

Anita Delaney

The uncanny, phantom limbs, the cyborg & technology

Transcript of a gallery talk on Vera Klute's exhibition 'Finish your plate' held at Wexford Arts Centre in Nov 2009.

I am going to give a talk today on the exhibition by German artist Vera Klute, called 'Finish your Plate'. I have known Vera for a long time; I am also an artist and used to teach a series of lectures at IADT Dun Laoghaire on 'Representations of the Cyborg and Technology'. (...) I would like to touch on some issues relating to science fiction and how they fit in with Vera's work. I think it is important to have a dialogue, about some of the issues that the work represents and open it out to some wider theories and wider ideas that maybe aren't apparent at first glance.



Image 1: *Its rude to stare*

One of the things said a lot about Vera's work is that it has a humorous element. We can see these pointing fingers here (image 1*) that follow you around the room. We have this strange machine over here: 'Loop the loop', that seems to produce diamonds from maggots (image 2*). Upstairs we have a machine that makes flies buzz around inanely.

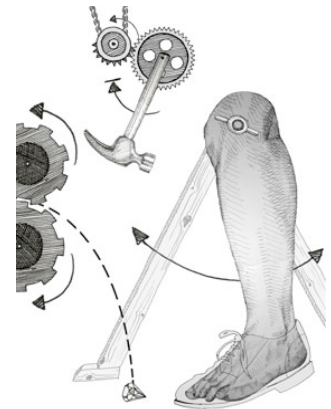


Image 2: *Loop the loop* (detail)

Humour is a thing that maybe you don't see a lot of in contemporary art. I'm put in mind of another artist who I know Vera is very fond of and who I myself also admire: David Shrigley, an English artist who does these darkly humorous drawings and photographs. This one here called 'Panic Button' (image 3*). And I have another one here, one of his photographs: 'Antidepressants'. It's hard to draw parallels in terms of style with Vera and David Shrigley, but I feel they are using humour in a similar way. It's this kind of 'barbed' humour - or you could almost say a kind of trickery. It's the humour, which might appeal to you firstly, like the iron hand inside the velvet glove or as Shakespeare once said: 'look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it'. And certainly as long as I have known Vera, I don't really see the humour in the work anymore; I see a kind of sinisterness. And the more I look at it and the more I think about it, I see it disguising a lot of anxiety - about the body; about our place in the world.

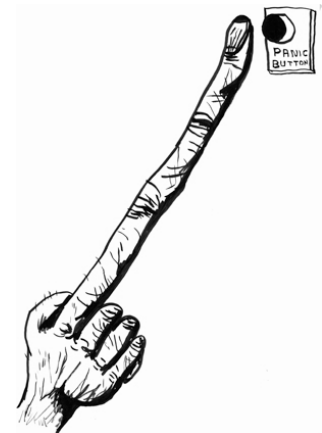


Image 3: David Shrigley, *Panic Button*

* Image 1: Vera Klute, 'Its rude to stare', Silicone, webcam, wire, MDF, approx. 80 x 50 x 40cm, 2009

* Image 2: Vera Klute, 'Loop the loop' (detail), video- installation, 120 x 159cm, 2009

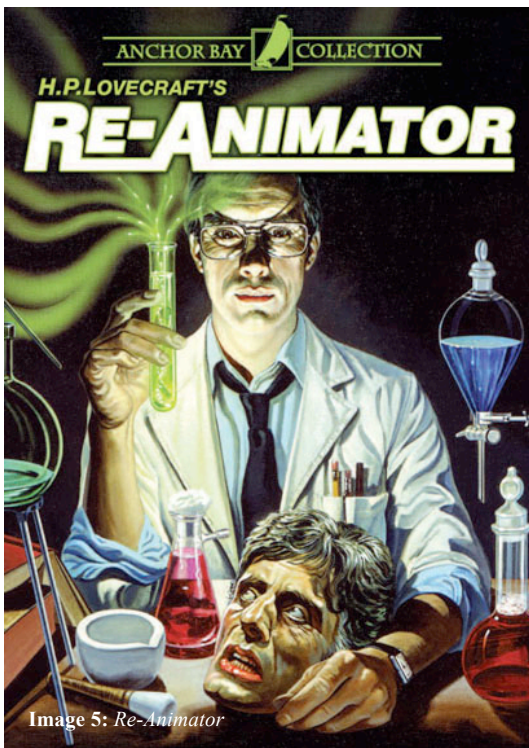
* Image 3: David Shrigley, 'Panic Button', 2008



