

Kathleen Sellars *New Robotics Research*

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Kathleen SELLARS

New Robotics Research

Gil McELROY

In his 19th century London home, Charles Babbage, the Victorian inventor of the Difference Engine, the mechanical precursor to today's digital computers, kept a model of his invention on display for visitors to see. Right next to it stood the Silver Dancer, a 12-inch high figure of a female automaton, all intricate brass clockwork mechanisms, with a tiny bird perched on the finger of one hand that would flap its wings, wave its tail, and open its beak. Babbage was fascinated with the automaton, product of an 18th century maker, since first he had seen it as a schoolboy, and when the opportunity to own it presented itself many years later, he had jumped at the chance.

Babbage's juxtaposition of an amusing novelty — albeit, a toy of enormous complexity — and his mechanical computer — all precisely machined gears and cogs — was well in keeping with the Victorian's fascination with technologies that blurred the lines between entertainment and scientific achievement.

Not so much has changed, really, in two centuries; the entertainment industry and our need to be amused and distracted drives the pace of technological achievement (where, for

a great deal of technological advancement is headed — towards the ethically uncertain interface with things biological — and proffers us a preview of one version of just what may lay ahead.

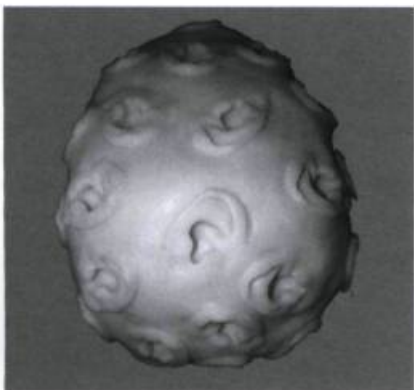
It all starts, here, with an overall structure to the exhibition that utilizes that well-worn visual trope of a trade show exhibit. And so irony is, consequently, implicit, in our face from the moment we first step into the gallery space. Sellars has outfitted the room with high-quality advertising posters and slogans ("Quality research you can trust"), corner display cabinet, video display, and two freestanding display cases with samples of the products being marketed.

Those "products" Sellars calls COQAOS: Cyber-Organic Quasi-Animate Objects. According to the text on one of her posters, "the first COQAO was genetically engineered from stem cells of a new silicon life form discovered in the underground vault of an abandoned cyclotron laboratory..."

So Sellars sets the stage, intending that we consider the biomorphic sculptural artifacts that are the point of the exhibition strictly within a carefully established and predetermined context that conjoins elements of advertising and marketing campaigns (that evoke the kinds of things undertaken by multinational pharmaceutical corporations hawking their latest drug) with a large dose of pseudo-science — back story and all.

The drawback to this intense visual and textual backdrop is that it can easily move to the fore, and that Sellars's artifacts risk getting lost, all too easily slipping away from consideration (or even existence) as aesthetic entities and becoming little more than props there solely to hold up the entire contextual edifice.

There are six of these artifactual things in all. One is set off by itself, a biomorphic-looking lump housed behind the glass-fronted doors of a corner cabinet. Connected to a laptop computer, the silicon thing rhythmically "breathes" — swelling in size and then detumescing — and emits a clacking sound reminiscent



instance, would the internet be today without the impetus of the porn industry having pushed technological boundaries forward so as to better sell its product?).

Kingston-based artist Kathleen Sellars's exhibition *New Robotics Research* scouts out the region where

of an old manual typewriter. And it is responsive to presence: the lump ceases its motion and sound if one stands immediately before it, resuming its activity as one moves away. The screen of the computer hooked to it shows bars and circles of colour, as well as short texts indicating room temperature and humidity levels, as if the lump were actually a sensory thing.

The remaining five of Sellars's

sculptural artifacts — all objects of latex — are contained in the two freestanding display cases in the centre of the room. COQAO: *Linguae cum Capillis*, #45 is a bum-like thing, a cleft lump with a kind of scaled surface that appears comprised of what most closely resembles a pattern of human tongues laid out along the exterior. This surface bristles with scattered erectile hairs, and the sculpture occasionally heaves up and down, as

← Kathleen SELLARS, COQAO: *Kaput Cum Multibus Auribus*, #36, 2008. Latex, motion. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Kathleen SELLARS, *New Robotics Research*, 2008. Installation view. Photo: Stephen Wild. Courtesy of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre.

