

# Harry Dodge: The Inner Reality of Ultra-Intelligent Life

Press Release

With Notes By Harry Dodge

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*Harry Dodge: The Inner Reality of Ultra-Intelligent Life*, the first solo exhibition in Los Angeles of the interdisciplinary artist considers machine intelligence and materiality. For the past several decades, Dodge has been a pioneer in a variety of spheres, including video art, sculpture, drawing, performance, screenwriting, feature film production, and DIY queer community-making. *The Inner Reality of Ultra-Intelligent Life* features the premiere of two new video works made especially for the exhibition, *Mysterious Fires* and *Big Bang (Song of the Cosmic Hobo)*, paired with an array of earlier work, including sculptures and drawings, which showcase the evolution of Dodge's interests and trajectories over the past decade.

In his new video work, *Mysterious Fires*, Dodge plays a human-level machine intelligence (1) being interviewed by a concerned interlocutor (played by Cay Castagnetto); the video reflects the artist's interest in the fast-moving, ethically-charged field of robotics and machine intelligence. The conceptual, pedagogical discussion the two characters engage in is faceted throughout by their amusing interpersonal dynamic and idiosyncratic means of verbal delivery, which extends to include other members of the filming crew, breaking the proverbial "fourth wall (2)." In short, while performing a script primarily concerned with the terrifying pall of absolute instrumentality (3) (the future of machine intelligence), the characters and crew frequently interrupt themselves with wit, affection, delight, error, flattery, and absurdity.

Through disruption and play, *Mysterious Fires* asks its audience to consider where fallibility, care, love, and laughter (affect) belong in a situation of absolute, super-charged intelligence—especially if intelligence is defined as the virtuosic mastery of goal-achievement. The work's methodology also relates to contemporary conversations about the relationship between sociality and making (4), as crystallized in poet and critical theorist Fred Moten's remarks: "Form is not the eradication of the informal. Form is what emerges from the informal. So, the classic example. . . is "What's Going On?" by Marvin Gaye—and of course the title is already letting you know: goddamn it, something's going on! This song emerges out of the fact that something already was going on. . . . What emerges is a form, out of something that we call informality."

The artist appears once again in *Big Bang (Song of the Cosmic Hobo)*, here as a low-rent automaton in an urgent quest to launch a small group of cosmic particles back into a state of pure potentiality. In this film, a cyborg (5) (a shirtless Dodge with a Chroma key green cardboard-box robot head) purchases a particle board cabinet at IKEA and, after gloriously smashing it to bits with a sledgehammer, heads out to scatter the dust at a scenic overlook. After a sort of burlesque cataclysm intervenes, in swift order the work invokes questions about the materiality of the virtual, and the possible fecundity of dissolution or destruction (6).

The various sculptures and drawings that accompany these video works, which stem from different points in the artist's career, have been curated for their poetic discussion of the possibilities for moving beyond a desire for purity (7)—primitivism, neo-Luddism—and into a state of ecstatic contamination, be it machinic, affective, or intersubjective.

**(1) Human-Level Machine Intelligence**—or General Intelligence—is the unbelievably complex ability to perform the wide variety of tasks currently associated with the human animal. For example, general, carbon-based intelligence borne by the human brain-body can parse nuance from ambiguous sentences, identify moving objects, do a little math, comfort a nervous dog, remove a wood splinter from flesh, giggle through a soft wash of embarrassment, fall over and manage to stand back up (believe it or not, this is an onerous software+hardware feat), dig a hole, make/upload a pornographic video entitled *No-hands cumming in car (very verbal)*, and laugh at unexpectedly jarring turns of phrase. At this point, machine intelligences can surpass human abilities but only in narrow sets of tasks. (Think of rocket ships, calculators, cell phones, Google searches.) It will be a gargantuan—but imaginable—leap to machinic, silica-based intelligences alchemizing their bruising computational strength such that they might actualize a version of general intelligence. What does it need in order to develop>>this machine whose primary talent is relentless, iterative speed? Information! A new and expanding flow of Big Data provides a roaring, colossal updraft to the (formerly cozy) brushfire of our computers' in-built proficiency— basically, rote supersonic perseveration. (Big Data<Parsimony<Detail<Almost infinitely “high” resolution <continuum <affect). Technologies arising from this beatific pairing are already available, e.g., GPS/traffic apps, Amazon recommendation algorithms, judicial recidivism-risk calculators (which have proved inarguably racist), etc. Will you, could you care, love, befriend a machine-consciousness?

