

Can't Help Myself



Aaron Fagan, Senior Editor

I recently discovered a 2016 exhibition hosted by the Guggenheim Museum that left an indelible mark on the contemporary art scene—Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s installation titled “Can’t Help Myself.” This piece, a chilling convergence of technology, human emotion, and social commentary, showcased the artistic duo’s ability to transform complex concepts into visceral experiences. Through its profound simplicity, the installation raised questions about control, autonomy, and the human condition in an increasingly automated world.

At the heart of “Can’t Help Myself” was a Kuka robotic arm, caged within a transparent enclosure. This machine, industrial and imposing, was programmed to perform a single task: to continuously shovel hydraulic fluid that perpetually seeped away from it back into a contained space. The liquid, reminiscent of blood or bodily fluids, gradually spread across the floor, only to be painstakingly gathered again by the machine. The arm moved with an unsettlingly organic fluidity, its actions eerily human in their precision and urgency.

The brilliance of the installation lay in the robotic arm’s programmed responses. As the liquid spread further away, the arm became more frantic, more desperate in its attempts to control the spill. The more it worked, the more the liquid spread, creating a futile cycle that resonated deeply with the viewers. The audience, separated by a transparent barrier, could only watch as the machine struggled endlessly, unable to help it, or themselves, from feeling a growing sense of unease and empathy.

This endless cycle of containment and spillage served as a poignant metaphor for the human condition in the 21st century. The robot’s frantic efforts mirrored the struggles of individuals in modern society—trapped in cycles of labor, maintenance, and control, all while dealing with the slow, inevitable spread of entropy. The title, “Can’t Help Myself,” further deepened this connection, suggesting a dual meaning: the machine, bound by its programming, literally could not stop itself from performing its task, just as humans often feel trapped by societal expectations, economic pressures, or psychological compulsions.

Sun Yuan and Peng Yu are known for their provocative and often unsettling works, which frequently explore themes of life, death, and the boundaries of the human body. “Can’t Help Myself” was no exception. It was a masterful example of how they used the cold, mechanical nature of technology to evoke deeply human emotions. The robot, though lifeless, became a symbol of our own existential struggles—an entity engaged in a never-ending task, forever on the edge of completion, yet never quite succeeding.

The use of an industrial robot also raised questions about the relationship between humans and machines. In an era where automation and artificial intelligence are rapidly advancing, “Can’t Help Myself” confronts viewers with the implications of this technology. The robot’s actions, while programmed, were also reactive and unpredictable, blurring the line between machine and sentient being. This ambiguity left the audience questioning where control truly lies—are we the masters of our creations, or do our creations ultimately control us?

In the world of power transmission and automation, the fine line between control and chaos is always in focus—whether on the factory floor or in our broader society. “Can’t Help Myself,” using a robotic arm out of its intended context, sheds light on that very tension. The robot’s relentless, futile task—containing hydraulic fluid spilling around it—becomes a striking metaphor for the struggles faced in industries relying on automation. Just like this robot, always battling entropy, engineers and operators are constantly tasked with optimizing processes, maintaining systems, and innovating in the face of seemingly uncontrollable challenges. At the heart of power transmission and motion control is this same pursuit: balancing precision and efficiency against wear, tear and the unpredictability of real-world applications. The art installation, while a commentary on the human condition, brings into focus the very issues that drive this industry—the pursuit of perfection, and the systems we rely on to maintain it.

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