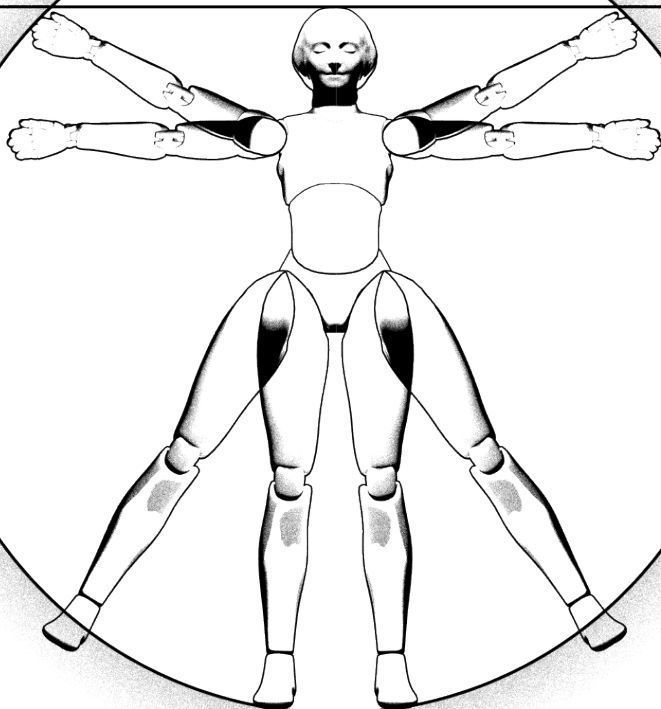


Vector Festival 2026
Flagship Exhibition



Ailin Dong, Angelina Almanza,
Daniel Miller, Pranya, Lee Henderson

Curated by Ciar O'Mahony

In her 1985 essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway writes, “Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language.”¹ In this context, Haraway calls upon the emerging cyborg cultures of the late-capitalist West to embrace coalition across difference, fragmented identities, in what she describes as a “struggle against perfect communication.”² In Haraway’s framing, we are all born into a cyborg world. We assemble ourselves from genders, ethnicities, sexualities, technologies, and countless other overlapping identities, living through their contradictions rather than resolving them. Like figures in a Ralph Steadman illustration, we move through the world as fractured forms held together in motion, a silhouette of unity composed through fragmentation rather than wholeness.

Within Haraway’s expansive understanding of the cyborg, the relationship between biological bodies and machines, while important, is an undercurrent rather than focal point. If we are already cyborgs, as Haraway argues, then the boundaries between all of identity, biology, and technology cannot be understood as fixed or natural. Instead, they are porous, ideological, and constantly shifting. The cyborg does not mark a fusion of human and machine so much as it reveals that such distinctions were never stable. There was no “once-upon-a-time wholeness” when humans were human and machines were machines. It is from this position that the exhibition *Who Cares for the Cyborg* asks its central

1 Haraway, Donna J. “Manifestly Haraway” (Minneapolis, US, London, UK, University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 55.

2 Ibid, p. 57.

question: if we are all already cyborgs, conceptually and materially entangled with the technologies of everyday life, what can our relationships with those technologies reveal?

Looking at the history of computing, many of the words that define our current relationship to digital technology were once used to describe human labour. From the seventeenth century through the 1950s, the term “computer” referred to a person (from the late 19th century onwards, often a woman) who solved complex mathematical equations in service of astronomy, navigation, warfare, and other fields.³ More troublingly, the word “robot,” now a technical term broadly referring to an autonomous machine capable of sensing its environment, processing information, and performing actions in the world,⁴ derives from the Czech word *robota*, meaning forced labour. Its Slavic root, *rab*, means slave.⁵ Today, these origins of human work, waged, coerced, or forced, are largely forgotten. We now understand computers and robots primarily as electronic technologies with seemingly limitless applications in everyday life.

From the 2010s refrain of “there’s an app for that” to today’s AI boom, we have cultivated a cultural expectation that technology should solve our problems, even the most complex, with little labour on our part. In practice, this often translates into an expectation that our machinic

3 Grier, David Alan. “When Computers Were Human” (Princeton, US, Princeton University Press, 2005)

4 Guizzo, Erico. “What is a Robot” (robotsguide.com, 2023) <robotsguide.com/learn/what-is-a-robot>

5 Jordan, John M. “The Czech Play That Gave Us the Word ‘Robot’” (thereader.mitpress.mit.edu) <thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/origin-word-robot-rur/>

collaborators perform their work without any visible effort (without lag, whirring, overheating, crashing, or any indication that work is taking place).

Such expectations do not urge us to care for the technologies in our lives. Rather, we are encouraged to use them, forget them, and upgrade to a better model when a new one goes on sale. Like many people, I find myself becoming petulantly annoyed when my computer runs out of storage (my fault), or when the streetcar I need is rerouted for essential maintenance (par for the course). These moments reveal how readily we treat technological infrastructure as invisible until it fails us, and how rarely we acknowledge the labour, maintenance, and care required to keep it functioning.

