

Visual Arts

New York's New Museum reopens with a juggernaut show about people and machines

Spanning all of its newly doubled footage, this exhibition examines what it means to be human in an era of technological upheaval

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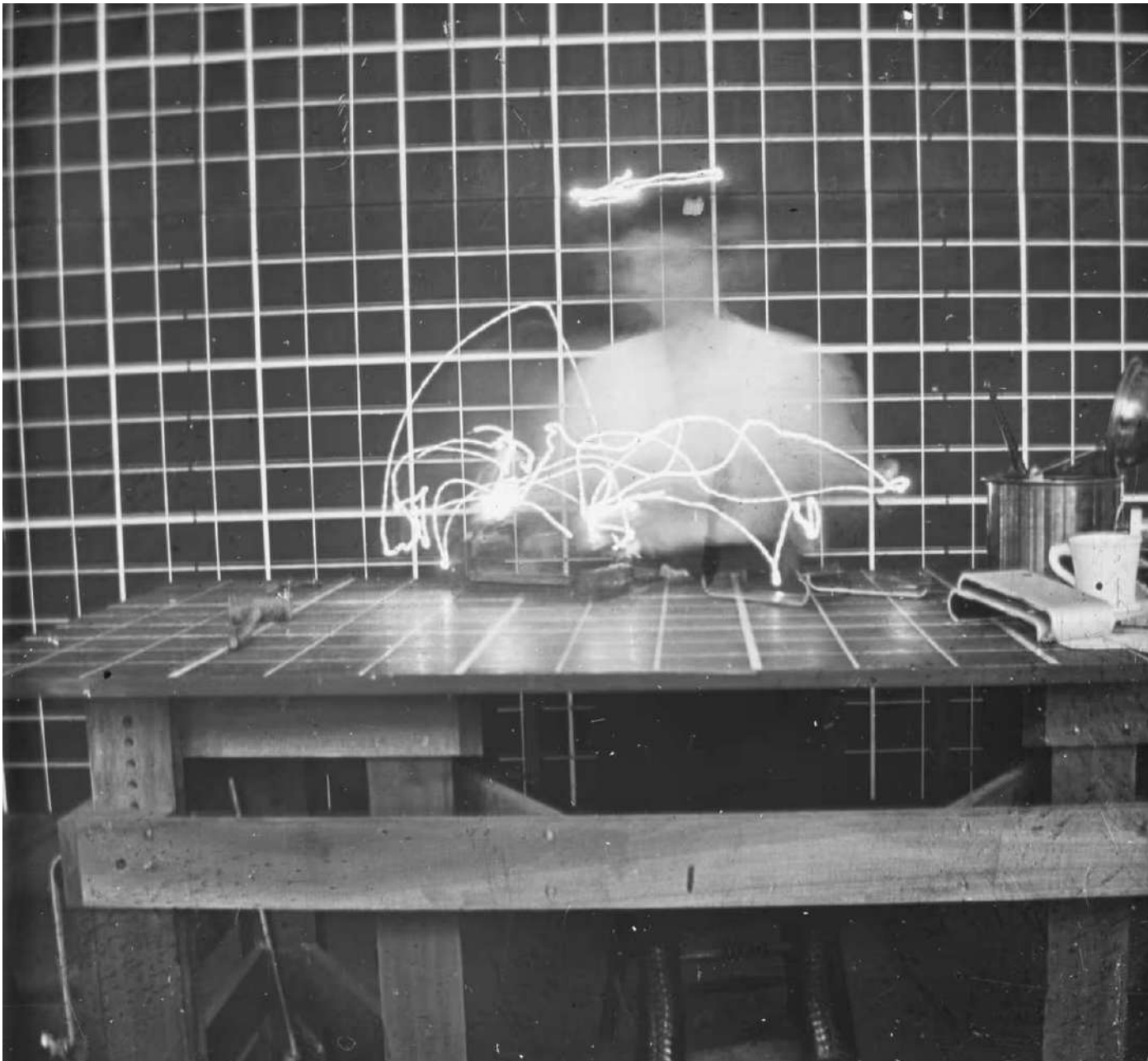
The New Museum is back, thank goodness, and after months of postponement its reopening feels like a spontaneous response to world events. In a moment shadowed by high-tech warfare, the triumph and threat of artificial intelligence, and an industrially engineered environment gone awry, the museum has produced a perfectly pitched juggernaut of a show about the relationship between people and machines. The exhibition, which celebrates the expansion into a second building, arrives as consolation and communiqué, a gust of wistfulness and warning.