One of the theories that I would like to mention at this point, is the idea of the ‘uncanny’; ‘das Unheimliche’ as it is called in German. The ‘uncanny’ is a Freudian theory: Sigmund Freud, wrote an essay in 1919 trying to explain the ‘uncanny’. In a nutshell it’s this idea of the familiar becoming strange. It’s a nightmare-ish sense, something you can’t quite put your finger on. For example we could look at these three fake x-rays. We have what are obviously meant to be (...) these internal diagrams of the human chest, but in the case of ‘Juliska’, the heart is replaced with a pepper (image 4*). So the pepper, this familiar object becomes this weird thing, this uncanny thing. Freud declares the ‘uncanny’ as something that can come about through habit, through displacement. So we have the idea of the displacement of the pepper as the heart and regarding repetition (...) we have the fly swatters repeatedly falling in a wing like motion and becoming slightly strange because of that; that habit of falling and re-falling; the habit becoming strange (image 8). And the idea of the habit as Vera says in her statement is fundamental to her work:

That idea of using the habit; how we’re enslaved with the habit; what that means for life; how we understand things through habit; how things become strange through habit.

The other thing that I want to talk about, (...) is all these weird severed body parts and I’m of course thinking of ‘Its rude to stare’ (image 1) with its severed fingers that follow you around the room. We’ve got the arms and the leg here in ‘Loop the loop’ (image 2). And upstairs we have the shadow puppets of the hands (image 9) - again these kind of isolated hands. (...) This recurring theme made me think of all these really horrible zombie films that I was subjected to by my older brother as a very young child. Which I can see in retrospect are kind of funny and harmless, but at the time they really horrified me.



There was one film ‘Re-Animator’ which is 1985 about a medical student who develops a serum that brings bodies back to life (image 5*). And when tests it out on a hand, the hand comes after him, attacks him and tries to strangle him. You got a slightly more sanitized version of course in ‘the thing’ in the ‘Adams Family’.

So that led me on then to this idea of phantom limbs, the idea of the severed part. I came across the neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell (1800s to the early 1900s). He worked in the American civil war as a medical doctor and saw literally thousands of soldiers and sailors who had arms and legs blown off and consequently became very vehemently anti war, which is understandable. But he did a lot of work into perfecting the amputation procedure and also identified the phenomenon that has come to be known as the ‘phantom limb’, where somebody can lose their hand or arm or foot or leg but still feel it, still get pain in the phantom part even though its gone. This doctor Silas Weir Mitchell had a second career as a writer and in 1863 (...) he wrote a story (I guess its maybe slightly auto-biographical) about a soldier in

* Image 4: Vera Klute, ‘Juliska’, digital print, 39,8 x 55cm, 2009

* Image 5: Stuart Gordon, ‘Re-Animator’, 1985

similar times to him who is also a medical doctor; George Dedlow is his name. Poor George has one arm shot off by rebels, closely followed by both his legs in another incident and then finally his other arm, so he's left as this unhappy fracture of a man as he describes himself.

I'll just read you a short part of it. We've come to George as he is lying now in hospital and he's thinking about his condition, where he has no arms and no legs – he's lost so much of himself and he's contemplating his plight.

