DUMMIES, DOLLS AND ROBOTIC SIMPLETONS INTERPRETING ARTIFICIAL STUPIDITY

BODY NARRATIVES

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"Although humanity has fashioned a system of powerful, immaculate machines and products, in their presence the human subject can only feel a sense of belittlement, incompleteness, lack—a feeling [Günter] Anders calls 'Promethean shame'. [....] It is the human body itself—comparatively unadaptable, vulnerable, mortal—that is felt to be the ultimate obstacle to the perfection of the machine environment."[1]

I n the age of smart houses, art that manipulates the perception of artificial intelligence downward gathers a critical importance. Why are divine or demonic powers of omniscience and immorality so often projected onto the bodies of machines in the popular imagination? If the Greeks had three levels of social interaction—between the divine, the human and the realm of the sub-human (in their eyes, the comic world of servants and slaves)—then, the mythology of machine-human interactions is tragically organized around divinity. "Cyborg envy" (cf. Allucquere Roseanne Stone) is another aspect of this tendency to attribute perfection and the aura of futurity onto our own artifacts. Meanwhile, our own everyday experience tells us that even the smartest machines are pretty dumb with their one-track literal-mindedness and their tendency to break down at every contingency. Why are we humans being inculcated with an inferiority complex or feelings of 'Promethean shame' about our own bodies in relation to machines? The pressure on artists to master the very latest software on the most advanced hardware is equally part of this endless and fruitless human quest to match purported machine progress and perfection. While pride in electronic craftsmanship should not be dismissed, the arts are not just a part of an electronic culture, they are also *about* it. An interactive art work that embodies a metaphor or meta-interaction about the relations between humans and their machines must be free to adopt any level of technology appropriate to the statement to be made. Art that demonstrates the dependency, solipsistic behavior, lapses of intelligence and the tendency toward fatigue and obsolescence and general overall stupidity of machines is welcome here.

What kind of statement is an artist who produces robots which limp and drag themselves ungracefully across the floor trying to make? That was the question I asked myself at an Alan Rath exhibition a number of years ago. Then, I met *Adelbrecht*
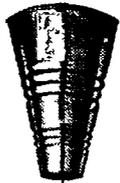
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at the Machine Culture Exhibition at Siggraph 1993. This robotic ball with delusions of grandeur (thought he was god) rolled around an enclosed area full of tables, intruding and interrupting human conversations with his irrelevant mumbling. He was like a humping dog at my feet and every time I rolled this machine pest away, his gyroscope would flip him around and send him right back to me. (Of course, *Adelbrecht* eventually broke down, probably from rough handling.) I learned a lot from Martin Spanjaard's irritating piece of art: it exposes "interaction" with machines as a fallacy based on the assumption that events that occur simultaneously are causally related. Just because this "bachelor machine" is emitting language doesn't mean that it is talking to me; just because it keeps coming back doesn't mean it has lust or affection for me. Furthermore, the apparent onanistic self-sufficiency of its programmed mutterings to itself are not divine self-completeness but a kind of psychotic incapacity to relate to its immediate context.[2] (Rath's imperfect robots, on other hand, offer the appearance of suffering that is more like our own.)

At the same exhibition, Perry Hoberman's *Faraday's Garden* (1993) invited visitors to interact with obsolete consumer appliances and dated audio-visual technology by executing what amounted to dance steps on a mat spotted with sensors. Machines buzzed and whirred in a chorus together, depending on where human feet fell. Freed by fashion from their instrumentality and sense of benefit or menace, such purportedly immortal machines are reduced to junk and garage sale detritus, their will to power pared back to the desire of an electric cord for a power supply. The technological simplicity of this piece finds its counterpoint in the artist's *Bar Code Hotel* (1994), using the most advanced and expensive computer: images of teddy bears, Elvis and other objects are made to shake, rattle and roll depending on what bar-codes are stroked, responding to the relentless surveillance and pressure toward rationalization and consumption with pure silliness.

