**Hey Look At Me! Thoughts on the canonical exclusion of early electronic art**
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The genesis of electronic media art has more often than not been located within the military industrial complex, where the conflation of mechanics and binary code – combined with the immediacy of combat, dependent on ever increasing surveillance technologies – resulted in a burgeoning cybernetics industry and its attendant cultural by-products. As Katherine Hayles has so lucidly outlined in *How We Became Posthuman,* computer science provided a touchstone for science fiction writers and artists who were writing our futures. Charlie Gere and Christiane Paul have written important histories of electronic media art beholden to the synchronicity of a paranoid post-war climate coupled with the excitement of an ascending digital culture.

But clearly if we are to talk about "history", about how particular art histories are produced, then we need to consider much more than just the history of production, which in the case of electronic media art is very much tied to technological progress. Rather, we also need to consider the history of exhibition and dissemination of this genre of art practice. While I think it is useful to similarly locate exhibition history concurrently with production history, I would like to go further back to consider the deeper history of the exhibitionary complex, in order to first, consider ontological questions about objects and the desire to display them publicly and second, whether factors that led to the exclusion of electronic media objects from museum collection and display during the analogue/digital shift may have been predetermined at the museum's inception.

This paper will address the absence of early electronic art from the historically evolving artistic canon. Looking specifically at work produced between 1973 and 1995 by Canadian artists, Doug Back, Catherine Richards, Tom Sherman, Jana Sterbak and

Norman White, I will argue that the electronic art object contested museum practices by drawing attention to itself in ways that were be deemed 'uncivilized' by the exhibitionary complex of the day. Applying Louis Athusser's interpellation of the human subject to the electronic art object I will suggest that the 'bad behaviour' of early electronic art created reminiscences of carnivalesque subject/objects that were ejected from the museum at its genesis.

Scholarship devoted to the nineteenth century project of classification shows that such categorization had an interdisciplinary mandate cutting across science through the taxonomy of species into the arts, resulting in the birth of the museum. The regulation, categorization and disciplining of objects and living beings began an ongoing project - to which the human genome project attests - of encoding the world, predicting digitization and the fantasy of control that digital culture suggests. My intention here is to suggest that forces of categorization and classification within the museum at its originary moment may be responsible for subsequent exclusions of particular genres of art practice, in this case electronic media art.

In his book *The Birth of the Museum* Tony Bennett traces the events that ultimately led to the separation of high and low culture through the dichotomy of the museum or gallery, and the fair. Bennett notes that the motivation in this polarizing initiative was not just in relation to objects, but also in relation to people.

> While the gallery is theoretically a public institution open to all, it has typically been appropriated by the ruling elites as a key symbolic site for those performances of 'distinction' through which the *cognoscenti* differentiate themselves from the masses.[1]

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[1] Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum, History, theory, politics.* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 11.

Bennett describes how nineteenth century museum architecture actualized this dynamic through relations of space and vision. Sight lines in galleries were designed not "merely to allow a clear inspection of the objects exhibited, but also to allow visitors to be the objects of each other's inspection."[2] Thus any inappropriate behaviour, whether of people or objects that drew attention away from the distinction of the space or the ability of one to surveil another, could be deemed unworthy. The response was to relegate all such objects to the caste of the fair, to the amusement park, where the carnivalesque was free to exhibit, and the abject was celebrated. Through the nineteenth century the architecture of display moved swiftly from the private curiosity cabinet to the museum via the catalyst of the Great Exhibition of 1851, making evident the potential of the museum as a pedagogical instrument. The fair, on the other hand presented quite a different proposition. In *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of Late Victorian Culture,* the cultural historian Keith Walden suggests that the Canadian National Exhibition was a liminal space, where anything could, and should, have happened. Showcasing everything from complex automata, to faith healers to new varieties of corn, the fair arranged and steadied, but simultaneously disturbed and upset.

This begs the question – what to do with an art object that destabilizes the pedagogical project of the state? If this is a nineteenth century question, its corollary in the twentieth might be "What to do with an object that challenges the authority of modernist art criticism?" which had replaced the state as purveyor of taste and value. In Michael Fried's intense critique of literalist and minimal art, *Art and Objecthood,* written in 1967, the author suggests that "art degenerates as it approaches the condition of

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[2] Ibid, 52.

theatre."[3] Theatricality in art interferes with presentness, with the potential for a transcendent experience of the work itself. Fried's position similarly calls for a separation of what he considers high and low culture, what is present and instantaneous, and what acknowledges audience. But is this only a consideration of taste or is it more conspiratorial? I would like to consider Louis Althusser's theory of subject interpellation within this narrative of the museum. The exhibitionary complex was instrumental in the project of interpellation of individuals, transforming them through ideology into good, loyal subjects and well educated citizens. Bennett concurs "Detaching the display of power – the power to command and arrange objects for display – from the risk of disorder, it also provided a mechanism for the transformation of the crowd into an ordered, and ideally, self-regulating public."[4]