The works in this exhibition focus on those moments of contact between humans and technology, which are often defined by demand. Viewers are not being asked to sympathize with machines, nor necessarily to anthropomorphize them. Rather, works ask us to acknowledge the labour they perform at our beck and call by rendering that labour visible through aesthetic experience and audience interaction.

The first work visitors will likely notice is *A Loving Woman*, an installation by Pranya, alongside the accompanying zine, *The Elastic Self*. Through an unflinching examination of the cyborg sex fantasy, Pranya's video narration grounds the exhibition firmly in the realm of the physical body as it investigates desire, projection, intimacy, and the ways in which technological bodies are shaped by human fantasies. The work's scale,

combined with a soundtrack composed of dialogue drawn from pornographic videos featuring female sex robots, extends its presence throughout the gallery, casting the surrounding works in its affective atmosphere.

In Ailin Dong's *Friendly Machine*, the wall-hung textile appears static at first, but when interacted with, it tenses and contracts, seeming almost to squirm away from the visitor's touch. The work's tongue-in-cheek title suggests a device fatigued by its obligation to remain "friendly" to users, as though it has finally reached a limit and chosen to reject contact. A similar dynamic emerges in Daniel Miller's *Flexion*, a webbed network of interactive, air-articulated artificial muscles that jolts and gasps when activated by visitors. Its response to our touch is sudden and almost tortured; its sinews hanging limp against the gallery wall until summoned to attention, the work becomes a parable for a worker disturbed from a state of rest (or exhaustion) to do our bidding.

These encounters are markedly different from our interactions with the touchscreen devices we carry in our pockets. Beyond occasional haptic notifications—which themselves primarily function as alerts to our own demands, we receive little indication of the labour these devices perform as they retrieve, process, and deliver information.

If the dominant cultural image of the cyborg is a human body enhanced through mechanical augmentation (from Alex Murphy in *RoboCop* to Major Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell*) the works of Angelina Almanza and Lee Henderson propose a kind of reverse cyborg:

machines that incorporate the conditions of human embodiment. Almanza's *Dyscalculator* is a calculator interface programmed with dyscalculia, a learning disability affecting mathematical processing, which causes the machine to visibly work through calculations that ultimately produce incorrect answers. Rather than presenting computation as seamless and infallible, the work exposes the processes typically hidden beneath technological efficiency, while also alluding to the history of the human computer and the idea that malfunctioning (lit. to perform badly) is a fundamentally human trait, as in to *err is human*.

Similarly, Henderson's *Phantom Limbs*, a series of "pet-sized" robotic sculptures accompanied by a poster series, mimic human biological functions. *PUL5* produces a pulse that viewers can feel when they place their hands on its soft surface, while *H3TR* maintains a consistent internal temperature resembling that of the human body. If we often imagine machinery as a means of enhancing or correcting the human body, what happens when our machines instead contain our perceived flaws or reproduce our own vulnerabilities? Through these works, the boundary between human and machine becomes less a division than a reflection, revealing the ways in which our technologies inherit, perform, and complicate our own conditions.

If we concede to Haraway that we are already cyborgs, and that machines are, as she writes, "an aspect of our embodiment,"⁶ then what becomes of a culture that trains

us to demand labour from the technologies we have built and networked into our bodies and minds?

In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry suggests that cultivating attention to beauty is not a frivolous pursuit but a political one, a practice that trains our capacity to perceive and value the world more fully.⁷ This may prompt us to ask a related question: if we spend our days uncritically demanding labour from our machines, are we not also training ourselves to uncritically demand labour from each other? From our communities? From the world itself?

Let us instead follow Scarry's call to attend to beauty. By paying attention to the beauty of our machinic outgrowths, we may begin to recognize the labour, care, and interdependence that sustain them. Attention, in this sense, becomes a form of care. Asking who cares for the cyborg is also asking who cares for us. And I hope the answer is that we do.

7 Scarry, Elaine. "On Beauty and Being Just". (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999)

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About InterAccess

Founded in 1983, InterAccess is a non-profit gallery, educational facility, production studio, festival, and registered charity dedicated to emerging practices in art and technology. Our programs support art forms that integrate technology, fostering and supporting the full cycle of art and artistic practice through education, production, and exhibition. InterAccess is regarded as a preeminent Canadian arts and technology centre.

About Vector Festival

Vector Festival is an experimental media arts festival dedicated to showcasing digital games and creative media practices. Presenting works across a dynamic range of exhibitions, screenings, performances, lectures, and workshops, Vector acts as a critical bridge between emergent digital platforms and new media art practice. The festival is proud to be a participatory and community-oriented initiative organized by InterAccess in Toronto, Ontario.



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