

ON TRACK: A SLIPPERY MECHANIC-ROBOTIC PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

This article explores the production of *ON TRACK*, a performative installation, whose slippery, smelly narrative emerges from the interactions and interferences between a mechanical mop, a troupe of robotic brushes and spilling viscous fluids. The machinic assemblage performs 'other ways of knowing', unfolding where the programmed and choreographed meet the messy and unknown. The work was created within the *e-MobiLArt* project.

ON TRACK is a performative assemblage involving a mechanical mop, a troupe of robotic brushes and spilling viscous fluids. The work develops an ironic lens through which to look at human endeavor, its overly complicated mechanisms and procedures, and their vulnerability to a slipperiness already built in. The machinic assemblage brings together and sets up interactions between four systems: one mechanic-repetitive, another one robotic-agitated, an abrupt precipice, and a number of viscous liquids. Apparently set to clean, the mechanic and robotic protagonists interfere with and interrupt each other, teeter and spill. A disaster-prone scenario unfolds, creating an ever more slippery mess in intricately choreographed ways.

The work is particularly concerned with the endless cyclic mechanisms of production, control, distribution, and maintenance. Each of these processes calls forth new processes and in endless thwarted patterns they restore, recirculate and renew the issues that prior processes have so sophisticatedly invested resources in; as if summoning both *Sisyphus* and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Developing *ON TRACK*, we aimed for a mechanism that *performs* these processes and their in-built tendencies to slip, deviate and stutter, rather than *representing* them. Performance, in Irit Rogoff's words, "comes into its own in the name of an unease, in the arena of a promise of something that is yet to come, yet to be articulated and of agency yet to be recognized, yet to be named"[1].

The unceasing process of redistribution is articulated in the form of a motorized mop. The mop instrumentalizes our desire to clean and to restore order; and yet looking at how it cleans, it becomes



Fig. 1. *ON TRACK* installation at the State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece, in May 2009. (© in serial. Photo © in serial.)

apparent that it only transports and disperses the mess. The slowly swinging mop is joined by a troupe of five autonomous robotic brushes that bring a nervous, teetering energy to the scenario. Opposing and extending the mop's mechanics and pendulous movements, the robotic brushes bear something more human; laden with intent and sensation, they perform complex choreographed agitations. We've derived the basic motif for their choreographic software instructions from the "danse des petits cygnes" (ballet *Swan Lake*), in which four dancers, arms linked, perform quick, repetitive, mechanical, synchronized steps. The challenge of performing this dance sequence lies in the risk of one dancer erring and so threatening the whole row to collapse; error leading to error, leading to more error. While the two systems interact via infrared signals, the dialogue only serves to interfere with the brushes' impossible assignment.

Two further 'systems' are in play to propel this narrative of slippage and hindrance. Five large industrial buckets are filled with viscous liquids, latex, fish glue, and other slimy substances. The buckets are leaking and supply an ongoing provocation for the mop that with each swing, mixes them together with pigments to create a congealing trail of puddles and crust. The robots themselves are trapped on platforms mounted above the buckets. Confined by their elevated cells, they are abandoned to gesture restlessly and, in frustration, teeter at the precipice. Doing so, they are constantly rocking the buckets, and thus unknowingly contribute to the creeping mess.

Brought together and set into interaction, the four systems produce a machine, an assemblage of heterogeneous parts, mechanisms, materials, move-

ments, and instructions. Following Andreas Broeckmann's definition of the machinic as an aesthetic principle, we were interested in "process rather than object, ... dynamics rather than finality, ... instability rather than permanence". The heterogenic logic of this machinic assemblage produced results that are at the same time programmed, organized and unpredictable, emergent [2].

The machine's performativity unfolds through the interactions—or perhaps, rather, continuous collisions—of movements and materials, and their potential to form metonymic relations to culture, technology and society. The slippery dynamics of control and becoming express themselves in the evolving tensions between the programmed and meticulously choreographed, and the unplanned, emergent. Infrared signals broadcast by the mop cause the robots to stutter, and—together with tiny rounding errors in their internal clock—their synchrony dissolves. The buckets leak, rocked by brushes that have been robbed of their power to clean, and fluids coagulate around puddles. The mop keeps mixing and dispersing the fluids until they turn into a sticky, smelly, grey-brown amalgamate.

Fig. 2. Installation detail: robot-brushes teetering at the precipice above leaking buckets. (© in serial. Photo © in serial.)



The machine's movements are constantly interrupted and its performance forms—and breaks—where all its actors (heterogeneous parts) collide. The performative effect of this tension is captured in André Lepecki's notion of critical anxiety. In his words, "perception of a hiccuping in choreographed movement produces a critical anxiety; it is dance's very future that appears menaced by the eruption of kinesthetic stuttering" [3]. In *ON TRACK*, the performance, composed of hiccuping movements and forming puddles and crustings, constitutes a continuous state of transformation and becoming, always at the verge of loosing control.

