

Itziar Barrio: On *Bodybuilder* and *ROBOTA MML*

The word “robot”—derived from the Old Slavonic “rabota,” meaning “forced labor”—was famously coined by Czech writer Karel Čapek in 1921. In Čapek’s play *R.U.R.*, or *Rossum’s Universal Robots*, robots are conscripted to work so that people don’t have to (and shareholders can reap profits), occasioning debates among humans on the factory grounds as to whether the androids are sentient and should be afforded rights. The robots eventually orchestrate a bloody rebellion against their oppressors, ushering in a new age. Over the past century, the assumption that the relationship between humans and technology is necessarily subjugating, and the fear that the erosion of the divisions between “human” and “robot” might have catastrophic consequences, have continued to hold court in popular thinking. All the while, humans’ enmeshment with technology—physically, intellectually, affectively—has continued to deepen, destabilizing putative ontological categories.

Bilbao-born, New York City-based artist Itziar Barrio, who operates from the position that human subjects are constantly “becoming-with” technology, premiered her tripartite “Material” series (2016–2023) in a 2023 solo exhibition at Smack Mellon in New York City. Exploring “intersections between technology, labor, identity, and matter,” her conceptually driven, deeply researched projects unfolded across video and sculpture. Among the works presented—now, displayed dyadically at NADA Foreland—were *ROBOTA MML* (2023), a video that takes Čapek’s canonical play as a starting point, and the video-sculpture *Bodybuilder* (2023), which vignettes and builds upon a key figure in *ROBOTA MML*.

ROBOTA MML centers issues of labor: both in the sense that the robots symbolize alienated, disenfranchised, and subaltern workers who come to collectively organize, and in that Barrio produced the work amid heated debates about the potential impact of evolved artificial intelligence on labor markets. The video is thick with quotations and allusions aimed at critiquing dominant social orders and hegemonic thought. Into *R.U.R.*’s narrative arc, Barrio deftly interweaves references to Luis Bruñel’s 1962 *The Exterminating Angel*, a surreal Marxist film in which wealthy guests at a dinner party find they cannot leave the room; Théodore Géricault’s 1818–19 *The Raft of the Medusa*, a painting of a contemporaneous shipwreck that brutally exemplified how class distinctions can kill; and histories of queer bars as spaces for uprising and creating new realities. (The robots are largely gender-fluid or queer-coded.) Character monologues additionally draw upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theorization of desire as a process or event and Elizabeth Grosz’s suggestion that the realities of geological dynamism subvert notions of life as static. With increasing regularity, scenes are suffused with smoke: signifying a psychic charge, a state change, or one world burning down to hasten the arrival of the next.

The camera intermittently cuts to a bodybuilder (José Cano), offering wordless, smoky close-ups of his rippling muscles and veined flesh as he flexes and poses. His body, contoured to a superhuman extreme, is further defamiliarized and abstracted through the proximity of Barrio’s lens. In *R.U.R.*, the general manager argues that robot labor is

a social good: “Nobody will live in poverty. They won’t have jobs, that’s true, but that’s because there won’t be any jobs to do. Everything will be done by living machines. People will do only the things they want to do, they can live their lives just so that they can make themselves perfect.” In theory, the bodybuilder—who can focus on sculpting and displaying his ideal body, who visibly reaps the fruits of his unalienated labor—epitomizes this “perfect” human, liberated from the drudgery of employment. *Bodybuilder* transforms a sleek black squat stand into a supporting architecture for a vertical video screen that plays a sequence of shots of Cano’s segmented body sensually wreathed with smoke. Resting on the ground near the adapted fitness armature, a brass pole terminates in a bricolaged “weight.” In the sculptural series of which this work is part, constituent elements intimately reveal the artist’s presence not only as the creative laborer behind the work, but also as a body and consumer: Barrio pairs her old spandex pants, salvaged after they ripped at the crotch with repeated wear, with concrete casts of packaging for products she has used, a literal concretization of flows of production and consumption. Desire, that driver of capitalism, bodies, and machines, hangs heavy in the air, like smoke.

–Cassie Packard