

# The (in)Animate Body

*Thorunn Gudmundsdottir*

*Royal Conservatoire Antwerp, 2023 | Timmy De Laet*

## Table of Contents

<b>The (in)Animate Body .....</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>The Root of the Eerie.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Effects of Robotics in Art.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The 3 layers: Essence, Deconstruction and Reassurance.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Absence as Source for the Uncanny .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>9</b>

# The (in)Animate Body

The (in)Animate Body comes from a deep interest in the psychological power of the uncanny, derived from an interest with its presence in robotics. In this essay, we will explore the concept of anthropomorphism in robotics, the connection it holds to the uncanny and seek for what awakens this feeling within the human mind. We will also explore how artists use these concepts as a source of inspiration to create thought-provoking works that challenge our perceptions of what it means to be human. By examining these concepts, we can gain a deeper understanding of how technology, psychology, and art feed of each other to create new forms of expression that push the boundaries of what we thought was possible. Robotics and Human Tendencies

Anthropomorphism is the tendency of people to attribute human characteristics, including human-like mental capacities (e.g., feelings) to non-living objects. We are constantly making everything human. In general, individuals tend to attribute human characteristics to non-human entities as a way to understand events and behaviors they encounter.

Anthropomorphization can enhance feelings of connectedness and empathy. People who frequently anthropomorphize may also exhibit increased moral reasoning and feel more guilt after causing harm to others.

Currently, anthropomorphism is evaluated as one of the most influential elements in the development of human-robot interaction. The main objective is to make it easier for machines that resemble humans to be incorporated into society. For robots to possess the capacity to engage in social interactions with humans, certain features are essential. These features frequently lead the robot to carrying humanlike appearance and behaviour which can aid in accomplishing this goal. The robot's appearance and behaviour are not the only factor of anthropomorphism. The observer's social background, gender, etc. must be taken into an account. Therefore, the user's perception of the robot itself is not easily controlled.

The anthropomorphizing of robots raises many concerns. One of them being the eerie feeling people oftentimes experience in the presence of robots, the feeling of uncanniness. When a robot is instructed to operate its movement in a manner that resembles a human movement, people begin to develop a certain level of emotional connection with it. To achieve this, the speed, acceleration, and deceleration of the robot's movement must closely imitate that of a human. This means that when an element in the dynamics of a movement is off cue, the robot's presence easily makes its observer anxious and uncertainty. Therefore, when a robot

appears human-like but moves in ways that is unusual it can provoke the feeling of uncanny. An example of this is given by Mori in his infamous essay regarding the Uncanny Valley:

*“a smile is a dynamic sequence of facial deformations, and the speed of the deformations is crucial.” When the speed is cut in half in an attempt to make the robot bring up a smile more slowly, instead of looking happy, its expression turns creepy.”<sup>1</sup>*

These unusual movement of robots project an otherness to them which often surprise people. Even though, during human interactions there is always a possibility of unexpected meanings that were not intended for. This means that the fact that a robot's friendly gesture may suddenly be perceived as aggressive by the human, might not be so abnormal. The abnormality lies within individuals experiencing a sense of unfamiliarity when an expected inanimate object exhibits characteristics of animate being that is, which can trigger subconscious and concealed impulses, causing feelings of uncanniness.

The use of anthropomorphism in robotics has raised questions about what it means to be human and what awakens a sense of uncanniness in humans. Many wonder why humans feel this particular sensation and where it originates from. Mori speculated “I have no doubt it is an integral part of our instinct for self-preservation. The sense of eeriness is probably a form of instinct that protects us from proximal, rather than distal, sources of danger.”<sup>2</sup>.

## The Root of the Eerie

Although uncanniness is often linked to robotics, yet this quality is experienced by humans in various situations in real life. People's sensitivity to this quality of feeling ranges vastly. The uncanny's nature is completely subjective, varies from person to person based upon their own individual experiences. Despite its subjectivity, there are certain elements that specify the reason for why this feeling arises within us.

The experience of uncanny sensations arises when there is intellectual uncertainty surrounding the animation of an object, whether an object is alive or not. The physical condition of a human, such as the manifestations of insanity, can provoke uncanniness in the observer due to doubts arising whether the perceived human is being controlled by mechanical processes hidden underneath its appearance. This experience arises as well when inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one. Wax-work figures, artificial dolls and automatons often awaken this impression. Intellectual uncertainty is crucial to produce this feeling.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mori, *The Uncanny Valley*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Mori, *The Uncanny Valley*, 5.

Uncanniness is not only linked to objects but also to a situation one finds themselves in. To give an example is when one finds themselves returning to the same situation, involuntarily, resulting in an uncanny atmosphere where one feels helpless. This presence of involuntary repetition passes on an eerie quality to something that would otherwise seem harmless and installs a sense of inevitability in one's mind that goes beyond mere chance. Freud connects this to our ability to propound the principle of a repetition-compulsion in the unconscious mind, driven by instinctual behaviour that is likely intrinsic to human instincts. It is "a principle powerful enough to overrule the pleasure-principle".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we often find what reminds us of the repetition compulsion uncanny.

