

**Q+A: Sherry Turkle**

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by Akiko Busch



*In Evocative Objects: Things We Think With (MIT Press, 2007),*

writers meditate on the emotional power of such ordinary products as rolling pins and cellos, laptops and glucometers. The book's editor, Sherry Turkle, brings special insight into the tender relationship between mind and inanimate matter. A psychologist who directs the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, Turkle specializes in the connections between people and artifacts.

*Her next edited collection, Falling for*

*Science, is due out from MIT Press in June. I.D. spoke with her about one of contemporary culture's biggest crushes: the android.*

**Much of the work being done in artificial intelligence and robotics has to do with our ability to connect with inanimate objects. Is it really possible to fall in love with a thing?**

The new generation of "sociable" or "relational" robots has been built to engage us, creature to creature. They can recognize faces, learn the names of individuals, make eye contact, trace our movements, all things that push our simple Darwinian buttons. When an entity does these things, we are toast; we believe there is a sentient creature before us.

**Whether it's an iPod or home diagnostic medical equipment, we often seem to generate—require, even—a sense of need and dependency.**

One might say that when faced with a knowing, 'caring other, human beings are incredibly cheap dates. Classically, we projected a sense of "otherness" onto our inanimate computers, provoked by their interactivity and reactivity. With these sociable robots, there is a new dynamic: We no longer simply project our desires onto them; we now want things in return. We nurture what we love, but we also love what we nurture. Our involvement with relational artifacts intensifies our connection to them. We are vulnerable to objects that ask for our attention and care. And so we have to be vigilant.

### **Have we gone too far in our devotion?**

I call it technological promiscuity. We are prone to attaching to technologies even if there is no authenticity in the forthcoming "relationship." From there, it is a small step to wanting the object to care for you in return. So we have to exercise our critical faculties. We have to ask about our human purposes. What do we want to attach to? What is worthy of our loving attention? Robots may be technological marvels, but they do not have a human life cycle, they don't have mothers, they don't feel pain, they don't know about loss, illness, the fear of death. Human beings connect with each other in deep ways because of commonalities in our experience.

### **How should designers approach our emotional involvement with inanimate objects?**

The first thing designers as well as consumers should think about is the human purposes being served by the design. It is more crucial now than ever before to consider how to respect, not exploit, our human vulnerabilities—particularly the emotional programming of our animal past and present.

### **You write that "evocative objects bring philosophy down to earth." In what way does this apply to robotics?**

I believe that we are in the very early days of sorting through our feelings about robotics in its relationship to the human spirit. People are excited that we can create a plausible-looking android, but we need to work through the gee-whiz phase. It takes a while. Some roboticists refer to an "I-Thou" relationship with robots in the sense that the philosopher Martin Buber talked about the most profound connection that can arise between people. But this requires compassion. It is not something a clever engineer can create. Androids offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. The fact that people are even considering this as a relationship shows us to be at a point of exhaustion. What is tiring us so in our efforts to have intimate relationships with people? Why are we so ready to move away from human engagement and replace it with the mirage of connecting with artificial intelligences? A sociable robot is an evocative object for thinking through these kinds of questions.

Akiko Busch's most recent book, *Nine Ways to Cross a River*, was published in July by Bloomsbury/USA.

Portrait by Mark Mahaney