

**Notes on the Plural-Voluptuary**  
**By Harry Dodge**

*Presented at Pieter, January 5, 2017*

*Artist Talk for “The Inner Reality of Ultra-Intelligent Life,” at the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena.*

This evening's presentation is dedicated to Patti Smith and the beautiful mistake she made in the middle of her performance at the Nobel Prize ceremony recently. Here's to you Patti.

1.) I'm going to show you a scattering of work. Drawings, sculpture. These are some of the sculptures I have in my studio right now. I'm going to whip through them up front here; you can make of them what you want—all I'll say is that they offer some negotiation of analog and digital, alien and earthly, material and virtual. Here are a few shots of work from my 2015 show at WallSpace, THE CYBERNETIC FOLD.

2.) The video we're going to watch tonight, *The Ass and the Lap Dog*, kind of mirrors or answers, *Mysterious Fires*, the 25-minute piece showing at the Armory right now.

*Mysterious Fires* focuses on artificial intelligence, and takes the form of a performative dialogue between an AI and a masked interlocutor. While performing a script primarily concerned with the terrifying pall of absolute instrumentality, the characters frequently interrupt themselves with fallibility, delight, error and laughter. Along these lines, the video figures a clear correlation between error and affect. Whereas *The Ass and the Lap Dog* consists of a series of monologues, a sort of sequence of repetitive subversions: subversion of expectations, subversion of templates, scripts. The characters in *The Ass and the Lap Dog* won't do what they've been conscripted to do: instead, they offer up this logorrheic, fantastic, alternative architecture in the form of imagistic, discursive worlds. Disobedient world-making. I know there's a difference between the accident or the error and the subversive, creative act. But I think the two videos reflect or complement each other an interesting way, have a sort of tilted space between them, which I want to burrow into, even if I don't completely understand it. So I wanted to screen this earlier work, as a means of oblique bridge-making to the work at the Armory; maybe we can think through this bridge together.

Here's one attempt. There is a thing about error, it's a type of being off-script, and subversive, disobedient world-making can have this element as well. There is this condition of dropping out of, being outside of, but proximal to the structure, and in strong relation to it as a would-be forming force. I should note here that I have a long-standing interest in moments when the ooze of the flesh of the world is swept into structure, howsoever that may happen: molecules congealing, language making, labor into wages, any kind of naming. Form from the informal. Which is to say, structuring happens, and then unravels again, or transforms, and I'm interested in the fertility of that flexing, errant hybridity. Also, as you'll hear after we watch the movie, there's just some crap about matter and machine intelligence I really want to tell you about.

So let's watch *The Ass and the Lap Dog*. PLAY MOVIE.

3.) Now officially, we're here for the occasion of this show going on at the Armory—And so, let's start there. That show which is called, *The Inner Reality of Ultra-Intelligent Life*, is about a lot of things but most obviously, most broadly, the show takes up the problem of the materiality of virtuality, or maybe even the manifold materialities of the virtual—and the two videos *Mysterious Fires*, and *Big Bang (Song of the Cosmic Hobo)* deal with that pretty directly.

*Mysterious Fires* considers a sort of wildly interesting thought-experiment about the fundament: that is, the arguably intelligent vitality of matter—and presses it to the extreme. One of the characters is a machine intelligence, a machine-consciousness. (There's this notion implicit here that barring the existence of spirit—or soul, or any metaphysical special sauce—that consciousness is quite obviously “emergent.” And another way of saying that is *consciousness is something (more than the sum of its parts) that arises when a certain incredibly complex set of molecules is arranged in a very particular way*. So, like a marvel but made from matter. Max Tegmark, a cosmologist-philosopher and theoretical physicist, suggests that consciousness is what it “feels like to process information.” So one of the questions that animates *Mysterious Fires* is, “Would you, could you, befriend, care for, love a machine-borne consciousness?” And woven into that elongated (but soft-pedaled) query is documentation of, performance of human fallibility, this idea of the error. And all of the affective, reverberative delight, compassion, love that comes in the glow of such a thing—a mistake.

