

# autobody

essay by Carolyn Bell Farrell

Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.<sup>1</sup>

– Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"

With each new innovation, the contours of our sense of reality shift. Time, space and gravity are no longer deemed impediments; we negotiate new modalities on a daily basis, ably traversing different realms of existence. Communication technologies instantaneously transmit the body and its images across a global network. The interventions of biotechnologies, and genetic and reproductive technologies, alter the materiality of the corporeal body, itself, engineering its potentiality. Natural functions are regulated, rejuvenated and even replicated, assuring our longevity. Mediating our bodies, as well as our perceptions, memories, politics and histories, the ideologies promoted and circulated by contemporary technologies are restructuring human experience along technologically-driven models. As a result, we find ourselves immersed within a technological consciousness.

As the web of interactions between humans and machines becomes increasingly more complex and more pervasive, the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, self and other, body and prosthesis erode. Paul Virilio observes in *The Lost Dimension*, "What used to be the boundary of a material, its 'terminus,' has become an entryway hidden in the most imperceptible entity."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, our present-day coupling of machines and organisms denies the autonomy of the body as being separate from the technological practices that are reshaping it. Subsumed by a technological imperative, the value we place on human agency and on our experience of becoming, of evolving in time as part of a continuum, has diminished. The map of our bodily reality is being redrawn: the boundaries are now permeable.

Lois Andison explores the status of the body at this juncture between the biological and technological. In a program of kinetic sculptures, the artist investigates the implications of the human/machine interface, and its effect on our experience of the "natural." Andison locates her practice within the domain of the hybrid, a cross-breed wherein the machine assumes characteristics of the human body (e.g. artificial life forms, automatons) or the human body assumes characteristics of the machine (e.g. cyborgs, bionics, computer prosthetics). Laboriously she translates simple human actions and reactions via technological means. Social reality and fiction co-mingle, as the artist attempts to crisscross the divide between fact and fantasy, skirting the rational while playfully transgressing convention. Comical and ironic, menacing yet vulnerable, her robotic forms turn our efforts to reinvent the human body into a burlesque. Attenuating the membrane of plausibility, Andison's humorous critique exposes the potential consequences of our forays into this ever-widening territory of intercorporeality.

Early hybrid sculptures by the artist reference technological practices within the realm of animal husbandry: inception, gestation, maternity, lactation, and death. Nature is extracted, replicated and harnessed into the service of humankind. More recently, Andison has focused on the mechanization of nature, and its re-animation via technological means. Raw, organic materials are introduced into urban spaces and grafted onto technological apparatuses. *camouflage 2* (1998) comprises ordered rows of wild grasses programmed to sway back and forth in unison, propelled by a mechanized wind.<sup>3</sup> Adopting the guise of a prairie landscape, her

mechanical "field" simulates a segment of the natural environment, albeit transplanted within the white cube of the gallery confines.

Camouflage, the title bestowed on a series of automatons by Andison, is an inborn natural attribute of survival, a means to elude one's enemy by mimicking one's surroundings, as well as a military strategy. In his essay "The Classical Age of Automata," Jean-Claude Beaune claims that the original automaton was conceived and constructed as a machine for killing, commenting that "mobility, speed and camouflage belong with the arts of war that live concentrated within the sequence of automata."<sup>4</sup> Conflating these associations, Andison points to the more insidious aspects of surviving within a technologically-mediated world, while negotiating its slippery slopes of differentiation between reality and the "reality effect."<sup>5</sup>

As electronic technologies increasingly emulate our sensory modes, our reliance on somatic experience is superseded by the technological gaze or, what has been coined as "the skin of culture."<sup>6</sup> In her recent host of automatons, Andison explores the consequences of technology's exclusion of the physical body as the locus of lived experience, the instrument of perception and the mirror of society in general. Specifically, she cites the impact of advanced technologies on the culture of beauty and on the collective fabric of desire, while enumerating a legacy of inculcated behaviours which masquerade as "natural" attributes of the feminine. For *camouflage 1* (1998), the artist harvested hundreds of Queen Anne's lace over a three-year period. Affixed to a dressmaker's Judy, the skeins of withering wild flowers echo period lace, while disguising the skin of pink latex that covers an antique bodice. A sensor-animated collar encircles the mannequin's neck. Emulating the jaws of a Venus flytrap, this large motorized Elizabethan ruff flaps on approach – as if anticipating comparison with mass-disseminated images of physical beauty and inexhaustible youth. Simultaneously enticing and repelling spectators, her gestures beckon yet dissuade too close a read. Conflating the ephemerality of nature with the female condition, Andison alludes to society's preoccupation with youth as a requisite of beauty. In a technological society where the perpetually "new" is privileged, age relations are power relations: youth, and its corollary, beauty, hold sway.<sup>7</sup>

While technologies are instruments of control with limited agencies, as tools they embody conceptual models and, as such, embody values we hold about the world. In a late essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud comments: "With every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning... Long ago he formed an ideal conception of omnipotence and omniscience which he embodied in his gods. To these gods he attributed everything that seemed unattainable to his wishes, or that was forbidden to him. One may say, therefore, that these gods were cultural ideals. Today he has come very close to the attainment of this ideal, he has almost become a god himself... Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God."<sup>8</sup> Sixty years later, in *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits*, Andrew Ross makes reference to what has become the "folklore of technology... the mythical feats of survivalism and resistance in a data-rich world of virtual environments and posthuman bodies."<sup>9</sup> Yet, the possibility of an invulnerable and, hence, immortal body still reigns as our greatest technological myth.