*Still more remarkable, however, were the psychical changes, which I now began to perceive. I found to my horror that at times I was less conscious of myself, of my own existence, than used to be the case. This sensation was so novel that at first it quite bewildered me. I felt like asking some one constantly if I were really George Dedlow or not; but, well aware how absurd I should seem after such a question, I refrained from speaking of my case, and strove more keenly to analyze my feelings. At times the conviction of my want of being myself was overwhelming and most painful. It was, as well as I can describe it, a deficiency in the egoistic sentiment of individuality. About one half of the sensitive surface of my skin was gone, and thus much of relation to the outer world destroyed. As a consequence, a large part of the receptive central organs must be out of employ, and, like other idle things, degenerating rapidly. (...) I concluded that it would be at a minimum, and that, if utter loss of relation to the outer world were capable of destroying a man's consciousness of himself, the destruction of half of his sensitive surfaces might well occasion, in a less degree, a like result, and so diminish his sense of individual existence.*¹

So George is coming to the conclusion that if half of him is missing he's half a person, he's half in the world, he's half aware. George then goes on to get rouged into a meeting with some psychics and the story ends on a strange note where they contact the other world and his legs make themselves known to him. George is then miraculously raised up on these invisible legs, the phantom legs that have returned to him and waltz across the room.

After reading this story I'm looking now at these strange phantom fingers over here and wonder whether they have perhaps come back to accuse someone, somewhere of some kind of crime or some kind of loss which they endured.

On the other side of that then, on the idea of thinking of parts of the body that in fact aren't there, I came across another neurologist. His name is Jules Cotard, who at 1840 came to identify a condition known as 'Negation Neuralgia'. He came across a number of patients which all exhibited this really weird, but really strong sensation.

One of his patients Madame E., 54 years of age, married; mother is put in a medical centre on June 15th 1863 after having made various suicide attempts. Madame E. is in a state of anxious agitation. She imagines that she has a shrunken throat and a displaced heart. (Maybe like the heart in 'Juliska' here.) All organs have been displaced; she cannot do anything about it. In 1864 her condition continues: same delirium, same anxious paroxysms with the continuous repetition of the same formulae phrase. Madame E. is lost. She no longer has a head; she no longer has a body.

Monsieur C.: 45 years of age (another one of his patients), of a sturdy constitution, married, a father. Some time near March 1880 he began to express negative and completely absurd ideas. Brought to the medical centre in April 1880, Monsieur C. insists that he is not married, that he does not have children, that he has neither a father nor a mother, that he has no name. Monsieur C. resists all care that is taken to his body; he refuses to wear clothing because his whole body is nothing more than a large nut. He refuses to eat for he has no mouth; he refuses to walk for he has no legs.²

1 'The Case of George Dedlow', Silas Weir Mitchell, Atlantic Monthly, 1863

2 Trevor H. Turner (1992). A diagnostic analysis of the Casebooks of Ticehurst House Asylum, 1845–1890. Psychological Medicine. Monograph Supplement, 21, pp 1-70

So on the flip side of this we see in the instance of the phantom limbs the idea of how we relate to the body, of imagining parts that aren't there. But then on the other side we see the complete inability of acknowledging parts that are there.

I see in the work this anxiety about the body in a philosophical sense: How do we understand ourselves? – A fundamental question of existence that I don't really feel qualified to answer. But what I can maybe suggest is a play in the work: How do we perceive our bodies? How do our bodies give us a sense of self? How do our bodies give us a sense of self in the world around us?

So we've had 'the uncanny', we've had this idea of the body; his idea of the body in pieces and in parts – I might move on then to the idea of the cyborg.

