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Calendar



You, robot

JOHANNA TOROKOLA



AARON EDSINGER

"PIA LINDMAN: EMBODIMENTS"

An opening featuring a live performance by Pia Lindman will be held April 18 from 5:30-7 p.m. The show runs Mon-Fri 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m., through June 30. MIT Museum, Compton Gallery, Room 10-150, 77 Mass. Ave., Cambridge. 617-253-4415. www.cavs.mit.edu

Artist Pia Lindman observes robotics experts at MIT to help us understand the creation of identity

BY SARAH TOMLINSON | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Think scientist, and you probably picture eggheads who insulate themselves from the world's mess with pocket protectors and mathematical formulas, and who have no room for emotion or humor. Sounds like a good time, right?

For Finnish-born performance and video artist Pia Lindman, whose work explores human reactions and interactions, these supposedly unemotional thinkers offer new ways to get inside the hows and whys of what we feel.

Thanks to a 2005-2006 fellowship from Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, Lindman is currently observing and interacting with scientists and their robotic creations at MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. She has become particularly intrigued with researcher Aaron Edsinger and his robot, Domo, which he is programming to move and react much like a human does. Her observations of the relationship Edsinger has with his creation, rendered as drawings

and a live performance, form the core of "The MIT Project," which is a part of the larger show, "Pia Lindman: Embodiments," on view at MIT through June 30.

In addition to giving viewers a sneak peak of the work Lindman is doing while in residence at MIT, the overall exhibition is a retrospective of sorts of Lindman's work, and includes two of her earlier pieces. Lindman created the first, "The New York Times Project" (2003), after spending a year examining the newspaper's photos of people expressing grief in very different ways, from wailing to throwing rocks. She then isolated these gestures into simple line drawings, which are gathered together in several books, called "Black Square," and in live performances collected on a video called "Lakonikon." The other piece of the "Embodiments" show, "Corporation: Reenactments and Improvisations in Corporate Communities" (2004), involved Lindman observing employees at a corporation based in Midtown Manhattan. During her time there, she tried to pick out how people consciously and unconsciously defined

Artist Pia Lindman in a recent performance of "The MIT Project." Much of the work is based on Lindman's observation of MIT scientist Aaron Edsinger's interaction with his robot, Domo (below).

themselves through the gestures they made at work. Again, Lindman represented her observations through drawings and in a videotape of a studio performance, both of which are included in "Embodiments."

Lindman says the questions she asks in her robot project, as in all of her work, can be expressed simply, but that they are a profound part of our existence. "How do we think about ourselves as humans?" she says by phone from her New York home. "And what does it mean to have emotions? Right now, having done The New York Times piece, I've kind of come to this conclusion that emotion is culturally trained. But it really is the only thing we have — it is the one thing that gives us our identity."

The creation of robots, especially machines that we want to look and act in a manner that suggests human beings, offers new and potentially fertile territory for Lindman to explore issues of identity and the origin of emotion. "Now that we've embarked on this effort, or adventure, to create lifelike beings, we are again pushing that boundary [of the elements that create identity]," she says. "And so, the question is, what do we do to our own identities" if scientists successfully devise a machine that looks and acts human?

It may all sound like the stuff of science fiction, but Lindman has found that people can be deeply moved when faced with the portraits of themselves and their feelings that she offers them. And while her creative questioning is rendered in stark drawings and stylized performances — work that may seem as highly controlled and coolly clinical as the scientists she is currently observing — viewers tend to bring their own, often strong, feelings to the work, even if Lindman would prefer that their reactions be more rational than emotional. "I realized that, when people were looking at [The New York Times piece], they started to invest their own emotions into the drawings," she says. "They started to make interpretations. They started to be emotionally involved. And that was actually the opposite of what I had endeavored."

It is Lindman's ability to bridge the gap between the often abstract nature of art and science, and the visceral, emotional world of human life, that makes her such an intriguing observer of robots and their creators, according to Larissa Harris, executive director of MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies. "She can kind of talk to anybody and bring them into her way of understanding the world," says Harris. "But also, she's a performer, and she kind of learns things with her body. The way she understands the way that emotion is located in the body is a really profound thing."