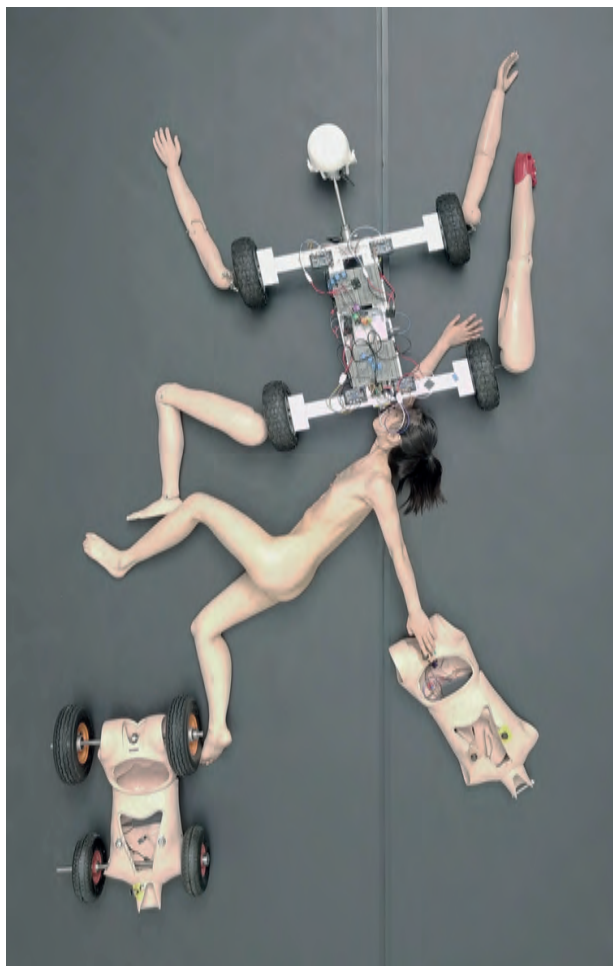


IN E.T.A. HOFFMANN'S NOVELLA *THE SANDMAN* (1816), the protagonist, Nathanael, is enraptured by the eyes of the automaton Olympia. We have long been entangled with machines – and are, today, increasingly so. The performances of South Korean artist and choreographer Geumhyung Jeong take their departure from this fact. Somewhere between puppet and fetish shows, her works – which feature sex, nudity and a peculiar balance between human and non-human agents – cast their own spell. We watch her use machines while machines use her.

# TOY STORY

GEUMHYUNG JEONG'S  
CYBORG EROTICS

BY FABIAN SCHÖNEICH



Geumhyung Jeong, *Homemade RC Toy*, 2019, performance documentation, Kunsthalle Basel. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Basel; photograph: Evelyn Bencicova

This summer, I saw Jeong's 'Homemade RC Toy' (2019), her exhibition and series of performances at Kunsthalle Basel. On a black dancefloor in the building's glass-roofed hall, various half-human, half-machine constructions lay scattered. Some had prosthetic arms, legs and wheels, recalling remote-controlled cars. These animatronic bodies were naked, revealing wires, batteries and flashing lights.

When the audience enters the space, we are told not to take any photos or videos and to sit on one of the installed platforms. Jeong is still transferring spare machine parts onto trolleys to make space for visitors. She walks across the dancefloor and inspects the machines. The room fills, doors are shut and two museum staff walk past the audience with 'No Photo' signs. Jeong then undresses in a corner of the room. Once she is naked, she walks onto the black dancefloor. Her body is a dancer's body – tense, aware of every movement, each muscle controlled.

She lies down on the floor, her head hovering over one of the torsos. In the object's groin, and where the nipples would be, Jeong has installed small joysticks. It's so quiet in the hall that mechanical clicking becomes audible as she begins to gently move the joysticks. She takes a joystick in the pubic area of one machine by her mouth, moving it briefly, at first, then longer and longer. With this she controls the first object, which now slowly drives towards her, turning slowly and eventually stopping behind her.

While this is happening, the artist repeatedly changes position, stretches or bends her leg, spreading both and lying down beside the torso or the machine. The humming of the electric motor breaks the silence. It is a slow but intense choreography between a human and humanoid machines, lasting about an hour. All five machines move toward the artist and, at the end, away from her again. At some point, human and man-machine become one. The artist gets dressed again, takes some tweezers and a small package from which she removes a disinfectant wipe. She uses it to carefully clean the joysticks in the 'private parts' of the human-machines. The visitors leave the room and Jeong arranges the spare parts back on the platforms.

Naturally, Jeong's work criticizes a disappearing boundary between humans and machines, the advent of AI and cyborgs with human features. But it goes beyond this. When I watch the hands and feet of the human-machines moving slowly on the floor, I end up confusing the extremities of the machine with the limbs of the artist. What makes the work so attractive and up-to-date is the intoxicating closeness between the two that Jeong creates. Her own nudity is not vulgar but logical, since any garment would introduce distance. An artist, choreographer and trained dancer, Jeong knows how to move and choreograph bodies, including those of this artificially assembled social fabric. The result is a dance between different actors who are completely reduced to movement and can thus transcend their own origins ●

*Translated by Nicholas Grindell*

**FABIAN SCHÖNEICH** is a curator, editor and writer based in Berlin, Germany.

**GEUMHYUNG JEONG** is an artist and choreographer based in Seoul, South Korea. In 2019, she had solo exhibitions at WIELS, Brussels, Belgium, Tanzhaus NRW, Düsseldorf, Germany and Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland, and participated in the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia.



