

## Press release

# Museum Folkwang

## **Between Faith in Progress and Loss of Control: *The Assembled Human* at the Museum Folkwang**

**Essen, 7 Nov. 2019 – In its multimedia exhibition *The Assembled Human* (8 November 2019 – 15 March 2020), the Museum Folkwang is exploring the ambiguous relationship between human being and machine. Taking current discussions about artificial intelligence and digitalisation as its point of departure, the show revisits the past 120 years of art history as represented by outstanding works of classical modern art as well as prominent examples of post-war and contemporary art—from Fernand Léger to Ed Atkins.**

The exhibition *The Assembled Human* brings together more than 200 works by over 100 artists concerned with the relationship between human being and machine, among them Bettina von Arnim, Willi Baumeister, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Rebecca Horn, Wassily Kandinsky, Maria Lassnig, René Magritte and Nam June Paik. In 18 sections it presents works of painting, sculpture and printmaking, early photographic experiments, installations, films and contemporary digital pieces to examine themes such as faith in progress, war technology, artificial intelligence and the state as mega machine. The loosely chronological arrangement offers insights into greater contexts and watersheds such as the two world wars or the cybernetic turn. The recurring ideas range from utopian hopes for the future and prospects of a better world to fear of loss of control and the concern that the human being might be supplanted by the machines he has created.

These ambiguities are also manifested in art of the pre-1945 era. The industrial revolution was the natal hour of the 'assembled human', to use a term coined by the cultural studies expert Bernd Steigler. The beat of machines prescribed the new rhythm for the human being—man became a work machine. Photographic documents from the Historisches Archiv Krupp testify to the significance of this transformation in the Ruhr district. The route through the exhibition begins with masterworks by artists such as Giacomo Balla, Marcel Duchamp, El Lissitzky and Fernand Léger. Right at the start, Umberto Boccioni's mechanical figure of 1913 strides briskly into the future: as a Futurist, Boccioni welcomed technological developments and the tempo of his time. In 1920, Fernand Léger depicted the labourer as a proud and confident figure, and three further works illustrate his multifaceted understanding of the mechanised human. These positive perspectives on the man-machine relationship are juxtaposed with critical views. The horrors of World War I prompted Otto Dix to have the human beings in the painting *The War* disappear between weapons and war machinery. The Dadaist assemblage *The Petit-Bourgeois Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild* by George Grosz and John Heartfield, visualising a maltreated human-like creature devoid of individuality, is the two artists' critical comment on the impact of technical progress on society.

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The exhibition moreover encompasses more than 20 filmic works, including the legendary 1916 film about the Poldi factory in Central Bohemia, Harun Farocki's *Eye/Machine* about surveillance and war technology, the *Dance of Iron* by Alexander Kluge, newly edited for the exhibition, and Sidsel Meineche Hansen's *Seroquel*.

Many artists, among them Roy Lichtenstein and Konrad Klapheck, investigated the consequences of war. The post-war years also saw the rise of cybernetics, a science that sparked changes in society and art alike: Nicolas Schöffer developed interactive sculptures; John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and others collaborated with engineers for the *9 Evenings* in New York. Within that framework, they adopted the cybernetic idea of "feedback"—the object's reaction to its surroundings—in art.

Works by women artists form another focus of the show. Ella Bergmann-Michel explored the topic of "human being and machine" as far back as the 1920s. Women artists of the 1960s and '70s followed suit, confronting the predominantly male visions of the mechanical man and the mechanised, sexualised woman with new female cyborgs. Kiki Kogelnik, for example, created works in Pop Art style showing the female body as a product. Lynn Hershman Leeson and Helen Chadwick associated the female body with everyday technological devices and criticised the virtually automatic links between man and machine, woman and kitchen appliances.

As far back as 1959, Jean Tinguely cast technology as a protagonist in his painting machine *Méta-Matic No. 10*, which has its present-day counterpart in the ceaselessly drawing robot in Goshka Macuga and Patrick Tresset's 2017 installation *Before the Beginning and After the End*. Other contemporary artists such as Trevor Paglen, Tony Oursler and Avery Singer have updated these approaches by addressing themselves to the possibilities offered by the digital age. The artificial intelligence trained by Paglen, for example, produces pictures of its own on the basis of keywords – thus raising the question as to whether AI can perform creative processes.

The exhibition features numerous international loans from private collections and prestigious museums, including the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Tate in London, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid.

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## Information

*The Assembled Human*

8 November 2019 – 15 March 2020

Main sponsor: RWE

Funded by: Ministry of Culture and Science of North Rhine-Westphalia, Brost-Foundation, RAG-Stiftung, Kunststiftung NRW

Supported by: Sparkassen-Kulturstiftung Rheinland, Sparkasse Essen

An extensive exhibition catalogue is being published by the Kerber Verlag (museum €38.90, bookshops €65).

Accompanying programme

The exhibition is being accompanied by an extensive event and museum education programme. For details, go to [www.museum-folkwang.de](http://www.museum-folkwang.de).

Opening hours

Tue to Sun 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thu and Fri 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Closed Mondays

Admission

Standard €8 / concessions €5

Combined ticket *I was a Robot* and *Shin Matsunaga* €10 / €7



**Fernand Léger**

*Le mécanicien*, 1920

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

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