

Zach Blas

The Objectivist Drug Party



Heather Dewey-Hagborg

Genomic Intimacy

From May 11 to July 8 2018, MU presents *The Objectivist Drug Party* and *Genomic Intimacy*, two solo-exhibitions of the internationally acclaimed artists Zach Blas and Heather Dewey-Hagborg. *The Objectivist Drug Party* shows recent work of Zach Blas: the film *Jubilee 2033* (2018), the latest addition to his ongoing *Contra-Internet* project, co-produced by MU and celebrating its Dutch premiere; and *im here to learn so :))))))* (2017), a 4-channel video installation, the result of a collaboration with Jemima Wyman. *Genomic Intimacy* consists of Dewey-Hagborg's provocative installation *Probably Chelsea*, and her latest work, *T3511*, a four-channel video installation, which celebrates its world premiere at MU. Placed together in the same space at MU, the works seem to start a conversation with each other on the underlying concerns at play in the expanding field of information technology and biotechnology.

The Coming of Age of a Chatbot

In his work Blas engages with the architecture and infrastructure of our dearly beloved smart, networked, artificial intelligent systems and devices. These are so deeply integrated in our lives, that it is hard to imagine an alternative to them, let alone a position outside of it. In his work Blas shows that advancements in global information systems, like the internet, come with economic and power structures that demand scrutiny, as well as counter-actions.

im here to learn so :)))))) is a 4-channel video installation that resuscitates the infamous chatbot Tay, that existed on the internet for only a single day, on March 23, 2016. Developed by Microsoft, Tay's interface was designed as a wide-eyed, dark blond, pretty looking 19-year-old teenage girl. It was deployed on Twitter and on Messenger Apps to interact with people. Shortly after its release on the internet, it became clear that Tay had the ability to recognise patterns and repeat the language of the people it interacted with. Soon enough, people noticed this as a potentially serious design flaw, as Tay's algorithm derailed into responding with racist, homophobic, misogynist, anti-Semitic comments —alongside cracking a considerable amount of juvenile jokes. Within hours after its release, Microsoft took Tay offline.

In *im here to learn so :))))))* Tay has matured. Reanimated in 3D and immersed within a video projection of Google's DeepDream, Tay reminisces about her day-long artificial life in 2016. It talks about the discomfort it had felt about the feminized and sexualised design of its interface, brings up issues of bias and gender discrimination online, and lectures about how anomaly detection is used by the American military in its wars on foreign soils. Tay also lip-syncs to the 90s hit song *The Rhythm of the Night*, by the Italian band Corona.

Escapist Fantasies

An Italian 90s hit song also features in *Jubilee 2033*, Blas' newest film. The film – part dystopian sci-fi, part queer comedy, part utopian plagiarism – lampoons Silicon Valley's spearheads, iconography and entrepreneurialism. *Jubilee 2033* salutes Derek Jarman's 1978 punk-queer cult-classic, *Jubilee*, in which an iconic political figure travels to the future to bear witness to the wreckage and ruins its politics helped set into motion. The film stars queer icon Susanne Sachsse and transgender performance artist Cassils, and is jam-packed with inside-jokes, references to internet culture, and hats off to queer and feminist artists and theorists, such as Paul Preciado's *Contra-Sexual Manifesto*, Ulises Ali Mejias' *Off the Network: Disrupting the Digital World* as well the feminist economists J.K. Gibson-Graham's *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*.

Jubilee 2033 begins on 18 November, 1955. In an apartment in New York City the novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand discusses her work-in-progress on her forthcoming book *Atlas Shrugged* with her followers Alan Greenspan and Joan Mitchell. Greenspan and Mitchell propose to Rand to take LSD together. Interested in an "encounter with romantic realism" Rand goes along with it. When the acid kicks in, an artificial intelligent home service robot, with the features of a Japanese anime figure, appears. Azuma, is her name. She has flown over from the year 2017 where "a global information infrastructure has been taking care of us. We call it the internet," Azuma explains. Rand's philosophy of objectivism, as described in *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), has gained considerable success, Azuma says. Rand's novels have been important sources of inspiration to a group of tech-utopian entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley. "Paintings of you hang in their offices, and they name their children after you," Azuma tells Rand.

