

RONNIE VAN HOUT



...the feeling of empathy that we could have for the Robot is for something that appears fallen. Something that has failed. This feeling can also allude to a fear of success, or a fear to stand up and be judged for what we do.

Ronnie van Hout

In his essay "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966), Robert Smithson discusses architecture and science fiction by celebrating a new kind of monumentality that embraces "entropy" and "energy drain".¹ At around the time of his first earthwork, *Creation of the Humanoids* (1962) was playing in the cinema. In the movie, the survivors of a nuclear holocaust fuse man with machine, creating cyborgs to assist in the rebuilding of civilization. Gentle and sensitive, the androids are imbued with the memories and personality of recently deceased humans. Andy Warhol also had an interest in science fiction and this cult movie was thought to be his favourite. Ronnie van Hout returns us to the nexus of minimalism and science fiction with his outdoor sculpture *R.U.R.* – an eight metre long dysfunctional robot that lies supine in the forecourt of the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings.

Fabricated from high-density polystyrene, and finished with dark resin, *R.U.R.* is motionless on the concrete concourse. This pathetic giant is a stand-in or reproduction, a relic from a previous era. Clearly, its distinctive physiology resembles a robot with upturned feet and perforated face for eyes and a mouth. We can't help but ponder its curious position outside a grand, ornate nineteenth century building. Unmonumental, *R.U.R.* defies conventional notions of civic sculpture featuring upright memorials to heroic figures. Instead, van Hout's character might have given up or fallen over with exhaustion having failed the utopian, technological enterprise.² Van Hout's android is an enervated and defeated machine. With an empathic emotional range, it appears obsolete and paralysed with inertia.

Recalling Robert Morris's primary structures that relate to body shapes, van Hout has assembled various conjoined blocks that are human scale. Sculpturally, the object comprises a series of intersecting unitary and flat planes. These ordered forms and solids are marked by mathematical precision. The sculpture functions as seating and can be used for conversation and respite. Participatory and legible as a machine figure yet *R.U.R.* draws on the tenets of minimalism with formal finesse:

I was looking at minimal art when I thought about the block shapes, and an implication of sci-fi. This robot sculpture is probably the opposite of minimalism as it is figurative and contains a narrative.

R.U.R. is the acronymic title for *Rossum's Universal Robots*, a science fiction play written in 1921 by Czech writer Karel Capek who coined the term "robot" which also means forced labour in Czech. In the play, manufactured people take over the workforce and kill everyone but in doing so, they discover their own souls. By conflating science fiction with minimalism, van Hout's adorable humanoid explores the human condition of tenderness and empathy.

Natalie King
July, 2008

Natalie King is a curator, writer and broadcaster based in Melbourne.

All quotes from Ronnie van Hout are from correspondence between the artist and author, July 2008.