EI ANATSUI

John GAYER

Gawu

if breathing. *COQAO: Digituli et Axillae*, #207 is oval-shaped lump surfaced with finger-like appendages laid out like flattened coarse hairs. It too "breathes". *COQAO: Umbilici cum Digitis*, #10-16 is a bowl-like object that also comprises a surface of finger-like appendages, but here they stand straight up and away from the thing, trembling gently (excited? fearful?) and occasionally breaking out into noisy and violent shaking. *COQAO: Cubiti*, #27 is a ball-shaped thing, covered all the way around with breast-like extrusions that symmetrically coat the surface of the sculpture like some bizarre version of a soccer ball.

And finally there's *COQAO: Kaput cum Multibus Auribus*, #36. I consider it on its own because of potent real-world connections it brings to the fore. This biomorphic sculpture comprises an oval form the surface of which is entirely covered with the life-sized shapes of what appear to be human ears. This one too engages in motion, occasionally rocking back and forth in its case, as if restless, uncomfortable, or uneasy.

I choose the latter adjective, for the piece uneasily, if powerfully, evokes an experiment carried out in 1997 with what became widely known as the "Vacanti Mouse." Cow cartilage was transplanted onto the back of a bald white laboratory mouse, and, courtesy a mold implanted beneath its skin, was grown into something which resembled (and, in famous photographs which appeared worldwide, was mistaken for) a human ear.

Granted, the contexts of Sellars' work — aesthetic and otherwise — would tend to preclude any such similar misinterpretation, and, in any event, most of the work here tends closer to the novelty of the side show as opposed to trading in anything truly monstrous.

And yet, because of a single artifact, all bets are off. ←

Kathleen Sellars: *New Robotics Research*
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The sumptuous wall reliefs and golden field of mountains in *Gawu*, a survey of mostly recent work by Ghanaian El Anatsui at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, fascinate the eyes and entice the body with their lustrous, if ultimately deceptive, beauty. Superficially bearing the features of traditional craft work as practiced in parts of Nigeria, Ghana and Togo, the bold designs and immense scale of Anatsui's compositions divulge a view sharply critical of contemporary life in West Africa. His output also undermines our assumptions about African art in general. Within the limits imposed by exhibitions such as MOMA's *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, which emphasized the influence and historical importance of the human figure on Western art, non-figurative forms of expression have often been overlooked.

The work featured in this exhibition breaks down into two categories: free-standing sculptures and wall-mounted pieces, also referred to as "cloths." The very crumpled and prominently placed sculpture *Wastepaper Bag* (2003) not only greets visitors to the gallery, but also introduces the artist's principal theme. Standing over two metres high, this oversized and seemingly empty container — literally formed out of

discarded sheets of newsprint — rises up from a pile of discarded paper on the floor. Only upon closer inspection do we realize that the artist has utilized aluminum newspaper plates. In doing so, he not only identifies a major source of trash, but also argues for its management.

