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DRUG-BUYING ROBOT ARTWORK SEIZED BY SWISS AUTHORITIES

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By [Rhett Jones](#) | January 16, 2015 - 12:14PM

For the past three months, an art exhibition in Switzerland [has been displaying](#) random items that were bought on the Darknet by an automated bot; most controversially, one of the items was [a bag of ecstasy](#). According to the artist's collective behind the piece, [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#), the artwork was seized by authorities under confusing circumstances on Monday.

The piece, which is titled *Random Darknet Shopper*, was included in an exhibition called "The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration." For the duration of the show a computer ran a piece of software that randomly bought one item a week from Darknet markets similar to the [Silk Road](#). The bot had a budget of \$100 a week and when a new order arrived in the mail, the item would be displayed in the gallery as part of the work. [In addition to](#) the aforementioned bag of 10 ecstasy pills, it also purchased a baseball cap-mounted hidden camera system, a fake Louis Vuitton handbag and a fake Hungarian passport. The exhibition had its full run and the seizure by authorities occurred the day after it closed.

The collective responsible for the artwork posted a message on its website yesterday explaining the legal action:

“On the morning of January 12, the day after the three-month exhibition was closed, the public prosecutor’s office of St. Gallen seized and sealed our work. It seems, the purpose of the confiscation is to impede an endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited by destroying them. This is what we know at present. We believe that the confiscation is an unjustified intervention into freedom of art. We’d also like to thank Kunst Halle St. Gallen for their ongoing support and the wonderful collaboration. Furthermore, we are convinced, that it is an objective of art to shed light on the fringes of society and to pose fundamental contemporary questions.”

Though the exhibition had been running for three months, it recently became the subject of some [alarmist articles](#) declaring the arrival of a robo-pocalypse in which bots will be buying drugs and breaking the law and no one will be able to do anything about it. The collective specifically points to a [Washington Post article](#) as having raised concerns. That piece framed the Random Darknet Shopper as an example of the “next wave of cybercrime” in which no human culprit could be held responsible.

According to the artists's stated intentions, it would seem this sort of reaction has people asking questions that the work was designed to inspire from the beginning. In their words:

“Can a robot, or a piece of software, be jailed if it commits a crime? Where does legal culpability lie if code is criminal by design or default? What if a robot buys drugs, weapons, or hacking equipment and has them sent to you, and police intercept the package?”

ANIMAL reached out to the artists by e-mail and spokesperson Carmen Weisskopf told us that it's “too early to know what will happen next.” Here's her full comment:

“When we were dismantling the exhibition on Monday, the authorities seized the box containing all the items from the Random Darknet Shopper. To prevent the authorities from destroying the seized drugs, we had the box sealed. This means that our side must be heard, before the public prosecutors office can take any further action.

At the beginning of next week, we will probably see how the authorities wish to proceed.”

(Photo: [!MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK](#))

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