

## AN ESSAY WITH DIGRESSIONS

### 2. WORDS FAIL

...And then the hallucination, if it was that, happened.  
He saw the personnel manager in a new light. The man was dead.

He saw, through the man's skin, his skeleton. It had been wired together, the bones connected with fine copper wire. The organs, which had withered away, were replaced by artificial components, kidney, heart, lungs – everything was made of plastic and stainless steel, all working in unison but without authentic life. The man's voice issued from a tape, through an amplifier and speaker system.

Possibly at some time in the past the man had been real and alive, but that was over and the stealthy replacement had taken place, inch by inch, progressing insidiously from one organ to the next, and the entire structure was there to deceive others. To deceive him... in fact. He was alone in this office; there was no personnel manager. No one spoke to him and, when he himself talked, no one heard; it was entirely a lifeless, mechanical room in which he stood.<sup>1</sup>

### I. A CIASCUNO IL SUO

The delusion that the subject (or other people or the whole world) is a machine is not uncommon. Sometimes a person is convinced that they themselves are machines or that others are somehow using machines to listen to their thoughts or make them do things.<sup>2</sup> The first recorded case of paranoia expressed as a mechanical delusion comes in 1810 with James Tilly Matthews who believed his mind was being controlled by a gang operating a machine he called the "Air Loom" hidden in a London cellar and sending out invisible magnetic rays. He described the machine in great detail and the drawing made from his description as part of the case notes has entered a canon of images<sup>3</sup> which inform the history of delusion. Victor Tausk, an early disciple of Freud published a paper on a phenomenon he called 'the influencing machine'. Tausk had noticed that it was common for patients with schizophrenia to be convinced that their minds and bodies were being controlled by advanced technologies invisible to everyone but them. These 'influencing machines' were often elaborately conceived and predicated on the new devices that were transforming modern life. Patients reported that they were receiving messages transmitted by hidden batteries, coils and electrical apparatus; voices in their heads were relayed by advanced forms of whatever media technology was, at the time, new or dominant. Tausk's most detailed case study was of a patient named "Natalija A", who believed that her thoughts were being controlled and her body manipulated by an electrical apparatus secretly operated by doctors in Berlin. The device was shaped like her own body, in its stomach was a velvet-lined lid that could be opened to reveal batteries where her internal organs would have been<sup>4</sup>.

According to some definitions one could argue that people are machines: .... using mechanical power and having several parts, each with a definite function and together performing a particular task.<sup>5</sup> This is what we are,<sup>6</sup> this is what we do even if we aren't altogether clear what the "definite function" or "particular task" may be a lot of the time. Or ever.

At some point in the process of making the work for this exhibition I asked myself what the sculptural equivalent of a driverless car might be like? What it would do? I made the first version of (part) of this work in 2015 calling it *The Inspirational Mesmeric Device (As Seen In A Dream)* because that's essentially what it was<sup>7</sup>: in that version there was a seat for the operator<sup>8</sup> or driver – who is also the watcher or spectator. Dispensing with this also dispenses with any kind of fixed viewpoint.

It also, for what it's worth as an observation, throws not a signal but the *absence* of a signal around its arrangement of lamps. The word that kept coming to mind to describe it was *saccade* but that was wrong it was in fact a *syncope*<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore it's not (like, say the Gysin/Burroughs *Dream Machine*) a machine for inducing syncope but is for modelling them or "running" them in the computer sense. The observer's neurological response is, in this case, irrelevant.

I originally sub-titled the series of machine sculptures<sup>10</sup> that I made from 1996 onwards "Crimes Of Futility" – which was a sour and negative choice but gives some insight into what their definite function might be. Looking back at them now I wonder if they aren't just representations of estrangement and alienation but that they are a manifestation, an accretion, of those emotional states – like icicles or stalactites or the hair and teeth that form in certain kinds of cyst.

Generally the "machine" works were made after (possibly in response to?) periods of stress, depression, anomie<sup>11</sup>. They weren't therapy, though. They didn't make it all go away – at least no more than any other enterprise involving physical work and social interaction would do.