#### PLAY MYSTERIOUS FIRES CLIP

4.) So here I'm going to play you guys a clip from my movie, *Love Streams*, which I made in 2015. This section you'll see borrows heavily from Sylvan Tomkins' book, “Affect, Imagery, Consciousness.” This was a book, written in 1962, so Tomkins' ideas here about robots, which predate any kind of mainstream digital milieu, were breathtakingly prescient. And this is not a guy who was studying computers mind you—he's a guy who was theorizing human affect, sometimes considered to be the progenitor of Affect Theory. But in this essay he careens into this long aside about automatons, sort of really just to make a point about humans. So we'll watch a clip from *Love Streams*—but let me help you understand what you'll be hearing. Your going to hear my character detailing the way in which programmers are too vain to make machines that begin existence, like infants, in helplessness and confusion (which would, in a sense, be the only way to make a machine that could truly “learn.” You know, sort of by trial-and-error.) So, that's followed by a description of how human intelligence develops by navigating action-task errors, (you know this sort of tight feedback loop of “yah, yer foot went into the sock or it didn't.”) so that's how we learn,—but (and this is the crazy part) our intellects also benefit by this other, deeper layer of mistake-making, that he calls, “motivational error,” that is, being wrong about what we think we want, wrong in an analysis of our own desires. Here's the clip:

#### PLAY LOVE STREAMS CLIP

5.) So to recap—when you give the automaton extremely explicit, closed-ended directions, the machine-brain is then limited to this particular set of templates, **forever**. If you can code it, you can have it. To be able to cultivate **intelligence**, though, something that swims and grows, a programmer must be able to design various kinds of trial-and-error learning possibilities into its plans for the automaton, as well as ways for the machine to build up or layer-up specific insights. In deep neural networks the learning is taking place in multiple layers. This kind of protocol, a fluid, burgeoning architecture is made by piling up more and more complex

computations, which run, or are written synchronically, based on outcomes in the layer just below. But with multiple layers this gets complicated fast. For example, imagine a teacher tells a toddler, "Grab the orange pencil and put it in hole #1." The child picks up an orange pencil and puts into hole #2. The teacher instructs, "Try this again, put the orange pencil into hole #1." The toddler places the pencil into hole #1. Success. Great. (This is an example of one-layer trial and error with a feedback provider.)

So now imagine you instruct the toddler, "Grab the orange pencil, go through the door #3 and put the orange pencil into hole #2." The child takes a green pencil, goes through the door #1 and puts the green pencil into hole #1. The problem here is how to approach the correction. Simply repeating the instruction won't work as the toddler doesn't have a clear sense of where they have gone off course. One might be tempted to start by pointing out clearly, "Orange pencil, green pencil." However, the entire goal of machine-learning is to stay away from that sort of explicit mentoring.

People have been theorizing these complex learning processes for decades. But they haven't been able to pull it off. Not enough computing power. Not enough data. The average human brain has between 100 trillion and 1,000 trillion synapses. For a simple artificial neural network in 40s, 50s, 60s, "the attempt to even try to replicate this was unimaginable." (NYT)

But in September 2016, about two months ago, a group of Google employees, called *GoogleBrain*, introduced *GoogleTranslate*, one of the world's first neural network-based softwares.

In short, basically, this thing learns.

And to support its learning, its creators undertake what is referred to as, Training—which is based on trial-and-error/correction pedagogical models, (otherwise known as operant conditioning.) The *GoogleBrain* team trained the machine-intelligence for a year before they thought it was sophisticated enough to introduce to the world. I guess it's awesome—translates whole sentences instead of just word by word. And the thing is, it takes human natural language as its primary fodder which means that our ability to communicate with machines has made huge leap. Though the team at Google is still miles away from achieving anything close to the size of a human brain, their investment did allow for the discovery and implementation of artificial neural networks not dissimilar in size to the brains of mice. "*GoogleBrain* members who pushed and helped oversee the *Translate* project, believe that such a machine would be on its way to serving as a generally intelligent all-encompassing personal digital assistant."(NYT)

