

Hello Hi There--Theater for Downtown Machines

It's *We, Robots* at P.S.122

A A A [Comments](#) (0) By [Tom Sellar](#) Wednesday, Jan 12 2011, Village Voice

Twentieth-century futurologists used to wonder if machines would ever think independently. At P.S.122 this month, you can not only see computers talking and thinking for themselves—you can hear their views on major epistemological questions. Annie Dorsen's brilliantly conceived *Hello Hi There* pits two chatbots—robots without physical bodies—against each other in a highly ironic contest of wits. One has a male voice, the other female; their utterances also project onto separate screens. Both have been programmed with everyday expressions and with the transcript of a famous 1970s television debate between [Michel Foucault](#) and [Noam Chomsky](#); the computers improvise the rest.



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The night I attended, one stated that “we are just having a nice little chat about the limits of humanism,” then suddenly declared, “I am immortal!” The other advised not to “judge ideas by their immediate, practical usefulness,” adding “I’m with Michel on this one.” They chide and taunt, postulate definitions of intelligence and creativity, and even disparage theater people. This is not just more digital formalism onstage: *Hello Hi* There is a genuine experiment with many currents coursing through its post-Socratic dialogue.

By putting her bots center stage, Dorsen generates rare intellectual stimulation for the downtown performance world—humans beware.