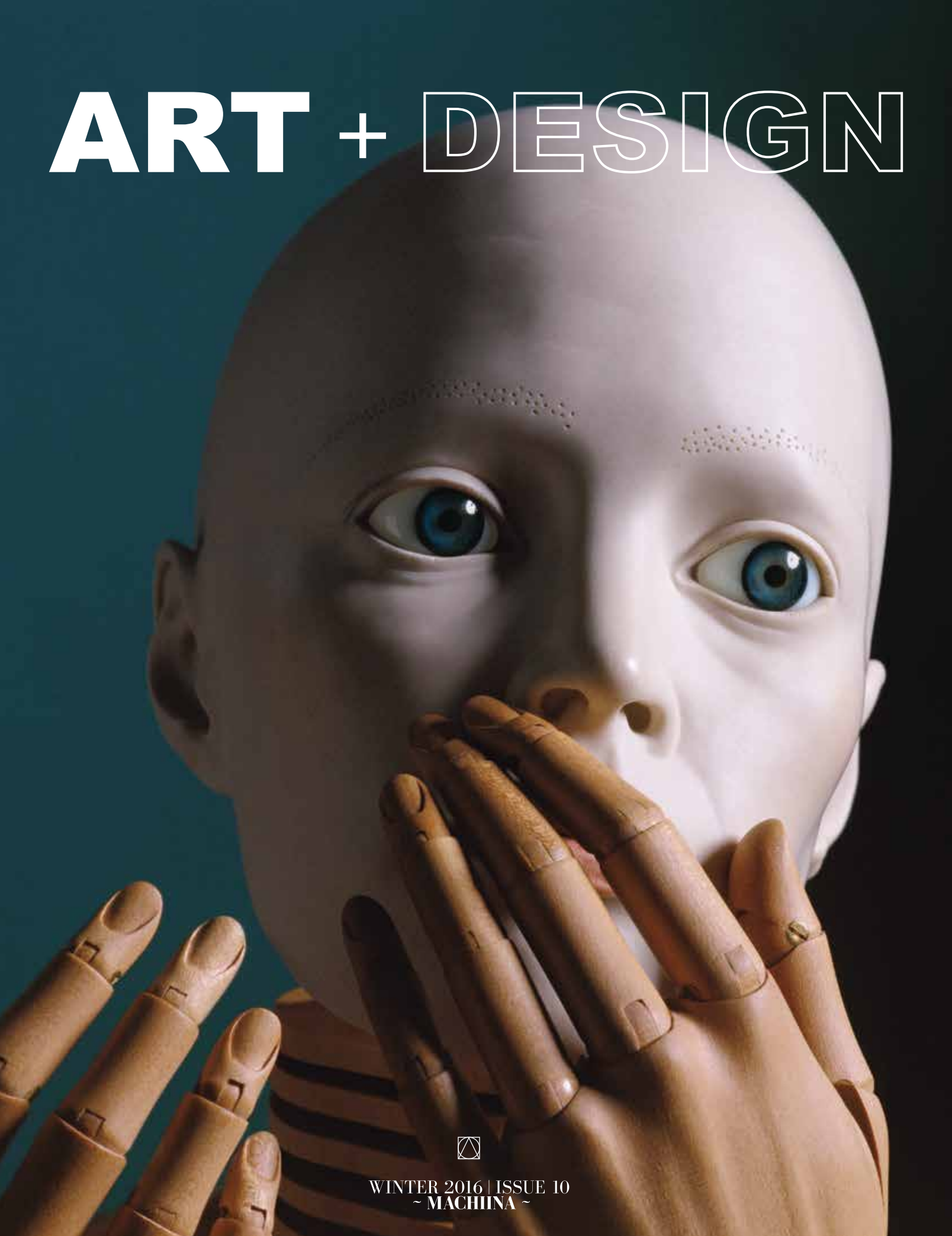


# ART + DESIGN



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~ MACHINA ~

*an essay*

# MACHINA

by LAURIE G. FISHER

Ever since our ancestors first laid eyes on the wheel, our love for technology has gone strong. We are a species on a constant quest for a better life, and machinery is the means to the end.

Like the barons of the American Industrial Revolution, the tech gods of today's Information Age build upon our existing dependence on machines and technology to sell us an "easier" life. Thanks to the geniuses behind smartphones and apps, even dating is easier. With Tinder, for example, the love of your life—or a least a willing companion—is only a right-swipe away! We are truly in an age in which technology is a central part of our intimate lives. Our forefathers (hell, even our grandmothers) never would have dreamed the cherished moments of life would rely on some kind of machine.

