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THE ROBOTIC CHAIR

September 20, 2007 – January 6, 2008

Co-presented by The Children's Museum and
the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery
Presented at The Children's Museum in concert
with Contemporary Art Forum | Kitchener and Area (CAFKA)

Essay by Bruce Willis Ferguson

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ROBOTS R US BRUCE WILLIS FERGUSON

There is an interesting aspect, perhaps even a secret that is obvious only when visiting in person the BMW manufacturing plant in Leipzig in the former East of Germany. Beyond and somewhat hidden from the extraordinary architecture of Zaha Hadid and the cars slowly floating above the administrative space with their blue auras announcing a kind of new religious icon in a new cathedral of capitalism, are, of course, lines and lines of immense robots. These overly articulated, colossal robots make the cars, pretty completely from the beginning of the assembly line to the end. They are often gigantic and thoroughly ambulatory and their welding alone makes them spectral. The enormous spaces they inhabit are part Henry Ford's five-year efficiency plan (given willingly and directly to a waiting Stalin) and part Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*. Like Hadid's architecture, this cinematic space of labour is already the future now – the answer to its prayers and its nightmares. Robots today make Milano cookies, mow lawns, walk into live volcanoes, mine fields and underwater shipwrecks, act as children's pets or companions, drive European trains, explore toxic waste dumps and defuse bombs. They do dangerous jobs and they do things we can't do because they can go places we can't or are unwilling or less willing to do. In theory they save time, the most ethereal of commodities. They also, as in Leipzig, replace traditional human labour, a dream come true but a double-edged sword, as local unemployment, rather than "free" time, is one of the more obvious consequences.

Automatic servants have a fairly long history of prediction and possibility but in the period of modernism beginning in the late nineteenth century, they arrive with regularity in the global imagination alongside the development of film and its prosthetics – cameras and projectors. It is almost as though film is a faint but persistent glimmer of the automated human double – a ghosting precursor to the real thing. Film's persistent clatter through the sprockets is the miniature fantasy double of modernism's assembly lines, a parallel life which is contained in Charlie Chaplin's "image" going through the assembly line gears in *Modern Times*. He is eaten up by modernism and film at the same time – and of course he becomes one of the first victims of modern "celebrity" as a result. But, genuine, not fantasy robots, nor Frankensteinian novelistic monsters, came into full existence due to transistors and integrated circuits in the mid-twentieth century. If a machine can be programmed to ape a functioning being by getting data from its environment and move in and through and manipulate its environment, it is probably one of the sophisticated doppelgangers we like to call a robot. Robots can resemble humans, or toys, or snakes or insects or steroid bullies; they can give help or attitude; they can run or fly or walk crablike, but they are generically the same, regardless of temperament or abilities. They live in the techtorium with us and, not surprisingly, they are like us in many ways. Ironically, when one thinks about Leipzig, it was a writer, Karel Capek, who coined the word robot from a Czech word meaning "menial labour" in 1920. In his play *Rossum's Universal Robots*, his automated creations overthrow their architects, a theme which underpins a skepticism that often underlies much of the discourse around robots, and much technology, even today. For the robots to have such an important positioning in Leipzig means that the idea was more powerful than perceived by even the most noir imaginations of art; while today architects and machines are each others' friends – joined inextricably in a rhythmic industrial dance.

The capabilities of robots, their aspects of magical metamorphosis that were formerly confined to dreams and delusions, have become an almost commonplace component of entertainment, science and the military. Proximity sensing, gravity sensing, automatic docking and self-reproducing acts or scenarios are persistent visions in the fantasy worlds of novels, films, toys and video games and realities in the realm of science where robots fulfill tasks, explore new territories and conjoin with fantasy in the military of course.

