

**KRISTIN  
LUCAS**  
**if lost then found**  
 DEC 1, 2006 - JAN 13, 2007  
 OPENS: THURSDAY  
 NOV 30, 2006, 8PM  
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# Invasion of the Cybernetic Hand and Other Predicaments

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*Kristin Lucas: If Lost Then Found at the Or Gallery, Vancouver, December 1, 2006 to January 13, 2007*

In 1986 Stelarc announced that "evolution ends when technology invades the body."<sup>1</sup> The evolutionary halt, he maintained, was necessary as it was no longer advantageous to remain a human or evolve as a species, since "the body's complexity, softness, and wetness would be difficult to sustain"<sup>2</sup> in the coming digital environment. Stelarc's performances, featuring prosthetic and digital attachments designed to respond to his muscular movements, were inscribed in a utopian rhetoric signifying a Cartesian desire to transcend the dripping body. In time, he had hoped that the wet body would yield to its dry-cleaned technological Other in order to survive on this planet.

Evolution and dry-cleaning were the two things that came to my mind when I saw *If Lost Then Found*, Kristin Lucas's recent exhibition at the Or Gallery. This unlikely association was prompted by *Ocean Liner* (2006), an assemblage that combined such ordinary household items as an ironing board, a rice-cooker, and a set of plastic leaves sprinkled with a white powder to stage a snowy, alien landscape. I first thought of the rice-cooker as a surveillance camera watching the silence of the winter scene; then I decided that it could also double as a motor capable of generating enough power to activate the attached propeller which could in turn guide the snowy landscape on its marine voyage. These seamlessly amalgamated throwaway products in their novel configurations alarmed me as to what scenarios might be taking shape in my kitchen cupboard.

Sitting beside *Ocean Liner* was a zoomorphic black stool fused with four wheels and two metallic wings.

The large grilled wings, made out of lawn chairs, appeared to have steered the buoyant stool through the room and landed for a temporary rest. The sculpture seemed ready for a second take-off. A few steps away from the stool sculpture, and undoubtedly in telepathic communication with it, was *Social Climber* (1998), a six-legged remote control ascending a plinth. The implied narrative conveyed through the titles and the intricate armatures of Lucas' sculptures helped to animate the assemblages in the room. The resulting static dynamism of these sculptures evoked visions of organic motion and growth and led me to imagine how they would behave if they were plugged in.

Groaning in the rhythmic tone of an off-the-hook telephone, the toy *Chicken Little* (1996) was delicately wired to an oscillator housed in a Band-Aid box. Willingly suspending my disbelief in Lucas' lyrical constructions, believed *Chicken Little* to be on life support and blamed the drizzled washing detergent for mutating the ironing board into an ocean liner: evolution was drenched in tetrachloroethylene.

What would it mean for a machine to evolve? Writing in the late 1940s, the American mathematician Norbert Wiener theorized that evolving machines were those that could "learn and reproduce themselves."<sup>3</sup> Learning was the mechanism by which a machine transformed itself in response to past experiences, while reproduction was the replication of input into identical output data. Learning and reproduction were defined as interlinked phenomena whose efficient operation relied on an effective feedback mechanism. Through feedback, a machine could detect changed environments and assess appropriate responses.

A literal parody of digital feedback mechanisms was enacted in one of Lucas' videos in the exhibition. On the opposing side of the exhibition space, facing her sculptures, was *Magic Eyes Cream Headache Sandwich* (2005), a video composite shown on three monitors. The monitors were placed on a table covered with a red and white checkered tablecloth—a pattern that

continued into the virtual space of the video staging a remote-controlled, three-way picnic. The central monitor framed Lucas' protruding head behind a burning candle placed in a slice of creamy-green chocolate cake. The flanking monitors connected Lucas with her two hands, one flesh and the other cybernetic. As Lucas blew the candle and grinned, the artificial hand grabbed a fork and prepared to dig into the cake. She was then slowly fed every last crumb. I could only assume that the hands were also enjoying themselves.

I wondered if the well-mannered synthetic hand, sitting calmly in its woolen sleeve, was plotting the eventual takeover of Lucas' entire body. Was the feedback melodrama turning into a sci-fi cybernetic invasion? The term "invasion" should not be taken slightly. Lucas' left-hand companion is not a prosthetic, but rather a cybernetic hand. A prosthesis is an external or implanted device that supplements defective or missing parts of the body. A prosthesis is not an invader. It is designed as an addition to, and not a substitution of, the existing body. A cybernetic device, on the other hand, as envisioned by Wiener, is an electronic system built to replace human control functions. From this perspective, it was the hand in *Magic Eyes Cream Headache Sandwich* (2005) that controlled the body's functions. The use of the composite video was representative of this cybernetic logic. Stretched across the three monitors, the video had fractured and re-connected Lucas' body electronically. Its electronic signals bound the alienated fragments of her body into temporal instances of unity.

In the expanded time of the looped video, the staged feedback melodrama was morphed into forced consumption. As the cake was served *ad nauseam*, Lucas' grin faded behind the jabs of the fork and the puppet show turned grotesque—an enactment of force feedback technology as a sardonic caricature.

Against this mordant backdrop was the monologue of the protagonist of another exhibited video, *Involuntary Reception* (2000). This video told the story of a girl—played by Lucas—engulfed by an electromagnetic

field whose destructive beams interfered with digital emissions of electronic equipments. Her unfortunate predicament marked her as a destructive threat, whose ability to easily (and involuntarily) hack into computers had placed her under the surveillance of the FBI and the CIA. The hapless cyborg heroine of *Involuntary Reception* resembles the entrapped and violated subject of *Magic Eyes Cream*. Both bodies are impaired by technology. They narrate the malaise of technological intrusion and lament the impossibility of escape.

The theatrical hyper-consumption of *Magic Eyes Cream* and the compulsory ruinous conducts of *Involuntary Reception* were formally echoed in Lucas' sculptures. Built from obsolete household items, the assemblages were a reminder of wasted by-products of over-production/consumption and crowded junkyards. Possessing a mind of their own, the leftover objects had continued their lives in mutated alien forms. The frivolity and irony invoked in Lucas' works destabilized the neutrality of technological innovation and its all-encompassing potential for the eradication of human frailty. Unlike Stelarc's propagations of the obsolete body, whose survival is dependent upon the armored envelope of resilient gadgets, Lucas' captive subjects deplore the defects of uncontrolled technological growth. *If Lost Then Found* laid clear that whatever anthropomorphic qualities we might ascribe to our creations, we are unable to account for the wanton side-effects of their evolved forms.

*Sara Mameni is a Vancouver-based artist whose work was recently included in the exhibition Between Your Hand and My Head at the Western Front. She is currently completing an MA in Art History at the University of British Columbia.*

## NOTES

1. Stelarc, "Beyond the Body: Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand," *NMA* 6 (1986-87): 28.

2. Ibid.

3. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: MIT Press, 1965), 170.