

Technical Difficulties

IN AN IDEA-RICH, OFFBEAT EXHIBITION, THE AMERICAN VISIONARY ART MUSEUM EXAMINES OUR LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH HIGH TECHNOLOGY. BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



Allen Christian, *Piano Family: Adagio, Amorosa, Bucky* 2012, spare piano parts.

FORGET THE sliced-up cows and the sharks pickled in formaldehyde that Damien Hirst trotted out in the early 1990s. Forget Marina Abramovic's stare-you-down endurance act ("The Artist is Present") from 2010. If it's the truly daunting and unbelievable you're looking for, the clever realization of a uniquely artful, concept-driven scheme, consider the fact that the U.S. government and others around the world now possess eavesdropping technology so sophisticated that they can and do monitor, around the clock, the telephone

calls, e-mails and credit card transactions of entire populations. Even the most imaginative conceptual artist would find it hard to realize such an ambitious project.

It is against this backdrop that the American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM) in Baltimore has organized and is now presenting "Human, Soul & Machine: The Coming Singularity!" (on view through August 31). Timely and full of surprises, it is one of the most thought-provoking museum exhibitions mounted recently. AVAM's founder and director, Rebecca A. Hoffberger, who

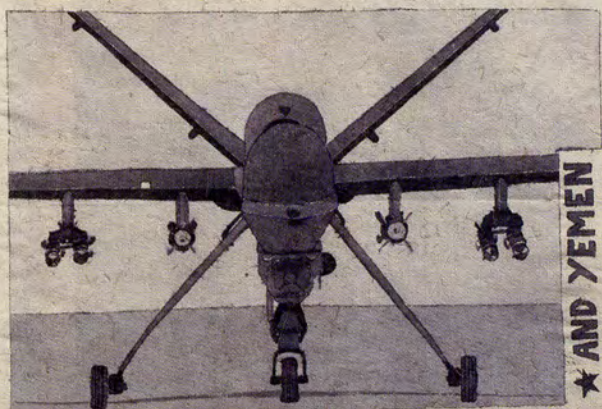
curated the exhibition, observes, “Thanks to many incredible technological advancements, the times we’re living in are both exciting and scary. This exhibition proposes that we can either use technology to empower or to diminish what it means to be human. The choice, as the art and information on display suggest, is ours to make—and it’s one we have a responsibility to make wisely.”

As with all the exhibitions AVAM has offered since it first opened its doors in 1995, the approach Hoffberger and her curatorial team have taken to assembling and presenting the new exhibition has been more proactive than preachy. “I’m an addict of fresh thought,” Hoffberger says. “I don’t like ‘far-out’ art *just* because it’s ‘far-out.’ At AVAM, we try to relate the art and objects we show to real people, to life. Here, there is no critical ax to grind or sacred, canonical history to protect.” Hoffberger explains that although the museum has “enjoyed a



Clockwise from top left: Lindsey Bessanson, *Green Horn Beetle*, organic material and metal cogs.

MQ-9 REAPER



★ AND YEMEN

REAPER DRONES HAVE TYPICALLY ENGAGED IN HUNTER-KILLER MISSIONS OVER IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN* BY TARGETING HUMANS ON THE GROUND WITH **HELLFIRE MISSILES.**

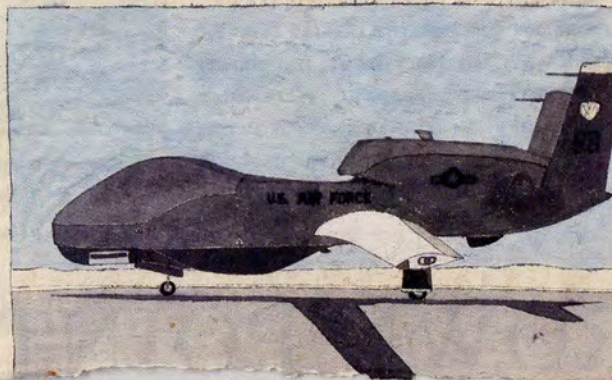
THE U.S. MILITARY PLANS TO MORE THAN TRIPLE ITS INVENTORY OF HIGH-ALTITUDE ARMED AND UNARMED DRONES CAPABLE OF 24-HOUR PATROLS BY 2020.

