

Elena Knox: Beyond beyond the valley of the dolls

by Prudence Gibson

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Elena Knox

Beyond beyond the valley of the dolls.

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One of feminist theory's stakes is gender in computer-generated situations. Specifically, how is gender imagined and enacted in robotic cultures? If robots are an augmentation of human intelligence, and some are characterised as female, is this progress for a feminist critique? If robots are intended as service industry, and characterised as female, is this regression for feminist critique? These developments in robotics affect our understanding of what it means to be human and gendered ...or not.

The field of Social Robotics is experimentally researched and developed in the Creative Robotics Lab at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), where artist Elena Knox has made research-led artwork for her latest solo exhibition, *Beyond beyond the valley of the dolls*. She programs robots (Geminoid-F), directs performances between humans and robots and also creates *mise-en-scène* installations of critical feminist re-enactments, featuring fictional eighties television show hostesses. The actors applaud in percussive symphony in *Ovation* (2013) or Geminoid-F engages with an elderly woman, discussing how the robot, too, will grow old, despite its monotonous denial, in *Pathetic Fallacy* (2014).

Human actions and gestures are increasingly informed by our interaction with technology and robots. A feminist approach to systems of knowledge is developed in Knox's work by channeling attention towards the strange social cues and weird cultural gestures that women have historically performed in entertainment industries. Think of advertisements where women wave their hands over a consumer object as a signal of desirability. Think of Delvene Delaney, a beauty pageant winner who rose to fame in the eighties on Australian TV show *Sale of the Century*, as the gracious hostess, leaning over expensive watches and other valuable prizes, such as 'a new car'

These female prompts are so embedded in our culture that we don't notice that the virtual ground has shifted, in anticipation of a future world populated by robots. Women as mediators for family, for home, for consumer items and for men-in-power has transformed into a burgeoning concept: women as machinic mediators. Most very human-like androids are given female faces. Famously so with Apple's Siri, voice technology is also often female. The peculiarities of artificial life are central to a feminist discourse. There are both positive and negative thematic excrescences to this new robotic age. Is it possible to argue that female mediation (for home and hearth and male governance) has evolved into machinic mediations, where the empowerment has moved away from the male machinations and towards the intermediary threads, that is, the technology itself? Or have these digital or technological entities been given female voices, faces and attributes to soften the fearful blow of hostile artificial intelligence?

Elena Knox's development of questions of machinic mediation in her work is forging new, profoundly affecting connections between humanoid robotics, performance and feminist aesthetics. She had a two-day time frame to work with Geminoid-F when the robot toured to the Creative Robotics Lab at UNSW in 2014. The breadth and depth of video and interactive work Knox developed in this brief window is overwhelming. She created theatrical spaces with lights and props, she programmed and puppeteered the robot, she wrote dialogue and directed actors to perform with the robot. She filmed, edited and recorded. She styled, animated and re-performed.

Knox understands the pathos of all human/nonhuman life and she understands the power of humour to progress an intellectual feminist conversation. In *Ovation* and *Reinventing the Wheel* (2014) she grasps the 'alien' world of television variety show hostesses and animates, re-performs and subverts the stereotype. Knox accesses these misogynies but uses ironic humour to subvert her own subversion. The sophistication of her recent body of work also resides in its embodiment: gesture, proprioception, role-playing and an interruption of established cognitive processes are the main game.

Relations between men and women, technology and robots have become a network of female-characterised enactments and systems of specifically female intelligence that might appear less hostile to the eyes of male counterparts but are in fact more dangerous, more powerful. From the early automata to the new insect-like robots at the Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation in Tokyo, there is a global tendency to perceive robots as friend and foe, helper and hindrance. Like our relationship to the weird fiction of alien beings that have populated films, books and computer games, robots also comprise this unknown force, the frightening allure of the 'other'. Knox has created a vast virtual/real world where a rethinking of feminist and human-computer discourse is enacted in multiple performative scenarios.

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Elena Knox, *Ovation*, 2013, HD video and stereo sound, 6:15, video still