I suppose machines are distinct from tools in that they don't engage with the hand in the same way and thereby the person<sup>12</sup> They don't require anything of us except switching on<sup>13</sup> – it doesn't really matter whether we even look at them or not. They just keep on going – or rather functioning; to say "going" suggests to me there's some spatial metaphor, that they actually get somewhere literally or figuratively and the ones I make certainly don't do that. Where machines like these are concerned, machines which perform repeated behaviours, the cause of their actions becomes simply that the actions are what was performed previously and so are repeated. Where they are "going" is round in a circle<sup>14</sup> – back where they started, which is to say nowhere.

### POSTSCRIPT

And what held me back from morbidity, melancholy and a spiralling trajectory of spinning loops going down into hopelessness? It was the manifestation in my studio of an alien from the planet Trafalmodore. The Trafalmodorians are a fictional alien race mentioned in several novels by Kurt Vonnegut. They are beings who exist in all times simultaneously, and are thus privy to knowledge of all past and future events (including the destruction of the universe...) Vonnegut describes them thus: ...they were two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber's friends. Their suction cups were on the ground, and their shafts, which were extremely flexible, usually pointed to the sky. At the top of each shaft was a little hand with a green eye in its palm.<sup>15</sup> But of course, as four-dimensional beings their appearance will change radically at any given point. Mine has six eyes, three legs and tentacles. The alien manifested itself through my working process as I messed around with material left over from making the rest of the work in this exhibition.

Originally I thought I might make a Lovecraftian horror<sup>16</sup> but the Trafalmodorean emerged instead, equipped to guide me through complicated and entrapping loops and spirals backwards and forwards through Time – Time which preoccupies me increasingly as I get older.

... the Universe does not look like a lot of bright dots to the creatures from Trafalmodore. The creatures can see where each start has been and where it is going, so that the heavens are filled with rarified, luminous spaghetti. And Trafalmodorians don't see human beings as two-legged creatures, either. They see them as great millipedes – with babies' legs at one end and old peoples' legs at the other...<sup>17</sup>

There might be some traction in the idea that every day, every hour represents a larger (and growing) percentage of the Rest Of My Life – I still experience each of these subjectively as anyone else might an hour or a day but each one uses up an increasingly large chunk of my remaining allowance, thus resulting in a sort of temporal panic. The sight of the six-eyed, eight-tentacled, three-legged alien reassures me that there really is nothing to get too worried about; the destruction of the Universe isn't necessarily the End of the World.

<sup>1</sup> *The Martian Time Slip*, Philip K. Dick 1964. I took the opportunity of a sabbatical to re-read a selection of the novels of Philip K. Dick and I think that this one is among, if not the, best. It may be a flawless work of Art, though one that drew me into its universe in an increasingly disturbing way: I'm very aware of my own suggestibility.

<sup>2</sup> The idea that the Universe is a machine (possibly set in motion by a God who then fucked off and didn't even bother to leave the manual anywhere we could find it) was apparently popular among Deists during the Enlightenment as well as being prevalent among schizophrenics and people who took too many drugs in the 1970's and 80's.

<sup>3</sup> In 2002 Rod Dickinson made a full-size replica for an exhibition in the Laing Gallery Newcastle – if one can make a "replica" of something entirely imaginary – there is probably a better term – instantiation perhaps, even though the definition of the term has to be stretched a bit from its strict usage in computer science.

<sup>4</sup> I am aware of how much more of this there is than what meets the eye but won't go into it in depth at this point.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>6</sup> ... and that the *symbolic* is called the world of the machine undermines Man's delusion of possessing a "quality" called "consciousness," which identifies him as something other and better than a "calculating machine." For both people and computers are "subject to the appeal of the signifier"; that is, they are both run by programmes. Are these humans, Nietzsche already asked himself in 1874, eight years before buying a typewriter, or perhaps only thinking, writing and speaking machines? (Kittler, F. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. 1999. Stanford University Press)

<sup>7</sup> Though it may have been a hypnotic reverie or a trance or something – I don't particularly recall, though if I did I might not opt to share the information.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps more correctly the "subject" since the machine is that which aims to induce a trance could be described as the "operator". The terms "operator" and "subject" are used those generally used in the practice of hypnosis to describe the participants, the operator being the one who hypnotises, the subject, the one who is (or isn't in some cases) hypnotised.

