many. These kinds of preliminary, annual canons result in a voyeuristic subject/object relationship between humans and humanoid robots.

A. Beyond the Cube

This paper is merely the beginning of a larger questioning. How can art history inform how we present and quantify value in robotics? How can we learn from curatorial practices? Whose story is being told by the robot? Whose story has informed the creation of the robot?

In every field, there is a canon of creators and creations that become the gatekeepers for who or what is allowed in. The difference is that social robotics as a field is new—it is at the beginning of creating that canon—and we have the power to create a different reality.

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