

# MPA

by Harry Dodge

"Mourning the Earth."



MPA. *Mars*, 2014–2015, archival pigment print. Courtesy of the the artist.

I met MPA four summers ago at a thumping, outdoor birthday party planned with the idea of mud wrestling as its vital core. I'm good on task and had been charged with lobbying strangers, one-by-one, to join in this tatty keynote enterprise. By no miracle, the grappling round-robin eventually launched—on the other side of the yard—and though we talked avidly that night, oddly prolix, MPA and I did not reconnect for years, until this last February when I got a note from her suggesting the following conversation.

She was reading my text, *The River of the Mother of God: Notes on Indeterminacy*, v. 2—a long essay in the form of a small 94-page newsprint pamphlet exploring the mutual imbrication of form-flow, position-momentum, now-then—and was "inspired by the feeling of parallel think tanks." Forthwith, I attended the opening of her first solo museum exhibition, *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future* at the Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston. The polestar of this installation is an active telephone line through which MPA has conducted over 200 conversations with strangers imagining a "red future" in light of plans for the imminent human colonization of Mars. We recorded the following in my studio. I had prepared a score of questions, but most of these disappeared into the maw and draw of our manifest energies.

**Harry Dodge** At your show in Houston, while I was watching you perform... Well, I wasn't watching you perform, but I was witnessing the performance you were doing, which was called *The Interview*. Or is it called *The Interview is Active*?

**MPA** The phone is *The Interview*.

**HD** Yeah, so there's a kind of lounge there with a red phone next to it on an end table. People are invited to sit in the lounge and talk on the phone with you under this sign that says, "The Interview is active." That's the extent of the prompt, which is so cool. And while they're in the

lounger there's a view to this huge photograph of Mars, which I think is an object that's sitting on a pallet in your yard at home?

**MPA** On a concrete foundation from a homesteader house in the desert.

**HD** Yes, this huge red print of Mars, and you've sort of over-tinted the whole thing with this intensely arterial kind of warm red. People were lined up waiting to talk to you. And people are sort of comfortable and happy while they're on the phone. I was watching them. It looked like they were speaking with a loved one, I think because they were in this lounger, sort of lying down. And there's a lot of intimacy, in some sense, in this piece of yours, but also in live performance in general, which I'm really interested in. What is your relationship with this tangle that is vulnerability, intimacy, the performance of a self, and the performance of a piece of art?



Installation view of *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

**MPA** Well, coming from theater, I fell in love with the energy between performers and audience at an early age. But then I spent ten years undressing this intimacy. Making something naked, more naked.

**HD** That was the thought you had often.

**MPA** Kind of. I was definitely aware of taking something apart.

**HD** Taking what apart? What do you mean when you say taking intimacy apart?

**MPA** I wanted to challenge the illusion of character. Was artifice of story and character necessary to stimulate that cathartic experience intrinsic to classic theater or that temporal intimate bond in performance? Stripped of character, the question became what generates presence? In Texas, you said of the performance: "It was pretty incredible to see absence reiterate simultaneously as presence." That was important to hear. Liveness is powerful and *is* presence. And this latest experiment turns away from employing my body or a performer's body to this task, and offers voice—literally a disembodied voice—to activate the space in this way.

**HD** Yeah, there's a lot of analogies to be drawn with space travel and distance, which is another way of saying remoteness. In the exhibit, you had a triad, with the image of Mars at one node, and then your position in some other room. We don't know where you're at, but here's your live voice, your *availability* as the other node of a very mysterious triangular circuit that actuates with the viewer. What do you call them, by the way? The viewers?

**MPA** Participants or visitors.

**HD** I like that. "Visitor" is in a sort of multivalent register; "visitor" could be from space, or from Toledo. They both sound right. With you being remote, a participant is set up to generate, or imagine, or articulate into the unknowable. Visitors create a positive before the absence even finishes making itself. I was surprised by so much presence. So much affect flooded into the space you left by performing remotely. A social imaginary, something about your availability. We all swam in it. How would you characterize your experience of performing remotely? "Telepresence" is a word I've heard used...

