

# Synthetic Baby

## Biljana Popovic

27 September – 28 October 2018

**THE PHYSICS ROOM** CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

**Synthetic Baby**  
**Biljana Popovic**  
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What do you think about when you are driving? For the cybernetic subject, deep thinking happens on the skin. The car is not an object to be fetishised, but a mediated lens, a transformative and existential machine with which humans have a reciprocal relationship. The car transforms how we know the world, and how the world is.

Using two pieces of recent technology—The Fortwo Smartcar and the Samsung Gear 360 camera, *Synthetic Baby* opens up a historical moment—namely the early 21st century—via a dance. This dance concerns the cultural role of technology, and it takes place between two sensibilities: romantic naturalism and technophilia.

*Synthetic Baby* is a multimedia installation that operates as a prop-opera where cyberfeminism, pop phenomenology, and theories of embodiment come together in a period piece set in the near-past. Building from previous work, Biljana Popovic explores the relationship between identity and the designed environment through the production of new socio-spatial contexts.

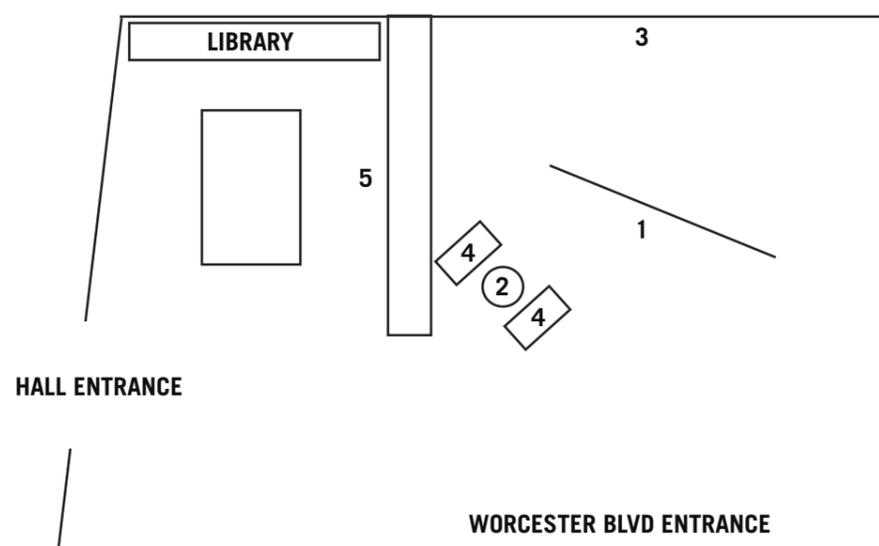
Tech industries do not expand in proportion to each other; digital technology is taking over the marketplace at such a rate that older tech trades like automechanics and architecture are starting to look like blacksmithery and stonemasonry. The technophile claims it is not enough to use tools, it is the love of technology that fuels innovation—and considers technophilia to be an equally legitimate position to romantic naturalism, equally capable of fighting for social justice and earthly survival.

What does freedom to identify mean in a period of sexual revolution, pumped up bodies, the metrosexual and the 'Can I speak to the manager haircut'? Identity is losing its grip as an organising force of the body/environment/technology/politics assemblage. The feeling that washes over is a collapse between the natural and the artificial. We were always already artificial.

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**Biljana Popovic** (b. 1990, Loznica, Serbia), is a New Zealand artist currently based in Berlin, Germany. She graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts with a BFA Hons in 2012. She is the next recipient of the Creative New Zealand Berlin Artist Residency program, October 2018 - October 2019. Recent shows include *Thing Persuasions*, a collaborative exhibition with Sam Beca at Veronica Gallery, Amsterdam 2018 and *Andromeda*, a collaborative installation with Juliet Carpenter for *Shout! Whisper! Wail!* The 2017 Chartwell Show, Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki.

## List of Works



1. **Smarthide**, quilted textile: neoprene, synthetic, binding, fixings, embroidery, 3400 x 3800 mm, 2018.

2. **Something Entirely Natural**, 360 virtual reality video work shot on Samsung gear 360 camera with sound design by Claire Duncan and water dance performed by Ruby Read, 3 min 27 sec, 2018. This work will be made available online for the duration of the exhibition at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hP7kdr5laSE&feature=share>

3. **Boudoir**, mural with waterbased paint markers, 2018.

4. **Chairs**, custom-made, 2018 & **Table**, steel & glass, 2018. Credit: Milos Popovic.

