

ENEMIES WITHIN

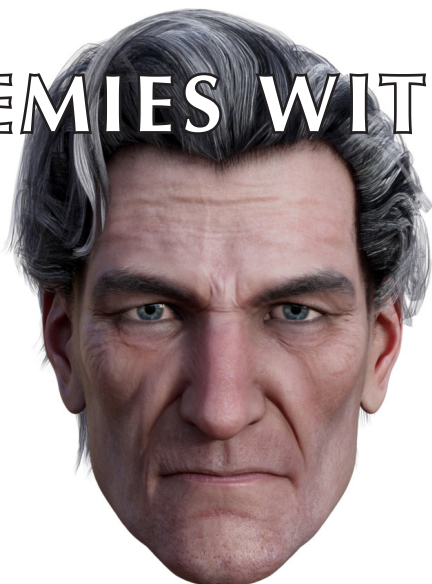


FIG. 1 — THE BRAIN

THE EMPEROR OF TECHNOSCIENCE HAS ACHIEVED DOMINION, THOUGH HIS CLOTHES ARE GROWING MORE THREADBARE BY THE MOMENT, THE ONCE NOBLE COSTUME OF PROGRESS BARELY CONCEALING FAR MORE WAYWARD AMBITIONS.

— Erik Davis, *TECHGNOSIS*, 1998

A rotating head—the crude effigy of some embittered aristocrat with a sharp face and mean affect—spins over a base of interlocking cogs. The metal cylinder, menacing in its infinite rotation, instills a mild sense of unease or hypnagogic terror, as though the character within possessed the power of mind control.

The cog is the ubiquitous symbol of the industrial worker, whose individual role in an assembly line performing identical tasks is essential in the functioning of the entire enterprise or ‘machine.’ The cog-worker’s reality is shaped by the maddening cycle of their labour and the condition of their relative interchangeability, resulting in the mood of existential insignificance and dread often attributed to them. In our context, the cog’s presence points to the anachronism of the zoetrope—the technical name for this rotating, optical machine—and its history as an innovation in entertainment technology hailing from the same, mythologized golden era of exploited European factory workers. Their struggle is now the symbolic stuff of much mediated nostalgia.

Despite its relative antiquity, the zoetrope’s genuine ability to impact our central nervous system remains intact. The implied sentience of the zoetrope is made possible by an unconscious inference on the part of our human visual system called the Phi Phenomenon. This phenomenon almost perfectly illustrates the primacy of the perceptual organization of sensations over the individual sensations themselves, as described in Gestalt psychology, allowing the perception of smooth movement where only a succession of stationary images exists.

This automaton in the form of a zoetrope with a faux-aristocratic human voice, which Tom Richardson has dubbed *The Brain*, functions as the exhibition’s kinetic superego. Cold hearted and comically elitist, it is an upper class British subject trapped inside of a barrel. Through a variety of unsettling strategies—condescending speechifying, mesmerizing optical illusions, and a frenetic display of bleeps, bleeps, and flashing lights—*The Brain* seems to willfully bully and indoctrinate anyone within range.

On the other side of the room, a trio of avatars unknowingly refutes the false consciousness of *The Brain*. These three wander along the length of the enormous, digitally animated proscenium stage of a projection that fills the adjacent wall. While the zoetrope’s audio-visual assault may succeed, at least somatically, at disorienting a human audience, *The Brain*’s main motivation appears trained in vain on communicating its ideological position to these virtual characters. Fully animated, computer-generated phantasms, their technological sophistication is of a higher order than the zoetrope’s—without real bodies they are impervious to the illusions of *The Brain*.

Like the cast of some deranged and idiotic bar joke, the motley group—a jester, a coal miner, and an elven warrior of some kind—were crafted by Richardson to fulfill and disrupt a well-worn set of character archetypes: *The Fool*, *The Brawn* and *The Beauty*, respectively. When combined with the cacophonous



FIG. 2 — THE FOOL

Brain, the group recalls the character dynamics found in the satirical theatre tradition *Commedia Dell’arte*, wherein social hierarchy is lampooned when the pig-headed seriousness of the moneyed authority figure is inevitably undercut by the absurdity, indifference and wit of the representatives of the subjugated underclasses. Despite their simulated lower social stations within real world hierarchies, the ironic qualities latent in their character builds allow the avatars to embody a kind of comedic refusal.

A cipher for the mine closures and violent coal union crack-downs that rocked Britain in the 1980s, Richardson’s *Brawn* figure is a vanquished miner lingering in some anonymous, abandoned tunnel. Like the other avatars, *The Brawn* is

a digital body of the commercially available variety frequently used in fantasy fan art. The figure has been modified to appear heavily coal-dusted and marked by a weathered fortitude found only in those who have toiled physically for many years. As an archetype, *The Brawn* fulfills the role of the group’s collective id, manifesting its instinctual desires and practical, bodily concerns; this *Brawn* does so by illustrating the indexical means by which class struggle is read in the bodies of its subjects.