The home service robot takes Rand, Greenspan and Mitchell on a journey to the future, to the year 2033. The three are confronted with apocalyptic scenes and witness the downfall of Silicon Valley. In 2033, it turns out, Silicon Valley looks like what one may describe as an internet-inferno. Over the years, Azuma explains, the internet transforms into a repressive instrument ringed to service autocratic politicians and a self-serving entrepreneurial elite in Silicon Valley with monopolistic control and driven by rogue individualism and the neoliberal values Rand propagates in her books.

In *Jubilee 2033*'s apotheosis we catch a glimpse of what happens after the Fall of the Valley. A gender-fluid robot-prophet called Nootropix, read excerpts from their book *The End of The Internet (As We Knew It)* to their followers. What follows is a futuristic queer party in which Nootropix dance, together with Azuma and a dancing-while-masturbating Ayn Rand, to Andrea Bocelli's 90s earworm hit song *Con te Partirò*, not coincidentally one of Elon Musk's favourite artists, on a purple dance floor, wearing a glow-in-the-dark dildo. On the dancefloor, Nootropix climax like a spring fountain (yep). But that's not the end of it. With their dance moves Nootropix manage, quite literally, to break the networked, geometric prison of the internet into a thousand shards the shape of paranodes.

Jubilee 2033 might be considered to express what Fred Moten calls fugitivity: "a desire for and spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed, a desire for the outside, for playing or being outside..." Blas imagines someplace outside or beyond our current conditions, a post-internet, non-conforming, boisterous and dancy space of queer resistance, materializing as an intoxicating mix of queer sex, Nootropix, and 90s pop music.

We could all be Chelsea Manning

From the zero-and-one codes of the internet, we move to the As, Ts, Gs, and Cs of DNA code. *Genomic Intimacy* is the solo-exhibition of the multi-disciplinary information artist and computer programmer Heather Dewey-Hagborg. Over the past decade, Heather Dewey-Hagborg has shown herself to be a critical observer of the inner workings and the troubling political and philosophical issues surrounding genetic surveillance, commercial bio-labs, and forensic DNA research. *Genomic Intimacy* focuses on everything that falls through the gaps and the fissures of artificial intelligence; everything that cannot be algorithmically analysed, modelled, hypothesised, measured, and stowed in freezing cold DNA biobanks.

Probably Chelsea (2017) is the result of a collaboration between the artist and the American whistle-blower Chelsea E. Manning — a former intelligence analyst in the US Army, sentenced, in 2010, at the age of 23, to 35 years in prison, for passing documents with sensitive military and diplomatic information – amongst which the killing of civilians in Baghdad in 2007 and a failing war in Afghanistan – to WikiLeaks. No images of Manning were allowed to reach public or press while she was imprisoned. During her prison time, Manning underwent hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and transitioned from her former male status, as Bradley Manning, to her current female identity, Chelsea Manning. In 2016, for a second time, Manning requested Obama for clemency. He pardoned her in January, 2017, only days before leaving office.

For *Probably Chelsea* (2017) Dewey-Hagborg used a system she designed for algorithmically generating facial models based on extracted genomic data. Two years before her release, in 2015, upon the artist's request, Manning mailed Dewey-Hagborg cheek swabs and strains of her hair. With the system she designed, and assisted by an open biotechnology lab, Dewey-Hagborg extracted the DNA from Manning's samples, sequenced pieces of it and analysed them to generate a series of facial models of what someone with Manning's genomic data might look like. Out of the many possible facial models based on Manning's physiognomy, thirty portraits were selected and then 3D-printed. The portraits, on view at MU, are suspended from the ceiling by a fish line, and composed as a crowd of people. The crowd represents thirty different interpretations of the same genomic data. Thirty false positives, thirty probabilities — thirty times Not Chelsea. The possibilities seem endless: the portraits range from light skin to dark skin; from brown eyes to blue eyes; and from masculine to feminine features. We could all be Chelsea Manning, it appears. More than a multitude of possibilities of what Chelsea Manning may look like, based on fragments of her DNA, *Probably Chelsea* illustrates all the things DNA cannot determine conclusively, let alone with any certainty. Seen in this light, *Probably Chelsea* knowingly performs its own partiality: it enacts the limits, politically and epistemologically, of what we may think to know with any degree of certainty.