5. Selected Readings for *Synthetic Baby*

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Exhibition Preview: Wednesday 26 September, 2018

Exhibition Runs: 27 September – 28 October 2018

Thank you to the Chartwell Trust for their generous support of *Synthetic Baby*.



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## Biljana Popovic in conversation with Jamie Hanton

25 September 2018

**Jamie Hanton:** You've said the project revolves around the Wata dance, can you tell me more about the dance, its context, and how you came to it?

**Biljana Popovic:** It's important to say that the Wata dance is a loose reference; the dancer is not a Wata practitioner. Wata is short for *wasser tanzen* (water dance) and I think it was developed in Switzerland in the 1980s. What inspired me about the Wata dance is that it happens between two bodies; a practitioner and a client. The client makes their body go limp and they put their trust into the other person's arms, their nose is blocked with a peg and they are gently pulled under the water and guided back up for air. They call these movements dolphin dives. It's supposed to have health benefits like boosting the immune system, lymphatic drainage, I've always liked the sound of that, lymphatic drainage...

**JH:** So it's a therapy, it's therapeutic...?

**BP:** It's therapeutic. It's supposed to have mental and physical benefits. I liked it better than using synchronized swimming as a reference, because that's typically a bunch of pretty girls in pretty costumes smiling all over the pool. This is more about surrender and the intimate trust that happens between two bodies folding into each other in a low gravity environment. It's almost like this meditative moment when you're driving in your car, completely sealed within this acoustic envelope and you haptically become one with this machine. You're not even thinking about the separation between you, you're not thinking 'I've gotta turn the steering wheel a little to the right now', it's all automatic, you're functioning as one synchronized flesh and steel body. There's a metaphor there between the Wata practice and the act of driving.

**JH:** Thinking about agency of practitioners, the therapist, and the car, was there anything specific about the Fortwo smart car, as an object, that you wanted to interrogate?

**BP:** It's a really funny object; it's an object that's having an identity crisis, it's on the verge of becoming totally electric but it's not really eco, and it's got some assisted driving functions as many new cars do now, but it's the emblematic small car. That's what I like about it. I like the scale of it being closer to the scale of the body, I also like that it's ubiquitously European, but it's a city car, it's an urban car... it's metro.

**JH:** So small range?

**BP:** Small range. It's just for zipping *you* around, it feels like a very personal vehicle. I can imagine that some of the first self-driving cars will resemble them. It's on the cusp. I was talking to a friend about self-driving cars and the power dynamic between me, the all-powerful driver-car, and then pedestrians, the mere mortals on the street. This is the kind of identity I assume when I'm driving—what's going to happen when I'm not driving anymore? It's almost like this dominant submissive relationship is going to switch, and suddenly it's like I'm going to be carried around in the arms of the car's loving embrace. I'm less interested in person/car relations explicitly, than I am interested in this idea of interpolation: becoming an assemblage of driver and the machine.

**JH:** I'm wondering who's adopting this technology, who's driving this particular part of innovation? What kinds of people are they? Are they environmentalists?

**BP:** ... who wears swatch watches? The company that made the smart car was Swatch + Mercedes. That's how we get the acronym smart: SwatchMercedesART. But now it's owned by a different company. So it was a watch maker's car. And it's interesting that it's one of these projects done by a non-automotive designer. Like a fish out of water. There was a car that Mies van der Rohe designed, also ridiculous. A product designer doing automotive design. An architect designing a car ...

**JH:** Homer's car. Did you see that episode?

**BP:** No, I don't think I've seen it?!

**JH:** It looks like the batmobile.

**BP:** Amazing.

**JH:** [Bringing up the car on Google.]

**BP:** Woah look at that! What's that bulb, globe out the back for? It's like his family is in a fish bowl. And so is he...

**JH:** 360 viewing in the back seat.

**BP:** Nice, 360 viewing, look at that...

**JH:** I'm just thinking about designers designing out of their field...

**BP:** Perfect reference.

**JH:** Originally, *Synthetic Baby* was going to feature a 'wall of fame' or a trophy cabinet for a technophile or a car enthusiast...

**BP:** Yes, but maybe it wouldn't look like a car enthusiast's hobby room that you're used to seeing. Earlier we were talking about the difference between looking at and looking through. The car not as something just to be looked at like 'Ahh check out the rims on this!' Not as something to be sensationalised, but as something to think through. The windscreen is literally and figuratively a lens between you and the world.