RQ-4 BLOCK 10 GLOBAL HAWK

"WE CAN'T GET ENOUGH DRONES"

GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS, HEAD OF THE UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND, WHICH INCLUDES THE AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ WAR THEATERS.

JANUARY 19th 2010



From left: Rigo 23, *MQ-9 / Reaper and Yemen* 2010, ink on recycled elephant dung paper; *RQ-4 / Block 10 / Global Hawk*, 2010, ink on recycled elephant dung paper.

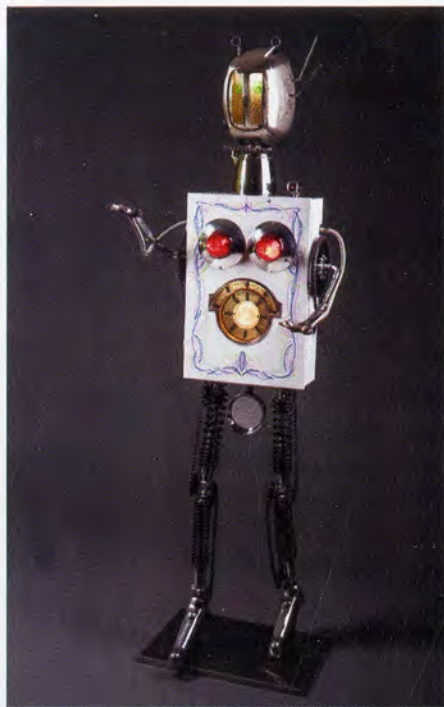
close association with self-taught artists, AVAM is not only an outsider art museum per se. Instead, more broadly, we look for and focus on art and ideas that are visionary, that dare to propose new ways of looking at and thinking about the world, and that even put forth new ways of thinking about solving problems."

The biggest and perhaps central notion underpinning the artistic-intellectual sweep of "Human, Soul & Machine" is that of "singularity," a term some futurists have been using in recent years. Kevin Kelly, a co-founder of *Wired* magazine, once defined it as "the point at which all the change [that has occurred] in the last million years will be superseded by the change [that will take place] in the next five minutes." Given that today's average smartphone has more computing power than the Apollo 11 spacecraft that first took humans to the moon in 1969, the magnitude of such imminent, perhaps

inevitable change could strike many people as unfathomable.

So it is that AVAM's current exhibition offers a lot to be inspired or deeply disturbed by, depending on how a viewer regards the ever-expanding role of technology, especially of artificial intelligence and all things digital, in so many aspects of contemporary life. As its introductory text notes, "Human, Soul & Machine" considers if, after the production to date of some two billion personal computers and the mapping of the human genome, humankind is or is not "on the road to becoming...better, healthier, happier [and] less warlike."

The show is, in effect, a wide-ranging exercise in connecting the dots—facts and ideas social, cultural, political, historical and economic—that all link up, in various and unexpected ways. Conveyed through wall texts and the artworks on view, this rich pool of information—about everything



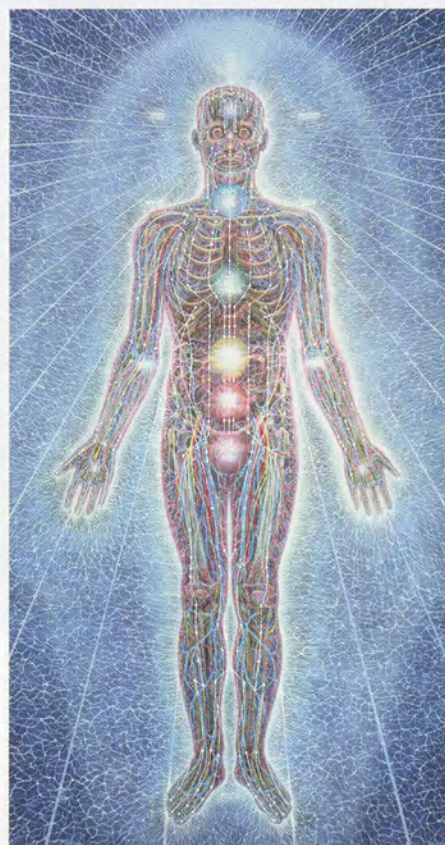
Clockwise from top left: Steve Heller, *Not Plain Jane*, 2013, found metal, car parts, toaster; Universal Mind Lattice, 1981, acrylic on canvas; Alex Grey, *Psychic Energy System*, 1980, acrylic on linen; Dalton M. Ghetti, *Glass Head Man*, 1987, graphite and broken light bulb.