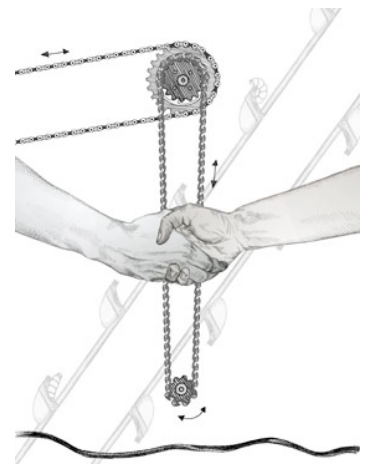
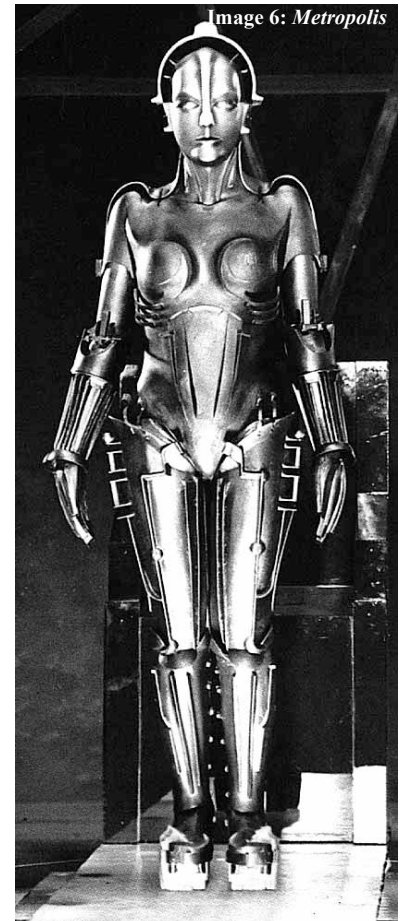
The cyborg may be something we're familiar with through films like 'Terminator'. The cyborg of course really exists in terms of the medical cyborg, people with pacemakers can be considered cyborgs; people with these new electronically operated prosthetic limbs can be thought of as a cyborg.

I have some images here of one of the first cinema representations of the cyborg from the 1927 film 'Metropolis', by German filmmaker Fritz Lang (image 6*).

This is Maria. Maria was the robot counterpart to a real female character in it. 'Metropolis' is based on this idea of the despotic future where the world is run by machines, which are operated by a very few rich elite; and it is the working class which become the hands of the machine. So Maria, the real Maria is the embodiment of the workers movement who is trying to break the slaves free. But the evil doctor invents this robot Maria to try and counter her. So in this early representation we can see the idea of the cyborg as this metal machine, which reminds me of similarities to 'Loop the loop' (image 7*).

So in early representations cyborgs are seen as these kind of evil creatures, these evil machine driven creatures. We also have more pleasant renderings of the cyborg like 'Data' from 'Star Trek'. So there is this idea of the human body integrated with technology as a good thing and there is this idea of the human body integrated with technology as a bad thing. Cultural theories surrounding the cyborg are maybe less defined than the good and evil cyborgs apparent in science fiction and cinema.

But to the human body again: the human body is not just a physical or material entity; it is not only constructed by genetic information but by dominant social and cultural trends. Gender, Race, etc. are as much designed by physical genetic information as societal and cultural expectation and demand. The first cyborg was proposed as an astronaut that could be technologically modified to endure these conditions that the human body alone wouldn't be able to. And again when we think of the cyborg as the technologically enhanced body, we're back to this idea about thinking of the body in pieces. And in that regard, if we're technologically monitoring something, for example an electronic



* Image 6: Fritz Lang, Metropolis, 1927

* Image 7: Vera Klute, 'Loop the loop' (detail), video- installation, 120 x 159cm, 2009

prosthetic limb, we're perhaps thinking of that part of the body as separate from the rest of us. And the disappearing body of course: if parts of you are being replaced by technology, what does this mean for the part of you that's being taken away, the organic part so to speak?

To bring it back to the technology on display in Vera's work, we have of course the swatter piece here, which is one of my favourite pieces (image 9*). When Catherine Marshal who opened the show talked about it she said it reminded her of something that Leonardo Da Vinci might have invented, but instead of fly swatters he might have put propellers on it – some kind of fantastic flying machine (image 8*).



Image 8: Da Vinci, Flying machine

Which I think is a lovely sentiment, but then I have to wonder what it means that there aren't propellers on it, that it isn't a wonderful flying machine, that it is this fly swatter machine. And I also have to wonder how it relates to the piece upstairs, which I may think of as a sister piece, which has all the flies buzzing around (image 11). So this idea of taking the technology and making it something ridiculous, what does that mean for that use of technology?