**MPA** Very present. I feel absorbed in the anonymity, or the play with unknowing the identity of each other on the line. Not framing this exchange with anything visual emphasizes the mind's path to the visual. Or in other words, these interviewing conversations use Mars, and the oncoming human colonization of Mars, as a conversation point that interviews the imagination of one another. And is this imaginary an intimate and binding material between two humans?

**HD** Right, what is the pith of relation, the muck or matrix that intimacy rides on? It's not emptiness or space between us, it's a scatter of matter that's between us, that conjoins us—people, things. In part, I was so taken with your piece, because I read it as exploring all this stuff I'm totally working on right now, too. In my last show, *The Cybernetic Fold*, a notion of remote interconnectedness and plurality was one of the primary thematics. I had this video in the back room called *Love Streams*, which was a meditation on linkage, the "space" between things as not spacious at all, but full with relation.



Harry Dodge, *Love Streams*, 2015. Video, 13:00. Courtesy of the artist.

**MPA** *Love Streams* begins with this presentation of particle theories, yes? A kind of lecturing tone about phenomena—

**HD** It's all about spooky actions at a distance, this crazy debate over whether distance exists, a notion of non-locality that physicists are still hammering out after a hundred years. The character introduces the idea of molecular entanglement—which is believed to be one of two things: a particle is in two places at once, or two particles are communicating faster than the speed of light, so in other words, instantaneously. In either case, there's a problem preserving the idea of locations in space. From there, it's no leap at all to incredibly deep interconnectedness—

**MPA** But then these kinds of "lectured" thoughts spill out at the end into this very funny stream of gestures around a new TV remote that depicts the absurdity of—

**HD** That's a sort of poem, or like a satire about remoteness, about how humans grapple with wirelessness, telepresence, a kind of technical gadgetry gone haywire. In this case, an under-desk, pull-out keyboard tray has titanium arms capable of reaching say, miles. And snuggled in between those two chapters, of course, is a short essay on automatons and affect. I was excited by the links between our two pieces. Totally overlapping concerns, brought to fruit in

very different ways.

**MPA** Totally! Let me ask you, switching from the human body or video to objects, does a similar vocabulary apply? Are your sculptures performing? I did say this to a sculptor once and they hated performativity in relation to—

**HD** Oh no, I'm right there with you! Listen, I went from performance, where I was doing evening-length shows with dancers and slides and film and monologues—I wanted to be Bette Midler, when I was a kid...

**MPA** What? Do you sing?

**HD** I don't sing, nor do I dance. *(laughter)* Mostly in my live performances I was a monologist, sort of aspirational Spalding Gray if I could coin a genre. But sculpture is a whole different story, it was a weird transition to sculpture— because the thing is, humans like to watch humans. You know, the question quickly became how to get a body in the work without putting a body in the work.

**MPA** I know, liveness, it doesn't let me abandon it. To tell you the truth, *The Interview* is the last work I made for the show. I was trying not to be there—

**HD** "NO NO NO, I'm not gonna do it!"

**MPA** *(laughter)* I will tell you it's been an interesting week on the phone line.



Installation view of *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

**HD** What are people talking to you about?

**MPA** So...very...much. A lot of mourning the Earth. To look at the idea of humans on Mars invites most humans to look at Earth, which is a bit of my point, and to who humans *are* on Earth. What is it that we do? You know, coming here today, I wasn't sure how to open up about the layers of feelings I've collected from a week of these conversations. There has been a range of responses to the question of humans going to Mars in the next 15 years, from discussing the very practical limitations of the human body sustaining life in a Martian atmosphere to persons who discuss elaborate and more esoteric relationships with the energy of space and non-human beings in space. For real. What I feel overwhelmingly, though, is the repeated sentiment that humans are—both by nature and through context—destructive. That war is a part of what humans do, and that in imagining the future, these conversationalists seem to see humans in this version of Earth as dying, and with humans continuing to

extinguish themselves. It's heavy.

When we spoke at that coffee shop to talk about talking, we both admitted that we had been rethinking the word "evil." (*laughter*) Are you still thinking about E-V-I-L?