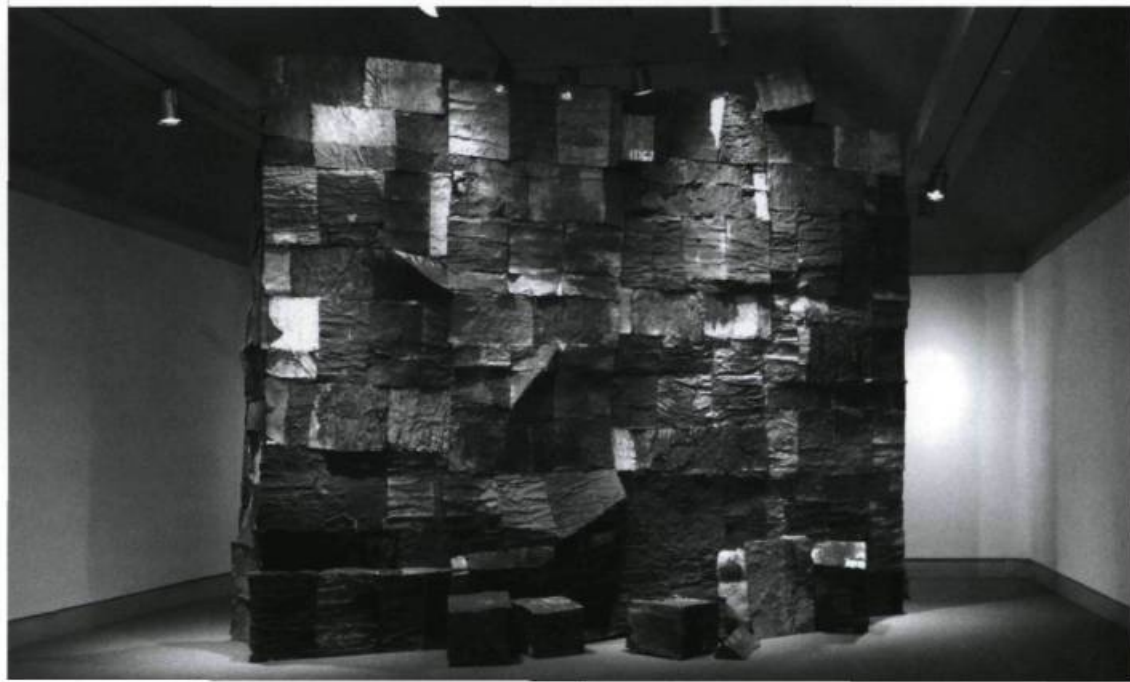
Anatsui delivers the same message in a more subtle manner through *Peak Project* (1999), the earliest work included in this survey. Made from the lids of imported tins of fresh milk, it forms a veritable landscape of small brassy mountain tops. And the *Peak* in the title happens to be the name of one brand of milk. Spreading before us, the range appears impenetrable. Joined with copper wire, the many pierced discs and exposed wire ends pose a risk to our flesh. The expansiveness of the installation brings icebergs to mind. While its glittering presence aims to distract us, the idea of an unseen threat cannot be escaped. The imposing *Crumbling Wall* (2000) reveals how even simple forms of recycling only temporarily mitigate the effect. Constructed out of scrap sheets of metal that were reused as graters for the production of a staple food, the work ironically suggests a ruination build up in one fell swoop.

In the "cloth" pieces we see non-traditional materials blended with customary practices. Made using innumerable aluminum fragments — recovered liquor bottle covers — joined with bits of copper wire, the artist, with the help of student assistants (Anatsui currently directs the

sculpture section at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka), creates flexible objects that reach out from the wall to articulate space in massive rumpled and folds. In visual and technical terms these works remind us of large abstract paintings, tapestries, wall reliefs and, considering the tile-like elements from which they are built, mosaics. What sets them apart from these static configurations, is their inherent sense of movement. Full of colour and energy, the flexibility of these pieces enables them to be reconfigured for each installation. This not only lends them a performable aspect, but it also lets them be re-experienced as new works.

Anatsui manipulates his medium with a command that bears deftness and originality. Simple processes — he sorts the aluminum pieces according to colour or uses them randomly, he shapes them by cutting or folding, or leaves them intact — lead to richly complex compositions. The golden centre of *Skin of the Earth* (2006), for example, fades into a border of comprised of red and black. This evocative work's appearance disavows its material reality in at least two ways. Its colour and sheen indicate a lovely leathery skin, whereas its topography points to the surface of the ground. Red highlights break up the black edges. They imply fresh wounds in an, otherwise, charred perimetre.

Other abstract works include *Andinkra Sasa* (2003) and *Many Moons* (2007). The former composition refers



EI ANATSUI, *Crumbling Wall*, 2000. Collection of the Artist. Photo: Martin Barlow/Oriel Mostyn Gallery.