The 19-year-old stack of steel-wrapped cartons designed by Japanese architects SANAA has acquired a new sidekick by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, which doubles the gallery square footage and finally gives the institution the space and grace it needs to let its ambitions roam free. The inaugural exhibition vindicates the scale of transformation. *New Humans: Memories of the Future* is a feat of curatorial orchestration, the apotheosis of a years-long meditation on what it means to be us in an era of technological upheaval.

This beast of a show looks back fondly at futurisms past, the better to see the present. Wandering across the whole museum, which spans 140 years and 732 objects made by more than 200 artists, we linger on moments when advances in engineering ruptured the known world and entire generations flinched as the future rushed towards them. Each escalation unleashed contrary responses: dread and wonder, cool rigour and skittish paranoia, calculation and panic.



The New Museum's extension, by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, doubles the gallery's square footage © Jason Keen



A time-lapse photograph of a woman working at a table by 'efficiency crusaders' Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, who fastened tiny lamps

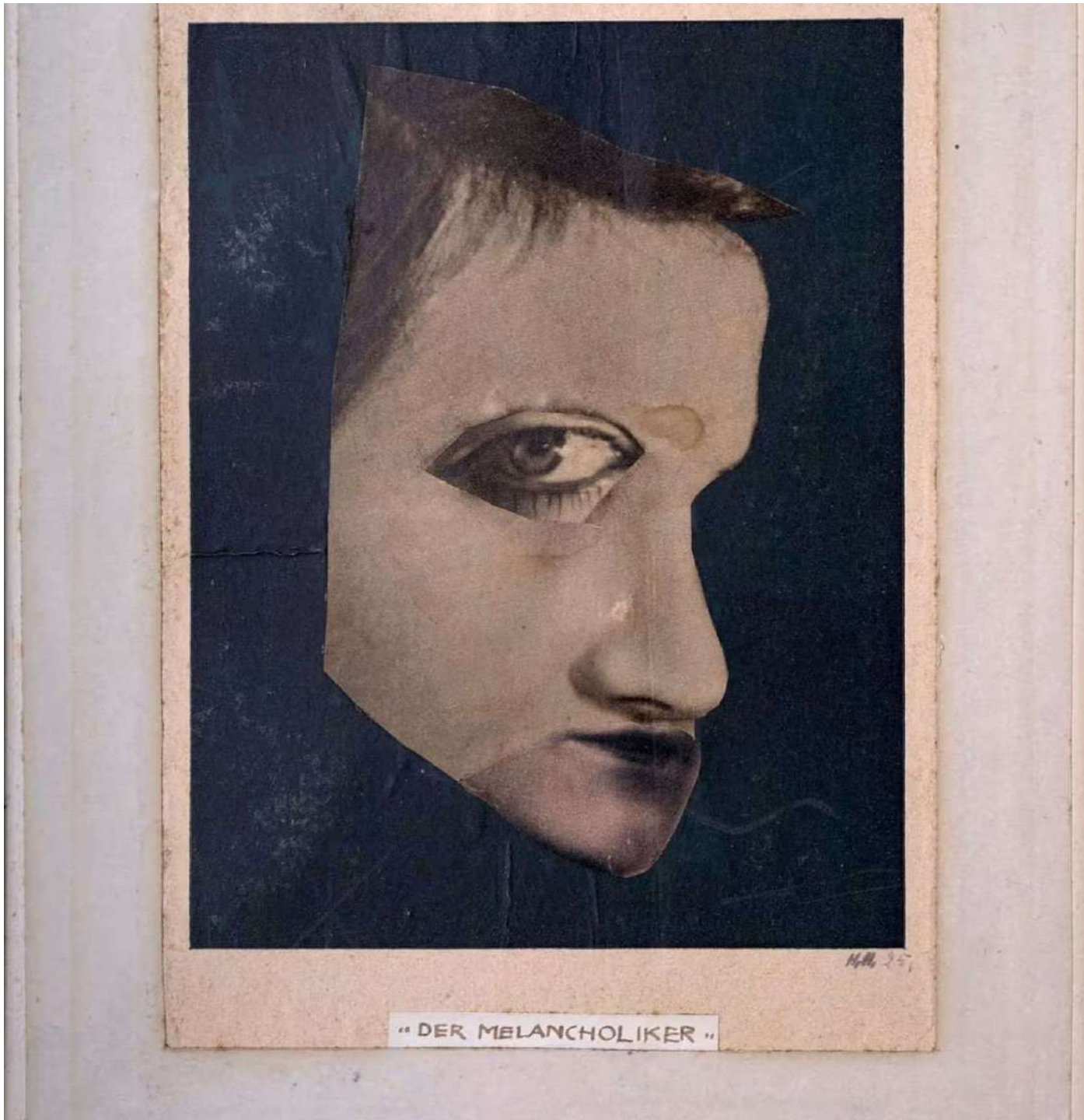
to the hands of workers to track their movements © NMAH Archives

The museum's primary topic is our own time, but here we get an abundance of historical backstory. What emerges from the juxtapositions of artists generations apart is a dazzling, disquieting epic. It unfolds in a loose chronological sequence, starting with the early 20th century, a period shaped by multiple shocks: automated labour, mechanised warfare and new media.

