



ERIK SCHNACK

WIRED

MADRYN COSBURN

Cover art:

Cyborgian Trans(per)formance

Erik Schnack + Madryn Cosburn

Youngblood Gallery, Cape Town

6 - 20 August, 2015

All photographs by Michel Dei-Cont

WIRED

an art installation exhibition by
Erik Schnack and Madryn Cosburn

Venue: The former Sam Cohen Hall, Windhoek, Namibia

Dates: 23 April to 04 May 2018

With sincere and heartfelt thanks to the National Arts Council of Namibia, the University of South Africa, PC Centre and the Franco-Namibian Cultural Centre. The creation of this exhibition was possible due to their recognition and support.



FOREWORD

It is hard not to speculate about the future, to look into its murky depths and think about what could be. This speculation is at the core of Schnack and Cosburn's work. Looking forward they see a cybernetic future, a future in which technology has the potential to dominate our intellectual and physical worlds to such a degree that we no longer draw the line between machine and human. However, in their work there is a continued commitment to the very human act of making, both hand-crafting and programming.

StArt Art Gallery has the privilege of exploring contemporary Namibian art in all its diversity. These cybernetic artworks defy location by looking into the future and locating themselves in a place that is as yet unknown. On the other hand they are also fully grounded in the experiences of their makers and their audience. These experiences and interactions are therefore also Namibian and located in the here and now. The developing world often takes the lead when it comes to recycling and upcycling. In large part this is out of necessity, but it is also out of a commitment to preserve the natural resources that countries like Namibia still possess. The materials that build the future are often depicted as chromecast, slick and expensive. In countries, like Namibia, that do not have access to this wealth the future may look slightly different, aiming to balance the sustainability of upcycling with the innovation of technology.

The future presented in these artworks can be read as an offering, and a suggestion for an accessible future that can be built by the work of our hands.

Helen Harris and Gina Figueira

START
art gallery

WIRED

Wired is a multi-media art installation comprising a family of handcrafted suspended sculptures that respond to the viewer via a series of strategically placed sensors. These represent cyborgs and mimic Artificial Intelligence (AI). Constructed by Erik Schnack and Madryn Cosburn, the works are intended to express concerns about the possibility of technology ultimately dominating humankind. Here, the two present their creative motivation and influences.



ARTISTS' STATEMENT

Throughout time, new technologies have frequently evoked conflicting emotions in the general population of that era. Technology has been viewed as an evil force that could diminish both our humanity and our relationship with the planet we inhabit; yet simultaneously has been acknowledged for its benefits, such as expanding communication and offering solutions for some of humankind's greatest practical problems.

Wired represents our own unease around the paradoxical relationship between technological advancement and humankind by dealing specifically with aspects of society's confusion and anxiety around the notion of the cyborg. At the same time, it presents our explorations with alternative making materials not commonly associated with current expectations around the cutting-edge components of a cyborg aesthetic.

Briefly, the cyborg was first defined in 1960 as "a being with both organic and biomechatronic body parts" (Clynes and Kline). It is neither bionic, bio-robotic, nor android. Haraway later called it "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1991a: 149).



“A cyborg is a cybernetic
organism, a hybrid of
machine and organism, a
creature of social reality as
well as a creature of fiction.”

Donna Haraway (1991)



By the 1980s, authors and other cultural creatives were motivated to explore themes of possible *near futures* that are generated and populated by human-machine hybrids. This new emerging science fiction genre based on speculative fiction was termed *cyberpunk* and was intended to provoke apprehension by seeming more 'real' than pure science fiction. It included the technological possibilities and threats inherent in the notion of the cyborg.

The cyberpunk movement generally presents a dystopian future characterised by alienation and dissent. Some cyber-theorists already argue that we are part-human and part-machine due to our dependence on the internet – in itself a cybernetic device – and since the internet is all-pervading, the world could evolve into a post-geographical state, and humankind into a cyborg population.

This perspective raises certain concerns for us: the potential for technological advancement – in particular, the cyborg – to become unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unstoppable; the difficulties encountered when attempting to identify a central source responsible for specific technologies, as well as who controls and manipulates them; and fears around AI developing self-modification and becoming self-conscious beyond human control. In such a case, human relevance itself would be under interrogation. But our work also concentrates on the positive aspects of the cyborg, looking at how it can raise questions about stereotypes through hybridisation, and maybe present us with more encouraging *near futures*.



A trigger here has been the cyberpunk sub-genre known as *steampunk*, a movement that incorporates digital technology with a visual aesthetic that refers to 19th century steam-powered industrial machinery, clothing and artefacts. We have adopted certain aspects of steampunk culture in creating *Wired*, through reinterpreting the use of retro-aesthetics. Three interrelated aspects of the steampunk aesthetic have influenced us here: the way the movement's appropriation of Victorian visual objects constructed with a *bricolage* technique results in the creation of hybridised historical fantasies.

One concern of ours is the destruction of the environment due to toxic waste, along with our recognition that this kind of pollution began in the Victorian Industrial Age. Our approach to 'reaching into the past' is to use objects and materials with their own history – discarded waste – to provoke other ways of thinking about a technological future that could be more beneficial to the planet, and by extension, to mankind.

To create our contemporary 'cyborgs', we upcycled discarded waste materials and joined them by using the ancient construction craft of chain-plate (body armour). This work's optimistic *near future* story speaks of both eco-sustainability and the significance even now of handcraft; and the sculptural forms intend to debunk the apocalyptic cyborg stereotype.