from how the U.S. government spends taxpayers' dollars to the soulful musings of Rumi, the 13th-century Sufi mystic—free-associatively documents the evolution of technology, from humankind's first use of fire (in drawings by the self-taught artist Chris Roberts-Antieau) to computer-chip implants that already have made cyborgs (bionic humans) of more than a few men and women around the world. Example: The Spanish-born artist-composer Neil Harbisson, who was born unable to see colors. He wears a cybernetic eye that is attached to his brain; it allows him to hear the frequencies of different colors through bone conduction. A video on display describes his condition, and Harbisson's geometric-abstract paintings, also on view, show how he expresses his understanding of color visually, through art.

What to do about snooping surveillance technology, not to mention the genetic modification of human bodies, ever more deadly weapons and the imminent arrival of super-capable, consciousness-possession computers whose artificial intelligence will surpass the human brain power of their creators? Works in the exhibition, such as the Portuguese-born Rigo 23's drawings on paper of unmanned killer drones (2010); Frank Warren's "PostSecret" project, in which people anonymously send the artist postcards confessing hitherto unrevealed personal secrets (including, chillingly, "I'm Facebook friends with my rapist"); and Alex Grey's mixed-media "Sacred Mirrors" (1980) directly or indirectly examine that question.

The exhibition also contemplates where the human soul—that old, romantic-spiritual thing—might fit into a high-tech future that is already here today. (As Hoffberger puts it, "Given the way technology is moving, do we want to become like machines? With each new high-tech invention, how do you download a 'you' into an 'it'?"") Grey's powers-of-the-universe, powers-of-nature, where-do-human-beings-fit-in phantasmagoric paintings look for and evoke an eternal, all-unifying, omnipresent spirit with their images of trees as fecund bodies, along with choruses of prehistoric animals, suns, eyeballs and planets. The spirit of Grey's art





Lindsey Bessanson, *Purple Butterfly*, organic material and metal cogs

seems to be much more comprehensive than the usual ecumenical effort praying, chanting, self-styled religious leaders.

Also on view, revealing the soulful through the skillful touch of the human hand on one of nature's most basic materials, wood, the sculptures of the Virginia-born carver Fred J. Carter (1911-1992) depict Native Americans, Appalachian coal miners and ambiguous mythological figures. Carter, whose works were meant partly as a warning against industrial destruction of nature, once observed, "Man is becoming so dehumanized and desensitized.... It's just the destruction of man by himself."

Quotations and citations of economic, scientific and other kinds of data appear as wall texts throughout "Human, Soul & Machine" and are an integral part of the exhibition. Among them are the prognostications of the 66-year-old inventor, author and futurist Ray Kurzweil, a director of engineering at Google (and inventor of the flatbed scanner, among many other things). *The Singularity is Near*, a 2010 film made by Kurzweil, Anthony Waller, Ehren Koepf and Toshi Hoo, features the scientific *Wunderkind*-turned-future watcher predicting a not-so-distant time in which debilitating diseases will be curable through genetic manipulation, and humans will not need to consult Google's vast data storehouse by means of computers, because they will have access to all that info via chips implanted in their brains.

Elsewhere on the walls, the French philosopher and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin intones, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." And perhaps most tellingly, theoretical physicist Albert Einstein offers these *bons mots*: "I fear the day when technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots." 