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CONTACT: Bridget McNie
For Robot 250
412-224-6006
bridgetm@jackhorner.com

BIGBOTS: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU MIX ART AND ROBOTICS

Gigantic Art Installations Mark the Beginning of Robot 250 Festival

PITTSBURGH — June XX, 2008 — This summer, city park goers relaxing under a canopy of shady trees, may notice an unusual specimen that seems to be roving rather than swaying. If so, they have probably spotted the “Look-See Tree,” a mobile work of art created by local artist Ally Reeves. Beginning June 17 in West Park on Pittsburgh’s North Side, the “Look-See Tree” will be touring the city’s park system with Citiparks’ Roving Art Cart, continuing its travels into September.

But the “Look-See Tree” is more than just a work of art. It’s a robot, more specifically a “BigBot,” one of 11 giant robotic installations that will be on display around the city from July 11 – 28 as part of Robot250, a celebration of robotic technology aligned with Pittsburgh’s 250th anniversary. Pittsburghers and visitors from around the globe will have the opportunity to see the BigBots, which were created for Robot 250 by artists and technologists living and working in Pittsburgh.

The “Look-See Tree,” houses six motion-activated mini-theaters, which contain robotic animals set in environments within a large tree structure. From afar, viewers will see a large, sparsely limbed tree trunk lying on its side, supported by wheels and connected to a bicycle. Closer inspection will reveal several glowing hollows in the tree trunk. When viewers peek in, they will see fictional animals that will respond to their presence by gesturing — hiding, vocalizing, shifting or jumping — and otherwise reacting to the people watching them.

The BigBots celebrate art while enlarging the viewer's perception of what a robot is. Far from the stereotypical “mechanical men,” these BigBots run the gamut from a sensor-embedded roller coaster for plants on top of the Children’s Museum to a giant mechanical “sock puppet” with a gaze that follows visitors as they enter or leave the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.

Another early-bird BigBot will appear on July 5. Keny Marshall’s “prototype for an infinite array of semi-autonomous percussive devices,” aka “Crickets,” is based on Dr. John Conway’s “The Game of Life,” and will provide a simulacra of the process of life, death and rebirth through sound in the garden at the Mattress Factory Museum.

The other BigBots will be installed and ready for viewing and interaction from July 11- 28. They include:

- “Rise and Fall,” by Jennifer Gooch at Flagstaff Hill, will explore the meaning of flags and how their position on a pole can portray the status of the “state” they represent.
- “Double-Taker (Snout),” by Golan Levin at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, will be watching people outside of the building in a very human way.
- “You’re #1” by Ian Ingram at The Andy Warhol Museum, is a giant foam finger that will spread joy as it points to you, and you, and yes, even you.

- “Reach, ROBOT,” by Grisha Coleman at PPG Plaza, turns the plaza into a robotic instrument conducted by the passing people. The resulting composition samples music and readings from Pittsburgh’s great African-American musicians, composers, poets and writers.
- “ABB Basketball Arm,” by Pete Feher at the Carnegie Science Center, will test your free throw skills and show off its own.
- “Shelter,” by Garth Zeglin at Carnegie Library, main branch, will provide billowing and tranquil technology in the International Poetry and Reading Room.
- “Mower,” by Osman Khan at Phipps Conservatory, is a robotic sheep that mows the Phipps lawns, evoking questions about the frequent tendency of technology to replace what we already have.
- “Green Roof Roller Coaster,” by Gregory Witt and Joey Hays at the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, will answer the age-old question *Do plants like roller-coasters?* Three roller-coaster cars of tall grasses will enjoy a furious ride, all the while monitored like astronauts for vital signs and state of happiness.
- “Extreme Animals: The Video Game,” by Jacob Ciocci and Matt Barton at the Carnegie Museum of Art Sculpture Court, will resemble a kids’ clubhouse. Inside you will find animatronics stuffed animals and re-animated taxidermy all crowded around a TV playing video games.

Maps of the sites displaying BigBots will be available on the Robot 250 Web site at www.robot250.org and in the *City Paper*, providing a “robot trail” for families and visitors to follow as they travel from one BigBot to the next, as well as encouraging them to visit the programs and exhibitions associated with each site. Each map is equipped with a PAT bus route to travel from site to site.

For more information about BigBots and all Robot 250 events, contact Bridget McNie at 412-224-6006 or bridgetm@jackhorner.com.

About Robot 250

Robot 250 is a city-wide community art and technology program designed in conjunction with Pittsburgh’s 250th anniversary, that has turned Pittsburgh into a living, breathing learning lab by enabling students, families, artists and the public to build their own customized robots. Launched by Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh with support from The Andy Warhol Museum, The Brew House Association, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art, Carnegie Science Center, The Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, CitiParks, CMITES, Manchester Craftsmens’ Guild, The Mattress Factory, Neighborhood Nets, Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, PPG Plaza, YouthPlaces, the YWCA, the Port Authority and the *City Paper*. Robot 250 is fun for the entire community and makes robotic technology more accessible and useful for the general public. Robot 250 is a year-long program that culminates in mid-July with a two-week event filled with a wide range of family activities, including hands-on workshops, student and artist exhibits and film presentations. The event will also include giant robotic “BigBot” installations that will be displayed throughout the city. For more information on Robot 250 visit www.robot250.org

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Available for Interviews: Illah Nourbakhsh, associate professor, Carnegie Mellon University’s Robotics Institute
 Carl DiSalvo, assistant professor, The Georgia Institute of Technology

Ian Ingram, BigBot Curator
BigBot artists upon request