

Kal Spelletich

SFGATE

It takes brains to make robots perform as art

By Charles Desmarais
April 6, 2017

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By appointment only

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Artist Kal Spelletich (left) and Mitch Altman prepare Spelletich's "Split Brain Robotics" installation for weekend presentations at The Lab in San Francisco, Calif. on Tuesday, April 4, 2017.

If robots kiss, is it a mechanical feat or a sentimental moment? What if their behavior is controlled by the brainwaves of two human beings?

San Francisco artist Kal Spelletich has built a career by hijacking ideas from engineering and science, then giving them the feel of flesh and blood. His show at Catharine Clark Gallery in 2015

was heavy with the pathos of the wired contemporary life, with jerky robotic figures acting the parts of personal friends at the push of a button.

For three performances this weekend at the experimental art space the Lab, identical 16-foot robots will move and interact, controlled by electrical impulses from the brains of two attendees. From the look of a preview video, the robots are more like giant disembodied arms with lethal claws than humanoids. Members of the audience will be fitted with electroencephalography, or EEG, monitoring helmets.

Most of the audience will not participate directly — only a few participants can be accommodated with the helmets. “We don’t know how many,” Spelletich said in a phone interview. “This is all new for us. Eight or 10?”

While Spelletich made the robots, the project is a collaboration with two others, Mitch Altman, a co-founder of Noisebridge hacker space, and Masahiro Kahata, who is described as a “psychotronics” specialist. An announcement calls the project “an experiment in improving people’s lives by exemplifying the poetry of the mind.”

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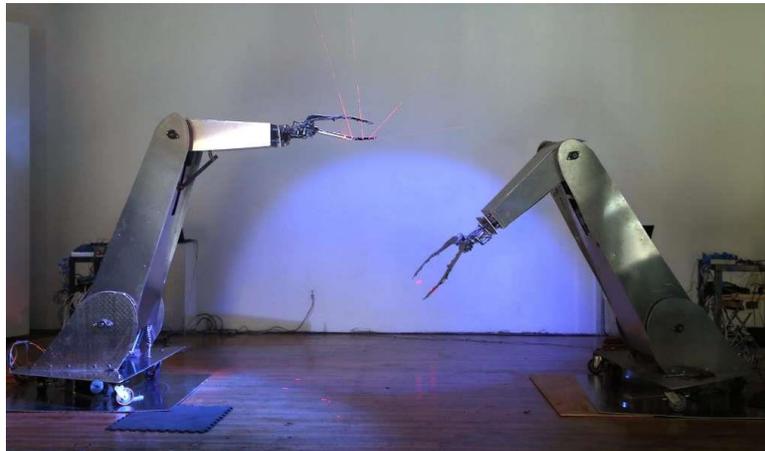
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Artist Kal Spelletich makes adjustments to his "Split Brain Robotics" installation for weekend presentations at The Lab in San Francisco, Calif. on Tuesday, April 4, 2017.

As loopy as it all sounds, the artists pose some challenging questions. "Can we create empathy for a robot?" a statement asks. But, of course, the issue lies much deeper, at the root of human emotion itself.