In my subsequent search for examples of intentional artificial stupidity, I made a number of discoveries of dumb and dysfunctional machines, including Milo Garcia's ludicrous wall painting machine ("Two motors working together to paint a room" 1994), his skipping machine or "Dog chasing tail"[3] and other works as well as Paul deMarinis' low-tech Rube Goldbergesque musical creations. However, I became particularly interested in empty headed dolls and dummies, electronic or not as creations that explore the "evacuated subjectivity" and the "overthrow of the will to power," that is particularly new to the male subject.[4] The cultural work to be done on masculinity is quite different than on femininity; for that reason, empty-headed and single-minded female fools, clowns and naives have an entirely different and usually backward if not obsolete resonance. (The female couple in *Absolutely Fabulous* is a notable exception.) Barbie doll art, including the Barbie Liberation Front's reverse shop-lifting and reversing of the voice-boxes of "GI Joe" and "Barbie" or Sharon Grace's recent piece putting guns in the hand of the new girl-sized (between 3 1/2 and 4' tall)

Barbie—the owner age 3 to 7 may put on Barbie's wedding dress—relies on shifting gender codes for its effectiveness. Note how girls and women are expected to inhabit the position of the evacuated doll, a point which Todd Haynes' use of a Barbie doll as stand-in Karen Carpenter in his documentary on the star and anorexia, *Superstar* also makes. Unlike the fashion mannequin, the Barbie doll dummy in essence wears the child, rather than vice-versa. Similarly, the prosthetic authorship and control of the ventriloquist and puppeteer is reversed in the electronic ventriloquism of Mitsubishi's *Kaori* program (demonstrated at Siggraph in 1993): the electronic persona wears the human voice, not vice versa. *Kaori* is one more example of the colonization and subordination of the human body to virtual technology that work like Catherine Richards, among others, sets in question.

It takes drastic measures, i.e. symbolic castration, to evacuate masculine subjectivity; Tony Oursler's early use of empty suits as dummies or this example of Stephen von Huene's upper-bodiless *Tischtänzer* ("table dancers" at the ZKM Multimediale, 1993,) are examples. The table dancers each have eight pneumatic joints that perform twenty-five different dance sequences programmed at random to tap to the beats of Bizet, Handel and "Great Speeches of the Twentieth Century." (The dancers move a 200th of a second in advance in order to achieve the uncanny yet so obviously fictitious sense of simultaneity.) Oursler went on give his dummies and dolls faces and to project the severed heads associated with television onto them. Like transitional objects, extreme psychic states of pain, anger, agony and other manias could be dramatized in a literal way that we would be unlikely as well as extremely discomfiting to confront in a "real" human being. The uncanny nearness, yet difference to ourselves allows for the distancing and recognition of repressed or gladly forgotten traumas. Oursler found that the scale of the doll or dummy also makes an enormous difference in the reaction of visitors to his work in exhibition; tiny dolls in great pain evoked the most pathos.[5] "Bodies" could be joined into a gigantic mass of one collective body or melted directly into significant objects, as in "System for Dramatic Feedback" (Portikus, Frankfurt 1994 and MOMA 1995); in this piece we are in the psychic space of primary process thinking on the other side of the fourth wall, as the flat projection of spectators in a movie theater onto the wall of the installation demonstrates. Oursler also projects facial features onto flowers, giant pills, and bodily organs preserved in formaldehyde—what is inside is projected outside. In "The Laugh of #12", the organ jars are having a conversation full of non sequiturs because it is out of synchronization, suggesting an underlying solipsism of machine-mediated interaction that is masked through simultaneity.

