



ROBOT THEATER

**EDITORS: HILARY BERGEN, ERIC MULLIS,
BENNY SIMON, SYDNEY SKYBETTER**

Recent viral videos released by engineering firm Boston Dynamics showcase dancing robots whose impressive technique and synchronization serves as proof of their trainability in various dehumanized professions, from pallet lifting in industrial settings to military reconnaissance operations on the battlefield. These robots—Spot, Atlas, and Stretch, to name a few—represent the latest in a history of robot performance that stretches back as far as Homer’s Iliad, which features moving mechanical tripods created by Hephaestus, and to the automata fairs of Paris in the 1700s, where inventors like Jacques de Vaucanson and Adrienne Mayor displayed humanoid robots that could dance and play musical instruments. This history is imbricated with anxieties about the boundary between humans and machines and uses of mechanization and standardization to control bodies.

By the early 2000s, robots began regularly appearing in theatrical productions: dancing or acting on stage or performing in durational installations. During this period, the interdisciplinary field of social robotics grew in significance as a global network of roboticists began designing robots that could engage in dialogue and perform other social competencies. Such developments have led some performance scholars and performance-based artists to consider social robotics in terms of theories of choreography and acting and to see spaces of theatrical performance as venues for social robotics research which open up questions about human creativity, impulse, and agency. In turn, innovative robot theater projects have stimulated the reappraisal of the means and ends of social robotics; fostering analyses of the theatricality inherent not just to the robot itself, but to human-robot interactions scripted and staged in lab settings. These critical considerations propel an enduring interest in robot theater and for the robots that dance and perform for audiences.

Buffeted by the information explosion, networked social environments, and advances in artificial intelligence, robots with increased agency in the physical world have become more common in contemporary social contexts. They carry out industrial labor, contribute to military operations or policing, provide companionship and care for the elderly, facilitate education, act as secretaries and administrative assistants, perform sex and intimacy work and other affective labor, and participate in artistic endeavors. This collection of essays aims to consider how performance, broadly construed, can help in understanding, challenging, and envisioning new possibilities for social robots and more generally, to contribute to discussions about the ontological, epistemological, ethical, and sociopolitical issues they raise.

Submissions on these subject areas and questions are encouraged:

Methodologies:

- What theoretical and/or artistic approaches are best suited for analyzing the interdisciplinary phenomenon of robot theater?
- What do dancing robots disclose about dance studies, and acting robots about theater studies?
- How can robot choreographies illustrate key concepts from robophilosophy? Can they *do* robophilosophy or, more generally, philosophy of technology?

Histories:

- How can dance history assist in analyzing robot performance? How can the histories of dance styles (such as "the robot") reveal the mimesis and mechanization (i.e., the self-roboticization) inherent to the human endeavor of dance?
- How does the history of the screen (in cinema, computing, social media, etc.) add another layer to the concept of robot theater, one that takes into account viral media content, techniques of editing and trickery, and the overall visual spectacle of watching robots perform?

Ontologies:

- How can robot ontology inflect the ontologies of theatrical performance which unfold in public spaces, on proscenium stages, or on screen? How does it impact our understanding of dance movement?
- What relational ontologies occur while performing with a robot? How are embodied experiences and perceptions of alterity affected?

Pedagogies:

- What frictions and opportunities emerge as social robots, in the form of educational technology such as chatbots, learning management systems, surveillance, and devices, become increasingly present in dance and theater training?
- How might existing curricular and assessment requirements or mandates for dance and theater education change or adapt to the use of social robots by both teacher and students?
- How might established dance and theater pedagogies evolve to encompass both human and robot performance?

Social Value:

- How can robot theater challenge or otherwise show alternatives to understandings of social robots popularized in science fiction narratives and popular culture more generally?
- How can robot performance push the bounds of what is possible in theatrical performance featuring human beings?
- What artistic standards pertain to robot performance and how do they fit in the landscape of dance or theater aesthetics?

Ethical, Sociopolitical, Economic Implications:

- How can or should robot otherness be dramaturgically framed, and how might it reflect or subvert pre-existing embodied politics of race, gender, etc?
- What sociopolitical issues are presented when robots imitate popular dance moves?
- What constitutes ethical design in the context of robot theater?
- What are the ethical implications of movement-based artists working with roboticists and/or engineering firms on choreographic research?
- Who stands to benefit financially from robot theater, and what does this mean for the value assigned to the labor of dancers, actors, sex workers, or factory laborers?



Abstracts due: August 1st, 2023

Submit to: mullise@queens.edu

**Accepted essays will be included
in a proposal for the Routledge Series:
Advances In Theatre and Performance.**