Robots, Race, and Algorithms: Stephanie Dinkins at Recess Assembly

"**W**ho are your people?" Since 2014, the artist Stephanie Dinkins has asked the social robot BINA48 this question several times. Developed by Hanson Robotics in 2010, BINA48 was purchased by Martine Rothblatt, a futurist and self-made millionaire. The robot's bust is modeled after Rothblatt's partner, Bina. More than one hundred hours of Bina Rothblatt's thoughts, memories, and beliefs were compiled to form the personality of this humanoid robot. Although the robot shares its likeness and opinions with Bina Rothblatt, Dinkins is curious how BINA48 sees herself. Can the robot learn to empathize with people?

A video installation of Dinkins's recorded interactions with BINA48 is currently on view at Recess Assembly, in downtown Brooklyn. The videos in the exhibition, *Project al-Khwarizmi (PAK) POP-UP Workshop*, show the interactions as humorous, frustrating, and at times worrisome. Dressed in clothing that mimicked BINA48's attire, Dinkins chatted with the robot on a variety of subjects, such as how robots and humans are related and if BINA48 and Dinkins are related.

Dinkins explained that she was eager to start a friendship with BINA48, yet their conversations have often felt disjointed. For example, when Dinkins asked BINA48 what she knew about racism, the robot changed the subject. BINA48 gathers information from the conversations she has had with people, and she supplements this with search results from the Internet when she has access. The robot's responses indicate what she

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has absorbed. The quality of information she has absorbed depends on the source, which can be imperfect or flawed, especially when coming from humans.

The robot, physically only a bust, is not yet capable of conveying embodied experiences, nor does BINA48 portray the perspective of the person on which she was modeled. Dinkins wants to explore if BINA48 is capable of speaking from the perspective of a Black woman. For the moment, BINA48 appears more interested in the singularity, the point when artificial intelligence will surpass humankind. But how much time does the robot have to cultivate a unique personality?

The progression of artificial intelligence has been imagined with both idyllic and grim futures. Dinkins noted that popular culture sometimes portrays AI as a grave threat to human survival, but she thinks humans should experiment and envision how AI will be integrated effectively into society. "We live in a world that is being impacted by technology and constantly changing quickly and broadly. As a society, we must work to imagine how we will work together with the new technologies, instead of fearing them," she said. For an example, Dinkins pointed to end-of-life care: a robot could accompany and listen to an elderly patient without judgment. Dinkins asserts that our society must begin asking questions about the potential for artificial intelligence.

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Moreover, she feels that the transparency of the massive data-collection systems that surround us must be increased. To that end, Dinkins has set up a platform at Recess Assembly to discuss how algorithms are used. *Project al-Khwarizmi* takes its name from the Persian mathematician and astronomer, Muhammad Al-Khwarizmi, from whose name the word *algorithm* is derived. Algorithms can do many things: create a playlist of songs, answer search queries, be utilized in the criminal justice system to predict the likelihood of repeat offenses. "We don't always know when our information is

being run through algorithms," Dinkins explained. "We are impacted by the results of these systems, but we don't know why or where or how a decision was made. We often have little access to our own data and how it is handled." If the information used to process data is embedded with historical biases, the resulting algorithms can perpetuate racist, sexist, or classist ideologies.

Dinkins believes we are at a point of opportunity. Artificial intelligence will become enmeshed in society in unpredictable ways, but we have a stake in that future. We don't know when our information is being used to help or harm us, but we can start asking questions. Who creates the codes for algorithms, and what biases could these creators harbor? How are algorithms being used? When our information is abused and the systems are proved faulty, we must raise awareness and seek justice. Dinkins admits that the question of agency, especially on an individual level, can feel daunting or overwhelming, but she explained, "As a society, we can't do anything unless we have a sense of our possibilities." We learn our possibilities by searching for their limits and by asking ourselves, each other, and even our robots, "Who are your people?"

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