She's obviously using DVD-players and DVDs and things, but any of the machines on display, be that the swatter machine, the fly machine upstairs, the kinetic piece with the moving hands or even the representation of 'Loop the loop' here is positioned very much as a kind of 'retro-technology'. Present fears about digital technology may be part of this. We're obviously now more than ever surrounded by digital technologies, iPhones, mobile phones, iPods - you name it, we've got it. But there is just no visibility to this technology, we can't open it, we can't see how it works. Even if we can open it its inexplicable. Whereas all Vera's machines are wheels and cogs, dating back to the industrial revolution perhaps.

The Industrial Revolution was a huge turning point in social history. The ending of one lifestyle; from a pastoral lifestyle into this entanglement with the machine that we've been in ever since and the massive change that caused for the human animal.

So I have to wonder, is Vera's positioning of this technology as a kind of retro-technology in a bid to show the workings of the machine, that we can understand it, that she can understand it? Is it harping back to maybe a time when life was easier, when machines were only beginning, to a nicer human lifestyle? I'm not sure; I think its open to interpretation.

I may at this point mention the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard who talks a lot about the last few issues I've spoken about. He died in 1998 and his last ten years or so were concerned with how humanity is faced against technology - in particular relation to artificial life, the cyborg, artificial intelligence, computers and what that meant for us as humans. In his earlier career he stated, that the only thing we need to fear is the end of the world by the heat death of the sun (which isn't due to happen for at least another 4.5 billion years). So he seemed to be thinking that there wasn't that much to worry about. But as he came towards the end of his career and science advanced, he began to feel a very real threat to people and people's way of life, people's way of thought, the organic against the inorganic mind of the machine. And he wrote a series of essays and articles about

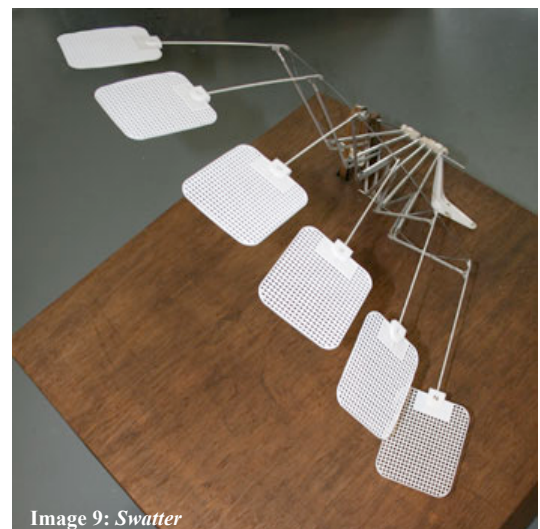


Image 9: Swatter

* Image 9: Vera Klute, 'Swatter', fly swatters, umbrella, motor, plywood, approx. 70 x 70 x 80cm, 2009

* Image 8: Leonardo Da Vinci, Flying Machine

the inhuman, how we're placed against the machine, what differences there are and how important that is to not give in to a technology-laden future.

We have prevalent themes or underlying facts of the show that I can see: the 'uncanny', this strange sense of weirdness, displacement - very post-modern, the idea of things not being certain. Its not like we're looking at images and we can go: 'Oh, that's almost definitely about this' and we can look at the machine and go: 'That's probably about that.' There is a lot of uncertainty in the show, which I think is good. Its good for this kind of work to ask more questions than it answers and put the responsibility on us as viewers to question our own ideas.

So, the 'uncanny', these fragmentary things and also the idea of the body, a very strong theme – the body in pieces; the cyborg body, an extension of that idea of the body in pieces and technology and ultimately that's all coming back to what dilemmas we're faced with as gentle animals when posed with these questions.



Image 10: *Sign Language*

I just had a few disparate ideas that I wanted to say, unrelated to the larger themes that I talked about; some individual reflections about separate pieces:

First of all the upstairs room (I just love), which I think has a very beautiful impact when you walk up the stairs. For me that has a lovely filmic quality, especially these deer caught in headlights (image 10*). On the night of the opening I was having a conversation with a friend:

'Oh, a rabbit caught in headlights.'

'No, actually they're deer.'

'No, actually they're hands.'

'Well no, actually they're cardboard cut-outs of hands.'