The thing that fascinates me most about the car, is its ubiquity—that it's this really subtle thing that takes up a lot of room in our lives and it's everywhere but we're not discussing our relationship with it. And they're shaping our cities, they're shaping our architecture, they're shaping our houses, they're shaping everything.

**JH:** But potentially would you say that the Fortwo is going to open up other concerns for design? The haptic relationship we have with the car will shift again. The power and agency will shift back to some unseen force; choosing a route will become limited...

**BP:** But maybe the power game will still be there, maybe it will go away from being in your foot on the pedal and your hands on the wheel and transfer to your voice, and there will be people whose voices Siri will pick-up without a problem, and people will learn to use just the right reverberation, just the right timbre, so that straight away the car is like 'Yes, I hear you', and you just sit there reading your newspaper and commanding it with your voice.

**JH:** I can imagine an in-depth initiation programme that you do when you get your car, you go through a setup, you talk to it for a couple of hours about anything and everything, or maybe keywords...

**BP:** That reminds me of the Spike Jonze movie *Her* and Samantha the ios says 'Tell me a little bit about your relationship with your mother', and he says 'I feel like she doesn't really see me' and he starts to go into it, and she cuts him off like 'OK, I've heard enough' and I think it was just for her to hear his voice while he was being emotive. But that's what I'm imagining our relationship with our cars is like, maybe not that far, but potentially...

Imagine if you could get a kiwi one that's like 'Turn left?' Makes everything sound like, a question! I would love to have a Jacinda one, she's got such a great voice. But then it would be weird because she's got bigger fish to fry, she shouldn't be directing me where to go...

**JH:** The total embodiment of the Nanny State?

**BP:** But is it a critique of it? It's a Nanny State fantasy, 'Yes, nanny me!'

**JH:** But it's also the greatest fear of those who fear the Nanny State; that they will be told by a female PM where to go and what to do. It's 2009 all over again. It's Helen Clark, and people saying we can smack our kids whenever we want, who are you to tell us not to smack our kids?!

**BP:** It's interesting you said a female Prime Minister telling us where to go, because on one hand it's like 'Women, don't tell me what to do!' and on the other hand, my uncle will set a female voice for his GPS and he'll be like, 'She's always very polite, she never raises her voice at me if I go the wrong way.' I've been reading about the gendered economy of pleasure within automotive culture: car magazines are a homosocial bonding sphere, a place for men to bond with other men, and there's some kind of deep underlying assumption that women cannot be emotional about machines, cannot love machines the way that men can, which seems like a role reversal compared to the way we think about women with other objects. Within this sphere, vessels like ships and cars and other vehicles take on this feminine identity, but in a totally passive way: they don't have a sense of agency, they're purely utility objects of desire.

That there is a woman having a dance with a car in my film work, I think is important. What happens when a woman's body comes in contact with a car, this is interesting to me, and I think that's a crucial detail to point out.

**JH:** Have you read J.G. Ballard's *Crash* or seen the David Cronenberg film?

**BP:** I've seen the film.

**JH:** I've been thinking about that text during this project. I've been thinking about the agency of the women involved in that story. The visceral and destructive; often sexual relationships...

**BP:** But it's also technophilia. It's extreme in its romantic eroticism. It's definitely a BDSM thing; they're giving themselves over to pain and risk. It seems like an eroticised modernism. Modernism is all about the love of technology to whisk you away into a future you don't understand, to relinquish agency...

**JH:** You've mentioned that the dance featured in the film work takes place between two sensibilities: technophilia and let's call it a return to nature, can you talk more about the return to nature?

**BP:** I think that this project positions itself as highly suspicious of the notion of a "return to nature" because I don't think there's any part of the world that is untouched by man(—funny word there). What I would say about romantic naturalism is that it's dangerous how it's misused to keep things the way they are, to keep the powerful in power, whether its an ideology, or a tradition etc. Religious fundamentalists will use this philosophy, homophobes will use this philosophy: the idea that the way things have always been is natural. I'm not suspicious of nature ... or maybe I am! When I graduated Elam, I told my friend Alex that there was this shop called Nature Baby and it was owned by an Elam Alumni, and he said 'If you opened a baby stuff shop it would be called Synthetic Baby.' That kind of nickname stuck with my friends. I guess I'm suspicious of the way we romanticise the natural.



Image: Biljana Popovic, *Something Entirely Natural*, film still, 2018.