Andison's practice reveals the ways in which myth and tool mutually constitute each other, elucidating the ramifications of these technologically-encoded instruments of meaning for women. *camouflage 3* (2000) consists of a fibreglass torso cast from the artist's own body, the human imperfections blatantly visible through the translucent flesh-toned sheath that drapes her entire form. The figure's arms are bound close to her sides within the restricted weave of this floor-length shroud. In lieu of legs, a metal stand issues from beneath her body, fixing her stance. As we approach, a sensor-animated prosthetic neck emerges out of this headless form, initiating a sequence of vertical movements. Fabricated from successive metal rings, it

telescopes upward. Andison's chimera-like creature seemingly bristles, the defensive posturing read as a vain attempt to ward off scrutiny. With her neck fully extended, she literally "blows her stack," climaxing in a small puff of smoke.

The corporeal schema is a dynamic organization of the body, rendering it capable of performing physical tasks that unfold in the absence of conscious intervention. Andison's prosthetic neck, like the mechanical ruff, is both a physical and a psychic extension – an involuntary and instinctual physical response common to human and animal species, as well as a social reflex, an expression informed by social content and coercions.

As a corrective device, the prosthesis infers an impairment or inadequacy of the biological body and reliance on technology to recondition it; as such, it imparts a semblance or illusion of control. Here, Andison inverts the power relations. The human body appears harnessed in service to the prosthesis, subordinated to the performance of a mechanical reflex.

In a program of work collectively titled *autobody*, Andison shapes a critical, reflexive space of discourse and self-definition, evoking a complex array of social, political, cultural, and aesthetic issues.<sup>10</sup> *maid of the mist* (2001) consists of a severed female head, slightly smaller than life-size, mounted on a wooden cabinet. Her mannequin-like features are perfectly symmetrical, her expression vacant. A contemporary index of physical beauty, her stylized facade objectifies an idealized self-image constituted by the reflection of others. Cast in bronze and resurfaced with an opalescent auto-body paint, the maiden's head seemingly bears the weight of our cultural reverence for beauty. The plinth on which she rests resembles a department store display unit, connoting the commodification of youth and beauty, driven by the economic demands of production and consumption. Ultimately, she is a product of the formulaic replication of aesthetic ideals, a construction capable of being endlessly reproduced.

Perforations extend over the entire surface of the maiden's visage. The holes are, in fact, conduits for streams of mist that she periodically exudes. Countering her fixed repose, the jets of steam suggest the release of pent-up frustration, anxiety and unvoiced resentment – as if her calm exterior masks a fervent emotionality erupting within. *maid of the mist*, as well as the earlier *camouflage* works, elicits the ambivalence women experience: wanting to disentangle themselves from the restraints imposed by society's insidious expectations of beauty yet, at the same time, desiring to conform to these ideals. While oppressive, exhausting and ultimately destructive, enslavement to beauty's torturous regimes endures. Escape from this contemporary "Iron Maiden" is seemingly futile.<sup>11</sup>

Andison parodies society's desire to engineer perfection, fuelled by the ideology of unlimited possibility. Her choice of immutable, industrial materials – fibreglass, aluminium, ceramics and auto-body paints – illustrates the consequences of our efforts to circumvent the aging process by molding a body impervious to the ravages of time. Yet, as Gail Weiss comments in her essay, "The Durée of the Techno-Body," "we 'inhabit' time and are inhabited by it, through our own bodily rhythms and movements, and through the interconnections between our own durée and the durée of all that we encounter... 'Freezing time' would lead to a corresponding freezing of temporality; it would require the severing of the continuum that unites one durée with another durée and would collapse an instant into an eternity."<sup>12</sup> Depleted of any vestige of sensuality, Andison's *maid of the mist* is host to a frozen, spectral and rust-proof veneer. Eternal youth, as portrayed here, culminates in a death-like stasis.

*sugar daddy* (2001), the token male automaton, shapes the concept of beauty as a system of currency, an economy predicated on politics and power relations. An expression of masculine authority and a prototype of the modern knowing subject, his presence also underscores the desires, motives and aesthetic ideals which

derive from the traditionally male-dominated disciplines of science and technology. A wall-mounted sculpture, *sugar daddy* consists of an orange fibreglass head, with a vertical steel shaft beneath functioning as a counterweight. As a whole, the configuration resembles something akin to a human lollipop. With the exception of his burnt sugar colouration – recalling the candy that shares his name – his generic features confer anonymity. The automaton's repertoire of actions is limited. In random sequence, he alternatively nods his head in approval or shakes it in disapproval. Lacking cognizance of his surroundings, he appears tethered to a cycle of habitual gestures performed *ad infinitum*, as if personifying the 'waking sleep' induced by our technological consciousness.