<sup>9</sup> *Syncope is defined in music as a displacement of beats or accents in a passage, and in medical terms as a temporary loss of consciousness caused by a fall in blood pressure. In syncope time is suspended, or as (French Philosopher, Catherine) Clément suggested in her 1994 Syncope: the Philosophy of Rapture, "time falters"... she argued, syncope is also found in other physical disturbances – like the woman who faints... only to be revived with a slap or smelling salts. Her first words will inevitably be "Where am I?" The real question, Clément argued... should be "Where was I?" Except that when an individual returns for syncope "it is the real world that suddenly looks strange."* (Geiger, J. *The Chapel of Extreme Experience* 2005 CreateSpace)

<sup>10</sup> *Stumbling Machine/Rebabeliser* 1996–8, *Machine for Capturing the Passing Moment* 2000–2005, *ArtistMachine* 2002–2007, *The Inspirational Mesmeric Device (As Seen In A Dream)* 2015, and, to an extent, the *Reversing Machine* 2012–14.

<sup>11</sup> And work of other kinds coincided with different emotional or mental climates – plenty of them, good and less good, so there's no need for sympathy here.

<sup>12</sup> ... conscious reflection in (proto)humans first emerged with the use of stone tools because the materiality of the tool acted as an external marker of a past need, as an "archive" of its function. The stone tool – its texture, colour and weight – calls attention to its projected and recollected use, producing the first hollow of reflection. (Bernhard Stiegler, as quoted by Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 2010 Duke University Press.)

<sup>13</sup> See Phillip K Dick's *The Autofac* – a short story which describes autonomous robotic manufacture out of control; the Autonomous factories have been switched on and they keep making things regardless of whether anyone wants them. I'd say this basically applies the person-as-machine delusion to an entire economy.

<sup>14</sup> I'd like to point out here that it is important for me that if there is sound in a gallery it comes from something and not just a speaker mounted on a wall – something that makes the sound even if it is just a cassette deck or a record player. In this case it is the latter – the work titled *Radiogrammaton*. Every time we listen to a vinyl recording it is actually live in the way that projected, celluloid film can be said to be live. Each is a performance in its own right<sup>15</sup> and is unique – the sound is re-performed by the acetate and a needle and tone arm etc... Vinyl gives us sound made into a very tangible, physical object; a very clear object. The record is the sound. However, playing the record slowly destroys it or, rather, adds to it. The processes of cutting the one-off records I use and playing them are pretty much the same. A reversible process in engineering is a process or operation such that a net reverse in the way it works will accomplish the opposite of the original function. The idea is that some systems can be reversed and operated in a complementary manner. If I connect power to the terminals of an electric motor it spins round; if I change the polarities it spins in the opposite direction; if I turn the shaft by hand it will generate electricity. There seems to be very much the same thing going on.

Analogue media wear out and die, just like everything else; or rather the information on them does. The background sound of the material gradually overwrites everything. They wear out into incoherence and a kind of silence, just like we do, but they do it publicly, with actions and sound effects, mocking the Extropians' fantasies of uploaded consciousness and apocalyptic singularities.

A scratched record is a *memento mori* and by definition all records are scratched as soon as we hear them. In the same way that all loops, however imperceptibly, are spinning downwards into stillness.

"Remember you must die..."  
"Thank you Alexa"

<sup>15</sup> *Slaughterhouse 5* Kurt Vonnegut (1970)

<sup>16</sup> Possibly a Shoggoth or an Old One.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>1</sup> *it ceases to be a mere noun and becomes an agent of adverbial and adjectival assessments. It stands for the entire class of experiential qualities and – in special cases – for lifestyle-defining practices. This means that when it comes to investigating the social trajectories of the objects that acquire such special significance we encounter neither instances of artistic epiphany nor commodity fetishism but face instead complex effects of collective enchantment whose meanings transcend the boundaries of purely aesthetic or narrowly utilitarian engagement with reality. We have tried to show that the vinyl record is such an object. (Bartmanski and Woodward) Which is to say that records are a bit special compared to a lot of other media.*

<sup>4</sup> I think this comes within the remit of what Ian White described as "liveness" in writing on Film and Theatre (*Here Is Information, Mobilise* Ian White, Lux, 2016.)