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# Happiness, Dries Verhoeven

By [Nicolas Garnier](#) . Published on 01/31/2022



One of the contemporary fears, of which it is still too early to say whether it will come true or whether it will remain in the realm of fantasy, is the replacement of human activities by specialized machines capable of carrying out all their tasks more quickly and more efficiently. What would happen then if in such a hypothetical future, a robot were to replace a pharmacist to in turn dispense various chemical substances to her human clients. It is this dystopian experience that the artist Dries Verhoeven proposes to experience in his performance *Happiness* , interpreted by a humanoid robot and played in the public space, within a fake pharmacy.

Dries Verhoeven is accustomed, for his installations in public space, to playing with the format of shop windows and other glazed displays as scenographic devices for highlighting living bodies that are both provocative and protective, which connects the private space to the public space, the intimate to the political. *Happiness*'s device takes this model while inserting it into a concrete bunker with no other ornament than a strangely white pharmacy sign. This cube is placed in the middle of a town square and its entrance remains open to potential onlookers curious enough to venture there.

Upon entering the blockhouse, the spectator finds himself faced with a counter protected by glass, behind which stands an inert humanoid machine, bathed in whitish overhead light. The illusion does not last long: the mechanics of the robot are left in the open air, thus revealing the wiring innervating its synthetic organism. Only a suggestively embossed plate over her ribcage and a silicone mask over her face give her feminine and Asian features, albeit largely stereotyped. Behind the animatronic pharmacist with white gloves, there is a reserve of "medicines". If at first glance the shelving is reminiscent of that of more traditional pharmacies, certain products quickly put forward cause trouble. Tins of mundane medicines rub shoulders with white powder, earthy pellets in plastic bags, metal capsules or even dried mushrooms. The mystery on the nature of these products will quickly be lifted by our hostess.

As the machine comes to life, a hatch in the counter opens slowly and reveals a first box. Through a loudspeaker, a female voice introduces us to the product, its dosage and its effects. It is a box of Oxy-Contin, a painkiller opioid sold by the American company Purdue Pharma which has become infamous for the past ten years for its deleterious effects on users who have become addicted. The voice does not develop on this controversy but is content to detail precisely the uses and effects of these pills before moving on to the next drug. This little merry-go-round will be repeated for the thirty minutes that the performance lasts, the robot giving us the sale item from its more or less legal inventory. The products presented

alternate between completely legal drugs that can be obtained on prescription and narcotics prohibited for sale. However, the saleswoman is not so much interested in the legality of these substances as in their concrete effects, in this case the fact that they all provide a certain chemical comfort, even a form of highly addictive artificial paradise.

Always in the same neutral tone, the synthetic pharmacist describes with precision and great detail the way in which the chemical compounds contained in these drugs insinuate themselves into the human body to modify its chemistry and disturb its perceptions. This litany of descriptions, the mechanical repetition of this icy voice and this glassy gaze produce a disturbing vertigo, combining a form of intimacy, nourished by empathy with the psychic states described, at a deep distance, an abyss represented by our robotic interlocutor totally disembodied.

The descriptions recall the all-too-human needs that are at the origin of the taking of these psychoactive substances: the search for a diversion or protection to overcome a deep vulnerability, whether physical or psychological. This weakness is as if reinforced by the contrast with the machine which declaims its arguments without blinking or almost. In its impassiveness, the machine is a mirror of anxieties that it cannot understand in any case despite the exhaustive knowledge of its arguments. The image thus reflected presents a tottering, fragile portrait of our condition. The neutrality of the machine could thus echo the cynicism with which the manufacturers of these different drugs, the large pharmaceutical groups as well as dealers of all kinds,

But this clinical neutrality also and above all makes it possible to escape the polarized judgments usually surrounding the subject of taking narcotics. This professional speech, which is directly addressed to the viewer, confidently poses the question of the use of psychoactive substances, a practice that is paradoxically omnipresent in both private and public spheres, but passed over in silence out of

embarrassment or prejudice. This social aspect of performance is enhanced by its geographic location. The makeshift pharmacy is always installed in public spaces deliberately chosen for the diversity of the population that frequents and invests them.

From a discreet approach, hidden in an anonymous blockhouse in the middle of the urban fabric, *Happiness* nevertheless offers a striking experience, a powerful and stripped face to face that confronts the spectator with one of the taboos of society. In this makeshift public dispensary, the jurisdiction of the law is temporarily suspended to explore a dark but important side of the human experience. Thus, the performance is built against its initial spectacular promise of confronting us with a humanoid robot, and confronts us on the contrary with ourselves, in all our specifically human fragility and ambiguity. A disturbing experience that stays in your mind long after you say goodbye to our synthetic hostess.

***Happiness, seen as part of the Paranoid androids, robots and men event, highlight of the Maillon, European creation hub. Designed by Dries Verhoeven. Dramaturgy Hella Godee. Stefano Trambusti digital puppets. Its Jimi Zoet. Suits Saskia Schoenmaker. Photo Willem Popelier.***

*The highlight entitled Paranoid androids, robots and men runs until February 5, 2022. This highlight imagined and coordinated by Barbara Engelhardt is presented as the crystallization of the red thread of the season, namely an open questioning on how (re)build a common space that is not only a transitory public space but a place of meeting and sharing. The highlight at Le Maillon explores the relationship between humans and their technological environment according to three axes addressed during the three weeks that the event lasts. At first, it is a question of thinking about the relationship with humanoid robots, machines endowed with human traits in order to interact with their users and to arouse a form of empathy, even if this too close proximity produces a feeling of discomfort, phenomenon known as Uncanny Valley and explored by Stefan Kaegi in his eponymous*

*show. The second part of the highlight questions the machine in a less frontal way, by exploring the way in which the behavioral codes of future generations will be constructed and influenced by interaction with digital technologies. Finally, the third and last moment of the highlight focuses on the relationship between robotics and health, by exploring the robot from a physical and quasi-carnal point of view as a prosthesis or as a palliative to the human presence for vulnerable people, with the shows *Man Strikes Back*, by the company Post uit Hessdalen, from February 2 to 5, and *Tank* by Doris Uhlich, from February 3 to 5, as well as the *En contact* workshop, among others,*