As Andison's series of mechanical body parts and severed limbs articulate an absurd reinscription of convention, they also create a stage for the construction and performance of bodily-based identities. In *iris* (2001), a fibreglass version of a dressmaker's Judy is resurfaced with dark blue auto-body paint. Her scale is imposing, her presence authoritative. The figure's breasts are suggestively adorned with ornamental decorations resembling details on an armoured breast-plate or floral decals. On approach, these metallic petals unfold. Each aperture reveals a mirrored interior surface, in which the spectator sees his or her own eyes looking back. Seductive yet threatening, these lens-like constructions operate as a defiant reversal of the gaze. Countering the inscription of woman as spectacle and object of voyeurism, her irreverent gestures are aimed at destabilizing the patriarchal status quo. While the hour-glass figure of the Judy quotes society's definitions of the perfect female figure, *iris* does not conjure images of glamour or sexuality. Instead, military associations are invoked, in particular, a war of territory waged for the primacy of the gaze.

Andison exposes the unconscious repetition of social mannerisms while alluding to the privileges associated with class, race and gender. In *the wave* (2001), a pair of stylized, porcelain-gloved hands parrots the salutary greeting of Queen Elizabeth II. Identity and status are smugly ensconced in her celebrated wave. On close inspection, we see that the 'pair' are actually comprised of two right hand ceramic glove molds, the size (6 1/2) and model number detailed on the surface. Moving independently, and slightly out of sync, one hand appears to mimic the other. An endless cycle of imitation ensues. Andison's quotation becomes a comic shadow extolling the moorings of these societal underpinnings. Mounted on a display unit, the gloved hands are disassociated from bodily form, operating as appendages to the visible mechanisms that propel them in a mesmerizing sequence of movements. Within Andison's incongruous medley of technological and human components, hierarchical differentiation is evident, yet it is the machine that takes precedence.

In striving for perfection, technological advancement has become synonymous with human progress or evolution. Supplanting the psychological processes of individuation, technology is envisioned as *the* transformative agent. As Jerry Mander observes *In the Absence of the Sacred*, "Where evolution was once an interactive process between human beings and a natural, unmediated world, evolution is now an interaction between human beings and our own artifacts. We are essentially coevolving with ourselves in a weird kind of intraspecies incest."<sup>13</sup> Andison's program of work illuminates the nature and folly of our ambitions to supersede the limitations of the human condition by reliance on technological practices. While satirical, her fabricated body parts, endowed with powers of movement, shed light on the ways in which mechanical apparatuses have come to engage us in increasingly more intimate relationships with technology. As technological determinism is pitted against self-determinism, she poses the question, "Can we reinvent our bodies and, in so doing, what are the implications?"

There is no individual in our society who is immune to the technological effect, who can sustain a resistance to its operations and ideologies. Like phantom limbs, our technological prosthetics may be invisible, yet they are ever-present, integrated into our psyches. What we can cultivate is a more conscious awareness of our

own interactions, and interdependence, with contemporary technologies. As Haraway admonishes, "The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment."<sup>14</sup> Hence, the turf war is within. As technologies insidiously root themselves in the passivity of our own automatic conditioning, it is, ultimately, our own 'technological somnambulism' that puts us in danger of being 'reinvented' in the image of our own products.

## Notes

1. Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 152.
2. Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, trans. Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), Columbia University, and Autonomedia, 1991) 17.
3. Lois Andison's solo exhibition presented at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, featured both *camouflage 1* and *camouflage 2*.
4. Jean-Claude Beaune, "The Classical Age of Automata: An Impressionistic Survey from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century," trans. Ian Patterson, *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part One, Zone 3*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Urzone, 1990) 479.
5. Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, 24.
6. Derrick de Kerckhove, *The Skin of Culture* (Toronto: Sommerville House, 1995). His title references Marshall McLuhan's comment, "In the electric age, we wear all mankind as our skin."
7. As figured in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, domination over the human body – the conquering of age, and the attendant loss of health, beauty and productivity – is the ultimate fantasy of technology.
8. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1930, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989) 737-738.
9. Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991) pp. 9, 88.
10. *autobody*, Andison's solo exhibition at the Koffler Gallery, includes five works: *camouflage 3*, *maid of the mist*, *sugar daddy*, *iris* and *the wave*.
11. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1991) 17. Wolf draws this analogy, commenting that, "The original Iron Maiden was a medieval German instrument of torture, a body-shaped casket painted with limbs and features of a lovely, smiling young woman. The unlucky victim was slowly enclosed inside her; the lid fell shut to immobilize the victim, who died either of starvation or, less cruelly, of the metal spikes embedded in her interior. The modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly rigid, cruel and euphemistically painted. Contemporary culture directs attention to imagery of the Iron Maiden, while censoring real women's faces and bodies."
12. Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 112.
13. Jerry Mander, *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & the Survival of the Indian Nations* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992) 32.
14. Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 180.