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Kathleen Sellars

New Robiotics Research

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In his 19th century London home, Charles Babbage, the Victorian inventor of the Difference Engine, the mechanical precursor to today's digital computers, kept a model of his invention on display for visitors to see. Right next to it stood the Silver Dancer, a 12-inch high figure of a female automaton, all intricate brass clockwork mechanisms, with a tiny bird perched on the finger of one hand that would flap its wings, wave its tail, and open its beak. Babbage was fascinated with the automation, product of an 18th century maker, since first he had seen it as a schoolboy, and when the opportunity to own it presented itself many years later, he had jumped at the chance.

Babbage's juxtaposition of an amusing novelty — albeit, a toy of enormous complexity — and his mechanical computer — all precisely machined gears and cogs — was well in keeping with the Victorian's fascination with technologies that blurred the lines between entertainment and scientific achievement.

Not so much has changed, really, in two centuries; the entertainment industry and our need to be amused and distracted drives the pace of technological achievement (where, for instance, would the internet be today without the impetus of the porn industry having pushed technological boundaries forward so as to better sell its product?).

Kingston-based artist Kathleen Sellars's exhibition New Robiotics Research scouts out the region where a great deal of technological advancement is headed — towards the ethically uncertain interface with things biological — and presents us a preview of one version of just what may lay ahead.

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In 1999, the artist got in touch with the Kingston-based research team at the Centre for Fruit Tree Research, the team that was responsible for the development of such crops as the Blueberry, Blueberry, Blueberry! The team was looking for someone to make a bust of the scientist who had helped them. The bust would be made of a silicone-like substance and would be placed in the laboratory. The artist was happy to take on the challenge and created a bust of the scientist. The bust was then placed in the laboratory, where it was admired by all who entered.

Recent projects include: COQAO: Cyber-Organic Quasi-Animate Objects (2008-2009), a series of sculptural objects that explore the intersection of biology and technology, and the potential for new forms of life to emerge from the interface between the two. The exhibition has been exhibited at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, ON, and at theMultibus Auribus, University of Cape Town, South Africa. The works are contained in the two free-standing display cases in the centre of the room.

COQAO: Lingvatum Rapifliss, #45 is a bum-like thing, a bit lump with a kind of scaled surface that appears comprised of what most closely resembles a pattern of human tongues laid out along the exterior. This surface bristles with scattered erectile hairs, and the sculpture occasionally heaves up and down, as
el's breathing. COQAO: Digitus et Axilae, #207 is oval-shaped lump surfaced with finger-like appendages laid out like flattened coarse hairs. It too "breathes". COQAO: Umbilicus cum Digitis, #16-16 is a bowl-like object that also comprises a surface of finger-like appendages, but here they stand straight up and away from the thing, trembling gently (excited? fearful?) and occasionally breaking out into noisy, violent shaking. COQAO: Cubita, #27 is a ball-shaped thing, covered all the way around with breast-like eruptions that symmetrically coat the surface of the sculpture like some bizarre version of a soccer ball.

And finally there's COQAO: Kaput cum Multibus Auribus, #36. I consider it on its own because of potent real-world connections it brings to the fore. This biomorphic sculpture comprises an oval form the surface of which is entirely covered with the life-sized shapes of what appear to be human arms. The form oscillates back and forth in its case, as if restless, uncomfortable, or uneasy.

I choose the latter adjective, for the piece uneasily, if powerfully, evokes an experiment carried out in 1997 with what became widely known as the "Vacant Mouse." Raw carriage was transplanted onto the back of a bald white laboratory mouse, and, courtesy a mold implanted beneath its skin, was grown into something which became known as the "Vaccinated Mouse." The piece uneasily, if powerfully, evokes the unsettling sense that something has been taken away from us, that we have been altered on the inside, something that now eats and enacts itself within us.

The sumptuous wall reliefs and golden field of mountains in Gawu, a survey of mostly recent work by Ghanaian El Anatsui at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, fascinate the eyes and entice the body with their lushness, their lustrous, ultimately deceptive, beauty. Superficially bearing the features of traditional craftwork as practiced in parts of Nigeria, Ghana and Togo, the bold designs and immense scale of Anatsui's compositions divulge a view sharply critical of contemporary life in West Africa. His output also undermines our assumptions about African art in general. Within the limits imposed by our assumptions about African art in general. Within the limits imposed by our assumptions about African art in general. Within the limits imposed by our assumptions about African art in general. Within the limits imposed by our assumptions about African art in general. Within

Andinkra Sasa (2003) and Many Moons (2007). The former composition refers...