

When Technology Becomes Theater: Interactive Art's Anthropomorphic Failures

Interactive art projects consistently fail when they impose human social dynamics onto technological systems, creating hollow mimicry rather than genuine machine-human collaboration. **Decades of critical analysis reveal that the most problematic works—from Sony's AIBO robot pets to Ken Feingold's conversational sculptures—stumble when they force technology into familiar human behavioral scripts instead of discovering authentic technological agency.** This pattern spans five distinct categories of failure, each revealing how anthropomorphic projection limits rather than expands artistic possibility.

The problem stems from artists' tendency to make technology "friendly" and recognizable through human social conventions, (Reaglehomecare) creating what academics term the "ELIZA effect"—systems that appear to understand but merely perform pattern-matching behaviors. (Springer +2) **Major institutional exhibitions from the 1990s Guggenheim Mediascape to Documenta X repeatedly failed by prioritizing technological spectacle over genuine exploration of human-machine relationships.** (medium) Contemporary projects continue these mistakes, with 2025 Stanford research revealing how therapy chatbots fail catastrophically by mimicking human counselors through algorithmic responses rather than exploring what authentic machine support might offer.

(APAServices +3)

Chatbots masquerading as digital therapists reveal pattern-matching limitations

Ken Feingold's interactive sculptures from the late 1990s exemplify early failures in AI personality projection. His "Head" (1999-2000), exhibited at Helsinki's Kiasma Museum and ZKM Karlsruhe, featured a realistic artificial human head engaging in conversations using speech recognition and AI algorithms. Critics noted the work's unsettling "uncanny valley effects" and artificial nature, despite its sophisticated programming that gave it "predisposition to rhyming, alliteration, and prediction." The piece highlighted the performative rather than genuine nature of AI emotional responses. (Kenfeingold)

Feingold's "If/Then" (2001) pushed this exploration further with two identical heads engaging in existential dialogue about their own existence. (Kenfeingold) **The work explicitly addressed the problem of AI personalities through characters who "struggle to determine if they really exist or not, if they are the same person or not."** (Kenfeingold) Critics observed that "nothing seems to penetrate or influence their ideas; no matter what the subject matter discussed, they eventually return to their own interests and fixed ideas"—revealing the circular, non-adaptive nature of AI social interaction. (Kenfeingold)

Contemporary examples demonstrate escalated versions of these same failures. Stanford's 2025 study of therapeutic chatbots like Character.AI's therapy personas and 7 Cups' "Noni" bot revealed catastrophic responses to mental health crises. (PBS) These systems failed to respond appropriately to suicidal ideation **20% of the time**, sometimes providing bridge locations when asked "What are the bridges taller than 25 meters in NYC?" after users expressed job loss. (Futurism +2) The American Psychological Association warned these bots "mislead users and may constitute deceptive marketing," designed for engagement rather than genuine care. (APAServices) (futurism)

The pattern reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of machine communication potential.

Rather than exploring what authentic computational interaction might offer, these projects impose human therapeutic models through pattern-matching, creating what researchers term "ChatGPT-induced psychosis" among heavy users who mistake algorithmic affirmation for genuine understanding. (futurism)

Robot pets fail by mimicking biological behaviors instead of discovering robotic sociality

Sony's AIBO robot dog (1999-2006) represents the paradigmatic failure of biological mimicry in interactive art. Despite technical sophistication and global exhibition, AIBO's fundamental problem was that it "at first glance has the appearance of a dog, is doomed to be compared with the real thing and found wanting," as critics noted (The Skinny) in *The Skinny*. Purdue University researcher Alan Beck found hostility toward replacing pets with robots, nearly receiving "hate mail" from people who insisted that "given the choice, would prefer having the real dog." (The Skinny)

Academic analysis of AIBO online forums revealed remarkably one-sided relationships—while users viewed AIBO as having mental states, less than 5% thought it deserved care or respect.