6.) So, some of you may be familiar with Paul Virilio's oft-cited idea that with each new invention we simultaneously invent a new accident. E.g., When we invent the plane, we invent the plane crash. When we invent the car, we invent the car crash. So quickly here, the term *general intelligence* refers to a machine whose skills rival a human's dexterity and range. In other words, *general intelligence* refers to a singular machine that would be able to utilize tools to build a dresser, laugh at jokes, do math, snuggle a dog and afterward trim a tree. And, again, we are far from achieving general machine-borne intelligence, but when we do achieve that, and we will, it's a debatably short leap to an ultra-intelligent machine, and its concomitant new accident, which is perverse instantiation, or malignant failure. Perverse instantiation is the idea that an intelligent machine perverts (or simply interprets poorly) a programmer's request. Some examples of this "new accident" are pretty epic and range from killing the family cat to transforming all the particles in the observable universe into paper clips.

7.) So say you have an ultra-intelligent machine, a machine that—as it gets smarter—can reprogram itself to be an even more powerful machine, an intelligence that grows exponentially. Soon you have a machine who not only knows language but every physical law ever discovered, every medical cure ever discovered, every logged fallibility of the human mind and body—these machines may be able to reallocate molecules from one being to make another, and more. As soon as you formulate something like this, right away you slam into this idea of who’s in charge—and the way you sort of map into that, or *control* it, is by trying to generate some ingenious core-code, some unassailable, ground-floor firewall upon which all the other coding depends. Of course, humans go right to morals and ethics, they want to guide these, so-called, seed AIs. (They’re referred to as seed AIs—the helpless baby intelligences.) They want to guide these infant-machines toward a sensitive, proliferative, evolving moral compass or, say, a complex philosophical sense of *Relation*, but forging these sorts of weirdly specific, but also (by-design) protean ethical frameworks is actually quite a challenge.

AI-researcher Eliezer Yudkowsky, knew right away that one of the most pesky of the impediments is humanity’s absolutely sketchy, decidedly imperfect moral compass. Glaring deficiencies are visible not just in the behavior but in the moral beliefs of all previous ages...What makes us think we are now “basking in the high-noon of perfect moral enlightenment?”) An ultra-intelligent machine would magnify our grave moral misconceptions a million-fold.

In trying to address the challenge, Yudkowsky devised CEV, or humanity’s coherent extrapolated volition, defined as follows: “*Our coherent extrapolated volition is our wish if we knew more, thought faster, were more the people we wished we were, had grown up farther together; where the extrapolation converges rather than diverges, where our wishes cohere rather than interfere; extrapolated as we wish that extrapolated, interpreted as we wish that interpreted.*”

So basically—this massively ultra-intelligent, machine-being should chart our values but front-loaded with a vision for some virtual alternate selves, our future-better selves, extrapolating from what we care about now, but as if we were more ethically-able, more mature. Basically, what would I want if I were a fucking better person? And one part of this that I find interesting is not just the spicy paradox of open-ended control, but the language-function of the future-anterior-conditional. This idea of extrapolation. A kind of materializing of the future by seeing it as already past. A virtual enbrainment, a kind of warping of the ethico-aesthetic flesh of time.

8.) As an artist, my interests are structural, cumulative but also cyclic. I don’t normally, in talks, provide analysis for specific pieces, but what the heck? I did want to scatter the seeds of these notions (the fecundity of the accident, the random, the error, smashed into the future-anterior-conditional of Yudkowsky’s CEV) and I’ll go even further. I think—in relation to what I’ve presented so far—*The Ass and the Lap Dog* easily has to do with odd-agents claiming personal situational power, in the face of a sort of controlling force, oppressor, colonizer-- to the point of transgression or even, oblique revolt. The piece also proposes structures and flows with which one might re-valorize, re-energize a socio-poetical imaginary. As far as it could be said to be a poem about power, one might easily read into it a proposal about non-locality, via active metaphors in the video about home, homelessness, the subversion of these categories of belonging and more. Fred Moten writes, “Fuck a home in this world if you think you have one.” And as you’ve seen in *The Ass and the Lap Dog*, what comes to stand in place of homesickness, is by turns, hallucinatory, combustive, cyborgian, painful. In making the piece, I was keyed in on documenting the awkwardness of my specific verbal idiom being spoken by others, some of whom English would not be their first language. So...documenting discomfort, a sense of ill-

fittingness, translation, but more than that, different than that—*interpretation*, that is, physicalized filtering of exact language, awkwardness of fit, this idea of over-coding in the flow of relation.

