

+/- Human review – Is this the future of artificial intelligence? Bring it on

 [theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/aug/09/wayne-mcgregor-random-international-zoological-human-review-artificial-intelligence](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/aug/09/wayne-mcgregor-random-international-zoological-human-review-artificial-intelligence)

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In René Magritte's surrealist painting [La Voix des Airs \(1931\)](#), three inscrutable spheres hover in an empty blue sky above green fields. I've always wondered what these enigmatic objects really are. Do they come from outer space? Are they about to open and unleash a robot army? What strange message do they bring from their impersonal dimension?

At last I know, because I have met them. I have even danced with them. In the darkened heights of the Roundhouse in north London, a flying flock of white spheres that uncannily resemble Magritte's dream objects float intelligently and curiously, checking out the humans below, hovering downward to see us better. They are the most convincing embodiment of artificial intelligence I have ever seen. For these responsive, even sensitive machines truly create a sense of encounter with a digital life form that mirrors, or mocks, human free will.

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Nobody is hidden behind a screen piloting this robotic airborne dance troupe. Each sphere has its own decision-making electronic brain. They fly in elegant unison yet also break ranks as they check their positions against the images recorded by infra-red cameras surrounding the circular space where they float and their human visitors walk. It is fitting to experience this eerily beautiful vision of the future in the steampunk setting of a Victorian railway building whose architectural grandeur evokes the first industrial revolution. It can feel like a Doctor Who episode come to life. What are those flying spheres, Doctor – are they friendly or is this a Dalek plot?

[Random International](#), the creators of this post-human visitation, have form in boggling minds. People queued for as long as four hours to get into their interactive installation the [Rain Room at the Barbican in 2012](#). This deserves to be as popular and is arguably a lot more thought-provoking. Working with choreographer [Wayne McGregor](#), whose dancers will perform with the ascendant orbs at weekends, these technologically adept art wizards extend the technology of drones to genuinely and movingly ponder the nature of life itself.

Looked at coldly, these devices are just inflated plastic balls whose movements are guided by rotors, like a toy drone. Yet the crucial fact that they guide themselves, mimicking conscious choice in their unplanned and to all intents and purposes spontaneous actions, is apparent without knowing anything about their design. You can tell by the way they move that they are free entities. Their behaviour is by turns entrancing and mildly menacing. They rise one after another from their resting positions in an upper gallery and calmly hover out into the open domed arena where their human guests are waiting. They are never at rest. As they glide in formation one or another is always changing its position, approaching the people below with what seems like curiosity. Then they all follow. It is when the entire swarm gathers directly above you that it suddenly becomes a threatening, sinister presence.

Surely science could learn a lot from this advanced work of art. McGregor's [understanding of dance](#) is clearly as crucial as Random International's engineering ingenuity in creating what amounts to a fascinating illusion of life. Experiments in robotics often produce disturbing doll-faced machines and stilted conversationalist computers. Yet the true secret of copying life, this installation shows, lies in movement. Dance, the oldest human art, turns out to be a key to comprehending life itself, and reproducing it. The orbs dance with you. They locate and follow members of

the audience, not with mechanical inevitability but a complex, gracious harmony. Making and breaking patterns, coming together and loosely floating apart, they dance with each other, too.

| *This artwork that opens visions of a future in which life evolves beyond biology itself.*

“It’s alive! It’s alive!”, as Frankenstein would say. Ever since Mary Shelley wrote that novel in 1818, the fantasy of creating life, whether by re-animating dead flesh like her overweening scientist or, now, by building robots, has tended to fixate on the human form. We assume robots will walk and talk like us. This installation demonstrates how very different a future of digital intelligence may look. Far from resembling the human, these entities are completely alien. They have no faces, voices or limbs. They do have openings underneath through which their machinery can be glimpsed. Marcel Duchamp as well as Magritte would recognise their post-human grace. In his masterpiece [The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even](#), left unfinished in 1923, a large panel of glass carries images of a floating mechanical “bride” and chocolate-grinding male admirers. Duchamp imagined a future where the organic and inorganic are one. He would be entranced by this artwork that opens visions of a future in which life evolves beyond biology itself. When our robot great-grandchildren drift in great electronic herds to the stars, this is what it may look like. That won’t be such a bad legacy for us to leave.