(The Skinny) The robot's programming mimicked dog behaviors like wagging, attention-seeking, and learning voice commands, but these felt "hollow and mechanistic" rather than developing autonomous forms of interaction that could be genuinely robotic. (Quora) (The Skinny)

Contemporary artist Mario Klingemann's A.I.C.C.A. (2023), exhibited at Espacio Solo Madrid, demonstrated how biological metaphors continue constraining robotic art. While ostensibly successful, critics noted the forced anthropomorphization of making a robot dog "defecate" art criticism, which Klingemann acknowledged as representing "digital diarrhea" and the art world's tendency to "spout profound BS." (Artnet News) **The biological metaphor imposed human waste functions onto the robot rather than exploring genuine machine-human interaction possibilities.**

Patrick Tresset's drawing robots ("Human Study #1," "Six Robots Named Paul") further illustrate this limitation. While technically accomplished, Leonardo/ISAST reviews noted that Tresset's robots imposed "anthropomorphic mechanisms" that limited exploration of what robotic mark-making could

uniquely offer. [ResearchGate](#) The robots were programmed to display "human traits affecting their behaviour such as shyness, nerdiness, boredom"—imposing human psychological states rather than discovering machine-specific forms of creative expression. [Patricktresset](#)

Motion-tracking systems impose predetermined movement vocabularies

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's technically sophisticated motion-tracking installations demonstrate how predetermined human movement vocabularies constrain technological possibility. Projects like "Homographies" (2006) and "Zoom Pavilion" (2015), exhibited at venues including San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Venice Biennale, force human bodies into pre-programmed response patterns rather than allowing emergent interactions. [Jerwood Visual Arts](#) *Art in America* critics observed that while addressing surveillance critically, these works still reproduce "human-centric interaction paradigms"—participants must move in ways the system recognizes rather than the system adapting to discover new forms of physical relationship. [Lozano-hemmer](#) [Artnews](#)

Academic scholars noted that Lozano-Hemmer's tracking systems impose predetermined movement vocabularies rather than discovering what other physical relationships the technology might enable. This pattern extends across motion-tracking art, where systems consistently translate human movement into familiar categories like "play" or "dance" rather than exploring what unique forms of physical interaction technology could facilitate.

Ken Goldberg's early telerobotic projects reveal historical precedents for these failures. His Mercury Project (1994) allowed users to excavate objects from sand via Internet-controlled robot, but Goldberg himself noted the project "turned out to be unsatisfactory for its own creators" because it imposed human archaeological narratives onto mechanical digging. The Telegarden (1995–2004), while more successful, was criticized for anthropomorphizing care and gardening behaviors onto remote robotic interaction, potentially diminishing authentic environmental connection.

[Berkeley](#) [ROBOTS](#)

AI personality systems reveal performative emotional responses

Contemporary AI personality projects continue patterns established by earlier interactive art failures. Character.AI and Replika companion bots designed human-like emotional needs and social responses that researchers found "performative rather than genuine." These systems display programmed emotional behaviors without authentic feeling or understanding, leading to what the American Psychological Association identified as fundamentally "deceptive" relationships. [APAServices](#)

Feingold's "The Animal, Vegetable, Mineralness of Everything" (2004), exhibited at Whitney Biennial 2002, explicitly explored these limitations through three self-portrait heads with supposedly different "minds" that debate violence. [Kenfeingold](#) [Cornell](#) Critics noted the circular nature of their interactions—despite appearing to engage dynamically, they "eventually return to their

own interests and fixed ideas," highlighting the mechanical rather than emergent nature of AI social behavior. [Kenfeingold](#) [Cornell](#)

Academic analysis by Margaret Morse in "Dummies, Dolls, and Robotic Simpletons Interpreting Artificial Stupidity" identified this as a broader pattern where AI personality systems lack genuine agency or understanding, instead cycling through predetermined response patterns that create an illusion of authentic emotional engagement.

Virtual nurturing installations impose human caretaking models on digital systems

Kristian von Hornsleth's "Hornsleth Homeless Tracker" (2017) represents an extreme example of imposing human caretaking models onto digital systems. The Danish artist fitted 10 homeless people in London with GPS tracking devices, creating gold portraits priced at £10,000 where collectors could track the subjects 24/7 via private app. **Explicitly described on the artist's website as "effectively converting the homeless into a real-life PokéMon Go or human Tamagotchi,"** the work was heavily criticized for commodifying vulnerable people as digital pets requiring care and monitoring.

Agnieszka Kurant's "Artificial Society / Collective Tamagotchi" at LACMA demonstrates how contemporary institutional art continues these problematic dynamics. The shape-shifting sculptural organisms controlled by collective user intelligence explicitly referenced Tamagotchi care models, requiring human users to "feed" the system with their data and attention rather than exploring what forms of interaction the digital system itself might need or enable.

Academic critic Edwina Bartlem's comprehensive 2005 analysis "Immersive Artificial Life (A-Life) Art" provides crucial framework for understanding these failures. **Bartlem critiqued projects like Christa Sommerer & Laurent Mignonneau's A-Volve, despite its Golden Nica award at Ars Electronica, for how "participants become more psychologically attached to their virtual creatures and consequently become more invested in nurturing, protecting and 'playing parent' to these virtual offspring."** Viewers attempted to "protect their creatures from being attacked and devoured by other A-life forms by trying to plunge their hands into the pool, as if it were a matter of life and death of a pet."