**HD** Yeah, well I got really embarrassed after our conversation about it.

**MPA** Really? That's fascinating, why?

**HD** I think that I'm very interested in the idea of nothing being strange, in other words nothing being "other." That everything is kind of locked, interlocked. And, I mean, you know, *intergalactically entangled*. (*laughter*) It's an unanswered question for me: what happens if I take these, the most extreme of brutalities and place them in a disease category or in an alien category—then I wonder if I'm doing this kind of operation that is actually not very functional, that everyone seems to do when they "other"-ize something they're uncomfortable with. It's usually a pretty slippery slope from there right? You get scapegoats, the wrong people suffer from some nodal categorical wart that's growing off the worst parts of humanism.

**MPA** You wanted to confront your other.

**HD** Yeah a little bit. And I work with things I'm uncomfortable with by conducting these thought experiments—like this one about contamination or even colonization, or this idea of impurity. I test myself, like, "Are you thinking in terms of the pure? What's a more nuanced way of thinking about this?" Basically I'm interested in a kind of contaminated space, a space that's perhaps ecstatically contaminated—rather than lamentably contaminated, or maybe both. I've been reading Glissant's book *Poetics of Relation*, in which there's some really, to me, very forward thinking proposals about contamination and hybridization and creolization. But the thing is, he proposes the idea of contamination as not just the rule—in that we change each other by coming into contact, by our collisions—but also and more importantly, that it's *productive*. Contamination as generative, though laden with perils, of course, especially if it obliterates diversity. Which brings me to the way we spent our very first conversation talking a lot about colonization, or these kinds of, in some sense, panicked and sorrowful recountals, wherein you described the corporate-public partnerships engaged with the colonization of Mars.



Installation view of MPA, *Long Line*, 2016. Courtesy of the artists and Contemporary Art Museum Houston.

**MPA** Yeah, the structures involved—

**HD** Remind me again of—

**MPA** Well...where to begin! I mean, there are several scenarios happening that are curious, or all too familiar. In NASA's case, Boeing and Space X won the bid to replenish the space shuttle program closed by NASA in 2011. Compliant to NASA's engineering standards, these two companies will now manage the fleet that transports astronauts and equipment to the International Space Station. NASA will pay a ticket price for the ride, but no longer pay for (which means US tax dollars no longer pay for) the construction, maintenance, or fuel of these shuttling spacecrafts. This of course enables the possibility of Boeing and Space X, as private companies, to eventually sell passages to space to anyone. I think there are already TV commercials inviting as much. There are other examples of NASA partnering with private industries that look a lot like ride-shares, "Hey, Motel 6, we will take your invention, that you paid for, to space and test it for you. You can park it in our garage, but you need to chip in on gas." The way I'm describing this does not escape a cynical critique of the behavior of neoliberal politics in a current world order. It is *too* much of the tale in which venture capitalism bypasses consensus or elected opinion, or the "too difficult" sharing of resources through socialisms, to direct that which governments—broken, corrupt, toxic centrums—fail to provide. NASA's publicly-stated intentions for their space explorations are varied, but do not exclude the potential extraction of material on neighboring planets, and are completely saturated in the language of conquest and colonization. Jump over to Mars One, a mainly

Dutch organization that is not affiliated with any government space program and is currently funded by private investors such as Lockheed Martin—*ding ding*—that is preparing to land 15-18 humans selected through an open-call application on Mars by 2027. This is a one-way ticket, with the intention to start the first human colony on Mars. Mars One plans to televise the entire event, and the revenue from sponsoring advertisers will go to pay for the continued life support of the humans on Mars. And a lot of people are very excited about this. And why not? Why should only members connected to government organizations ride the paths to space? But what's the cost of human exploration? And I don't mean just the obvious ticket price in the case of Boeing and Space X's joint venture, which will most likely limit these passages to very wealthy people, or the environmental cost of repeated ruptures through Earth's ozone into space and the continued mining of Earth's core to produce rocket fuel, containers that hold oxygen, and space-tempered, shielded crafts. I mean, can humans explore without abusing that which they explore and one another, let alone exhaust that which they depart from? The dynamics of imagining futures of humans in space is connected to answering the cost of human life on Earth and—I hope—urges addressing the systemic illness caused by conquest behavior.