We all know that all humans are mortal, yet we still struggle to accept this fact and our unconscious mind does not like to think about our own mortality. Therefore, our fear of death resurfaces easily and contributes to the uncanny effect surrounding topics of death. Many people feel the strongest sense of uncanniness when they think about death, dead bodies, and the return of the dead, including spirits and ghosts like in a haunted house. The feeling of uncanniness can be easily created when the line between imagination and reality is blurred. For instance, when something that we previously thought was only in our imagination suddenly appears in reality.

In Sigmund Freud's essay *The Uncanny*, the process of repression is believed to contribute to uncanniness. Defining uncanny, characterized as something that should have remained hidden but has been revealed, nonetheless. That is, the uncanny is not a novelty or an unfamiliar concept but something that is distinguishable and deeply ingrained in the mind that has become distant due to process of repression. Freud states that throughout history the meaning of the word uncanny in German, *heimisch*, becomes later *unheimisch*, that is familiar/homelike. Therefore, one can interpret the prefix "un" itself as a sign of repression.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, the feeling of uncanniness arises from intellectual uncertainty surrounding an object or situation, causing doubt about its animation and reality. The concept of repression, mortality, and involuntary repetition are also sources of uncanny sensations. The experience of uncanniness is complex, multifaceted and it can have a powerful impact on our perceptions and emotions.

---

<sup>3</sup> Freud, *The "Uncanny"*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, *The "Uncanny"*, 15.

## The Effects of Robotics in Art

Jordon Wolfson is an American contemporary artist known for his thought-provoking and innovative works. His works are within a wide range of media, comprising sculptures, paintings, technology, video, and installations<sup>5</sup>. The psychological power of the uncanny is ever present in his works as they often feature lifelike figures and animatronic sculptures that blur the line between the real and the artificial. He is known for his incorporation of cutting-edge technologies, such as motion capture and facial recognition software, to create riveting and interactive artworks that engage the viewer in unexpected innovative ways. Two of his art installations, *Female Figure* and *Coloured Sculpture*, have intrigued me deeply to say the least due to the psychological effect of uncanniness they bring and the sympathy I experience myself holding for the figures.

“The Female Figure” is a provocative and controversial artwork created by Wolfson in 2014 that revolves around the contemporary experience of being objectified through the act of being looked at and the violence of itself. It consists of a life-sized animatronic sculpture of a young woman dressed in a negligee and bearing scuffs and dirt marks, that embodies anthropomorphism in both appearance and movement. The figure performs dance movements with an elegant quality that closely resembles those made by a human. The movements and articulations are fluid, and the dexterity of the hands is sublime. The figure's blond hair accentuates its resemblance to a human with its realistic movement as well. Using motion capture and facial recognition technology, the eyes are programmed to detect spectators through the mirror in front of it, make eye contact with them, and maintain it. Meanwhile, it dances and looks a spectator in the eye through a green monstrous face mask, a speaking dialogue is projected that seems to be spoken by the machine itself. Miro's comment on a dynamic sequence of human movement is executed almost perfectly here, as the anthropomorphic lips move as a humans should.

The combination of the figure's unpredictable and unsettling movements and confrontational behaviour, challenges its spectator expectations. One constantly questions the robot's animation, even though you see it being held up by a metal pole that goes from the middle of the mirror straight into the figure's rib cage. Furthermore, despite the visibility of a cogwheel located in its shoulder, one doubts it being an inanimate object due to its organic motion. The psychological effects of uncanniness one feels while experiencing his work is very clear. This

---

<sup>5</sup> Jordan Wolfson - Biography | David Zwirner.

power Jordon Wolfson manages to evoke the eerie feeling that is uncanny in a distinctive manner.

## The 3 layers: Essence, Deconstruction and Reassurance

The (in)Animate Body attempts to provoke the eerie psychological state, that is the uncanny, within its spectator. So far, it has been explained what has sparked the idea of this concept. The question remains: How can one provoke the feeling of uncanniness in spectators with an animate body in front of them? For an embodied presentation, a short presentation was created consisting of three layers to attempt provoking this. The three layers put on a human body that, together, are meant to stir up the spectator's view.

The concept of "essence" as the first layer of this body concept is a fundamental aspect of its performance. It is based on the premise that the essence of a performance is rooted in the presence of a singular human body on a platform, as the performer. This idea suggests that the presence of an animate body creates a unique connection between the performer and the audience, directing the spectators to project sympathy and empathy towards it.

The deconstruction of the first layer is crucial in order to make the spectators question the essence or animation of the performer. This second layer, which attempts to deconstruct the human being of the performer, consists of 'unconscious movements' - movements executed by the performer themselves that appear as if they are not conscious of executing them. The spectators see these movements, and they become part of their reality, but it becomes questionable whether they are part of the performer's reality and if they are being controlled by a mechanical process. As robots have no self-reflexion this layer can be considered as a reference to it. These movements do not get in the way of the performer's essence but can affect it, although it is not noticed by themselves.