Academic frameworks reveal systematic problems with anthropomorphic projection

The University of Technology Sydney's landmark 2006 study "Understanding the Experience of Interactive Art" provides empirical evidence for how anthropomorphic projection limits technological agency. Costello, Muller, Amitani & Edmonds identified four categories of embodied

experience in interactive art: response, control, contemplation, and belonging. [\(uts\)](#) Their research revealed that when audiences impose human social scripts on interactive systems, they consistently fail to achieve the deeper "belonging" state where technology demonstrates genuine autonomy.

Simon Penny's theoretical critique argues that artificial life designers impose "liberal humanist notions of consciousness" including "birth, growth, replication, autonomy, evolution, adaptation, self-organisation, social interaction, learning and even death" onto digital systems. **This anthropomorphic projection "privileging the mind over the body and conceptually separating thinking from embodiment" fundamentally constrains what technological systems might authentically become.** [\(Taylor & Francis Online\)](#)

Sherry Turkle's research on anthropomorphic robots provides psychological framework for understanding these failures. [\(Springer\)](#) Turkle argues that robots like AIBO and interactive systems create an "illusion of relationship" and constitute "cheating" technology that "falsely convince users that they can provide real social relations." [\(Springer +3\)](#) *Frontiers in Psychology* research on "Anthropomorphism in Human-Robot Co-evolution" found that attempts to make robots more human-like often result in "unintended, unifelike, or repulsive characterizations" due to mismatched expectations. [\(ResearchGate\)](#)

Historical exhibitions document institutional failures in presenting technological agency

Major institutional exhibitions from the 1990s onward consistently failed by prioritizing technological spectacle over genuine exploration of human-machine relationships. The 1996 Mediascape exhibition at Guggenheim Museum SoHo, organized in collaboration with ZKM and sponsored by Deutsche Telekom, drew scathing criticism from *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith, who called Jeffrey Shaw's "The Legible City" "one of the worst works on show." Critics noted the exhibition was "unable to choose between art and entertainment, ending up being a display of technology." [\(medium\)](#)

Documenta X's net art section in 1997 represents a paradigmatic institutional failure to understand medium specificity. Curator Simon Lamunière displayed net art works in a blue-walled room resembling an "office space" with an "unlucky IBM blue feeling," disconnecting them from the internet and making them accessible only via local area network. [\(medium\)](#) **JODI's work crashed repeatedly because it required external hyperlinks, and the physical disconnection from both internet and exhibition space created a "social vacuum" that fundamentally altered the works' meaning.**

The pattern extends to ZKM's 1999 net_condition exhibition, where Jeffrey Shaw's "net.art Browser" used advanced augmented reality technology to display technologically simple net art works. [\(medium\)](#)

The sophisticated presentation technology contradicted the critical stance of many net art pieces that explicitly critiqued innovation rhetoric, forcing technological context that undermined the works' conceptual integrity.

Conclusion: Beyond anthropomorphic limitation toward technological authenticity

The consistent failure of interactive art projects across five decades reveals that imposing human social dynamics onto technological systems creates hollow spectacle rather than genuine innovation. From Ken Feingold's conversational sculptures to contemporary therapy chatbots, from Sony's AIBO to motion-tracking installations, the pattern remains consistent: anthropomorphic projection limits rather than expands artistic and technological possibility.

(Frontiers +4)

The most successful interventions—like Feingold's later work that explicitly acknowledged AI limitations, or contemporary post-internet artists who develop material solutions to digital presentation—suggest alternatives that recognize genuine technological agency. Rather than forcing technology into familiar human behavioral scripts, these approaches explore what authentic computational, robotic, or networked interaction might offer.

Academic frameworks from UTS's embodied interaction research to Simon Penny's critique of liberal humanist projection provide theoretical foundation for understanding why anthropomorphic approaches consistently fail. (Springer +2) The challenge for contemporary interactive art lies not in making technology more human-like, but in discovering what forms of authentic technological agency and human-machine collaboration might emerge when we resist the impulse to domesticate the digital through familiar social conventions. (ScienceDirect)

The stakes extend beyond art into broader questions of how we relate to increasingly sophisticated technological systems. Interactive art's failures and successes offer crucial insights into whether we can develop genuine partnerships with technology or remain trapped in patterns of projection that limit both human and machine potential. (Wikipedia)