**(2) The Fourth Wall** (that fleshy filter between performers and viewers of any narrative, real or concocted) has several dimensions—#it will be unending—and, art or no, can be said to exist at, well, #FourthWallsAreEverywhere. I'm dizzy-with-the-busy of this proliferative spatial othering! A handful of physicists have theorized what they call *brane space*, that, in my view (which is admittedly tatty & sort of bullshitted up) functions analogously. The membranes contain absolute information and create our sense of time as linear (which is pure illusion) and scaled-meaning (i.e.,

cosmologic-time, geologic-time, bath-time) more generally. To break it—the membrane or the fourth wall—is poo-pooed almost entirely by the most zealous of spectators (folks who like to watch) and, in the end, serves only to disorient and discompose brains wholly habituated to categories like here and there. File under, “Not recommended for the faint-of-heart,” and also under “Not worth the risk man.”

#SeeYouInMeatSpace.

#AllSpaceIsMeatSpace.

#HelloFromDiffuseMeatSpace.

**(3) Pall** is like, um, a *miasma*. And *instrumentality* is the noun-form of a word that refers to a thing being rendered wholly as a means-to-an-end. When a person or particle is instrumentalized it is utterly impoverished of any fundamental significance, either for-itself or with-others (beyond the way it will be exploited by machines or people bent on a goal). Now, let's pump the stakes up here by restating the idea that once a machine is “intelligent” it would conceivably reprogram itself into an even smarter, more powerful machine< ad infinitum. God-like abilities could result = “superintelligent agents,” “ultra-intelligent life.”

The idea here is that if intelligent agents are not *taught or programmed* to grow a sensitive, proliferative, evolving moral compass or, say, a complex philosophical sense of *Relation*, that any goal—even if it were a simple folly—might lead to one or hundreds or millions of human deaths, up to and including heretofore unimaginable planetary or cosmological transformations. As someone once said, “You don't want the domestic robot microwaving the family's cat even once.” Consider now the glaring problems with guiding superintelligent agents using current human mores. Briefly and politely, we're not actually done making values, making morality. #InterconnectedBeingsAgainstClimateChange, #StandYourGround, #ChooseLife. #TexasSodomyLaws. #BeyondHumanism.

Isaac Asimov, a mid-century science-fiction writer, famously sought to address the problem by penning a tripartite protocol—a fictional set of unmitigatable failsafes for programmable, intelligent agents:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

Decades later Asimov also added a fourth, or zeroth law, to precede the others:

0. A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.

More recent proposals include adding another law which prohibits a robot from altering itself. This is worth looking at: [http://futureoflife.org/data/documents/research\\_priorities.pdf](http://futureoflife.org/data/documents/research_priorities.pdf) as well as Yudkowsky's Proposal (CEV), <https://intelligence.org/files/CEV.pdf>, a paper on AI morality which I found to be quite moving.

**(4) Sociality and making.** In my experience, art-making has a few originary fires at its generative core. The pistons (as I'm able to describe them today):

1. Expression absolute. A kind of effluent-based, moderately discursive delight in the (illusory or actual) self-creation that attends (and is often inundated by) mark-making. But with sound as its primary example. Before movement (there is) sound. And with all movement, waves and rhythm. This paragraph strives shamelessly to point at something autonomic, fart-based, groaning.
2. Communicative Urge // Collisions explain everything. The art object or poem as a sort of mediating object by which I talk to you, touch you, structure instances of inviting myself to be fondled, known, changed by you. For me, this one, #2, is really big. Believe me. Making is social *fundamentally* and

can result in finished, so-called discrete discursive or material objects or in processes which are (possibly) made legible by the exhibition(ism) of sedimentary thought-streams as they (still living) wind through communities, generations, friends, family.