But why wouldn't they have dreamed of this future, since we are innately obsessed with improving life? And yet, *is* life really any better? You have probably read the reports on how texting is ruining the next generation's language skills and how "social" media only makes us forget how to function face-to-face. GPS and Google Maps have made us oblivious to basic skills like how to read a map, but have other modern tools for a "better life" made us lose touch with our fundamental human characteristics?

Undoubtedly, the Internet is one of the greatest inventions of all time, so why should we feel shocked such a tool would be used to service a human fundamental related to our will to survive: our obsession with self? Our well-curated online profiles give us the opportunity to indulge this obsession while also triggering the decline in another innately human characteristic: the belief in something "bigger," be it an organized religion, spirits, fate and karma, or even the powers of the cosmos.

From the beginning, spirituality and ritual have been a part of human life, as a means of understanding our being and to further our existence. This is likely the reason for art's existence—to provide a tangible connection to the sacred. Art is a reflection of societal trends, and art history literally illustrates the decline of faith in the unknown.

To examine the creation of religious and ritualistic art over centuries and around the world is to confirm how very human it is to contemplate the divine. These ideas weren't shared; they were innate.

The Paleolithic cave painters in Dordogne, France, who depicted clusters of dots over figurative representations, did not "pin" to Pinterest the inspiration Australian Aboriginals had in 2000 B.C.E. to make similarly patterned rock-wall paintings of their creators, the Wandjina spirits of the sky. Likewise, the Olmec of Mesoamerica, who carved stylized depictions of animal deities into stone, did not borrow this method of honoring gods from Egyptians who did the same almost 1,000 years before.

Centuries later, in Europe, most religious art was commissioned by the Christian church for the purpose of illustrating the story of Christ and to inspire worship. With the Renaissance in the 15th century C.E. came changes in the objective of spiritually themed art, when revolutionary ideas in math and science instigated the making of art for more secular reasons.

Sacred imagery remained prominent in art for centuries (and still thrives in some cultures), though its popularity waned as people found that their old belief systems did not have the same easy answers as steadily emerging technology and machinery. Now art with religious subject matter is meant to be shocking (like Andres Serrano's famously heretic 1989 photograph "Piss Christ"); is enjoyed purely for aesthetic reasons; or is considered insignificant.

No doubt knowledge is power. Though perhaps we've evolved so that the elemental characteristic of self-preservation, manifested in worship of what is material and "known," provided by today's technology, has drowned out the once deep-seated desire to connect to an unseen higher power.

Where are the images meant to inspire spiritual awakening and to contact the unknown? Where are representations of saviors and afterlives? Of belief in something bigger than the human race? What do we believe in now? Do we only trust information provided by the tangible, like our MacBooks and iPhones? Are we only interested in what is solid, scientific fact?

If there were a great shutdown of modern machinery and technology that included the Internet, we might literally die. Like a pet white rabbit, we would never make it in the wild. We've become one with the machine, like a baby and its mother's breast. It nourishes us. With it, everything will be all right. So why try to explain the supernatural and the immaterial unknown? The machine will take care of it. ▲





*photograph by* **ERIC BEGGS**





photograph by **ERIC BEGGS**

## ELIZABETH KING

*"Maybe the sculpture is like a violin, and the pose is the sonata. It can take hours, finding the pose and lighting it . . . I'm always amazed at the difference a few degrees of tilt makes in how we read the position of the head. If I move the eyes so the gaze shifts away from face on, even just slightly, a thread of tension enters the pose. I love the visceral evidence of impermanence, not in the object itself, but in its pose at any given moment."*

—Elizabeth King, *Sculpture Magazine*, 2009

Richmond-based artist Elizabeth King grew up in house full of prosthetic devices (her mother had polio), an influence that can be clearly seen in her art—figurative works with stop-frame animation that blur the boundary between actual and virtual object. Working in clay, wood, wax, and bronze, King follows the form of the human body, but at half life-size, engineering an anatomy of posable joints at her studio, a former department store built in 1910. "It's a fight between ghost and machine," she says. "At stake for me is the human habit of seeing a self as a 'thing' one minute and a 'being' the next." Her inspirations include early clockwork automation, mannequins, puppets, and works of literature in which inanimate or artificial figures come to life, such as *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*.

Her sculpture "Pupil" is on exhibit through February 14 at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville (*Phantom Bodies: The Human Aura in Art*), and in the permanent collection of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. ▲

*Pupil* 1987-90

Porcelain, glass eyes, carved wood (Swiss pear), brass

Half life-size; dimensions can vary; all joints are movable

Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.