

Jessica Field: Parabolic Behaviours

***Jessica Field: Parabolic Behaviours*, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario, January 19 – March 20, 2011**

Gil McElroy

Numéro 96, été 2011

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/63930ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (imprimé)

1923-2551 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

McElroy, G. (2011). Compte rendu de [*Jessica Field: Parabolic Behaviours* / *Jessica Field: Parabolic Behaviours*, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario, January 19 – March 20, 2011]. *Espace Sculpture*, (96), 36–37.

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Gil McELROY

Over the course of three nights in the late winter of 2011, an IBM computer nicknamed “Watson” participated in a *Jeopardy* television tournament pitted against two human competitors. While not so much smarter than its human counterparts, it was consistently faster buzzing its answers in. Watson comprised a major demonstration of a computer’s ability to function in the world of so-called “natural language,” where the kind of speech and text we routinely employ in the everyday includes semantically tricky puns and homonyms that are meaningless to run-of-the-mill computers unable to distinguish and shift between the levels of language we humans routinely move back-and-forth between with typically facile ease. Computers tend toward what is essentially the fundamentalist end of the communicative spectrum: understanding things at purely literal levels only.

That’s changing as the need for computers that can meaningfully interact with their environments—invariably bound up within the

realm of natural language—becomes ever more pressing and urgent. Consequently, it’s redefining the field of robotics, where passive computer meets active machine, and, not surprisingly, artists are having some input into it all. Oshawa-based sculptor Jessica Field is one of them.

In her robotics-based sculptural work, Field has consistently probed at the edges of that ever-evolving, ever more blurred interface that separates us from the technologies we’ve created to either aid and abet our human journey, or better annihilate those who get in our way.

As it turns out, stories matter deeply, here. A concept widely explored by the philosopher Gregory Bateson in his construction of an ecological understanding of what it is that constitutes the self-organizing holism of Mind in our world, is central to aspects of Field’s current body of work, especially in pieces that find a source in, of all things, folk art.

Three significant works Field showed here had little overtly to do with what we caricaturishly think of as “robots”—you know, those clever little pieces of engineering that are usually intensely complex amalgams of wiring, circuit boards and electric motors, and are sometimes sleekly dressed up with exteriors of molded

plastic or metal to make them a little less intimidatingly machine-like as they move about in a space and do what they do. Rather, Field has reached over to aesthetically mine the hand-made, rough-hewn, mechanical device of folk art that is usually called a “thingamajig,” typically a wind- or hand-powered sculpture that has been carved from bits of wood and which, courtesy of levers and maybe some gears, mechanically replicates repetitive tasks like, say, sawing wood, or dancing a jig. (Intended solely for amusement and adornment and not as any cultural or social statement, many have become highly collectable in and of their own right.)

With *The Musicians*, *Death and the Maiden*, and *Parable of the Strawberry* (all 2011), Field marries a series of stories or settings that have little if anything to do with technology per se (indeed, these narratives are arguably pre-technological) with what turns out to be a rather immense technological complexity and capacity. *Musicians* exemplifies this fusion. In a piece that is essentially a stage setting in miniature complete with tiny little proscenium arch, a quartet of musicians frames two central dancers—male and female. An elaborate arrangement of electronics, gears and levers largely

hidden away beneath the stage, powers both the awkward (and yet charming) movement of both musicians and dancers.

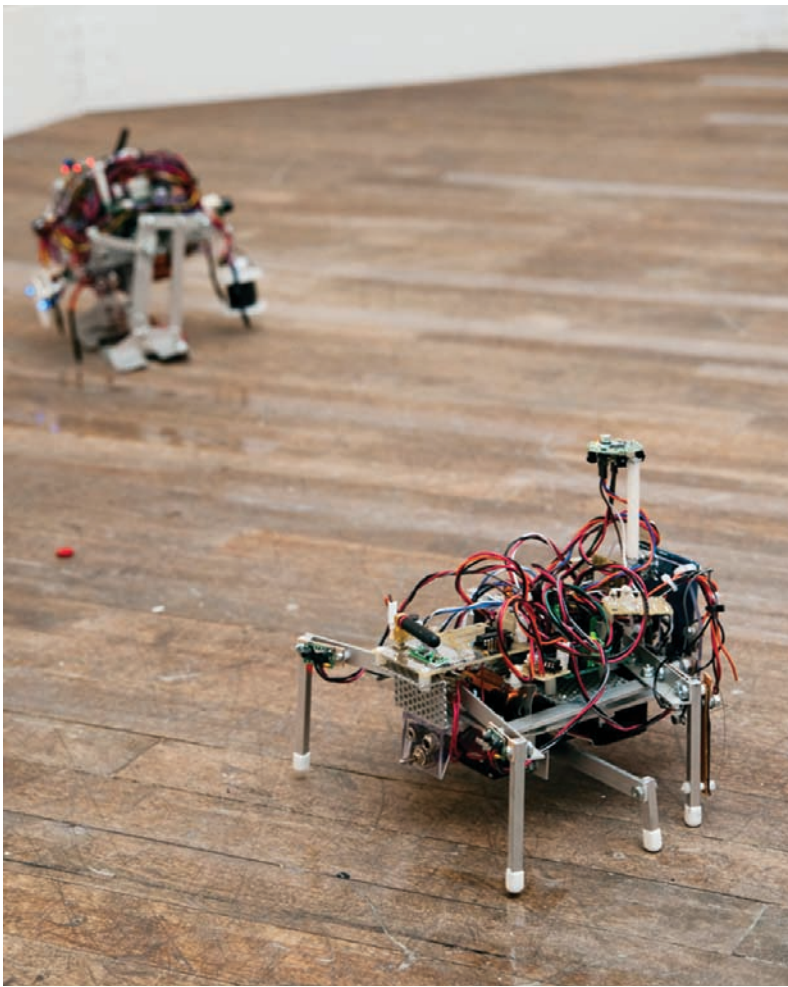
Where *Musicians* demonstrates the technology as it might be normally expressed at the level of folk art (it’s rather easy to envisage this piece sitting on top of, say, a post in someone’s backyard, responding to and powered by the blowing wind), *Death and the Maiden* and *Parable of the Strawberry* add a narrative layer to things that shifts the work critically past the point of being merely a clever toy. These pieces have something larger to say. Both are based on culturally well-known stories that carry a moral point, the former having a long history of artistic expression in Western culture, ranging from literature to painting to theatre and film, the latter, a short paradox-based koan, is of Buddhist origin. The skeletal figure of Death rears up and snatches the Maiden from her place before a mirror in which she admires her beauty in one work, and in the other, two fierce tigers threaten a man from above and from below as he clings to the side of a cliff. While holding onto a vine that is being chewed at by mice, he savors the taste of single strawberry he has just found. Field, here, makes no attempt

