Here’s the story behind that pole-dancing robot

If you’ve been on the internet recently you might have come across the above tweet, showing a robot with a CCTV camera for a head doing some half-hearted pole-dancing. It’s a good tweet! It captures a bunch of extremely 2017 feelings, including dystopia, fear of job automation, and the general mood of absurdity that’s going around a lot. Plus, you know, it’s a pole-dancing robot.

But, as a famous philosopher once asked: *why* is this robot pole dancing? To what end? Well it turns out it’s art, but there’s a bit more to it than that.

The robot is actually the creation of UK artist Giles Walker, who made the bot back in 2008. There are actually *two* pole-dancing robots, and a third companion that’s supposed to be DJ-ing. (It has a megaphone for a head instead of a camera.) But, as Walker explains to *The Verge*, the bots aren’t really supposed to be a commentary on robotics or job automation. They’re about surveillance.

[embedded content]

“At the time [when I made them], they were putting CCTV cameras up all around London, and Britain was becoming the most surveilled society in the world,” says Walker. “So I was playing with this idea of voyeurism, and who has the power in that relationship; whether it’s the voyeur or the person being watched.”

He adds that there was a lot of discussion in the news at the time about the “sexed up” Iraq dossier – a document published by the British government examining the existence of WMDs in Iraq, which a source later said had been exaggerated. “So I was just playing with the idea that if a document could be

sexed up, maybe CCTV cameras could be as well," says Walker. "That's how I got to these mechanical peeping toms. It was a mingling of all those things."

Since their creation, the robots have taken on a life of their own. Pictures and videos of them resurface online every now and again, and Walker hires them out to tech conferences, festivals, and other events. (They cost around £1,000 a day or $1,343.) And although they look straight out of a sci-fi B-movie, the bots aren't technologically complex. They're made from shop mannequins and are powered by windscreen wiper motors, with their movements controlled by short, pre-defined loops. "At that time I built all my stuff out of scrap and found objects," says Walker. "So not much tech in there. It's really old school."

Walker's other projects include Breakdown Clown (an animatronic sculpture that monologues while its speech patterns slowly degenerate); The Last Supper (a group of 13 sculptures that talk, argue, and smoke around a table); and a series of "homeless" robot sculptures placed in cities as guerrilla art.

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As pieces of art that might show up at a tech conference, though, the pole-dancing robots feel dated in 2017. The tech industry is only just beginning to come to terms with its long history of ingrained sexism and discrimination, and some people might see sexualized robots at a tech fair as an example of the bro culture that has, in part, contributed to these problems.

Walker didn't create the robots with these issues in mind, but says he'd think twice before making them again. He says the rise of "sexbots" particularly has given the sculptures new connotations. "These are meant to be a play on voyeurism, but because of the sexbot thing they've taken on a slightly

menacing touch," he says. Despite that, though, they're still touring, and Walker has no plans to stop. "They're the most popular thing I've done," he says. "Like a sort of Christmas jingle. They've become iconic."