**HD** You are all over that. Amazing. And I know we both—when we were talking—we're thinking, "This is terrible, these fucking assholes are going to go up there and ruin everything." That's my first thought all the time with most things. But I also want to have two thoughts at once, which are: "Yes, I'm panicked and desperate that everything's gonna get ruined and it's already being ruined," and, "How can I think about this so that it's also fruitful or even salutary?" And sometimes there's nothing that's gonna be salutary. So, I don't know. I mean, Fred Moten says it really well: when staring down futurity, among other things we always have to ask, "What do we have that we want to keep?" Which I take to mean also, "How can I facet this thought?"

**MPA** With the *Red, Red Future* conversations, many people on the phone talk about wanting to keep human life. And this want extends to Mars being a place to keep human life in the future, because they view planet Earth as a dying habitat incapable of continuing to support human life.

**HD** Well, one facet of this recent thought experiment—this one about contamination—is an effort to deal with my technophobia and this kind of absolutism I had for so long about the pollution of human activity, which has sort of misanthropic bones. I had been wanting the amazing tender Earth not to have to deal with us anymore, courting this sort of primitivist outlook. This isn't productive for me at this point. Time to make a new thought. And so my thought experiment has to do with this: I'm a deep materialist, and if everything is material—as I've been thinking for many years—nothing is *not* material. That's a kind of playground that makes other thoughts. And, okay, if humans don't have an "immaterial" special sauce, the soul, then they are just weird, very complex, amazing agglomerations of materials, food in a different form. This takes into account that I think of materials as possessing all kinds of properties that are as yet unaccounted for: magnetisms, forces, attributes people might think of as magix. So, I don't mean inert materiality. I mean amazing materiality—entangled, charged, and pungent with desire. If everything's material, and consciousness is an emergent property of these complex interactions of matter, then what do I think about artificial intelligence? Obviously, if I think of consciousness as a kind of set of chemical reactions—

**MPA** Now we're going there.



MPA, *Eye*, 2015, archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

**HD** Then could I say, if you had an incredible set of data and code, *could* it become high-resolution enough that it could be called consciousness, such that I would put it on par with human consciousness? Could I care about it like I care about so-called "alive" creatures? I have this line between the metallic—you know, the machinic—and the live right now that I feel is not fully considered. And I don't want to think of machines as potentially being conscious, or alive—I *really don't want to*. But if I were being honest, I'm softening on artificial intelligence or robotic consciousness or whatever.

**MPA** (*laughter*) Amazing. In the way you might be doing thought experiments, I'm trying to do assignments on the heart.

**HD** You have some drawings of your heart in your show. Can you describe what form that is taking and why?

**MPA** Well, I'm very curious right now about what potentially is "stored" in the heart, and a recycling of souls. This is informed by feelings, information channeled by psychics, information from religious texts. I would say, somewhat obviously, that the soul can exist without the body, but the body without a soul is one that decomposes. However, on a similar journey with you, the body decomposes into other materiality. So what are these bodies, a located trinity? My body trine, as a form of mind/soul/flesh material, is in a universal second with you right now, but did the flesh come from the Earth, and the soul from space?

**HD** So, you don't know? You're not sure?

**MPA** Well, is the soul the true space traveler? "True" is a little complicated, but...

**HD** Well, when they send human bodies hurling through space onto Mars, it seems a little retro to me. Doesn't it seem weird? Do we really need to throw the whole body over there? There must be a better way.

**MPA** Non-standard visitation.

**HD** But would you call it the soul? That's the only difference. I wouldn't call it the soul. I would try to smash that into a materialist thought.