In the world of art however, one encounters robots less often. The Robotic Chair reveals the meeting of architecture, design and art and their blur with engineering and infomatics through new technologies of communication, promising the likelihood of more meet and greets and blurring of disciplinary parameters than in the past. Unlike the fears of robots that underwrite so much technophobic popular culture or the power ascribed to robots by scientists and technophiles alike, this Robotic Chair both does and undoes the assumptions of both. It is simply a strong performative metaphor. The Robotic Chair acts in both the real world and the world of the imagination and memory simultaneously – doing its artful science and its scientific art in a symbiotic moment of symbolic dimension.

By that I mean that The Robotic Chair is neither/nor or both/ and in reference to any discourse of art, science, design or communication. It exists in a wholly new space because it has nothing and everything to do, no place and every place to go. It tells us both of its technological prowess and its physical vulnerability in the same beat – in the moment of its triumph it is a failure, and its failure produces an extraordinary achievement. It is the Sisyphus machine I suspect we all know in our hearts and minds, but which we repress in order to go on going. It reminds us that we can quicken and even simulate life through an object that seems to have “life of its own” and at the same time, entropy and death are everywhere present regardless.

Sisyphus – world famous conniver, - the King who convinced Hades to put on his own deathly handcuffs (or chains depending on your interpreter), and then kept him prisoner so that death was impossible for anyone, even in battle. Sisyphus – avaricious and deceitful – seducer of his own niece – betrayer of Zeus’ secrets – killer of his own guests. Sisyphus – who believed he was cleverer than Zeus, a god. Sisyphus – who was eventually led to the Underworld for his eternal assignment, where he fooled Persephone, Queen of the Dead, to send him back across the River Styx to live the good life again and again. This Sisyphus – whose sins?

indiscretions? imagination? hubris? – was finally condemned to what we would call hard labour. The justice meted out to him was to roll a great heavy boulder to the top of a high peak. Once he attained the summit (or just a moment before depending on your interpreter), after the most heroic of efforts, the rock would obey gravity’s inexorable pull and roll back down the slope again. Just as he had cheated death over and over, Sisyphus would now be a slave to the maddening futile repetition of eternity’s timeline. In the best interpretations today, he is the disk of the sun that rises in the east and falls dutifully in the west daily. He is a symbol of time immemorial and repetition as sustainability. In a rich social interpretation, he represents the emptiness of political ambitions. He is, in the second interpretation, a symbol of greed and corruption in the inevitable jaws of defeat. In the most burdensome of the dreadful interpretations, he represents pure futility and endless loss. He is the symbol of a cynical and fatalistic viewpoint.

So what of an object that falls apart and then puts itself together again? This is an object that is surprisingly vulnerable because of a history of the dependability of wooden chairs – the understanding of their roles and their ubiquitous presence. Their very ordinariness and long presence in the world of cultures presents a paragon of firm unquestioned stability. This particular chair, the robotic one, again surprises us as it resurrects itself through “artificial” intelligence to put the wrong right, healing itself in a slow agonizing transformation before our very eyes. The question then is what kind of metaphor is this – one that is not merely a figure or an image but one that occurs in time – in our personal time and in the time of our history. I call it a Sisyphus machine because, regardless of the history of robotics – from science fiction to fictional science to problematic real sentient “beings” in our space – this chair acts deliberately and a bit comically and suspiciously and magically to remind us of the enormous and thankless effort needed to sustain any act of hope or even sustainability by man, beast, flora or machine.

When bridges split, dams break, knees buckle, cancer strikes, heads fall, bodies fail, planes buckle, a hand scleroses, a sole splits, roots rot, skin burns, glass shatters and bricks crumble in the long list of inevitable effects with multiple causes, we are reminded of the curse of the limits of life and simultaneously of the possibilities. On the brink of disaster and crisis the body is full and quickened. It can pick up after itself and all those other optimistic and hopeful figures of speech can apply to both the body and the spirit. The Robotic Chair reminds us in this fascinating way that to give in or give up is neither the tale of evolution nor of our humanity. In the oddest of ways, it takes this machine – this wreckless chair – to remind us of the most bitter and wonderful of truths: Samuel Beckett's "Fail again. Fail better."