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HEADLINE: The Dog Bites Interview: **Robots** That Protest

An interview with men who make **robots** that protest.

BYLINE: Overheard by John Mecklin

BODY:

John Henry and Robert Trurl are both pseudonymous members of the Institute for Applied Autonomy, or IAA. Founded in the late 1990s by graduates of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pa., the five-man collective creates **robots** and computer software for the purposes of political activism. One such bot, Graffiti Writer, is a remote device mounted with spray cans; it can be programmed to paint a customized graffiti message on the ground. Henry is in a one-week residency with the Marin Headlands Center for the Arts. Trurl is based in San Francisco. Dog Bites talked to them about their philosophy and past projects during a picnic on Rodeo Beach. Dog Bites: Why did you found the IAA?

John Henry: A lot of us came out of the Robotics Institute [at Carnegie Mellon], which had a predominance of **military** funding from **DARPA** [the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Defense]. Our friends who were roboticists were working on these projects that were directly opposed to their ideological beliefs and ethics. It's part of engineering culture that you don't identify problems, you just solve problems. Getting to decide what you work on hasn't been a part of the domain since the days of the garage inventor. All our projects were about influencing engineers to take an ethical responsibility for the things they make.

DB: Why robotic activism?

JH: Some of us had a long history of activism. But we felt that the activist tactics that were being employed against the world of militarized engineering -- like spilling fake blood on the steps of the software engineering building -- however well meaning, were alienating people. If you want to critique a field, you have to be able to speak its language.

DB: What was your first project?

JH: Little Brother was a cute, humanoid robot that would hand out literature on the street corner just like people do. It was about 3 1/2 feet tall, all aluminum silver, so it looks like the quintessential robot, with literature in a slot in its chest. It had a sensor that would tell how far away you were, and at first it would say, "I have something for you," then if you came closer it would say things like, "Thanks for stopping by." It was very important that Little Brother be cute, with big eyes and big hands, a little mouth and body, like a Sanrio character, to bypass all the social conditioning. People are trained to spot activists and don't want to interact

with them. Using Little Brother, we got people taking the literature who you generally can't reach through activism: children and senior citizens. It was the college-aged kids who usually will take activist literature who wouldn't come near Little Brother. They were suspicious that it was connected to a corporation.

DB: What literature did Little Brother distribute?

JH: Most of the time it was for a group called Society for Reproductive Anachronisms, which was involved in issues of technological and capitalistic mediations of the reproductive processes. Like fertility clinics ...

Robert Trurl: ... corporations inserting themselves into human evolution.

JH: People generally discarded the literature within a two-block radius of the robot.

DB: Did the police apprehend Little Brother?

JH: No. The simple fact of us having robots basically means we don't fit the mold of what [police] are looking for. Juvenile delinquents don't have robots. One day this may change, and they'll go, "Oh, you're one of those robot troublemakers."

DB: How did Graffiti Writer work?

JH: We built it on the body of a remote-controlled car. The way it worked was, you hook up a keyboard, type in a message, then drive it where you want the message to be. Then you hit a red button. It can go pretty fast - it only takes a few seconds to paint a message on the ground. We thought it would be confiscated the first time we used it, so we said, "Let's use it someplace good." The Capitol building seemed like the most high-profile target. [The IAA graffitied the words "Voting Is Futile" in front of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., in 1999.] We learned our first big lesson: that as long as we have these robots, we're immune to authority. We got busted in the act, but the officer simply told us to get lost. After that, we'd try to attract as much attention as we could.

DB: Where did you take it, and what did you do with it next?

JH: We took Graffiti Writer to many cities in the U.S. and Europe, mostly public squares. We'd attract a crowd, then hand it off to different people. We got businessmen to use it, and other people who wouldn't normally participate in the illegal act of graffiti.

RT: It's like a toy -- very unintimidating and appealing.

DB: What messages did people write?

JH: We encouraged them to think big, but we didn't editorialize. If you put somebody on the spot, it's usually not that deep.

RT: Like, "Girl Scouts Rule."

JH: We had a cop use it once, and he wrote, "We love the Pittsburgh police!" It really seemed appropriate, because what does that mean a few days later, when somebody sees this graffiti that says, "We love the Pittsburgh police!" -- like, "What the?," you know? That asks all kinds of weird questions.

[The next working version of Graffiti Writer was a sleek, NASA-looking white pod called Street Writer. This robot printed 6-foot-high messages on the road while being pulled behind a truck. The IAA took it to the

finish line of the 2004 Darpa Grand Challenge, a public off-road robot race from Barstow, Calif., to Primm, Nev.]

JH: We became intrigued with the idea of doing an intervention there that would reattach the politics of what was going on, because it was being promoted as a family robot event. When the whole idea here is to build autonomous robots for battle in places like Iraq and Afghanistan ...

RT: The tight aesthetics of [Street Writer] was a key component to flying under the radar.

JH: We got waved through two security checkpoints while every other car was getting grilled. We just looked the part. Then we pulled off to the far end of the parking lot (it was at this casino outside Vegas) and wrote, with the machine, Isaac Asimov's first law of robots. [The original First Law of Robotics from Asimov's 1940 manifesto reads: "A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm."] We abbreviated it to: "A Robot Must Not Kill." If you develop robots, you've read Asimov. ... We were trying to bring up this ethical point that's been lost from discourse.

DB: What happened when you wrote it? Did anyone notice?

JH: No! (laughter) Um ... the event didn't go off as well as we'd hoped.

DB: I have two questions that may be related. Why do you insist on not giving your real names, and does activism-through-robots shield human protesters from being associated with potentially illegal acts?

JH: We are accountable, because when you're working the robot, you're there.

RT: We insist on anonymity because the IAA is a collective effort, and no individual is taking credit.

JH: The other, more practical reason for anonymity is we ... rely on day jobs to pay our bills and give us access to the tools we need. Being able to separate the outcomes of these projects from the tools is kind of crucial.

DB: What are some of your other projects?

JH: We did a project called "I See..." in which we built a Web site [picturing a map of Manhattan]. You can click on where you are, where you want to go, and it derives a path with the fewest number of surveillance cameras as possible. ... We did a thing called "Text Mob" that allows you to broadcast text messages on your cell phone to a bunch of other cell phones. ... The area that project found use was in the context of the protests [at the Republican National Convention]. It allowed people to share info about where the cops were blocking off streets, where they needed someone with a camera, etc. It became a way of keeping up with the real-time surveillance capabilities of the police.

DB: It seems like the IAA is more about facilitating activism than making a specific political statement.

JH: The projects usually happen on two levels. We're facilitating activism. Then the political critique is usually ... why the technologies that we've developed didn't exist. There's no profit model for them, there's no interest at the funding level. That's where our personal politics hit the pavement. (Lessley Anderson)

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