The Making of *ON TRACK*

The unusual mix of materials and approaches that characterizes this work's poetically messy articulation is the result of the coming together of four artists from different backgrounds. Called In Serial, our group has formed in the context of the European project e-MobiLArt in 2008. Together we combine approaches from choreography, digital arts, experimental architecture, film, interactive media, installation, and performance. We believe that the strength of the work produced comes from the productive collision of our disciplines, making possible a form of hybridization in artistic languages and approaches with *space and movement* at its core.

From the beginning, we were interested in engaging with humanity's wasteful exploitation of resources. Together with our common curiosity about mixing apparently incompatible materials, this led us to develop a series of concepts for increasingly bizarre, thriftless mechanisms. At first, we conceived a single, robotic mop, dancing and stuttering along a track. Over the course of a six-month design process, involving consultations with engineers, this complex apparatus was broken down into its characteristic movements; finally becoming the heterogeneous parts of *ON TRACK*'s machinic assemblage. Considering and designing our machine in parts allowed us to successfully exploit our diverse backgrounds. The hybridity of the work's materialization emerged once we placed all parts into the slippery relationships that shape *ON TRACK*'s hiccuping narrative.

Initial discussions were influenced by a number of previous works, including the delicately unstable assemblages of *The Way Things Go* (*Der Lauf der Dinge*) by Fischli and Weiss; and, the

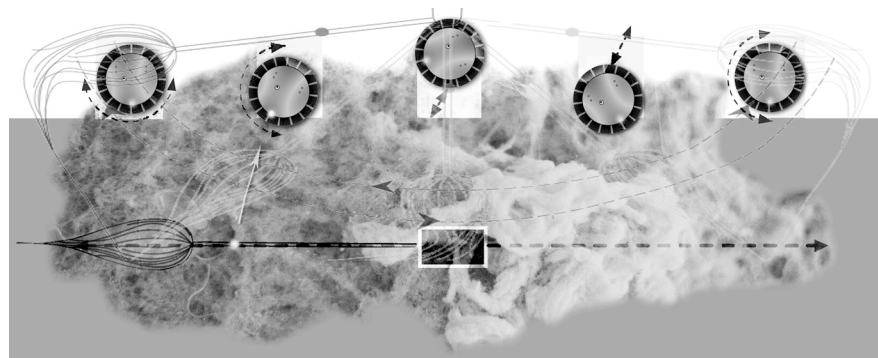


Fig. 3. *ON TRACK* floor plan and interaction scheme. (© in serial. Photo © in serial.)

bizarrely poetic machines and kinetic sculptures of Rebecca Horn. Like the robotic art performance *Grace State Machines: Flesh Bodies* by Bill Vorn and Emma Howes, *ON TRACK* is concerned with the tensions emerging from humanity's efforts to create and control machines. Vorn and Howes work has similarly drawn comparisons with *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* [4], however, in *Grace State Machines: Flesh Bodies* the tension is played out in the interaction between performer and machines, while in *ON TRACK* human interaction has been abandoned. The machines only respond to and interfere with themselves, thus heightening the allure of machinic autonomy and the issues involved as vital processes are handed over to machines and computer systems. While the machines in *Grace State Machines* broke down unintentionally [4], *ON TRACK*'s machinery never promises infallible power and cooperation but is struck in a meshwork of ambiguous, fragile relationalities from the outset.

Parting Reflections

Bringing together 'old' and new media in this collision of technologies, materials, traditions and skill-sets, we have found and pushed at rather unusual possibilities for electronic arts. Inspired by Calvino's 'true literature machine' that "feels the need to produce disorder, as a reaction against its preceding production of order" [5], *ON TRACK* messes up the conventionally clean and controlled domain of the machine. The continuous interactions and interferences and their eroded and encrusted leftovers produce a performative trace of the works' own history. As a cultural concept and artistic performance, the machine, slipping and hindered by leaking fluids, offers a critical metaphor; as a collaborative process and material realization, it engages with 'difference and the unknown' and 'other ways of knowing' [6]. Defying the notion of the seamless, the work thus also

exhibits the unanchored, messy production ground between different artistic disciplines. It is a playground not dissimilar to the turbulent liminal politics so bizarrely performed within *ON TRACK*. In contrast to the unintentional results of the excessive processes portrayed in this work, in a collaboration, the indeterminable, messy is of abundant potential [7].

ON TRACK remains in progress: for 2010, we've been invited to continue our slippery experiments in a series of artist residencies in Australia.

References and Notes

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Fig. 4. *ON TRACK*'s performance unfolds in a continuous collision of movements and materials. (© in serial. Photo © in serial.)