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Upcycling in steampunk culture is:

“[S]ustainability mixed with meaning and creative problem solving. It’s an act of time-defiance and time-resilience to adapt an object... and give it new life.”

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(Bruce Rosenbaum 2016)

Wired was influenced especially by the steampunk retro-aesthetic characteristic that relates to how the technical processes of making enhance the final presentation of the work, thereby broadening the reading of the work. The chain-plate technique used to construct the sculptures' protective armour forms a decorative pattern which resembles *andamento* mosaic. Here the fragments appear more tenuously linked by physical gaps rather than grouting. Once the sculptures are suspended and the installation lit, the decorative patterning of the upcycled cyborg figures create the illusion of floating, of disconnected metal plates, and throw intricate lattices of light onto the surrounding walls. Without the lighting we see just solid structures protected by chain-plate armour, but once lit, the tessellated pattern of light and shadow transforms the installation into a simulated digital world.

In steampunk culture, salvaged items are repaired with meticulous craftsmanship. Steampunk artist Bruce Rosenbaum recovers Victorian and/or industrial furniture, machinery and technology, repurposing them to create decorative and functional visual installations. He claims that, "[it] is sustainability mixed with meaning and creative problem solving. It's an act of time-defiance and time-resilience to adapt an object ... and give it new life." (2016).

This has special significance for Schnack, whose family background comprises chain-mail artisans in goldsmithing. He says: "For me handcraft has a special innocence. It is hard to associate bad intentions with handcraft. It is also difficult to detect an opinion or a stance in handcraft, it is non- authoritarian."



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(Erik Schnack 2018)



Although the creation of *Wired* has been motivated in part by the cyberpunk element of *near future* science fiction, and by the appropriation and *bricolage* techniques of steampunk, our own childhood experiences and fantasies have also influenced the work. *Wired* represents a collaboration - or trusted alliance - between a technophobe (Schnack) and a technophile (Cosburn). Schnack's parents instilled in him a distrust of technological processes and advancement, emphasising the importance of skilled handcraft techniques despite the ease associated with industrial mass-produced goods. By comparison, Cosburn's upbringing revolved around technology. His family had computers and embraced the latest technology, and even as a child he was able to write his own computer programs.

As a result, the collaboration revolved around Schnack's building the sculptural forms using the chain-plate technique historically mastered by his family, and Cosburn's building of the technological components for the work, namely the LED lights, the sound, the computer-programmed mechanical parts, and the AI coding.

Most importantly, *Wired* represents how the interconnection between two opposing worldviews - traditional craft and new technology - can create positive and mutually beneficial outcomes.

For more insight, please see our *Wired* blog:

<https://totallywired181858146.wordpress.com/>.

Text contributed by Erik Schnack





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“By detecting a simple response, the automated cyborg has its first encounter with humans. Starting off as an ‘empty brain’ it learns from its environment— picks up emotions— and as a reaction plays back its own creation of composition of sound, light, movement and poetry.”

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(Madryn Cosburn 2018)



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clynes, M and Kline, N, S. 1960. *Cyborgs and Space, in Astronautics*. New York: Rockland State Hospital. pp. 26-76.

Haraway, D. 1991a. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge. pp. 149-181.

Bruce Rosenbaum: Q+A Steampunk Dynamo (2016: 40) boutiquedesign.com April 2016.
Interview by Matthew Hall.

CURRICULUM VITAE

ERIK SCHNACK

Education

- 1990- 1993 Bachelor Degree of Fine Arts
1997- 1999 Post- Graduate Higher Education Diploma

Solo Exhibitions

- August 1994 *Power- Driven Sticky Tape*. Loft Gallery. Namibia
September 1998 *Machines of Progress and Destruction*. Engelhard Design Gallery. Namibia
May 2009 *Bulletproof*. Franco Namibian Cultural Centre. Namibia
May 2012 *Scramble*. Katutura Community Art Centre. Namibia
August 2015 *Cyborgian Trans(per)formance*. Youngblood Gallery. South Africa

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2000 SADC Arts and Crafts Exhibition. National Art Gallery of Namibia
ABSA Atelier Awards. Johannesburg, South Africa
2003 *Artists for Conservation*. National Art Gallery of Namibia
Standard Bank Biennale. National Art Gallery of Namibia
Human Touch. Turin and Milan, Italy
2005 *Independence Exhibition*. National Art Gallery of Namibia
Standard Bank Namibia Biennale. National Art Gallery of Namibia
2010 *An Exploration of the Southern African Geography*. artSPACE durban, South Africa
2012 *Namibia 6, Rathausgalerie*. Berlin, Germany
2013 *The Member's Exhibition*, Nexus Gallery. Adelaide, Australia
2016 *Conversations*, National Art Gallery of Namibia
1884 - 1915: An Artistic Position, National Art Gallery of Namibia
Drawings: Past and Present, National Art Gallery of Namibia
2017 *Textiles and Textures*, National Art Gallery of Namibia

Art Awards

- 2000 Stone Award, Gecko Advertising Awards, Namibia
2004 Overall Award. //Ae/Gams Cultural Festival. Namibia
2006 Silver Award. Gecko Advertising Awards, Namibia
2007 Wild Cinema International Film Award. Animation category. Namibia
Nomination for World Short Film Award, Animation. New York, USA
2008 Winner of Three-Dimensional Category- Bank Windhoek Triennale. Namibia
2011 Winner of Three-Dimensional Category- Bank Windhoek Triennale. Namibia