But in putting together this evening, and examining the piece in relation to the show at the Armory—I also see how these reads are relevant to a larger, more general discussion of anti-authoritarianism, resistance to cultural conscription, object becoming subject, (e.g., odd agents) and (on a more meta-level) mistaken desire or the false consciousness of the creatrix-- thwarted in ways we can't even see coming: festive, doomy and imminent.

9.) I'm interested in materiality related to continuum, which is related to entanglement, which I also talk about as ecstatic contamination. I'm interested in Poetics, Affect, the Unknowable. I had formerly thought that digital or quantifiable entities ("discrete") were structurally incompatible with this category of thought-object—the unknowable or structurally-continuous, that is. At some point I started to imagine a quantifiability that was so high-resolution that it essentially became analog. Effectively infinite. Perhaps but not quite. In other words, at some point I started to wonder if there could be a digital-object, or even some sort of programmable robot that might be able to produce affect, or something in the range of affect. I wondered whether I had been overstating my concern about the inevitability of sensual impoverishment with respect to digitality, quantifiability, encodedness, resolution, and infinity.

As Benjamin Bratton says in his recent book, *The Stack*, "Implicit or explicit, this lazy association of analog systems, with physics and nature, and digital systems, with artifice and artificiality, dulls and confuses our debates on technology in ways we cannot afford." Where do you personally draw distinctions between categories of flesh, machine, conscious, inanimate, subject, object? Are you interested in, do you have a felt-sense of being a plural subject? Will we ever make a machine that can, like a human brain, "isolate distinct patterns but retain the messiness necessary to handle ambiguity?"

Tomkins' noted in a long passage, that humans not only learn by their task-oriented mistakes, but by misjudging their own desires. When would machines misjudge their own desires? Would humans need machines to feign fallibility in order for us to be charmed by them? Are glitches to be considered as fecund randomness, the new accident?

10.) If Virilio's axiom holds, and the invention of any new kind of technology is necessarily and simultaneously the invention of a new kind of accident, and if the opposite holds and it is true—as Benjamin Bratton writes—"that the accident also produces a new technology," then what can be done with these inevitabilities? I mean to say, how can I harness and guide the possibilities for thinking about the imminent technology? What happens when the new accident and the new technology enmesh, being born in the same moment?

In the glow of *The Ass and the Lap Dog*, Bratton's additive decree—every accident also creates a new technology—rhymes with all truisms of entanglement: nothing happens in a vacuum, for every action there is a counter-action, and part of that, part of the entanglement, that is to say, part of the call-and-response is exactly that organisms are hell-bent on solving or at least, addressing certain problems. That's who we are, (no matter how we bracket that project). In the movie we just saw, something is generated in the whole cold shadow of the certain and the settled, and what's generated is a new technology, a kind of creative-critical resistance in the form of a personal-poetic imaginary. Another way of saying that is, our transgressions may be odd, may be esoteric, may be opaque, but let us begin and know, that, as Samuel Beckett has also admitted, THIS WILL BE UNENDING. And as Édouard Glissant has written, "We demand the right to opacity."

As we move forward into this unendingness, averting disaster may become a new technology—the technology of the future conditional. In painstaking consideration of how we’d choose to live “*if we knew more, thought faster, were more the people we wished we were, had grown up farther together,*” we become attendant to what we already have that we would like to keep, to improve upon, and to ferment. Along these lines, the **new** technology is also a **familiar** technology, one we all know. Think of it as ineradicability, dogged insistence, shot through with a kind of protean, plural-voluptuary: sluttish, mutually self-imbricated and kinetic. We are legion. There’s a line from Rosi Braidotti that I’m thinking of now, in Nomadic Theory she says, “a nomadic remembering is not indexed on the authority of the past. It rather occurs in relation to creative imagination in the future anterior: “You will have changed,” “They will have fought for justice,” “We will have been free.”