**MPA** That consciousness is a materialist thought, or all energy. Karen Barad discusses this situation.

**HD** She's a materialist, too.

**MPA** Yes, coming from a physics mind, "You can't create any matter, all matter is made," and in motion in many different relationships. But the soul, let's call it a soul project, is fascinating to me. In terms of the artificial intelligence you were describing, would enough data raise into high definition for what we call consciousness? Looking at that in the reverse, are souls engineered by consciousness? Are they an engineered high definition of energy? These thoughts lead me to the feeling of the infinite. Will we be building artificial intelligence to lead to a soul that is the soul that we've been existing in? Is that something we've partly built? Is that something cycling itself back and forth, in and out of relations that shift material form? Will there be another time-space place that we'll exist in that we will recognize authoring? That's one train of thought. Another is that all matter forms are interconnected to materializing time. That time is a movement of space giving the illusion of location, and shifting locations itself. Whether you and I move through space, go to Mars, is a movement of time. Can time, not space, move us to Mars? You with me here? A little bit? Not quite there? *(laughter)*

**HD** Gee, complicated. I love the idea of technology delivering higher and higher resolution computations, which lead ultimately back to the amazing thing that is the current universe. They're already 3-D printing organs. I'm on that. And that souls are the thing humans eventually come up with, or a state of consciousness that AI computers invent in order to better dialogue with an area the size of the cosmos. Fantastic! And I hear you talking about the idea of a fold, the notion of us looking back at us from the future.

**MPA** Yes.

**HD** There's a quote in my pamphlet about that. Actually. Let me read it to you right now: #114. *Related to vertical stacked, or simultaneous bodies in time, Rosi Braidotti suggests that 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."*

**MPA** Earlier in that text you mention something about the stacking of time. Do you think we can time travel? And I'm not asking this metaphorically—

**HD** I'm not sure that we're *not* time traveling...

**MPA** Already?

**HD** Yeah. I think we're travelers like that. Visitors. I couldn't explain it or give you a kind of breakdown of how it's happening. And I don't know that it would always be that you get your body into a time machine and set it to a time, and then it takes you back there by discomposing all your pieces and then recomposing them in a different epoch—I just don't think of it like that.

**MPA** Yeah, there's a lot that prevents the seeing, remembering, or accounting for things that appear as illusion. "Appearance" is key here in a debate for materiality. Defining what is real— isn't that at the root of difference between people in these geopolitical renderings of one another? I met a person recently, Anton de Ponce de Leon, who is part of a magic sect living for centuries in the mountains near Cusco, Peru. In his writings, past friends materialize by rivers and dematerialize after conversing or delivering messages. I think certain folks might read these accounts as metaphor due to a *faith* in a particularly popular definition of reality

that denies—that cannot see, that cannot *account*—for the existence of this experience as non-illusion. I'm of the sensibility that time travel is going on as well. Dreams are mysterious, and what's happening at CERN investigating dark matter?

**HD** What does dark matter have to do with time travel?

**MPA** Well, it's an open question. But I know that, for example, the Standard Model of molecules in physics has been challenged because, from what I understand, the Standard Model does not explain dark matter or dark energy, which most particle physicists say together make up like 95% of all matter in the universe. At CERN last year, engineering physicists tested the existence of the theorized Higgs Boson particle. This event opens up information to support or discredit the ideas by theoretical physicists about dark matter—one of which is super symmetry, which proposes that there is a partnering particle to every particle in the standard model, hence dark matter. But it's a little more than that of course. I interpret the theory to say that particle activity is profound. That space can stretch but never changes the amount of space. So if there was this black velvet piece of spandex and you pushed on it, you are bending space, and possibly can bring two parts of space into meeting without rearranging the whole configuration causing time to travel. Super symmetry seems about the ability for these multiplicities (I guess) of actions to be happening in space that don't absolve space. Like bent ends introduce beginnings. Which is beautiful.

**HD** It's possible that as lay people, when we hear and read about multiverses, super symmetry, dark matter, this stuff hits on something we do know, though it's a different kind of knowing. We might not understand the science, but we're also like, "GOT IT. BAM."