Together, the first two layers create an intellectual uncertainty as the layers' essences clash with one another. To further encourage this unease and provoke an eerie feeling within the spectator, another layer is needed. One that reassures the spectators of the performer's essence and reminds them that they are merely a human. This is done with spoken text in a language that is unknown to the spectator. In the first presentation of the (in)Animate Body the language used was Icelandic, as nobody present in the room had any capacity to understand it. This act of speaking is used to remind the spectators of the fact that the performer is an alive human being. In this specific try-out, Icelandic was used also to not draw too much attention to the monologue's content. But one might argue that the spoken words could work as a medium

to create a fourth layer. A layer consisting of uncanny storytelling, the written content and how it is delivered, in means to further enhance the “deconstruction’s” clash with the other layers to create this uncanny effect.

## Absence as Source for the Uncanny

The idea of the uncanny and the concept of the "absent body" in dance history are connected through their shared focus on challenging traditional ideas of what is considered normal or socially acceptable in dance. The "absent body" refers to the idea that in certain types of dances, the physical body of the dancer is not always present, but is instead represented through movement, music, or other forms of expression. This absence can create a sense of unease or disorientation in the viewer, as they try to reconcile the movements they see with the absence of a physical body.

Similarly, the uncanny in dance can also create a sense of disorientation or discomfort in the viewer, as unexpected movements or manipulations of the body blur the line between what is natural and what is not. By challenging traditional ideas of what is considered beautiful or acceptable in dance, both the "absent body" and the uncanny push audiences out of their comfort zones and force them to confront their assumptions about what dance should be. Ultimately, both concepts have been used throughout dance history to expand the possibilities of what dance can be and to create new and innovative forms of artistic expression.

In the concept of “the absent body” new ideas awaken regarding certain aspects of dance. One of it being an insistence on the dancer’s essence. The concept of “essence” emphasizes the physicality of the performer, which can be seen in the movement, gestures, and facial expressions of the performer - all contributing to the emotional impact of the performance. Through the use of the body as a tool for expression, the performer can convey complex emotions and ideas that resonate with the audience on a deep level. Another idea being the reduction of unessential props and scenic elements which furthermore insists attention on the dancer’s presence.

The work Jérôme Bel by Jérôme Bel (1995) belongs to this body concept. One of its distinctive factors was the play between presence and absence. That is playing with making the naked body visible and invisible by folding of skin. This play of questioning a body’s presence sources an inspiration for the “(in)Animate Body”. The questioning of the presence of the performer’s body, its essence, with the ‘unconscious movements’ it performs. Also belonging to the category of the “absent body”, is the piece Multiverse by Louis Vanhaverbeke (2016) where

objects are used as bodies - arguing that objects perform, thus are equal to performers. Opposite to this, the “(in)Animate Body” tries to go from a body to an object, proposing the essence of the performers body as an animate being to be blurred.

One can interpret that the task of this body concept and this paper is to practise conceptualizing an artistic idea. In reality, this alone supports the “absent body’s” idea that an ‘idea is more important than its execution’. The no dance-dance that this brings out, consequently argues stillness being equal to movement. The presence of this argument is seen within the embodied presentation of the “(in)Animate Body” as the performer’s use of stillness and slow movement is an artistic strategy to blur the line between the 3 layers.

## Conclusion

The essay discusses the concept of anthropomorphism and the challenges that it awakens in development of human-robot interactions. When robots appear too human-like, the feeling of uncanniness is often experienced by people in their presence. The feeling of uncanniness is not only limited to robots and is a subjective experience that varies from person to person due to their personal background. Uncanniness arises from intellectual uncertainty surrounding an object or situation, causing doubt about its animation and reality. Repression, mortality, and involuntary repetition are also sources of uncanny sensations. The concept of uncanniness is complex, multifaceted, and can have a powerful impact on our perceptions and emotions. Jordan Wolfson has accomplished to bring out the psychological power of the uncanny with cutting-edge technologies and use it to enhance the affect his concepts.

In conclusion, the (in)Animate Body is a performance concept that aims to provoke the eerie feeling of uncanniness in its spectators by deconstructing the essence of a human body on stage. The concept consists of three layers that together aim to challenge the spectator's perception of what is animate and inanimate, blurring the line between human and machine. The (in)Animate Body raises questions about the nature of human presence in the age of technology. believe that the psychological effect of the uncanny can be a powerful tool in the art scene.

## Bibliography

The “Uncanny” (1919). First published in *Imago*, Bd. V., 1919; reprinted in *Sammlung, Fünfte Folge*. [Translated by Alix Strachey.]

<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>

Mori, M. (1970). The uncanny valley. *Energy*, 7, 33-35.

<https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/MoriTheUncannyValley1970.pdf>

Coeckelbergh, M. Three Responses to Anthropomorphism in Social Robotics: Towards a Critical, Relational, and Hermeneutic Approach. *Int J of Soc Robotics* **14**, 2049–2061 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-021-00770-0>

David Zwirner. “Jordan Wolfson - Biography | David Zwirner,” n.d.

<https://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/jordan-wolfson/biography>