



ART ON DEMAND

AOD 4.4

curated by
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WHEN I CROSS-STITCH, I FEEL LIKE A MACHINE

In our current hyper-connected world, many of us have an increasingly ambivalent (or even fraught) relationship with technology. We may long for simpler times, resenting the degree to which we depend on our handheld devices and their ability to draw us irresistibly into inner worlds of imagination and communication. But when a device malfunctions we rail against being thrown back into the limitations of our physical world. Technology infiltrates our lives and bodies in increasing degrees, and as wearable tech morphs into digital implants and bodily augmentation, the boundary between the human and machine worlds promises to become increasingly blurred.

For *Art on Demand 4.4*, emerging artist Mallory Donen leans into the nuances of the human/machine relationship with her project *When I Cross-Stitch, I Feel Like a Machine*. Inspired in part by Alan Turing's (1912-1954) proposal that "the only way by which one [can] be sure that a machine thinks is to *be* the machine and to feel oneself thinking,"¹ Donen employs repetitive artistic processes such as embroidery, knitting, and digital image-making in an attempt to explore and understand what she has in common with machines. In the end, Donen's work suggests that it is possible for artists and machines to collaborate on the artistic process and even share authorship of the results.

The centerpiece of this project is *The Machine: Knitting Ouroboros* (2003 – ongoing), comprised of both a video and a companion knitted object that Donen first began when she was just 13 years old. Knitting is based on a specific set of instructions that are repeated over and over again, much like how computers operate with a set of specific and repetitious commands. As

a teenager, Donen reveled in the control she felt in understanding the instructions, the certainty of what came next, and the obsession with its continuity. She has continued to add to *Ouroboros* over the years, so that today it appears as a giant knitted sphere named after the mythic serpent that eats its own tail in an infinite cycle. It has become Donen's symbolic reference to the infinite—a concept she has come to appreciate as common to humans and machines.

In the course of knitting *Ouroboros* over many years, Donen has discovered that the tedious rhythm lends itself to the experience of the endless subconscious mind: a "human" sense of the infinite. Donen has no end goal in continually creating the flexible sphere, and simultaneously no intention to stop adding to it. She asserts her humanness by "feeling like a machine" in her desire to continue with the infinite repetition.

The process of finger knitting has also helped Donen identify the *physical* similarities between humans and machines. The video component of *The Machine: Knitting Ouroboros* is shot in real-time. At times Donen's hands appear robotic, mechanical, and unnaturally fast, while at other moments the



movement is rendered smooth and rhythmic. These actions—alternately harmonious and dissonant—suggest the spectrum of qualities that both humans and machines are capable of expressing.

Donen continues to explore these themes in her artist book *Think Like a Human, Act Like a Machine: Programming an Artist* (2017). A series of “Instruction Tables” sets out clear, programmable instructions that guide the artist’s creative acts in an experiment in eliminating spontaneity. However, when Donen attempted to strictly follow the instructions, she quickly realized that each step in the instructions could be completed in a variety of ways. Rather than restricting her activity, she was able to create very different final products, revealing the potential for creative agency even within highly structured limits.

Also on display is a series of works from Donen’s *Glitch Series 01* (2016), which question whether machines also have the potential for spontaneous acts of creation. The series is based on Donen’s

experience of trying to open a familiar digital image on her computer only to discover that her software had “created” an entirely new image by collaging several digital files together. Donen treated this “glitch” as an assertion from her machine, and accepted the invitation to collaborate on a new work. Donen uploaded the digital images that originated in a “glitch” into an online application to convert them into cross-stitch pattern instructions. She then followed the instructions, reproducing the digital images as hand-crafted embroideries. The resulting diptychs pair a printed digital image with its cross-stitched translation: the embodiment of Donen’s human/machine collaboration.

Science historian George B. Dyson (1953–) has referred to human/machine collaborations as a form of symbiosis, in which our differences are what make the symbiotic relationship work.² *When I Cross-Stitch, I Feel Like a Machine* invites this comparison, encouraging us to reconsider our evolving and increasingly intimate relationship with technology.

¹ “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” *Mind*, vol. 59, no. 236 (October 1950): 446.

² *Darwin Among the Machines: The Evolution of Global Intelligence* (New York: Basic Books, 1997),

ARTIST

MALLORY DONEN

Mallory Donen is a multidisciplinary artist based in Vancouver. She specializes in painting, photography, digital art and embroidery. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of the Fraser Valley, and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Manitoba. Donen’s work is abstract and intuitive; her process is influenced by patterns found in nature and her everyday environment.

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exhibition runs
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Images: Mallory Donen, *Glitch Series 01*, 2016, detail and installation view,
inkjet print and embroidery. Images courtesy of the artist.