

# “Rain Room” Creators Return with Interactive Robotic Sculptures

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Artsy Editorial

By Demie Kim

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Random International, *Fifteen Points // I*, 2016. © Random International 2016. Photograph courtesy of Pace Gallery.

At first glance, *Fifteen Points // I* (2016), a new sculpture by the London- and Berlin-based collaborative studio [Random International](#), is an obscure cluster of machines. Fifteen robotic limbs, crowned by LED lights and powered by computer-controlled motors, bend and vibrate in synchronized harmony. Yet soon enough, these uniform movements crystallize into a distinct form—that of the human body striding through space.

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“There’s something very healthy about going back to the basics, to vibration,” says Random International co-founder Hannes Koch of the sculpture, which is the centerpiece of a new show at [Pace Gallery](#)’s 24th Street space in New York. According to Koch, who started Random International with Florian Ortkrass in 2005, most of the technology behind this work has been around since the 1960s. “We could make this much easier, much simpler, but it’s not

about that,” Ortkrass adds. “It’s about what you see. What it does.”

Three years ago, Random International staged their breakout exhibition at the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York with *Rain Room*. The immersive installation allowed visitors to walk through a torrential downpour, without getting wet. And with “[On the Body](#),” their first show in New York since the phenomenal success of *Rain Room*, again they emphasize the relationship between man and machine. The exhibition features recent sculptural works that explore our perception of the human form, as well as the contrast between biological and mechanical movement.



Random International, *Self and other*, 2016. © Random International 2016. Photograph courtesy of Pace Gallery.

“We were fascinated by movement and what it does to us instinctively, emotionally,” says Koch. In 2011, this interest led them to the work of BioMotion Lab, at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, where researchers investigate visual perception and social recognition. Collaborating with its director, Dr. Nikolaus Troje, Random International decided to translate the lab’s studies on visual stimuli and the detection of the human form into three dimensions. They brought these studies into a recent artist residency at Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, which resulted in the first prototype of the new sculpture, *Study for Fifteen Points / I* (2016), also on view at Pace. This smaller sculpture is a spritely counterpart to *Fifteen Points / I*, operating more quickly and lacking the same degree of vibration—a contrast that only heightens the man-made, and thereby infallible, nature of these works.

Like *Fifteen Points / I*, another sculpture titled *Self and other* (2016) also reveals the human form through minimal information. On a black screen, the viewer is reflected in sparse beams of light that together form a blurred, rather than crisp, silhouette of his or her body. The reflection appears not in real time but after a momentary lag, which acts as an “encouragement to interact with yourself,” says Koch. “You become your own partner.”

This interactive nature of the work was emphasized by a series of “choreographic interventions” that were staged last Friday and Saturday. Dancer Fukiko Takase of Studio Wayne McGregor (which also collaborated on *Rain Room*) activated *Self and other* in a performance scored by Max Richter. Dressed in simple, nude-colored clothing,

Takase approached the work, first timidly, then assertively; her movements were captured in a shimmering cascade of light on the dark screen. “It sort of makes sense to put people in front of [the work] who are perfect at being in their body,” explains Koch. “They really add another layer of possibility, and a contrast between highly technified representation of your body, and then the purity of just the body.”



Random International, *Fragments*, 2016. © Random International 2016. Photograph courtesy of Pace Gallery.

Several mirrored works reflect the viewer’s presence yet subvert the traditional expectations of the looking glass. Upon approaching *Blur Mirror* (2016), for example, the viewer’s reflections are muddled in real time—a commentary on the simultaneous openness and opacity of data in the modern era. *Fragments / I* (2016), on the other hand, is a grid made up of some two hundred square mirrors, which disassemble upon detecting the viewer’s presence. Countering selfie culture, Random International’s sculptures make it hard to see ourselves, demanding physical, rather just virtual, presence.

None of the works seem particularly optimistic about the direction of digital technology; nor are the creators. “On a personal level, it gives me the creeps,” says Koch, speaking to the invasion of the digital in our everyday lives. But in their art, it’s simply a means to an end. “In the end, everything is technology, from paper and plastic to a paint brush,” Ortkrass offers. It’s this emphasis on the idea, rather than the medium, that sustains their study of mankind’s most fundamental abilities: to perceive and move our own bodies.

—Demie Kim

“Random International: *On the Body*” is on view at Pace Gallery, New York, Sep. 23–Oct. 22, 2016.