Art didn't necessarily require artists. The efficiency crusaders Frank and Lillian Gilbreth fastened tiny lamps to the hands of workers and used time-lapse photography to track their movements, hoping to streamline each task. In one image, a woman's blurred body rises above threads of light etched into darkness. The effect is eerie: a study meant to rationalise motion leaves a spectral trace, as if some wild force had escaped the system designed to contain it.

That slippage becomes one of the show's implicit arguments: images refuse to behave, and drift away from their makers' intentions. A grid of anonymous photographs, for instance, proudly itemises French military contraptions rolled out during and after the first world war. At this remove, the devices have become as baffling as Dadaist constructions. (Elaine Sturtevant's "Duchamp Bottle-Rack", 1992, dangles inconspicuously from the ceiling nearby.) They become even creepier when people demonstrate their use: we see faces sealed in gas masks, heads hooded, eyes obscured by patches. The images, drawn from the French National Archive, were meant to trumpet the science of warfare, yet they read like the chronicle of a plague.





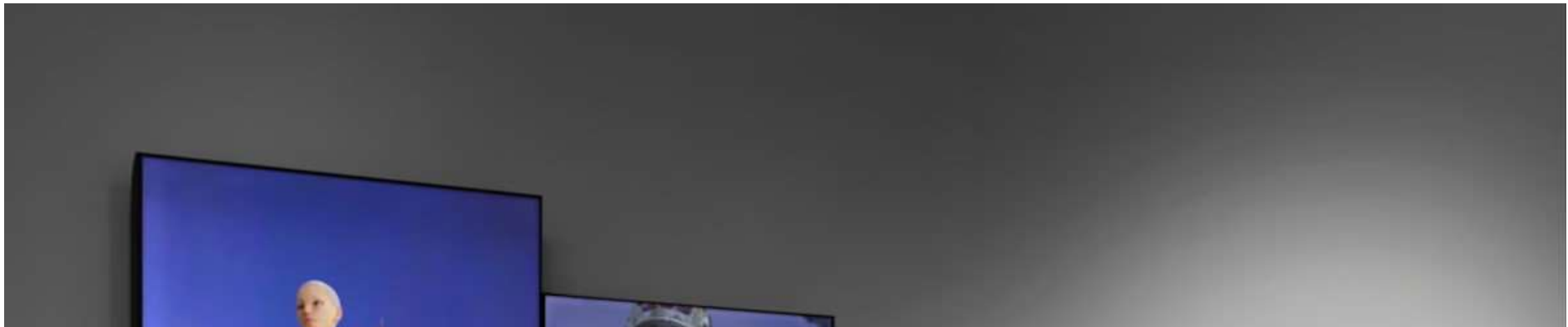


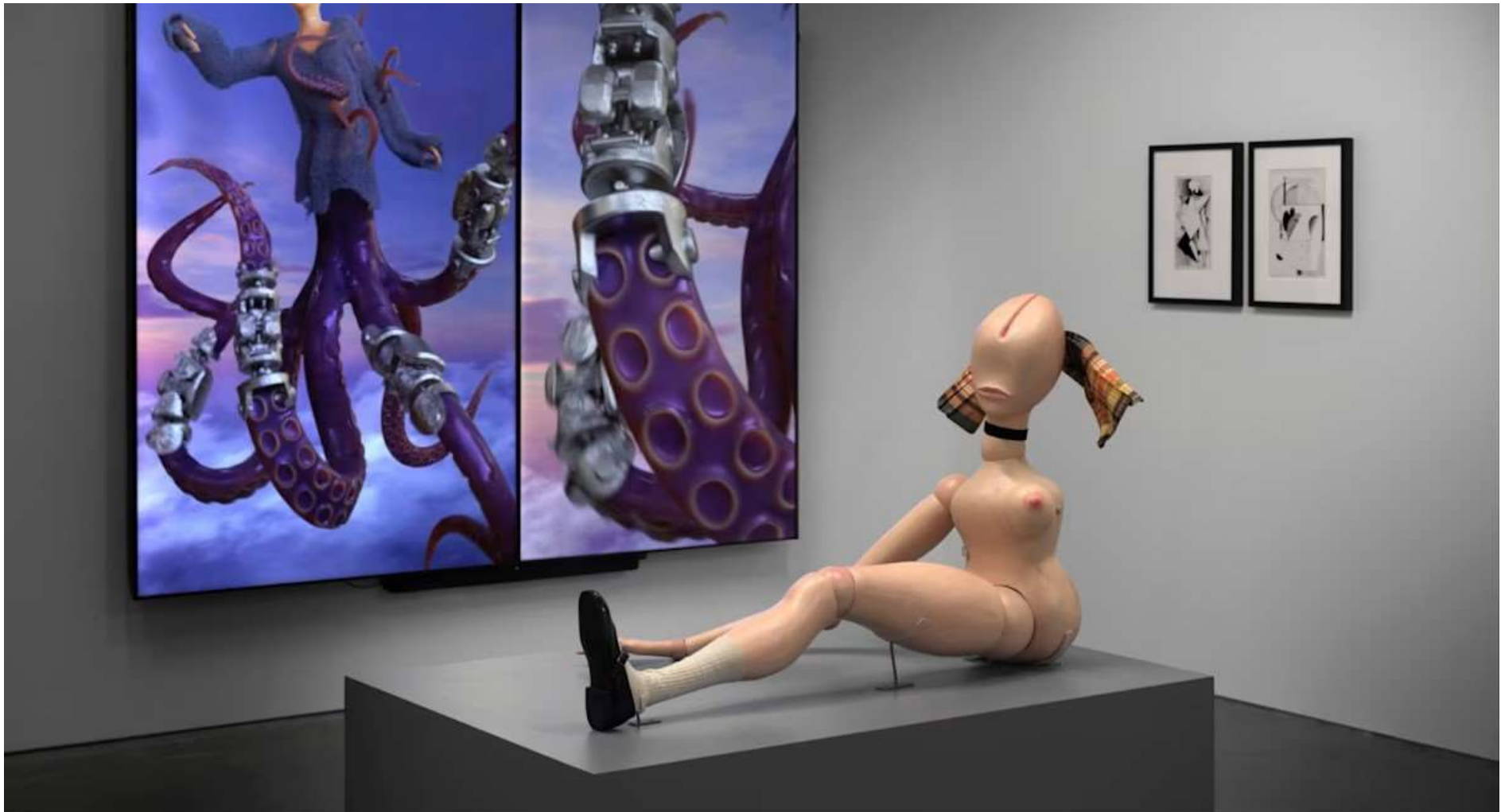
Hannah Höch's 'The Melancholic' (1924) © Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen

A similar unease suffuses Hannah Höch's "The Melancholic" (1924), a collage of a woman's face cobbled from mismatched parts. A sloping nose, petulant mouth, and single eye ringed with stiff lashes make Höch's New Woman look less like a figure of modern liberation than a feminine variation on the *mutilés de guerre* who haunted the streets of Paris and Berlin.

With an inventive flair that gives this show its vibrancy, the curators place Höch's collage alongside a painted metal prosthesis designed by Anna Ladd. Trained as a neoclassical sculptor, Ladd applied her skills to helping soldiers whose disfigurements went beyond the reach of plastic surgery. She and her team devised individualised portrait masks, moulding features in galvanised copper, painting them to match the skin, and fastening them in place with eyeglasses.

Set amid dada and surrealist distortions, Ladd's pragmatic solution acquires a queasy aesthetic of its own. Repair shades into nightmare; the body is healed by its avatar. The bionic man walks the streets.