Ken Feingold's "Where I can see my house from here so we are" (1993-94, exhibited at the Interactive Media Festival 1995) seemed like put-on to me at first, (especially since I had been taken in by his "documentary," *Un chien délicieux,*): Charlie McCarthy style robot-scooters with cameras for eyes and microphones for ears roam a mirror world, operated

telematically by remote joysticks and a *Kaori*-style ventrilo-quism program: several members of the public hidden behind curtains like the wizard of Oz, can speak and move via their avatars in the "public" or exhibition space. However, it is in-credibly difficult for the robot operator to orient her-or himself in the mirrored space using the monitor or to figure out whether one is seeing a "real" other dummy or a mirror reflection of "oneself". (I spent most of my time in this piece running my wheels up against my own mirror image.) Furthermore, the dum-mies can never "physically" meet, since each is held in its own sector by a barrier; and, the quality of the experience depended on the effort and ingenuity all the robot-masters were willing to put into open-ended play amidst such confusion. The frustra-tions I felt in the piece were revealing, as this piece is a meta-phor that embodies many of the features of electronic exchanges on the Internet and elsewhere. Perhaps, like Don Quixote con-fronting the knight of mirrors, the piece was designed to con-fuse us out of a delusionary state.

Considering the growing importance of "enhanced reality" and the fantasy of ubiquitous computing in contemporary society, art that foregrounds and experiments with the projection of per-sonality onto dumb objects is part of a project of demystification. While Heinrich von Kleist's empty-headed and graceful mari-onettes evoked the sublime, objects that seem stupid, clumsy and goofy are the humorous and pathetic exponents of our situation in the comedy of the slaves to mythologies of technology. Fools, simpletons and clowns have always been good for establishing an ironic relation to symbolic codes and conventions. It is interesting to speculate on why there is a vogue for such figures in contempo-rary popular and mass culture, from the regressive ideology of *Forrest Gump* and the delightful silliness of the clowns in *Dumb and Dumber* to the non-judgmental protagonist of *Ed Wood*, who mixes genders and plots and narrative codes in films so bad they are good. Historically, naive figures from *Don Quixote* to the "ad-venturous super simpleton" of the Thirty Years war in Germany (*Der abenteuerliche Simpliccisimus*) are marks of an age of tran-sition, in which conventional codes are in flux and older mytholo-gies still hold sway long after the societal forms they sustained have melted away. The meaningless presence of *Forrest Gump* in the audio-visual documents of historical events of a whole gen-eration is a warning that naiveté can also be just pathetic empty-headedness. A perfect cipher with magical powers who never changes or learns anything is in no way a cultural model. (Note that I do not believe this figure has much to do at all with mental disability or with the actual, very complex, extraordinary human beings who suffer from it; nor does the historical tradition associ-ated with fools, simpletons, dummies and clowns have any direct relation to the cultural artifact of I.Q.) Artificial stupidity is an experiment that can enrich the range of our cultural imagination, just as it can serve regressive notions of the redemptive power of simplicity and foolishness. The dummy doesn't have to learn from the experience if we can.

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Notes

[1]Christopher Phillips, "Desiring Machines: Notes on Commodity, Ce-lebrity, and Death in the Early Work of Andy Warhol," in: *Public Infor-mation: Desire. Disaster. Document* (New York: Distributed Art Pub-lishers and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1994), citing and commenting on Günther Anders ["other", birth surname Stern] notion of serial reproduction as immortality, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen: Über die Shicksal der Seele in den zweiten industriellen Zeitalter* ["the obsoleteness of humanity: on the fate of the soul in the second industrial age"] (München: H. Beck, 1956).

[2]Nell Tenhaaf describes the "willing machine" and the "bachelor ma-chine" as exponents of a masculinist relation to technology in "On Monitors and Men and other Unsolved Feminine Mysteries: Video Technology and the Feminine," in: *Critical Issues in Electronic Me-dia*, ed. Simon Penny (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 219-233.

[3]See Aladair Duncan's "Milo Garcia, i'M a Gorila c, i Micro Gala, i i a GlaM roc." *Mute 1* (Spring 1995), p. XII.

[4]See Tenhaaf, p. 227.

[5]Susan Stewart's *On Longing* is a sustained exploration of the cultural meaning of scale. Oursler's "System" explores both the gigantic body made of fragments and the enclosed toy worlds of the miniature.