So there is this lovely illusion to it. But for me it has a real film noir quality that's endlessly repeated; back to the idea of habit again. It would be tragic if it wasn't so gentle: These poor deer

are perpetually being about to be run over as they're grazing on the side of the road. And the reflection on the wall behind I think gives it a lovely quality.

On the left is a sister piece to that, again a lovely filmic quality with the bird flying under the cloud. And then in the middle we have his mad fly machine (image 11*), which reminds me of a film I saw a long time ago. The film was about these soldiers that were taken into a camp. Whenever somebody was

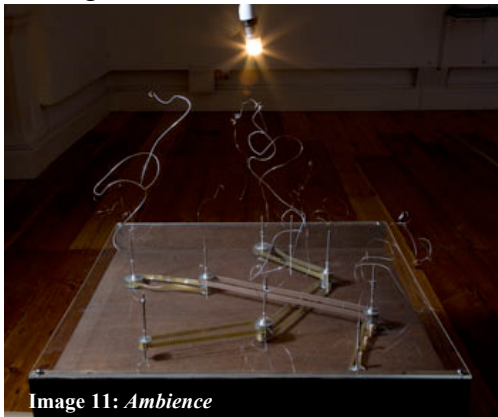


Image 11: *Ambience*

going to die the film used a code: there was a table where they used to sit and when they'd put the light bulb low down over the table you knew somebody was going to be killed. So when I look at the piece I have that memory and then I see these flies as well, of course these pre-cursors or post-cursors of death that come to feed on the body. And again it's gently balanced.

As I started the talk I was talking about a kind of barbed humour – a lot of the work is neither one thing nor the other. Its neither really sinister, like the fly machine upstairs because its so wacky and weird and bizarre, but its also not a laugh. It's kind of creepy – those are real flies on it by the way.

* Image 10: Vera Klute, 'Sign language 2' video projection & kinetic paper cut-outs, 55 x 35 x 170cm, 2009

* Image 11: Vera Klute, 'Ambience', flies, wire, motor, plywood, approx. 70 x 70 x 100cm, 2009

Another thing I've been thinking about in relation to Freud and psychology is this piece here called 'Preserves' (image 12*). The title makes me think of jam, but then when you look at the actual work it could be the preservation of the mind. It's obviously based on the Rorschach ink blocks. These were designed in the 1920s by Dr. Rorschach as a personality test. (They are still in use today even though they are contested like a lot of these things are.) The idea being that a patient would look at these images and the therapist would question them on what they see, note how they respond and draw



conclusions about their personality and potential mental disorder based on their answers. So I was looking at this and I was also looking at these three quasi-medical x-rays and I came to think about this false medical aspect. But then looking at the actual piece 'Preserves' and how very similar they are (to the Rorschach ink blocks), what repercussions does that have? Has Vera actually designed some great system like Rorschach for devising our personalities? Or does the fact that she's made this kind of show and the falseness of this particular psychological test give doubt to psychology in general? It's a pretty massive thing to say but I'm just putting it out there.

I just thought of 'Loop the loop' (image 2, 7) as a kind of a sweet idea to get away from the talk of severed limbs and cyborgs and doom and gloom and medicine. In the age that we're in, with the new sustainable development, the sustainable energy sources, I think this may be inspirational: it seems to make maggots into diamonds - which would be very useful to have if only we could get it to work properly.

While looking around on Wikipedia for some extra idea on how to introduce this show I came across this nice idea relating to Vera's technical and artistic skill: 'Artists and their audience entertain hypothetical worlds in the theatre of the imagination.' And Vera's work of course is not representational, it's very fantastical, it's very magical and because of her skill it's very easy for us as an audience to slip into those hypothetical worlds, because the illusion is so complete; the skill is so great. We believe this fly swatter machine; I believe it as a construction that doesn't just exist as a piece of art, but as some kind of machine. And there's obviously a massive appeal to the show and I think a large part of this is her rendering, which is highly skilled.

* Image 12: Vera Klute, 'Preserves', tissue paper, pins, 42 x 28cm, 2009