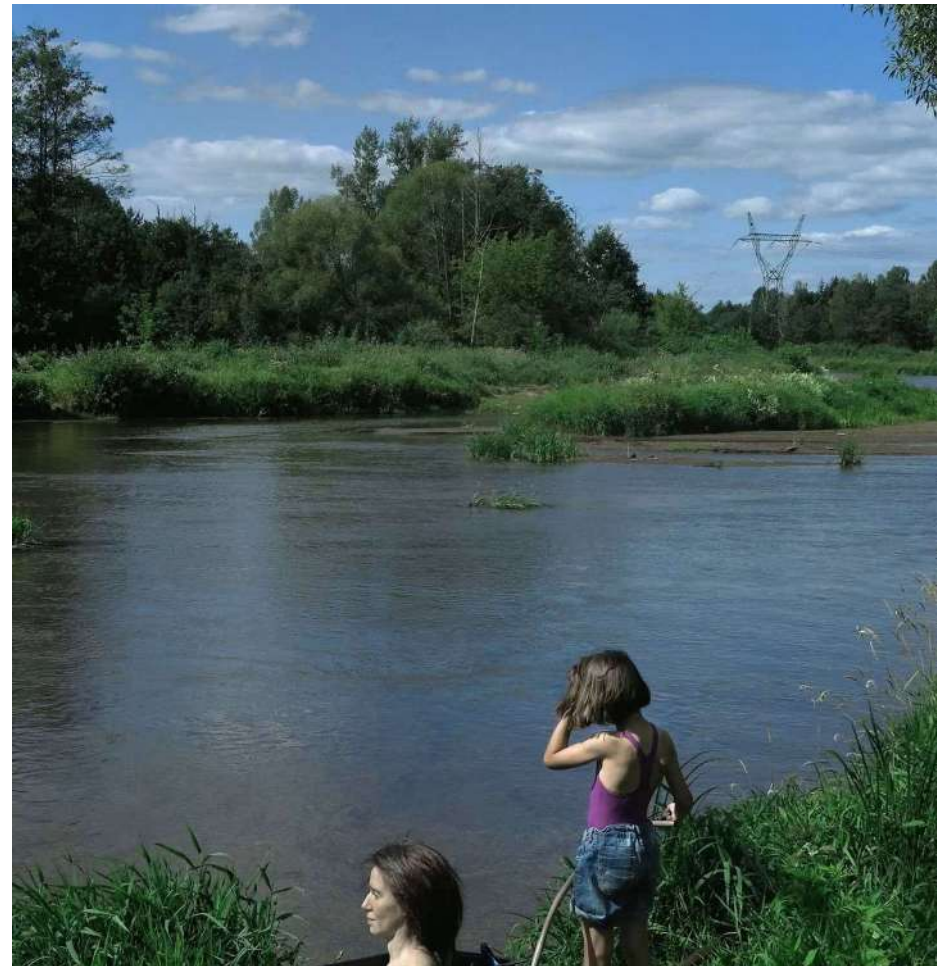


Works on display in the exhibition, including Hans Bellmer's dismembered 'The Half-Doll' (1972) © Courtesy New Museum; photo: Dario Lasagni

Freud described the uncanny as “a ghastly harbinger of death”, and the concept dogs *New Humans*, recurring decade after decade. It finds vivid expression in Hans Bellmer's dismembered “The Half-Doll” (1972), a one-legged, one-armed, single-breasted, life-sized marionette whose swollen protrusions veer towards the grotesque. Alina Szapocznikow's 1967 sculpture “Caprice-Monster” is a crimson agglomeration of limbs, fused into an unstable mass and faintly illuminated

from within.

Szapocznikow, who survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, endured a near-fatal bout of tuberculosis in 1950 and died of cancer in 1973, understood the body's vulnerability to rupture and reconfiguration. She inhabited a world of chaos, destruction and continual transformation, and she found in surrealism's repertoire of puppets, doubles, automatons and fractured faces a language equal to her reality.





'Mama #45' by Aneta Grzeszykowska



The artist's 'Mama #44' (2018) © Courtesy the artist/Lyles & King

More recently, Aneta Grzeszykowska has explored the unstable boundary between the organic and the mechanical. For “Mama” (2018), she fashioned a truncated double of herself, a limbless silicone bust that she consigned to her daughter’s tender care. In a series of macabre photographs, we see the girl carting her inanimate but frighteningly realistic mother around in a tumbril-like wagon, stroking her, disinterring her and holding a cigarette to her lips.

The whole multi-story symphony builds to the newly expansive fourth floor, where it bursts into a robotic climax. Androids created by dozens of artists chatter and bob, or just stand there as if waiting to be powered up. Meriem Bennani’s TV-headed creature behaves like a drunken guest at a party, loudly free-associating and moving in a bit too close. In a piece from Andro Wekua’s 2014 series “Some Pheasants in Singularity”, a synthetic young blonde in a little black dress levitates a few inches off the floor, eyes closed, chin resting on a glass slab that hangs from the ceiling. It’s the kind of work that makes the viewer feel complicit: you want to rescue her, revive her, or at least take her pulse — but you do nothing, of course, because this is a museum and she is not technically alive.





Untitled, from 'Some Pheasants in Singularity' by Andro Wekua (2014) © Courtesy the artist/Gladstone Gallery/Sprüth Magers

What gives this unruly assemblage its coherence is an elegiac sensibility that's baked into the institution. The show takes stock of our technological hangups by surveying a time when machines have held humanity's highest hopes and also incited fresh terrors. The result is alternately amusing and depressing — but also, somehow, exhilarating, because it demonstrates that we can still regard our soldered souls with curiosity, imagination and fatalistic wit.

newmuseum.org

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