TECHNOLOGY

Pre-digital dreams

Josie Glausiusz strolls through an evanescent 'cabinet of wonders' exploring the surreal side of technology.

I flung myself onto the floor cushions inside Stan VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome* and gazed at the flickering images projected on its curved ceiling. An attack of insomnia the night before gave me a good excuse to lie down and relax as pictures spun by: a dancing skeleton, a fork, a statue, a fried egg, a terrified face, the Statue of Liberty, the Kremlin, the words 'WHO WHAT HOW'. It seemed as if I was inhabiting a frenetic early version of the Internet — which, in a way, I was.

VanDerBeek, an experimental film-maker, constructed the original 9-metre-high movie-drome inside a grain silo in 1963. He foresaw a global network of such pods as "hubs for the distribution of knowledge via the universal language of the information age", connected by a network of satellites, television and telephones. He died in 1984, having never realized his dream. The reconstructed pod — a piece of this World Wide Web prototype — forms the centrepiece of *Ghosts in the Machine*, an exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York.

The exhibition is conceived as a "cabinet of wonders" encapsulating a prehistory of the digital age. It is designed to explore "the dreams and nightmares of technology" as expressed by more than 70 artists, writers and other visionaries. The eclectic jumble of installations conveys both our dread and our embrace of technology, with its power to transform life and death.

The most terrifying is a reconstruction — commissioned for a 1975 exhibition — of the *Harrow*. This fictional execution machine appears in Franz Kafka's short story *In the Penal Colony* (1919). In Kafka's tale, a person accused of an unspecified crime is strapped to a bed while an array of long needles carves the purported crime into their flesh.

With its cogs and gears, dangling wires and sharp needles suspended over a coffin-like bed, the wooden contraption evokes the terror that must face every prisoner confronted with today's electroshock devices and other torture technologies. Incongruously, the *Harrow* shares a space with Jeff Koons's vacuum cleaners, the *New Hoover Convertible Doubledacker*, encased in Plexiglass and lit with fluorescent bulbs. Koons's

piece is perhaps there to evoke the torment of domestic drudgery.

Another misconceived machine in the show, created by psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich in 1940, is the Orgone Energy Accumulator, a wooden cubicle lined with sheet metal and steel wool. A follower of Freud, Reich believed that a concentration of "orgone", which he conceived of as a primordial form of energy, would increase "orgastic potency". This would, in turn, relieve

Ghosts in the Machine

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indecency in 1952, Turing committed suicide, possibly by eating a cyanide-laced apple.

Henrik Oleson's *Some Illustrations to the Life of Alan Turing* (2008) appears in the same room as Reich's accumulator. This photo-collage series representing the dualities of Turing's life — public and private, mind and body, human

and machine — depict Turing's face obscured by, among other objects, a large screw, a grid of zeroes and ones, and a half-eaten apple.

The machine as medicine shows up again in a piece of art constructed by Emery Blagdon, a sometime vagabond and tinkerer who once built a working tractor from the ground up. Born in 1907, Blagdon created intricately woven wire-and-bead chandelier-like mobiles, which he called "healing machines", and hung them in an outhouse on his Nebraska farm. He re-routed the power lines from his house into the shed, hoping to harness the electricity's healing powers. However, Blagdon died of cancer in 1986, the energy from his machines having failed to heal him.

There is much to admire in *Ghosts in the Machine*. Thomas Bayrle's 1989 *Madonna Mercedes*, for instance, is a mother-and-child collage that, on close inspection, is made up entirely of drawings of Mercedes-Benz automobiles. Günther Uecker's *New York Dancer IV* (1965), a nail-studded phallic sculpture 2 metres tall and powered by an electric motor, is more mystifying.

Mystification, however, can also be a thing of beauty and delight, as evinced by Gianni Colombo's *Elastic Space*, a three-dimensional grid made of illuminated, moving rubber bands. Designed to "catalyze variable perceptual experiences", the piece is mesmerizing and soothing.

I stood in the quiet, darkened room watching the glowing rubber bands slowly moving back and forth, up and down. I thought perhaps I would stay for a while. I could contemplate infinity. And maybe go to sleep. ■

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Robert Breer's *Floats* (1970) move imperceptibly about the gallery.

pent-up psychic and physical tensions, promoting general health and vitality, and even playing a part in curing cancer. Reich offered the box for testing to Albert Einstein, who pronounced it a dud.

Among those treated with orgone therapy was British computer-science pioneer Alan Turing, who was forced into treatment to "cure" his homosexuality. His proposed Turing Machine would simulate the behaviour of any other machine, including itself. Two years after being prosecuted for gross