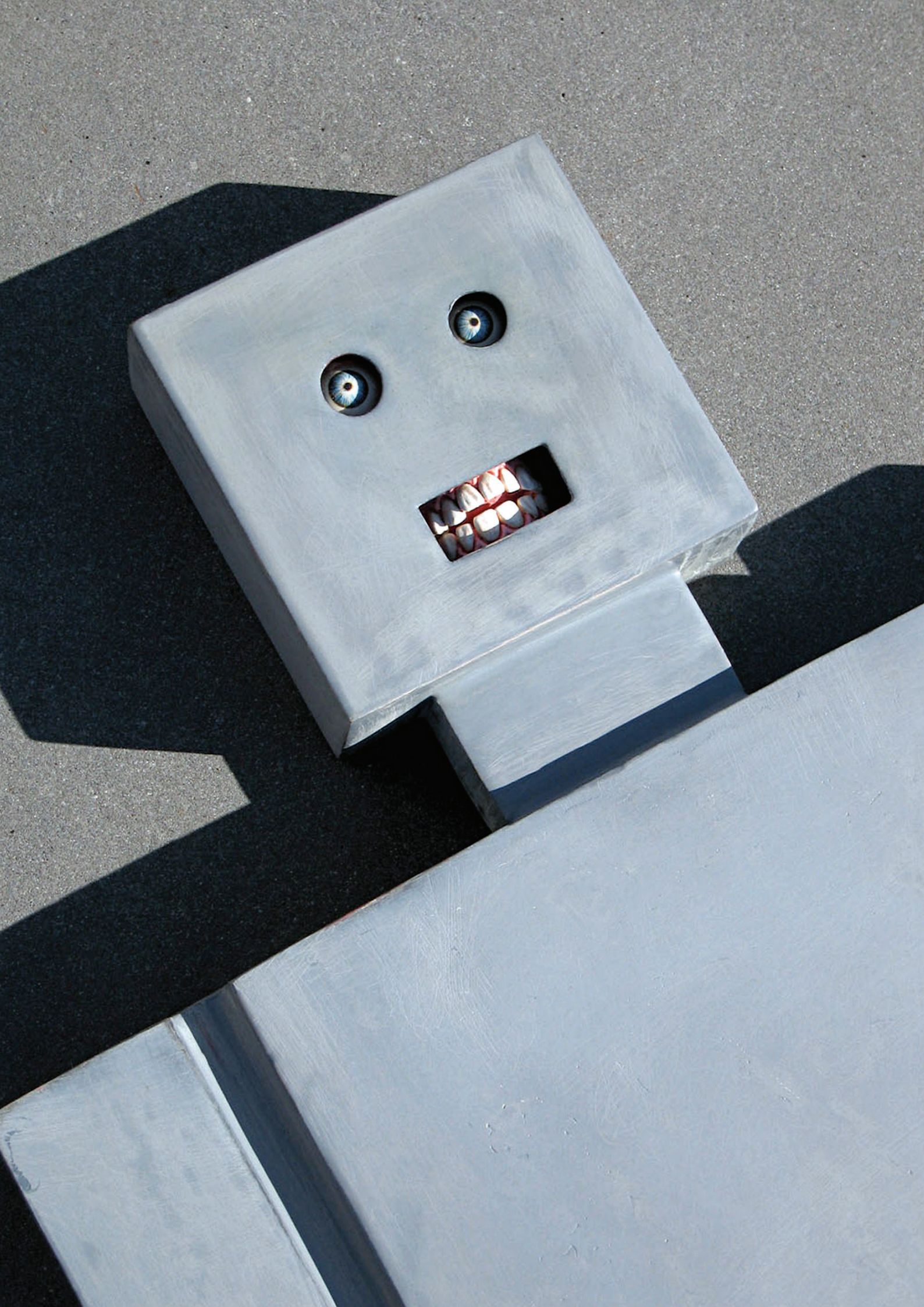
1. Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments", *Selected Writings by Robert Smithson*, http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy_and.htm (accessed July 2008)
2. "...we have come to live in an age that defines itself by the disappearance of monuments and the erasure of symbols – a headless century... a sculpture of fragments, a debased, precarious, trembling form that we have called unmonumental." Massimiliano Gioni, "Ask the Dust", *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, Phaidon and the New Museum, New York, 2007, p. 65.

Ronnie van Hout is represented by Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland.

R.U.R. is presented by Satellite in partnership with the Melbourne Art Fair 2008, Darren Knight Gallery and Hamish McKay Gallery.

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Ronnie van Hout has an extensive exhibition history in New Zealand, where he was born, Australia, and internationally including Germany, Austria, Lithuania, and USA since 1981. He is widely considered one of New Zealand's most important contemporary artists of his generation. His work is held numerous contemporary collections including Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA; National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Monash University Collection, Australia; Auckland Art Gallery, Wellington City Gallery, and Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand.



Satellite is a non-profit contemporary art agency that initiates, develops and presents ambitious public projects and commissions. Satellite is creating a unique identity within the Australian cultural landscape by working with artists beyond the gallery context at an unprecedented level of collaboration and development. Satellite links audiences, business, patrons and government with engaging ideas and highly visible outcomes.

Satellite works closely with festivals, galleries, museums, and organisations to develop adjunct programs of talks, forums and off-site exhibitions to complement their activities. Satellite acts as a consultancy to corporate, private and government bodies in the area of public art commissioning and policy, advocating critically engaged contemporary practice and concerns.

Above all Satellite seeks to be generative – new works, new discussions, new audiences.

Satellite projects embrace:

- Public, unusual, interstitial or decentred sites;
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Satellite was founded in October 2007, and *R.U.R.* represents the first public outcome of its ongoing activities. This inaugural commission reflects Satellite's mission to work closely with artists to realise ambitious new projects and facilitate new directions in their practices.

To discuss business partnerships, fully tax deductible giving opportunities or for more information about Satellite contact Simon Maidment at simon@satellite.org.au

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