

Inanimate Intimacy

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One of the great undertakings of critical thinking in the past twenty years, has been the freeing of the body from the inertia of matter and its re-articulation in the context of culture. The body belongs not to nature but to history, both that of the individual life and the field of its deployment in the social world. The first stage of this intellectual renovation involved the categories of the "perceived" body in feminist discourse; it then proceeded to the body "interpreted" by various discursive communities such as medicine, psychoanalysis or religion; and thirdly, to the body in various systems of "representation," such as nineteenth-century allegory, or the visualization of the "Other" in colonial discourse. These first three arenas Sartre would call "my-body-for-others," while the fourth category belongs to the operations of "my-body-for-myself," that is, the lived body as the site and locus of my actions and reactions in the world. What we are now beginning to clearly understand is that this lived body changes from one milieu to another, and is subject to various technologies which discipline and control it according to the needs of the social order.

It is here that my own analysis of Wendy Jacob's *Squeeze Chairs* begin, for the chairs are both an analog of the body and the site where a certain status of the body is to be broken down to ever more discrete units revealed. Subjected to overstimulation, the fear of a sexual epidemic, and massive systems of social control, the lived body withdraws from the world and from others to a unique form of narcissism at the service of self-survival rather than pleasure. As metaphors of the body, Jacob's pulsating, mechanically breathing chairs come from a long line of automatons which have established a bridge between the "natural," the conscious and the technological. From the puppet to the robot, the moving figure has fascinated mankind because it offers the possibility of man becoming Lord and Master of Life, and therefore of Death. Each epoch adds its own twisted possibilities to the tale and thus reveals its localized understanding of the inner workings of nature, as well as its dreams of social power.

The mechanical automaton is tied not merely to our myths and art, but to our scientific constructions as well. As Newtonian physics, Descartes' "ghost in the machine," or Harvey's conception of the heart made their appearance in history, they were accompanied by the mechanical Clock Jacks, Poupee Orchestras and card playing dolls which fascinate us to this day. This scientific paradigm of the world would later lead to the mechanization of man's labor in mass production parodied by the marionette-like movements of Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. In the nineteenth-century, a shift occurred which enabled the human body control in a rapidly industrializing economy. The human being as a transcendent, organic and autonomous entity, voluntary author of its own actions, was transformed into a reflex apparatus whose

separate "parts" could be controlled and manipulated. Industry's need for acute coordination of rapid, repetitive eye and hand movements, required very precise knowledge of specific parts of the body in order to control the focus of workers. It is an error to believe that art and science run in opposition to each other, for their paths crisscross in multifarious and unpredictable ways in a common world. The economics of attention ran parallel to the optical and formal aesthetics of modernism. The separation of the senses from movement and the physiological inventory of the body, led to a concept of vision "redefined as a capacity for being affected by sensation that have no necessary link to a referent, thus imperiling any coherent system of meaning."¹ It produced, in other words, a form of social/scientific autism for developing economies and the loss of shared communal values.

The automaton shifted gears, so to speak, making it more difficult than ever to tell the puppet from the puppeteer. In the 1886 novel *Tomorrow's Eve*, set in Menlo Park, Thomas Edison dreams of creating a female "Imitation Human Being" called Hadaly. She will match identically Alicia Clary, the mistress of his friend Lord Ewall, who had complained to Edison that though she is exquisitely beautiful she lacks a noble soul. At first, Ewall believes he can easily distinguish the woman from the doll:

*A ridiculous senseless doll! As if in the face of a living young woman as beautiful as this one, all that madness would vanish on the spot! Electricity, hydraulic pressure, cylinders, and so on-ridiculous!*²

Then he kisses her and is filled with revulsion as she intones, "Dear friend, don't you recognize me? I am Hadaly." Hadaly is the first of the Stepford wives, the perfect woman with a manipulatable soul, man's perfect mate, Duchamp's Bachelor Machines. The secret scenario of all automatons is their sexual role in a domestic economy, they "perform" without complications like emotional demands, pregnancy, or sexually transmitted diseases! It is here at this juncture that we begin to see the origins of the squeeze chairs in this exhibition.

