Cyborgs and the duality of perception and morality in performative interaction

Joan Healy

> Modern consciousness has been modified, people are trained through advertising and the corporate owned mass media to learn to be controlled and dominated. 'On-job control' involves deskilling the working class and turning them into robots doing repetitive tasks. The dominated class work so hard they don't have time to think about revolution. 'Off-job control' turns the dominated class into a passive consumer of superficial fashion and other forms of useless consumption as entertainment.
> Noam Chomsky (*Interview with Barry Pateman), Imperial Grand Strategy,* 2005.

In contemporary society we consume electronic products that reduce our physical labour and make menial chores fast and easy. From machines that are used to make communication easier, to ones that can clean our houses and wash our clothes. For some, the dream of a modernist utopia has been fulfilled. Those who can afford it are given freedom from physical labour and menial chores, and more time for leisurely pursuits. However, there is a dark side to our utopia. It is not just our machines that are used as slaves, but the people who are used to produce and dispose of them. Most people, ignorant of the suffering that belies the production of consumer goods, are either unaware or choose to be unaware of how their purchases support economies that are based on sweatshop labour and environmental destruction. If such injustices and human suffering caused due to the lack of workers rights were occurring on a local European level there would be outrage and condemnation. But not for the producers of cheap consumer products who live in the developing world. Why and how is there this moral double standard? Why are there merely small fringe groups that are aware of the inequalities and speak out against them?

I have done a number of performances such as *Cyberskin (2 stage transfer drawing),* where I try to use parts of my body to simulate the tasks of machines. My performances involve doing repetitive tasks, tasks that are very difficult for me and

intellectually unsatisfying, yet simple to the most rudimentary of computer drawing programmes. I try to draw parallels between my machine-like labour and the low paid labour jobs that employ so many people who make electronics equipment. By literally becoming a machine product, I make obvious the huge amount of human suffering involved in the production of such a trivial 'product'. The audience members become consumers and I make explicit their complicity in this suffering through their use of this human powered technology.

I was inspired by *The Turk,* an automaton by Baron Von Kempelen. Created in 1770, it was a chess playing 'machine' that toured Europe beating everyone it played at chess. It was finally revealed in the 1820's that the machine's housing contained a small man, a chess genius who pulled strings inside the box to manipulate the chess pieces. In my performances, I am also a person masquerading as a machine, but the difference in my performances is that I am in fact no match for the audience's expectations of me, and I fail at the only task I am meant to perform. In fact I put a huge amount of effort and suffering into creating something that doesn't work very well.

At the same time as I was developing the *Cyberskin,* I became very interested in the field of bio-mimetics, or animal tissue engineering such as the work done on the famous 'Earmouse' by Dr Charles Vacanti. I also noticed a trend in interaction design that placed a new emphasis on touch-screen interaction. As the main function of human skin is to sense physical touch, I decided to convert my back into a computer drawing pad interface. I conceptually combined the fields of bio-mimetics and touch-screen interaction design into the *Cyberskin* performance project creating a parody of them.

I wanted to challenge the ethics of the public in the face of using what I advertised as a 'cyborg', a 'living sensor' or 'artificial intelligence machine' using 'living human cell tissue '. So, I invented a fake history of its technological development, claiming it to have been engineered in a laboratory using 'synthetic biodegradable polymerscaffolds' and attached to a 'hybrid neuromechanical wiring system with 8-bit char matrix' etc etc ... In homage to Dr Charles Vacanti, I used his resume as inspiration to create my own scientific resume, portraying myself as a world renowned scientist in bio-engineering. I performed the piece in *Artbots 08* at the Science Gallery in the prestigious Trinity College in Dublin. I hoped that the *Cyberskin's* association with the university and its inclusion in an exhibition of other

actual robots would give the myth I had created more credibility and ability to spoof the public.

I constructed a costume that consists of a wooden housing painted silver to give it a machine aesthetic. On the back of the housing is a hole that reveals a rectangle of skin of my back. This is the 'touchpad'. Inside with me is a laptop with a drawing program that I use to replicate what I feel drawn on my back and this is then displayed above on a monitor. Also included are four holes in the housing to show parts of my skin that were painted in black, red, green and blue colors, they are the 'buttons' for the public to press to choose colours to paint with. The piece was inspired by the performance piece of the same name, *2 Stage Transfer Drawing (advancing to a future state)* by Dennis Oppenheim, where, by playing drawing games on each other's backs he investigates the sense of touch and the bond between father and daughter.

When I perform, the reaction from the crowd is diverse, with most people finding the work eccentric and funny, yet disturbing. Some people express compassion toward me and the uncomfortable position I am in. Others are fooled by the work, and think that my skin is artificial and mechanically connected to a computer screen. They are frustrated that the 'cyborg', (my reactions) are too slow and is not responding quickly enough to their commands. What was more interesting to me was that even though most of the visitors logically realized that the *Cyberskin* was a 'fake' and that there was a real person inside pretending to be a cyborgnetic machine, that actually there was still a mental disconnection in their perception of me. Visually, with only a rectangle of flesh showing, I was too abstracted from humanity for them to fully perceive me as a person. They would push on my skin harder and harder if I was too slow at replicating their drawings or at choosing a new colour. It was really interesting how there was a duality there, subconsciously they were expecting me to be as fast as a real computer, yet logically they knew that I was just a person in a box.

As Slavoj Zizek highlights in his book *Violence*, there are systemic class divisions that exist between rich and poor. These divisions exist on a global level and are perpetuated through unfair trade restrictions that benefit rich countries and multinational corporations. In Zizek's eyes, the suffering that our consumption supports is a form of violence. It is 'objective', we perpetrate it from a distance and pretend it doesn't exist because a reduction in the overproduction and consumption

of goods would damage the foundations of our capitalist economies and our wealth. In Darfur and Congo, wars are fought over natural resources where materials for electronics parts are mined. Millions of Chinese people subsist by working long hours on assembly lines making computer parts. However in Europe, the concepts of fairness and equality among all humans are part of the rhetoric that we believe are central to the ethics of our supposedly 'liberal' societies. But in reality, our economies and thus our societies, are actually built upon the neo-liberal colonisation of developing countries and the exploitation of their people in a modern day form or slavery.

There is a perceptual duality in our understanding of the people who produce the products we consume. As they are not a part of our lives and live too far away for us to ever be forced to encounter, we cannot relate to them as fellow humans. We never have to experience their suffering. They are the hidden cogs in the machines of society, a situation envisioned in Fritz Lang's visionary sci-fi epic *Metropolis*, where the working underclass remained in a hidden sublevel of human experience, existing purely to toil in the service of others. As I serve the public for 8 to 10 hours per day, the suffering I experience in my performances is a tiny gestural way to empathize with these workers and to provoke the consciences of those who participate in the consumption of me. The *Cyberskin* is an attempt to bridge the perceptual divide between our self-assumed innocence in what we do in our everyday lives, and the reality of exploitation indirectly associated with what we buy.

References

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