

Teaching

Sun Yuan &
Peng Yu

SUN Yuan

(sun yuen)

孙原

PENG Yu

(pung yu)

彭禹



Sun Yuan and Peng Yu

BORN

1973, Beijing

BORN

1974, Jiamusi, China

ESTABLISHED

1999

LIVE & WORK

Beijing

THEMES

Materials and Process
Narrative
Symbols

“More and more mechanical devices have entered our lives and even become part of our bodies. It is natural that they enter the art world.”¹
 —Sun Yuan

ART MEDIUM

Installation

ABOUT THE ARTISTS AND WORK

Sun Yuan was born in 1972 in Beijing, and Peng Yu was born in 1974 in Jiamusi, which is located in China's Heilongjiang Province. Sun and Peng both attended the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing at a time of radical experimentation in the Chinese art scene. Following a period of artistic repression during the Mao Zedong years and the Cultural Revolution, younger Chinese artists in the 1980s and '90s were beginning to pursue new forms of creative expression. They formed a collaborative partnership in 1999, and from early on, Sun and Peng used unconventional materials, such as blood, fat, and live animals, to test the boundaries of contemporary art, emphasizing real and sensational confrontation with their work.

Can't Help Myself (2016) is a site-specific installation created for the Guggenheim Museum. Sun and Peng were invited to create an artwork in response to ideas of territory, boundary, and borders. The result is a modified industrial robot that is caged within transparent walls and animated using visual-recognition sensors and software systems. The robot was custom designed to continuously sweep an oozing dark-red liquid so it remains within a certain circumference; when sensors installed in the ceiling detect that the liquid has seeped beyond an invisible boundary, the robotic arm carefully pulls the red fluid back into place. Once the intelligent machine has completed this repetitive task, it starts to dance,

randomly combining a sequence from thirty-two programmed movements that mimic human and animal actions, such as “scratch an itch” or “bow and shake.”

This installation examines our increasingly automated global reality, one in which territories are controlled mechanically and the relationship between people and technology is rapidly changing. During the exhibition, viewers were invited to gather outside the transparent enclosure and watch the machine inside, setting up a dialectic that reflects a moral question, “Who is more vulnerable: the human who built the machine or the machine who is controlled by a human?”²

1 Azura Wannmann, “The Guggenheim's First Robotic Artwork Is Out of Control,” *Vice*, December 28, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/e5y9z/guggenheims-art-robot-cant-help-itself.

2 Xiaoyu Weng, “Sun Yuan and Peng Yu: *Can't Help Myself*,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/34812>.



Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Can't Help Myself*, 2016. Kuka industrial robot, stainless steel and rubber, cellulose ether in colored water, lighting grid with Cognex visual-recognition sensors, and polycarbonate wall with aluminum frame, dimensions variable overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection 2016.40

View and Discuss

→ Look at the photographs of the site-specific installation *Can't Help Myself* (2016).

What do you see in this site-specific installation?

→ In collaboration with engineers, the artists programmed the industrial robot in this installation to perform certain actions.

What do you think the robot was programmed to do?

→ Go to [youtube.com/watch?v=4ooVr6RZ_nw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ooVr6RZ_nw) to watch a one-minute video of *Can't Help Myself*.

Now that you've seen a video of the robot, how would you describe the way that it moves?

→ Sun and Peng programmed the robot to continuously sweep the red liquid on the floor until it is contained within a predetermined area. If the robot is able to complete its work, it can choose its next movement from a set of preprogrammed actions modeled after human and animal behavior.

What do you think about the artist's choices for the robot?

→ The programmed actions of the robot relate to the idea of control. The artists explained, "Human beings have to learn from machines in order to take control of them. . . . It is an endless interplay of entanglement and containment between human and machine: they both take advantage of each other and progress with each other."³

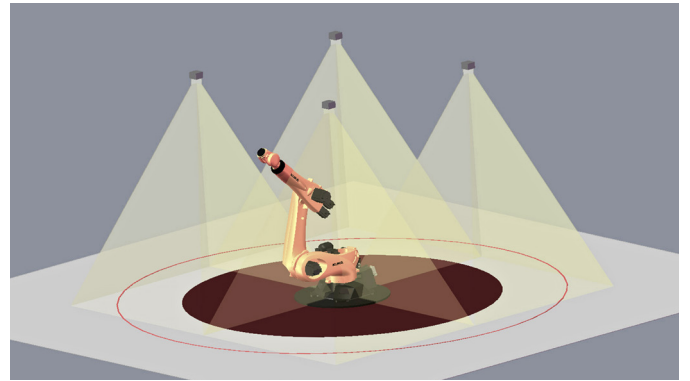
In this artwork, who do you think is controlling whom and why?