Participants speaking with MPA during *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

**MPA** There was a scientist on the interview line a couple of days ago, and the questions of God and soul came up, and he said, "Well, I think any scientist has to ask that question of God at some point." And I said, "Because humans conceive God, play God, know God?" The scientist and I talked about the fights over "God" and the fights with "God." And today there's a kind of emotion in me. There's a kind of wound present in these conversations. It's not manipulative. But the nature of this framework, of sitting and speaking on the phone with these questions that encourage people to imagine living on Mars, opens up an expression that is often vulnerable and talks around, or directly about, a kind of injury.

**HD** What's the injury?

**MPA** I think the wound is about an illness of colonization, of the colonized mind, paired with

the very real threat of differences of experience being policed. I can't help but contemplate on the ages of war. I *feel* a lot of human warriors on the earth right now, warrior souls, and I think that whatever these battles have been, something's going on with this shifting into a new age. *What happens in, after, and out of battle?* I've found myself asking the question: If humans were on Mars would they look back on Earth and grieve? Are we grieving humanity? In the presence of a wound, are feelings not felt as fact? Analysis intrigues, but the flight we're talking about resides in the experiential. All that absolutism of binary, all of that time/space travel is based on experiences that encourage you to "let go." And that letting go is not going to come from the place of fundamentals.

**HD** Do you mean it's not going to come from the laws that we're taught, when you say "fundamentals"?

**MPA** Yes.

**HD** I'm going to catch on this idea you're introducing—the notion of a chasm being opened between what we're taught and *how* we're taught to speak about what our experiences are. And therefore how we're taught to understand what our experiences are.

**MPA** What we call knowledge.

**HD** There are cultural injunctions, coercive at best, which seek to manage, compress, excise specificity from our otherwise infinite or fractal-tastic experiences. For example, I thought I knew what your show was going to be like. We talked about certain ideas before I went. I was like, "Got it." And then I flew to Houston and walked into the exhibit. And of course it wasn't about only things that were quantifiable, like things we had discussed. There was also the bodily experience I was having, and my attention brought to bear on the piece, which is in some real sense, proliferative, chaotic, maybe even infinite. I think what I'm interested in is there's something about the rational, and the enlightenment, and humanism, and the history of that that needs to be rethought. It's tired, it's constricted, it's too narrow. And it's devaluing, or amputating all kinds of bodily experiences, or what I call non-language knowings.

**MPA** You know, my locality right now is mainly being in the elements, and I'm reading the elements a lot, like literally: the wind and sun, and coyotes and big skies. And as we talk I keep thinking it's about less language. Of course, we cannot go away from language because there is nowhere to go. The commons between here and there is a binding paradox, you know. What is *there* is *here*. But how to understand so much sameness, when differences drive possession of location? In some sense, we are never going anywhere, and yet things arrive. Things visit.

**HD** Hell yes, things visit. Speaking of which—(*scuffle of chairs*)—here we are.

**MPA** What is this? Can I hold it?

**HD** It's a meteorite. An iron meteorite. HERE. It's heavy, watch out...

**MPA** Noooo. You're lying!!

**HD** It's from  *fucking*  outer space! It's probably some sort of crazy elegant machine from our future.

**MPA** No way.

**HD** No, it's REAL. Look at this crazy furrow, these pits. Does it feel like an extra-heavy doghead to you?

MPA Where did you get this?

HD I ordered it on eBay. (laughter)

*Harry Dodge's recent exhibitions and screenings include The Promise of Total Automation at Kunsthalle Wien, Austria (2016); solo exhibition The Cybernetic Fold at Wallspace Gallery, New York (2015); the world premiere of The Time-Eaters, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2014); Made in L.A. 2014, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2014); solo exhibition Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy, Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT (2013); Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2008). Dodge's work is included in collections at Museum of Modern Art (NY), Hammer Museum (LA). Upcoming exhibitions include Triples: Harry Dodge, Evan Holloway, Peter Shelton, The Approach, London, opening May 27; Routine Pleasures at MAK Ctr/Schindler House (LA), opening May 25; and solo exhibition The Internal Reality of Ultra-Intelligent Life, at Armory Center for the Arts (LA), to open Fall 2016.*