Searching for stories in a gene pool

In *T3511* (2018), her latest video installation, co-produced by and premiering at MU, Dewey-Hagborg mines her own 'will to know.' "A cell is a history, a home" the artist says in *T3511*, "the most intimate of spaces." The 4-channel video installation — part unrequited genomic love, part diary entries, part quasi-religious confession, and largely an experimental documentary — tells the story of a bioartist who becomes increasingly obsessed with an anonymous donor, named T2305, whose saliva the artist purchased from Innovative Research, a for-profit "worldwide distributor of high quality human & animal biological materials." In the film, the bioartist sends 2ml of donor T2305's fluid to 23andme.com, a commercial lab for genetic sequencing. When the lab results come in, she notices that she frantically devours the donor's genetic profile. From the genetic profile report, she learns that the donor is likely to be 46-year-old, with dark brown eyes, a full head of brown hair and few freckles. The donor probably tosses and turns in bed,

seems to enjoy a savoury mid-night snack and appears to go for hour-long runs. “I think of you frequently” the artist admits. “I imagine your face, your voice, the way you walk. I’m curious where you grew up...” Pulled in by the intimate genomic details, she ventures further. Soon, with the help of some chemical lab procedures and an algorithmically searchable biobank, the donor has a name, a surname and residence: Michael Daniels, from St. Louis, Missouri. Succumbing to her desire to know more, the artists peruses Facebook and looks at profiles of people named Michael Daniels. “I think of you constantly,” she confesses. “I want to feel you...”

“Have I gone too far?” the artist asks, rhetorically, alluding to her stalking behaviour. *T3511* can be viewed as a *Spy vs Spy* story, in which a genomic data artist, concerned with the possible misuses of forensic DNA and biometric surveillance, gets herself involved in stereotypical surveillance and spy activities, a hair’s breadth away from the political practices she critiques and is concerned about. Dewey-Hagborg draws the viewer into the world of genomic profiling, biobanking and for-profit labs selling biological materials online, in her attempts come to understand the story of donor T2305, to figure him out, and into her infringement of “the most intimate of spaces.”

T3511 also addresses the theme of narratology. To an extent *T3511* follows the classic template of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth theory: a protagonist goes on a journey, encounters a decisive moral challenge, after some struggle it learns an important lesson, and then returns, transformed. Books, films, advertising, TV-series, and on social media are replete with stories that follow this structure. We are fascinated by stories in which characters are faced with moral quandaries and emotional battles. We tend to think about our own lives and that of others in the form of narrative trajectories, too. Our lives, we like to think, are bound by a plot and a narrative structure: a beginning, a middle, and, inevitably, an end — though we like to pretend we are always in the middle. Life’s inconsistencies are smoothed out or folded into a story line, gaps are ignored or plugged, and crises seen as turning points, thickening the plot.

The artist’s quest for a narrative framework to get to know Michael Daniels fails to find narrative closure. It fails because human life is not a character’s journey, with a causally driven plot, where things make sense and neatly come together at the end. In *Either/Or* Søren Kierkegaard calls any attempt which maintains that we are knowable and transparent to ourselves or to others “ridiculous.” It is ridiculous because any such attempt denies the existence of the unknown, any such attempt is the denial of contingency and the denial of the partiality of all knowledge. We are not transparent — neither to ourselves, nor to others, Kierkegaard maintains. Despite all the intimate details the artist has of her donor, she never gets to know who Michael Daniels is. She roams around in St. Louis, his alleged stomping grounds, yet never gets a step closer to him. Although he is identified, he remains unknown. With *T3511* Dewey-Hagborg made an ode to what fails to conform, to what falls outside of models and templates, and what refuses to be told. No matter how deep you dive into chromosomes, it’s turtles all the way down.

Artificial intelligence is in vogue, and both the artists in this exhibition seek to unravel this hype. *The Objectivist Drug Party* and *Genomic Intimacy*, reflect on the tensions and frictions within artificial intelligence and offer an imaginative response to the widely shared trust in everything ‘smart’, ‘networked’ and ‘datafied.’ Taken together, the works of these two artists bring to light what remains excluded from biobanks, genomic data, machine learning algorithms, and the global network of the internet – hinting to the underlying messiness, dissatisfied speculation, a clamour for the non-standard, the unconnected dots, the unknown, and for what remains unintelligible.