

Time Is. Time Was. Time Is Past.

Shauna Jean Doherty

According to legend, the thirteenth-century friar, alchemist, and philosopher, Dr. Mirabilis (also known as Roger Bacon) spent seven years toiling to create a magical and mysterious brass object — a precise replica of a man’s head. This brazen head, as they are historically called, was part of a medieval tradition which saw sorcerers fabricate all-knowing automata allegedly endowed with a mystical clairvoyance and the ability to answer all questions, earthly and otherwise.

Automata, moving mechanical devices made in imitation of a human being, aided in the effort to understand the complex relationship between life and death, the organic and artificial, the divine and profane.¹ In the absence of modern science, these devices embodied complex ideas about nature, the body, the universe, and the principles by which they operate. Automata were almost always understood as magical and were occasionally considered to be the work of the Devil due to their association with alchemy.

The practice of alchemy traditionally combined philosophy, mysticism, and science, and during the Dark Ages was regarded with suspicion by most Christians (except for those that practiced it in secret). Alchemists were accused of perpetrating a form of evil magic, when in fact they were some of the world’s earliest chemists. Bacon himself had a reputation as a sorcerer who used demons to penetrate the mysteries of the universe for his own personal gain. Despite its Christian prohibition, Bacon and other religious figures endeavoured to establish a philosophical connection between alchemy and Christian salvation, in the study of human, divine, and natural phenomena.

It is told that, struggling to endow his prophetic creation with the gift of speech, Bacon summoned the Devil for advice, who announced that the head would speak only if provided “the continual fume of the six hottest simples”— a selection of plants used in alchemical medicine.² One evening, exhausted from his labours, Bacon succumbed to a brief slumber. In this very moment the monstrous head uttered its first and final cryptic words, exclaiming, “Time is,” “Time was,” and “Time is past.” Immediately following this oracular incantation, the head shattered, destroying itself and Bacon’s opportunity to ask it the secrets of the unknown.

Medieval automata, albeit diverse, shared two common qualities as manufactured objects: they appeared to move independent of human intervention; and mimicked the look or behaviour of

¹ Truitt, Elly Rachel, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 1.

² Adams, W. H. Davenport, *Witch, Warlock, and Magician* (Chatto & Windus, 1889), 38.

natural forms, eliciting “surprise, delight, and sometimes terror.”³

The multimedia sound installation *Cadence*, by Joshua MacDonald and Maria Simmons, exists in parallel to Dr. Mirabilis’ life’s work, melding the Christian, mystical, and mimetic elements of an object that may hold a clue to the mysteries of the cosmos and humankind’s role within it. Conjured from materials that stretch across centuries, including discarded pipes from a nineteenth-century Hamilton church organ, industrial plastic tubing, hand dyed velvet, copper, wood, and magnet solenoids, *Cadence* is an assemblage that animates the secrets of the past and the future. Like the medieval brazen head, it will answer any question you set to it — you just have to have the courage to ask.

Cadence, as a term, can refer to phenomena both alive and unconscious — the inflection of a human voice or a sequence of notes emitted from a musical instrument. MacDonald and Simmons’ installation straddles this boundary between human and machine. Its wheezing breath and fleshy fabric entrails give it the appearance of a monstrous⁴ humanoid but its plugs and wires keep it firmly in the object world.

The scavenged organ pipes have been resurrected in the exhibition space and reanimated with the assistance of contemporary technical wizardry; the installation has been programmed to respond to the vocal pitch of the gallery visitor. Once an individual initiates a conversation with the contraption, it responds with a complimentary tone emitted from one or more of the sixteen organ pipes that comprise its body. Through an intricate maze of plastic tubing that weaves overhead from an adjacent room in the gallery, air is pushed into the bellows system — an accordion-like mechanism that sighs in and out — regulating the air pressure that flows through the avant-garde instrument. This air navigates two wooden boxes, the vocal chambers, that eventually reach a series of eight electromagnetic switches. Finally, an electronic signal is sent to a selection of valves, which direct the air towards one of the pipes, exuding a cacophony of discordant and otherworldly sounds, and asserting the entity’s quiet sentience.

The schism between the organic and the machine worlds is further amplified through Simmons’ expertise in natural dyeing, specifically her use of bloodwood, madder root, and the scarlet resin secreted by the lac beetle — all substances known to ancient alchemists. The use of plant matter informs the organic effect of her textiles, even before she hand stitches them into bodily forms.

For thirty years these organ pipes had fallen silent, stored in a church room dedicated to the defunct instrument. Their reanimation, however, constitutes some modern-day necromancy, another ancient practice, carried out in the Middle Ages by malevolent magicians to

³ Truitt, Elly Rachel, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 116.

⁴ Monster, compellingly, comes from the Latin words *monstrum*, an omen, and *monere*, to warn.

communicate with the dead for the purposes of divination. The impulse to endow objects with human faculties (as in the case of *Cadence*, a voice, lungs, and fleshy velvet organs) has long been manifest in the psyche. Whether through the occult, Christianity, or magical automata, humans have never stopped searching for the answers of the universe, which may be found somewhere between the past, the present, and the future.

This essay is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Cadence*, on view in Hamilton Artists Inc.'s James Gallery from June 8 – August 10, 2019

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