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THE HOSTS: A MASQUERADE OF IMPROVISING AUTOMATONS

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JUST WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES TODAY'S ROBOTS SO DIFFERENT, SO APPEALING?

In 2007, a group of Japanese engineers from Osaka unveiled a child-sized robot; bald and naked with grey silicone skin and watchful, oversized eyes. Video documentation showed these eyes as they tracked its creators moving around the lab. Then, while the engineers spoke to it and offered it kind words of encouragement, the infantile robot attempted to adjust its body from a lying to a sitting position. This uncanny, faintly chilling struggle with hydraulic piston soundtrack can be viewed over and over, courtesy of YouTube (just type-in "Scary Child Robot" or "Creepy Baby Robot" to find the link). CB2 is a robot birthed into a kind of humanoid nascency, with a high level of awareness, yet limited functional responses. Two years later, CB2 has been equipped with complex programming that enables it to learn through observation, classification, trial and error.<sup>1</sup> Just like a real boy?

In the doleful camera-lens eyes of CB2 is a reflection of the myriad retellings of Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio (1883) in children's stories and popular culture, from Disney to Brian Aldiss (author of *Supertoys Last All Summer Long* (1969)), to Stephen Spielberg. Who (of those who saw it) could forget the melodramatic Artificial Intelligence (2001) and the main character David's frequently-expressed desire for a mother's love, to become a "real boy", and the fraught emotional conundrum of his surrogate mother as she decides to abandon him in a forest? While one could drown in the gush of sentiment that issues from A.I., it somewhat bluntly addresses a hurdle to the progress of our recognition of artificial forms of intelligence. In Japanese roboticist Masahito Mori's terms, the more a robot is not-quite-but-almost human in appearance, the more difficulty we have in accepting it, as we assess it emotionally, according to our own physiological and psychological judgment values, as a human being. The Uncanny Valley that Mori hypothesised in 1970 refers to a sharp decline in a sense of familiarity when encountering a being one at first perceives to be human, only to discover through the rupture of shock that is not. As Jasia Reichart wrote of Mori in her contemporaneous *Robots: fact, fiction and prediction* (1978), "...for Mori, the most terrifying and the deepest secret of the uncanny valley is a moving corpse, which would be even more frightening than the most realistic artificial hand going awry".<sup>2</sup>

“Nothing is more strange to a man than his own image.”<sup>3</sup>

It is with Mori’s thesis in mind that artist Wade Marynowsky has embarked on a series of robotics projects since 2007 that deviate from the hackneyed Hollywood tropes and popular science-fiction representations of the robot, while maintaining a fascination for the uncanny. Turning away from the predilection for repeating narratives of robot rebellion; of humanoid robots turning-on their makers at the point of achieving a human-like state of consciousness, or whilst undergoing a kind of existential crisis <sup>4</sup>, Marynowsky’s research has delved back further into European and Asian histories, where the invention of decorative automata arose from mechanical revolutions (from Medieval times to the nineteenth century) through the skilled hands of artisans, puppeteers, craftsmen and clockmakers. In turn, the handmade construction of these expensive automata, available only to the aristocracy (or perched in hard-to-reach public places)<sup>5</sup> aspired to harness the wonders of nature – to imitate the actions of birds, monkeys, horses and humans, all within the luxury of one’s home. Others created the artifice and illusion of live performance, where clockwork dolls played musical instruments such as pianos, harps and flutes. The idea of the automata as a source of entertainment, performance, reanimation and repetition is evident in Marynowsky’s first major robotics project *Autonomous Improvisations v1* (2007) which catalogued and remixed video documentation of Sydney’s underground performance and burlesque artists through the improvisational conduit of a computer-aided pianola, spookily played by unseen hands.

In 2008 Marynowsky inhabited what Ryszard Dabek called the “inner life of the automaton”<sup>6</sup> by providing the voice and conversational apparatus of a polite and superficially charming robot named Boris. His installation, *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie Robot* (after the 1972 film by Luis Buñuel) expressed a one-sided performance modality; of physical proximity without intimacy; of jokes with or without humour; of conversational language employed without the need for reciprocity or reply. Exquisitely dressed in a French maid’s black satin and lace with a bustle-like protrusion at his back, Boris’s embodied and mobile voice represented the notion of a self-contained and self-preserving intelligence.<sup>7</sup> For all of its polite exclamations and enquiries, Boris’s primary interest was to convey its satisfaction with its own appearance – not in self-improvement through the mirror of humanity, not a desire for emotion or the possibility of becoming a “real boy”. Marynowsky identifies in this work the complexity of our relationships with automata: We claim to ‘love’ our cars, our toys and dishwashing machines and through the mediated forms of our popular culture, we imagine that they could love us back (or otherwise pursue us to extinction). But do we consider that they could also be possessed of a selfish love for themselves?

*The Hosts: A Masquerade of Improvising Automatons* takes a leap across Mori’s *Uncanny Valley*, imagining a space for human encounter with robots that relies

only on the familiarity of context (a masquerade ball) and artifice (embroidered crinoline costumes and twinkling electronic lights). But it is not framed around the expectation of human mimesis. Inspired in part by E.T.A Hoffmann's series of tales including *Der Sandman* (1817)<sup>8</sup> in which a young man falls in love with a feminine automaton, Olympia, who communicates only through her glances, Marynowsky's Hosts recognise and track the movement of other robots and people in the space via their bodies and illuminated eyes – the space itself is watched-over by another ocular source of light perched above them all. The sumptuous, carnivalesque dresses and embroidery of The Hosts make them desirable objects in our eyes as we languish over the folds and filigree lace of their attire. In turn, The Hosts in their various high-camp masquerade guises (Princess, Clown, Cowboy and Military Officer) possess us in the spotlight of their dazzling gaze, holding us in their thrall before turning away and moving on. Unlike the child robot CB2, these eyes do not seek to consume in order to process our behaviour and imitate us, for The Hosts are far superior dancers. Marynowsky's robots occupy a kind of fragile utopia – a space for greeting and coexistence, for slightly menacing choreography and a testing ground for the possibility of equitable inter-intelligence relationships: A space where (free of superstition and paranoia) we do not see the plastic-coated shadows or the reanimated corpses of ourselves but rather other autonomous beings, improvising.

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1 <http://www.wordpress.tokyotimes.org> and <http://news.cnet.com>

2 Reichardt, J. *Robots: Fact, Fiction and Future Prediction* (London; Thames and Hudson, 1978) pp.27

3 Kapek, Karel. *Rossum's Universal Robots 1920, Act 1V*. This play by the Czech writer is widely held as the first instance in which the word 'Robot' was used. Robot is derived from the Czech word *robot*, meaning serf labour.

4 For instance, *Alien*, *Forbidden Planet*, *I Robot*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Dark Star*, *Terminator*, *Robocop*, *Blade Runner* etc.

5 The *Strasbourg Cock* by Villard d'Honnecourt was an automated cockrel, installed on the spire of the Strasbourg Cathedral in 1352.

6 Dabek, Ryzard. *On The Edge of the Uncanny Valley* Art Monthly 2009

7 Boris' outfit was the its only concession to the notion of robot as servant to humankind.

8 From the artist's notes.