

# Discover

## ART



William Tremblay's valve-powered Bionic Log has a five-foot limb span.

### ArtBots: The Robot Talent Show

September 17–19, 2004

Mink Building, Harlem, New York City

[artbots.org/2004](http://artbots.org/2004)

Artists are famous for being unpredictable and temperamental. Machines, typically, are not. But the robots on display at the third annual ArtBots Talent Show in New York City last September were fully endowed with an artistic sensibility. As I entered a street-level loft in Harlem, a trio of enormous, loosely conjoined white balloons, called Thoughts Go by Air, began a slow descent toward my head. I glanced about frantically to see who was piloting them before remembering that, of course, no one was. Like all of

the contraptions featured at the show, the dreamy balloon gangs are a special breed of robots: autonomous, idiosyncratic, and cantankerous.

Cosponsored by Columbia University's Computer Music Center and Digital Media Center, ArtBots is a showcase for art-making robots and robot-making artists. Among the former were five fist-size, self-propelled vehicles drawing like Jackson Pollock with colored markers on paper. Sisyphus, a software-guided ball bearing, plowed through a tray of shallow sand, inscribing intricate patterns. A suite of robotic instruments built by LEMUR (League of Electronic Musical Urban Robots) supplied jarring music.

The robot-making artists produced whimsical studies such as the "electronic life-forms": delicate, insectlike assemblages of multicolored wire and solar cells that chirped and squirmed in specimen jars. The many children at the show delighted in interactive exhibits such as the Self-Preservation Machine, a clownish space capsule with green boxing gloves and white cowboy boots that delivered punches and kicks when levers were pulled. The adults were a bit more critical. "It keeps on, like, *breaking*," remarked a bystander of LEMUR. A loud popping sound erupted from the Bionic Log, and its spastic limbs stopped waving. Meanwhile, the inventor of the Recycle Robot was down on his back, poking its belly with a screwdriver.

Perhaps the only form of self-expression available to a robot is, like, *breaking*. Clearly the ArtBots were giving their creators a dose of their own medicine. I noticed that Sisyphus was well-behaved to the end: It never threatened to tip the tray or trace epithets in the sand. Could that be why it won both the artists' choice and the audience choice awards? In robotics, as in art, true autonomy is a scary thing. —Karen Wright