If we consider that certain objects engage in behaviours that enable a temporary oscillation between a subject/object position, and if the museum is engaged in a project of interpellation of subjects for its own purposes, then any objects that hail the passer by would be acting in opposition to that state project. Consequently if an art object beckons you to interact with it, drawing your attention away from the presentness of transcendent art objects to an art object/subject that begs a relationship with it, that art work would be contravening the museum's objectives as laid out at its origin.

Norman White's *Helpless Robot* (1987 – present) is such an art work, performing utterances in response to the viewer's actions. This 'outering'[5] of its coded emotion is

[3] Fried, Michael. "Art and Objecthood." *Art and Ojecthood, Essays and Reviews.* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998)164.
[4] Ibid, 99.
[5] McLuhan, Marshall. Playboy. March 1969. or go to: http://www.digitallantern.net/mcluhan/mcluhanplayboy.htm

brash and noisy challenging not only the viewer, but also the other objects. It beckons you to it, demanding attention. It deploys a temporary subjectivity, what I refer to as *material agency*, enabling a relationship that exists in time with the audience. David Rokeby's *Very Nervous System* (1986-2004) exists in space and time, but is not visible. The room housing this work appears completely empty. It begs the viewer to generate the work through the viewer's own performance, as the audiences' movements generate musical electronic sounds in real-time.  The work begs the viewer to stop and play, to display actions that have more of a relationship to the stage or the dance hall than the museum.  Doug Back's *Small Artist Pushing Technology* (1987) brings the detritus of technology into the gallery. The entrails of obsolete computer parts, beckon to and recreate the viewer's perception of the electronic art object.  The monitor, expelled from its housing, moves around a track, stops and starts, seemingly having a life of its own, preoccupying us with the tiny stick-person artist on the monitor screen, who magically appears to control the monitor's actions. In the gallery, the work's anti-aesthetic appeared messy and the visible technology solicited the viewer to follow back through the wires and determine its functioning. Each of these works is somewhat unruly, performing for and with the crowd, interfering with the sanctity of the white cube. The first two works even beg for interference beyond the gallery, at the site of code, since the source code for *The Helpless Robot* is published online and the VNS system is available for purchase by artists who are invited to push the software according to their own desires.

In 1973 Tom Sherman produced an installation based on a Faraday cage, the objective being for the viewer to enter a room fabricated from a conductive metal that would attract all electromagnetic radiation away from its interior into the ground.

Unaware of the Sherman work, Catherine Richards produced *Curiosity Cabinet* twenty years later in 1995, also a room inviting the participant into an EMR-free environment. Finally in 2000 Jana Sterbak produced *Oasis*, a tent that functioned similarly. This chronology of similar works begs a question of archival neglect. How did a major work that addressed timely issues dealing with technology, such as Sherman's escape art historical documentation? Why was such an important work historiographically neglected, in spite of quite extensive media coverage at the time? The forces that led these three artists to work with the Faraday cage at these particular moments in time requires further exegesis, but the archival gap may have led to the unusual situation where three artists essentially produced the same work unbeknownst to one another.

None of the above works are housed in major collections and they have only been minimally collected. Is it their hailing nature that is responsible? Since they are not part of a national collection they remain exclusive of the Canadian canon of art. The literary theorist Paul Lauter has suggested that the canon is not just about taste and values but also jobs and power. For Lauter the canon acts much like a history text "expressing what a society reads back into the past as important to its future."[6] For the anthropologist Paul Connerton "the images of the past legitimate a present social order."[7] These observations further complicate the ramifications of canonical exclusion. At a time when we are all struggling with rate of change and technological obsolescence, it would be reassuring to be able to turn to those prescient art works from our recent past that were speaking to our conflicted relationship with technology during the analogue/digital shift.

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[6] Lauter, Paul. *Canons and Contexts.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) np.
[7] Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 3.

I do not assume that canonical inclusion is essential for electronic media art or that the artists themselves are even interested in attaining that level of prominence for their art, but I do think careful consideration must be given to the factors that have contributed to the canonical exclusion of art hailing from the early period of electronic media art production. I laud the efforts of inclusion of electronic media art now being undertaken by museums and galleries, but it is imperative that the gap in the historical record be rectified so that those texts that spoke so clearly of our initial angst in the face of new technologies are made available to us.