Contra the dignified, workerist appeal of the miner, the jester seems to reflect the abject requirements on society’s disenfranchised underclasses to perform ceaseless affective labor for the benefit of wealthy elites. Their grimacing face calls up a lineage of theatrical characters whose forced performativity and outrageous conduct functions to simultaneously amuse their audience and rebuke its self-assessed superiority.¹

Gurning—a bizarre pastime in which performers contort their faces into increasingly grotesque expressions—originated in England as a competitive activity as early as 1267. Though widely considered a form of harmless entertainment, many early accounts characterize gurning as a variety of begging wherein the person who gurns does so in the hopes of being rewarded with ale or

¹ Sianne Ngai, *OUR AESTHETIC CATEGORIES: ZANY, CUTE, INTERESTING*. (Harvard University Press, 2012).



FIG. 3 — THE BEAUTY

This text accompanies the exhibition
TOM RICHARDSON: BIG INDUSTRIAL ZOETROPE

BIG INDUSTRIAL ZOETROPE (2018) VARIOUS DIMENSIONS AND MATERIALS, 16 MIN 41 SEC
Multichannel video and sound installation with kinetic sculpture

DIRECTOR/ANIMATOR/MUSIC PRODUCER
Tom Richardson

CAST
The Brain
The Brawn/The Beauty/The Fool
Mark Oliver
Tom Richardson

“ARF A PINT OF ALE”
Written by Charles Tempst
Performed by Gus Elen

REBECCA BREWER (b. 1983, Tokyo, Japan) lives and works on the Coast Salish territories also known as Vancouver. Her work as a visual artist is centred around painting as a medium and as a discourse that can include other media, such as textiles, print and text. Rebecca is also a disorganized organizer—a co-founder of MODEL PROJECT SPACE, Vancouver (2014–2016) and a proud member of the Vancouver Tenants Union. New and upcoming projects include CHAMBER, a domestic music venue, and MESH, a neurodiverse art and science collaboration. Solo exhibitions include THE HOLDING SKY, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver (2016); THE WRITTEN FACE, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver (2014). Group exhibitions include ENTANGLED: TWO VIEWS ON CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN PAINTING, Vancouver Art Gallery (2017); VANCOUVER SPECIAL: AMBIVALENT PLEASURES, Vancouver Art Gallery (2016). Brewer received an MFA from Bard College in 2013, a BFA from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 2007, and she was the winner of the RBC Canadian Painting Competition in 2011.

TOM RICHARDSON (b. 1990, Hastings, UK) is an interdisciplinary artist living and working in Vancouver, BC. He holds a BFA from Emily Carr University. Richardson's cinematically infused works seek to reframe historical events for a contemporary context through drawing lines of research both from historical accounts and narrative fictions. Centred around animation, Richardson's practice expands to include sculpture, installation and 2D works. Recent exhibitions include REHEARSAL FOR A SYNTHETIC THEATRE, Field Contemporary, Vancouver (2017), PEER PRESSURE, Plaza Projects, Richmond (2017), GAME/VIDEO ART, Milan Triennale, Italy (2016), THE BUREAU OF TRUE VISION, Spare Room, Vancouver (2016). Richardson is a founding member of DUPLEX.



ALL IMAGES — TOM RICHARDSON, BIG INDUSTRIAL ZOETROPE, VIDEO STILLS, 2018

FIG. 4 — THE BRAWN



noticeably limited by the circumstances and identities of the agents who wield it. The virtual avatar has the option to conceal its maker's identity and disregard mimetic and substance entirely; the trump card that it wields is its non-conformity to the conservative creeds of both classism and materialism that the zoetrope demands.

Richardson's Beauty—a rough approximation of a folkloric elf with protruding teeth, leather armor, and a comical battle-scar—is half fantasy fetish avatar, half Iron Maiden ghoul. Filmic convention indicates that the Beauty archetype represents the heart of the group and its sympathetic quality. To see this hastily elf as a unifying influence over this disparate group of class-inflected characters strains the imagination. Yet, this Beauty seems extracted from the escapist realm of virtual role-play, the subversive benefits of which are often touted by its IRL advocates. Practitioners claim egalitarianism or a leveling effect in their role-play, the myriad material inequities of everyday life ostensibly reconciled or at least forgotten temporarily.

Formally, the world of fantasy role-play presents an alternative to the basicness of historical reenactment (however satirical) that the attire and context of The Brawn, The Brain and The Fool call to mind. Theirs is a virtuosic faithfulness to historical detail, while The Beauty's mode is pastiche—a fantasia that melds every possible object, event, costume, and location and presents it in an array of decontextualized reconfigurations.

The political utility of pastiche is unclear; it does not pretend to carry the same promise of reputation that satire entails. Yet, the anomaly

ARTIST ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS I would like to thank everyone who helped me along the way with this project. Especially Melina Querel and Daniel Jefferies for performing as theatrical bartenders on the opening night, Rebecca Brewer for her wonderfully in-depth essay, Mark Oliver for his spectacular rendition of The Brain, Stephan Wright, Wade Thomas, Gabi Dao, Ron Tran for all their support, Alex Muir, Lianne Zannier, Pietro Sammarco, Steff Ling, Sungpil Yoon and all the staff at VIVO for making this mad dream possible. And finally thanks to all my friends for putting up with me saying Big Industrial Zoetrope for the best part of a year.

VIVO MEDIA ARTS CENTRE operates with the support of the British Columbia Arts Council, Province of British Columbia, City of Vancouver and Canada Council for the Arts, as well as its donors, board, volunteers, and members.

