Imagining Artificial Beings from Antiquity to the Present (25-26 Feb 27)

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut (Florence, Italy), Feb 25–26, 2027
Deadline: Nov 8, 2026

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Talos at the Shores of Crete: Imagining Artificial Beings from Antiquity to the Present (25–26 Feb. 2027).

A Transdisciplinary Conference at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max Planck Institut. Within the Framework of the Project "The Art of AI. Rethinking Notions of Creativity, Aesthetics and Ethics"

«There came handmaids made of gold, looking just like living girls. They have in them intelligence in their minds, and human speech and strength, and they know how to work thanks to the immortal gods» (Homer, Iliad 18.417–422)

From ancient mythology and medieval automata to modern robotics and contemporary AI, artificial beings have occupied a central place in cultural imagination and philosophical thinking. Machines have often been imagined before they were built and their material and conceptual development has also continually reshaped the ways in which they are represented and understood. Long before the term “artificial intelligence” existed, artificial beings populated myth, ritual, and craft: Hephaestus’s golden attendants, Pygmalion’s animated ivory statue, Talos patrolling the shores of Crete, and the Golem shaped from clay are just some examples of this long history. On one hand, these figures embodied and shaped ideals, expectations, and anxieties about what it might mean to create something capable of moving, perceiving, or acting as though it were alive. On the other hand, they also shed light on the respective notions of intelligence and creativity at play. These imaginaries of and narratives about artificial intelligence have always been part of the human condition since its very beginnings, and they reveal a lot about human beings and their dreams and fears. Although these imaginaries and narratives cannot simply be assimilated to the modern concept of artificial intelligence, they form part of the genealogies through which contemporary AI is imagined and interpreted.

This conference is envisioned as an exploratory journey through the historical development of automata, robots, androids, and artificial intelligence. Following their changing configurations – through medieval and early modern mechanical devices, Enlightenment automata, Gothic figures of artificial creation, twentieth-century robots, cybernetic systems, and contemporary AI –, it will examine the interplay of philosophical concepts, artistic forms, technical practices, and cultural narratives that have shaped their meanings over time. The conference will also focus on historical-

ly and culturally situated understandings of agency and intelligence, and the relation between the natural and the artificial. Among others, the following questions will be addressed: How have artistic and fictional forms influenced the design, aims and interpretation of technical systems? How have new machines transformed the stories told about agency, life, intelligence and creativity? Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which these narratives articulate or hide questions of labour, power, gender, autonomy, responsibility and political control.

As the opening event of “The Art of AI”-project, which analyses whether concepts such as creativity, perception, and aesthetic judgement can be extended to AI, and what ethical and political implications this might have, the conference examines how inherited conceptions of artificial beings continue to shape the terms in which these questions are posed today. We welcome contributions from art history, philosophy, history, literary and media studies, the history of science and technology, and AI research, with the aim of bringing different genealogies, methods, and conceptual assumptions into dialogue.

TOPICS OF INTEREST
We welcome papers addressing, but not limited to, the following themes. Interdisciplinary approaches – combining art-historical, philosophical, literary, and technical perspectives – are especially encouraged:
- Definitions and narratives about the automaton, the robot, and the “intelligent” machine across different historical periods, cultural contexts and technological traditions
- How have artificial beings challenged or reinforced the boundaries between natural and artificial, animate and inanimate, human and non-human
- Meanings, expectations, perceptions and fears associated with artificial beings
- Metaphors of intelligence, learning, memory, vision, creativity and autonomy as both cultural narratives and technical models
- Visual culture of the artificial across periods and cultures: painting, engraving, sculpture, film, and the iconography of the automaton, robot, and android
- How technological developments transform narratives, genres and representations of artificial beings
- Anthropomorphic machines as mirrors of our society – with their effects on autonomy, substitution and responsibility
- Idealisation and its discontents: automata as figures of perfection, control, immortality, or transgression
- Ethical and political implications of automation
- How myths, fiction and visual culture have shaped technological research, design, investment and public expectations
- The discrepancies between fictional imaginaries, promotional narratives and the material operation of AI systems

Presentations should not exceed 25 minutes and will be followed by a discussion.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:
Please send the title, abstract (max. 2,000 characters), and a brief biography, all combined into a single PDF document, by 08.11.2026 to magnus.green@khi.fi.it.

Notifications of acceptance will be sent by 04.12.2026.

Reference:

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