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Invasion of the German Pop Robots

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

The robots, alas, do not fly first class.

"They are transported in boxes," said Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator at large for the Museum of Modern Art, laughing in response to a query about the travel plans for four illustrious automatons visiting New York for an exhibition beginning next week. "You open a box, out comes a robot. It's quite exciting!"



Enlarge Image

Sprüth Magers, Berlin and London/Kraftwerk German music icons Kraftwerk will perform at MoMA as part of a new retrospective beginning next week.

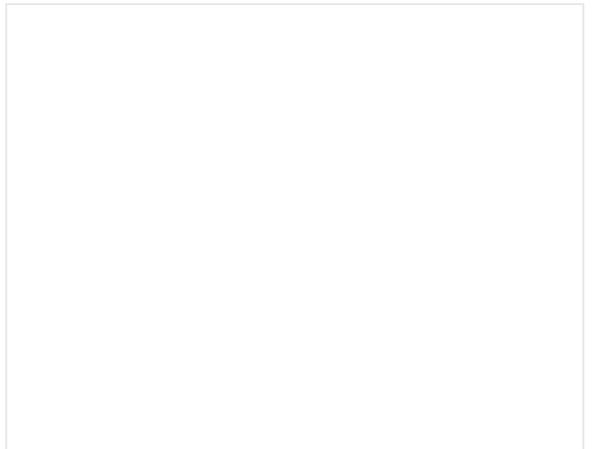
The robots, which arrived from Germany via cargo lode, will be key players in "Kraftwerk: Retrospective 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8," an enterprising show at MoMA devoted to a pop group with an unusual multidisciplinary appeal. Kraftwerk has human members too, but the robot avatars have been just as crucial to the group's influential style and sound since the late 1970s. Having done more than any musicians before or since to move pop music into the electronic age,

Kraftwerk can stake the most convincing claim to the mantle of "robot music."

Of course, the group's legacy stretches far beyond the sonic realm. "The ground-breaking difference with Kraftwerk is that by writing, composing, singing, performing, directing videos, creating stage sets, designing robots, they do everything," Mr. Biesenbach said. "It's not like they're pop people who have nice voices and somebody puts them in clothes. They do everything."

Visually, Kraftwerk has been prophetic in its allegiance to minimalism and to an aesthetic derived from industrialism and the early age of computers. Musically, that has entailed developing a studio-intensive sound whose sleek synthesized surfaces and meticulous explorations of rhythm underpinned much new-wave pop of the 1980s and numerous outgrowths since, among them electronic techno, ambient music and hip-hop.

"Albums like 'Autobahn,' 'Radioactivity' and 'Trans-Europe Express' really blew my mind," said the iconic DJ Afrika Bambaataa, who played Kraftwerk at formative hip-hop parties in



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the Bronx and enlisted some of the group's sounds in his epochal 1981 single, "Planet Rock." "The way they used to show psychedelic flowers back in the Woodstock days, it's the same with Kraftwerk and images of technology and space. It's still music of the future. It shows where we're at in the universe."



Sprueth Magers, Berlin and London/Kraftwerk

Kraftwerk mannequins will inhabit MoMA beginning next week.

To survey the group's body of work, which Kraftwerk has created in its secretive Düsseldorf studio and disseminated around the globe for more than 40 years, MoMA is mounting an ambitious exhibit conceived as something between a series of concerts and a studio visit. For eight consecutive nights starting Tuesday, Kraftwerk—in a quartet form led by its lone original member, Ralf Hütter—will perform its eight main albums live, with staging faithful to the aesthetic of each, as well as additional elements of animation and design, some in 3-D. A satellite show of archival video will accompany the series and continue through May 14 at MoMA PS1 in Queens, where Mr. Biesenbach is the director.

While the group continues to perform concerts around the world, new sounds from the Kraftwerk studio have been spare. (The last album of all-new music

came out in 1986.) Judging by recent onstage spectacles, though, the group has been busy refining and updating its original sounds while continuing to expand the visual aspect of its total project. The thrust of all that will be on display at MoMA.

"The idea is that you will be witnessing and experiencing art in the making," said Mr. Biesenbach, who devised the MoMA exhibit in close contact with the group. "For two hours, you will have the here and now, not mediated, not recorded, not to be communicated. It will be like an experience you have in front of a painting one-on-one. It goes back to one of the original roles of art: to have those moments of direct contemplation."

Those moments, of course, typically are silent in the confines of a museum—appropriate for a group that has remained largely mum about its own work since the beginning. (The band members declined to comment for this article.)

Playing with varieties of presentation and performance has been an integral part of Kraftwerk from the beginning, to such an extent that the group started dressing as mannequins and cyborgs in the '70s before ultimately substituting itself, from time to time, with actual robots.

"They did not invent the robots for no reason," Mr. Biesenbach said. "They are artists who take themselves away to replace themselves."

That performative gesturing and questioning has found sympathies in extra-musical realms, particularly from the more existential corners of modern art.

"The categories of art used to extremely separated and clear," said Marina Abramovic, the performance artist who staged a similarly boundary-stretching show at MoMA in 2010. "Performance was one thing, theater was another, dance was another, film was another, video was another. Kraftwerk, from an early stage, mixed so much."

Mr. Biesenbach, from a curator's standpoint, speaks of similar echoes between music and other forms of contemporary art.

"The art of Kraftwerk is about the tension between the human condition and technology,"

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he said. "It's about how human life is changed by machines."

And so it is that Kraftwerk—in both human and robot form—will take up residence in a museum that stands to be fortified by its live-wire charge.

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