→ Jessica FIELD, *Field Studies: Anthropods: Bi Magnetotransis and Hexa Seekozoid*, 2009. Electronics, metal, and plastic. Photo: Stephen FIELD.

→ Jessica FIELD, *Field Studies: Protozoan Flagellates*, 2009. Solar panels, electronics, and metal. Photo: courtesy the artist.



Jessica FIELD, *The Musicians*, 2011. Wood, metal and plastic. 60 x 90 x 45. Photo: courtesy the artist.



This occurs with her *Anthropods*, robots that appear more along the lines of what we've stereotypically come to envisage as typifying the whole field. Field's title is collective and of her own devising, a word that springs from the Greek root for "human," and plays upon the word "arthropod," which refers to animals with segmented bodies and exoskeletons. And merely by appearance these robots seem to satisfy our preconceptions as to what a robot should look like: lots of wires, circuit boards, electric motors, mechanical connections... Indeed, a kind of subspecies of such creations, *Protozoen Flagellates* (2009), incorporate solar panels held aloft, umbrella-like, above the main structure of these objects like horizontally oriented sails. Thusly powered, they shake or vibrate themselves as a means of propulsion across surfaces. Other versions have kinds of legs to move themselves about, making for a passing (and undoubtedly intended) resemblance to exoskeletoned creatures like crabs and such.

Field has an agenda with all of this, much of it having to do with comparing and contrasting the reality of functioning robots that, say, awkwardly lurch about and that haven't reached the level of a self-organizational Batesonian Mind (yet, anyway, with what Field refers to as the "idealisms" she projects onto them in video works. It's the gap between the two—between the level of sculptural reality in front of us, and the level of the image (as in Field's complex blackboard drawing *Schematic of Robot Desiring Purpose Brain Map* that visually sketches out the logical pathways of decision-

making processes, and the video lecture that accompanies it)—that is of consequence, here. And while it's a steadily shrinking gap, it's still rather sizeable. Field speaks of her robots as evolving, by which she means they are capable of being reprogrammed and, presumably, better able to respond to their environments. In a sense, it's a kind of cartoonish version of the learning process in which the robot may appear to be displaying the attributes of Mind, but which in fact has absolutely nothing to do with the real acquisition of knowledge.

With the *Anthropods*, we see the awkward elegance of complex bits of engineering, but never the arc of a robotic learning curve itself, for it is part of Field's programming and not part of, say, a robotic encounter with an object—not part of Mind. Only the maker—only Field—is in the know, as, in a weird kind of technological Creationism, she single-handedly guides the evolution of these works by essentially rewriting the script.

What we get to see are the aesthetic aftereffects of her decisions. ←

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Oshawa, Ontario
January 19 – March 20, 2011

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to mess with the significance of the narrative metaphors, she just has us experience them anew within the context of a machine and its repetitive sequences of carefully pre-established movements. In the juxtaposition of the mindless determinism of the machine paradigm and the endlessly meaningful stories they relate, a larger, meta-story about knowledge and its acquisition unfolds for us.

But at one critically important level, Field's thingamajigs are works about the fixity of things, and like all

such devices are themselves dead-ends, incapable of learning, of acquiring experiential knowledge. In short, they are utterly impervious to the advent of the new. "Make it new" was poet Ezra Pound's aesthetic war cry at the beginning of the twentieth century as he forged a new modernist path through literature (one that, alas, led him toward complicity with Italian fascism during WWII), and yet in another entirely separate body of work, Field articulates how the making of the new plays out within the realm of robotics.



Jessica FIELD,
Parable of the Strawberry, 2011.
Wood, metal, and plastic. 60 x 45 x 15 cm. Photo: Paul LITHERLAND.