Jacob's earlier work called upon the animation of inanimate objects like her breathing walls long before her contact with Temple Grandin's agricultural and personal squeeze machines. Grandin's project to calm animals before slaughter, her "Stairway to Heaven," runs parallel to her personal chute used to calm herself. Both uses were informed by her autism which provided her with a peculiar sensitivity to the animals she studied and a model adopted from occupational therapist, Jane Ayres, for use with autistic children. Called sensory integration, "it reduces touch sensitivity and calms the nervous system by applying deep pressure and slow vestibular stimulation ..."³ Adaptations were made by wrapping the children in gym mats while applying pressure and later Grandin herself envisioned the squeeze machine (modeled on a cattle chute) which allowed her to lay face down and, with a hand operated lever, regulate the pressure from the padded sides of the machine. Autistics often withdraw from "touch" by another person because

it sets off an overwhelming sensory overload and anxiety. The machine provided "pressure" which was re-assuring and soothing to Grandin, her automaton relaxed her in a way no human caress could. In Jacob's chairs we find what first appears to be a domestic solution to the agon of social life—we can comfort ourselves without contamination in the privacy of our own room. It is accomplished through the illusion that the home is a sacred space for subjectivity, free of social control. Each member of the family further withdraws to their own individual television sets, isolated even from kith and kin. The narcissism of the private offers salvation from the interpersonal, but it is a promise not kept. Here, in the remote social space of the gallery, the abstract viewer of an earlier aesthetic is replaced by at least one performer whose own sense of scale may be thrown by sitting in a space contoured to the artist's slender body. The artist, however, makes it difficult to perform auto-erotically, for the foot pump works best when operated by a second person. Consequently, we find ourselves back in the heart of the social, where our sexuality is always mediated by the social controls of the state and the manipulations of the media. Jacob forces us to become active witnesses with variable subject positions in "an inter-subjectivity which enables identifications and differences between women and men and between races and cultures to be recognized."⁴

The chairs themselves announce their rootedness both in industrial processes and our socialization through style. *Squeeze Chair* (blue wool), 1997 has a stolid but modern feel, consonant with a certain decor as dictated by the mavens of interior design. Personal style is always a product tied to one's class or class aspirations, the technologies of fashion effect the planned obsolescence required by a consumer economy which manipulate all our desires. *Squeeze Chair (with floral slip cover)*, 1997 markets a new moment in the domestic interior. A homey club chair for the "entertainment room" or the "great room," its demure pattern announces the joys of the nuclear family in the age of AIDS. One can imagine a whole series of these chairs addressed to the segmented markets of capital: the professional's library chair in leather, the blue collar chair in denim, a baby chair with washable plastic covers portraying our gendered destinies. With each chair's construction, we can see our own unique "taste" manufactured for mass consumption, just as our purported individuality has been analyzed and manipulated, created in fact, by the culture in which we live. We are our own automatons; for our preferences, our isolation, our constructions of intimacy, our subjectivity and our bodies are the androids of that monstrous puppeteer we see in the social mirror.

*Sharing in the trick of the automaton is merely another way to define ourselves as human, that is as both being and nothingness, presence and absence: the automaton is, in a way, our mirror...our evil eye.*⁵

Notes

1. Jonathan Crary. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press. 1991): 91.
2. Villiers de L'Isle Adam, *L'Ève future* (1886) *Tomorrow's Eve*, Trans. Robert M. Adams (Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1982): 192.
3. Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, (New York: Vintage. 1996): 79.
4. Rosemary Betterton, *Intimate Distance: Women Artists and the Body* (New York: Routledge. 1996): 193.
5. Jean-Claude Beaune, "The Classical Age of Automata: An Impressionistic Survey from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, I* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989): 437.