3. Poetic resonances as fecund-in-general. The dalliance (coital amusement)—erotic, embodied, enbrained—with affect and other things which are hard to put your finger on. #Taking up space with things that capital has no use for. #Only makes more things that defy instrumentalization. #UselessBullshitKeepsMeMeaning #Love. #DiffuseMeatIsLove. #ArtIsLove. #I'mHavingAWeirdFeelingLovesWhyWe'reHere.

**(5) Cyborg** is a term that combines the words *cybernetic* and *organism* into one and refers to a being that possesses both organics and biomechatronic body parts. Remarkably (in an amusing pucker of correspondence), a cyborg is a portmanteau-*word* (combines two words into one) that refers to a portmanteau-*being*—a type of hybrid creature who bridges the outside world with the inside world. (As if eating and breathing weren't enough to convince us.) The physical attachments humanity has with even the most basic technologies—so say many definitions of the word—already render us as cyborgs.

**(6) Fecundity of dissolution.** #CheckOutMyCompost=The impossibility of categories and collision. At what point does insisting on one's individual subjecthood begin to abrade the weave and flow of ecstatic obligation that *WE* is borne upon? Is coherence overrated? Is legibility (coherence's pimply cousin) overrated? Specificity is indispensable in any, even glancing, discussion of the way we change each other when we come into contact=Not all instances of contact are equal. Akimbo here, Édouard Glissant's idea of creolization without homogenization, of consenting not to be a single being or for that matter, a single *type* of being. So is it possible to make useful general structural analogies that help us use, know,

live in these types of permeabilities— these instances of ecstatic contamination, the constancy of relation?

(7) *Flay your inner fascist (you know you have one). And the other homunculus too, the lazy one, uncomfortable with the rigors of indeterminacy, prone to the easy flatline certainty that attends mastery. (Death arrives but the end never does.) Fucking feels like this.*

Harry Dodge  
Los Angeles  
2016

## About the Artist

Harry Dodge is an American artist whose 20 years of interdisciplinary practice—spanning performance, video-making, sculpture, drawing, and writing—is characterized by its explorations of relation, materiality, and the unnamable, with a special focus on ecstatic contamination. His solo and collaborative work has been exhibited at many venues nationally and internationally, including the 2008 Whitney Biennial, a solo show entitled, *Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy* at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in 2013 and the Hammer Museum's 2014 biennial, *Made in L.A.* Dodge's work is in several collections including the Museum of Modern Art and the Hammer Museum. His most recent solo exhibition was 2015's *The Cybernetic Fold* at WallSpace, New York. Recent group exhibitions include *The Promise of Total Automation* at Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, and a three-person show at London's The Approach Gallery, *Triples: Harry Dodge, Evan Holloway and Peter Shelton*.

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In the early 1990s, Dodge was one of the founders of the now-legendary San Francisco community-based performance space, *The Bearded Lady*, which served as a touchstone for a pioneering, queer, DIY literary and arts scene. During that time Dodge also wrote, directed, and performed several evening-length, monologue-based performances, including *Muddy Little River* (1996) and *From Where I'm Sitting (I Can Only Reach Your Ass)* (1997). In the latter part of the 1990s, Dodge co-wrote, directed, edited, and starred in (with Silas Howard) a narrative feature film, *By Hook or By Crook*, which premiered at Sundance in 2002 and went on to receive five Best Feature awards. From 2004 to 2008, Dodge was half of a renowned video-making collaboration with artist Stanya Kahn.

Dodge is currently working on a book-length essay entitled *My Meteorite*. He holds an MFA from Milton Avery School of Arts at Bard College and is permanent faculty at California Institute of the Arts, Program in Art.