View and Discuss

→ Go to youtube.com/watch?v=jRjrl42WsH4 to watch a thirty-second time-lapse video of *Can't Help Myself*. Notice that a room was built with Plexiglass walls around the robot. This was an intentional choice made by the artists for this site-specific installation, to mimic the environment of a science laboratory.

→ On the ceiling, the artists installed four visual-recognition sensors to create an invisible border around the robot. When the red liquid crosses the boundary, the sensors alert the robot that it must sweep.

Imagine yourself in this room. How would you feel? How would you feel differently if there were no barrier between the robot and the viewers?



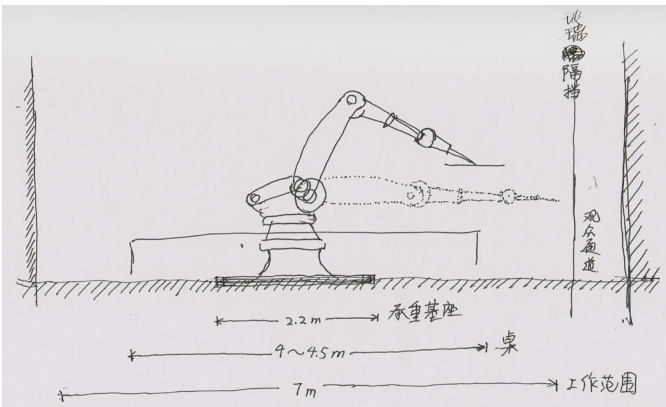
Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, digital rendering of *Can't Help Myself*, 2016

What is the significance of this invisible border? What might it represent?

Classroom Activities

Design a Prototype

Watch this video about Sun and Peng's art practice on the Guggenheim's website: guggenheim.org/video/sun-yuan-peng-yu-theses-of-our-time. In the video, Sun says, "I think an artist's work is a reflection of his or her will. The artist doesn't need to be on-site physically. Instead, you rely on an agent to carry out your will. This is my agent. It has limitless endurance. No one can match its endurance. All you need to provide it with is your will."⁴



Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, sketch for *Can't Help Myself*, 2016

If the robot is a stand-in for the artists, what does it tell us about Sun and Peng's will? If you were to invent a robot agent to carry out your will, or wishes, what would it look like? What would your robot do? Sketch a design for a robot prototype.

Freedom

In 2009 Sun and Peng created a work titled *Freedom*. In it, a powerful hose was tied to the ceiling, and a stream of pressurized water caused the hose to twist, slap, and dance forcefully around an empty room reinforced by metal walls.

Watch a video clip of *Freedom* at youtube.com/watch?v=D3-56ofw_1s. Compare and contrast *Freedom* and *Can't Help Myself*. What are the similarities between the two works? In *Can't Help Myself*, how do Sun and Peng expand on the theme of *Freedom*?

The Future

With *Can't Help Myself*, Sun and Peng contemplate what the future might look like as the relationship between human and machines becomes more connected.

Research other forms of technology and artificial intelligence. How are these advancements already a part of our daily lives? How might they change our lives in the future?

Resources

Websites

- Sun and Peng's Website.
<http://www.sunyuanpengyu.com/>.
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Videos

- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. "Artist Profile: Sun Yuan & Peng Yu." November 3, 2016. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/sun-yuan-peng-yu-theses-of-our-time>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. "Time-Lapse of Sun Yuan & Peng Yu's *Can't Help Myself*." December 29, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRjrl42WsH4>.

Audio

- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. "*Can't Help Myself* by Sun Yuan & Peng Yu." October 28, 2016. <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/cant-help-myself-by-sun-yuan-peng-yu>.

Articles

- Wannmann, Azura. "The Guggenheim's First Robotic Artwork Is Out of Control." *Vice*, December 28, 2016. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ez5y9z/guggenheims-art-robot-cant-help-itself.
 - Sun Yuan. "Sun Yuan on Seeing and Believing." Interview by David Borgonjon. *SCREEN*, June 23, 2015. <http://www.onscreentoday.com/conversation/or-else-its-not-utopian>.
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Books

- Weng, Xiaoyu and Hou Hanru, eds. *Tales of Our Time*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2016.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artists' surnames are capitalized to differentiate them from their given names. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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