Machination
Cake Industries (Jesse Stevens & Dean Petersen)

20 August to 29 October 2017
The title that the artists have taken for this exhibition, *Machination*, works in perfect synch with the art itself—readable as both a play on words and an exposé. Living in what has been called ‘the second machine age’ we are constantly engaged with and beholden to machines and machine intelligence. We entrust machines with our physical, emotional and economic well being. Technology in all its manifestations is a ubiquitous part of our daily lives. There are times when we are keenly aware of this saturation and others when we simply accept its silent presence. In the moments that we choose to perceive the presence of technology, we may think about how it works, muse about its history, what it means, where it comes from and who we are within it – or we may just sense it and consider its wonder.

Well into the first quarter of this new century, we have seen dramatic technological changes and the emergence of new cultural forms, practices and understandings developing as a result of technology. We rely on machines to facilitate interactions within our professional and personal lives. We also inhabit digital spaces and networks overseen by machines to define, author and project our presence and subjectivity. *Machination* presents us with a collection of machines, built by Cake Industries, each one exposing a critical truth about our individual and collective relationships to machines, technology and the digital worlds that have become ubiquitous within our daily lives. The works in this exhibition invite us to interrogate the circulation of ideology, action and the mediation of subjectivity through technology, as well as our own agency within this process.

Cake Industries’ artistic practice draws on technologies and processes derived from professional theatre and sound production as well as the DIY methods and techniques of the contemporary maker movement. Over many years Cake Industries have been combining and refining these forms within their own unique imaginary. One which has been
inspired by broken animatronics, the writing of Philip K. Dick and the cynical optimism that
binds the collective dystopic futures of 20th
century science fiction writing and cinema.
Another critical component informing their
work is early art making and exploration that
examines the intersection of human bodies
and machine based technologies such as
those found in the work of of STELARC and
Jim Whiting. Transposing their technological
practices through such an imaginary, Cake
Industries’ current work reflects and engages
the rhizomatic potential of its technological
foundations, while also pursuing the more
linear, overarching narratives and conditions
that are firmly located in the history of late
modernism.

Cake Industries most recent body of work
investigates the ubiquity of machines and digital
technology and likewise the implications and
complexity of the systems which drive them,
both physically and ideologically. Critical to this
approach is the revelation of how things work.
Process quite frequently presents as subject.
A pair of autonomous legs that walk using a
pulley system from a nineteenth century patent
for a steam powered man. An Edwardian era
automaton stripped back and transposed to
reflect both the physical elements of its origin
as well as the efficiency necessitated by its
new temporality. Elevating the time honoured
process of tinkering, the method of taking
something apart to see how it works, Cake
Industries provide access to explore beyond
the exterior of the machine into the process
and systems which bring forth its action and by
extension its perceived value.

Confluent to this investigation of process is the
tactic of shifting time to affect a concurrent shift
in perspective, creating a distance that can be
simultaneously both absurd and critical. Playing
with time and our perceptions of progress
Cake Industries are continuously repurposing
obsolete appliances and methods to reference
and explore contemporary relationships with
technology. Echoes of technological fads and
fascinations, reaching back hundreds of
years into the present day, reverberating and
hinting that perhaps this is not such a new
phenomenon. Through these shifts in time
and perspective, anachronistic technologies
animate the sociological implications of late
modern capitalism simultaneously revealing
both the beauty of their inner workings and
the insidious nature of their ideological
underpinnings.

At the heart of these critical explorations is,
of course, our own ongoing relationship with
technology and machines. Cake Industries
continuously implicate themselves within
the discourse of their practice. Replications
and representations of the artists’ physical
likenesses can be found embedded throughout
the exhibition. Their faces, features and limbs
are implanted within their machine creations,
eliciting a sense of animatism; the notion that
particular kinds of ongoing interactions with
objects can imbue the objects with traces of our
selves, including our fears, values and beliefs.
Shining a light on the egos, ambitions and
emotions which foreground and propel these
systems under scrutiny. Likewise, reflecting
on our own participation and complicity in
these very same systems. The artists’ bodies,
in this way, acting as surrogates complicate our
criticisms; ultimately implicating the human
values and voices that power ‘the systems’ that
these works seek to explore and expose.

Engaging with the work of Cake Industries,
we are invited to enter into an exchange.
On the surface that exchange, manifested
through motion, interaction and humour,
feels playful, spontaneous, at times even
celebratory. After a moment, however, there is
a shift; the joke lands, the party ends. The shiny
surface is pulled back revealing the levers, the
pulleys, the pistons propelling the machine.
From that revelation follows a subsequent
interrogation. What is driving this machine?
Is this progress? If so, at what cost? And to
whose benefit? Beneath the surface there is a
stark criticism of the machinery that drives late
modern capitalism and its implications on our
negotiation and representation of subjectivity
within a space that is seemingly both private
and public simultaneously. Cake Industries
invite us to explore, experiment and play with
our relationship to technology as we trace not
only the history and presence of such machines
in contemporary life but also attempt to unravel
our connections to intelligent, autonomous
technologies and the mythology of our current
‘machine age’.

Text by Nicole Hurtubise
Recently we began to detach from the world.

As a couple, as well as an artist collaboration, we’ve found ourselves gradually pulling away from mainstream culture, and making our own private world. A couple of years back we even moved from the increasingly compressed Melbourne to a country area so we could find a quiet space to create. The effect has been a new perspective on our society and the way people exist in it. We’ve found in this silence a strange observation platform to recognize what we have all become, and it’s quite bleak.

Much like a page from a Philip K Dick paperback, our world has caged-in the populace, and put them in a fantasy land where absolutely nothing is real anymore. Add to this an addiction to devices that demand our attention day and night, and you have nothing short of a waking nightmare. Our jobs are fake, our meals aren’t food, and our realities are controlled by market forces. Nothing actually matters.

As artists newly removed from this reality, we found ourselves building dark visions of the present, using historical forms. In “Machination” we see the embodiment of this new direction, firstly in 2016’s “It’s Nice To Be Alive”, reflecting the madness and utter uselessness of fitting in in the 21st century through work, rest, and play. Presented as a 6 minute piece of mechanical theatre, we adopt 1950s atomic-age aesthetics to present sequential scenes depicting our daily absurdity.

These new waters proved darkly seductive, and we continued to develop a healthy preoccupation with this mixture of contemporary observations and mid 20th century aesthetics. Post WWII was a disturbing time in history, in which governments, companies, and the general public found solace from the horrors of war in fabricating an existence that didn’t naturally evolve. Suburbia, matching wives, Johnson accounts, TV, non perishable foods, and little Timmy growing up to wear a suit, all mixed together to create a western insanity that accelerated our rush towards self-annihilation. Following this legacy, we can now all watch videos of cats as we slowly decompose on a flat pack couch.

As with our mechanical sculptures, human bodies are simply biological machines that in time wear and fail. There is something we find romantic and energising about this, the idea that through finding our happiness, exploring the world, we eventually lose our ability to access it, and surrender ourselves to inexistence.

There is beauty to be found in almost every dark corner of this world, which is where our work now appears to mostly inhabit. We could be overwhelmed, we could give up, we could become sub-assistant managers of a management company that services the management sector, but much like the Dance of Zalongo, we’d much prefer to gleefully dance ourselves off the cliff face into the abyss.

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