

Writing-with-
MIASMA
and
MIASMA_a
Reader

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P R E F A C E

'Writing-with_MIASMA' is a text that explores the research and practice of Maggie Roberts in producing the video work *MIASMA* (2018, digital video, 16:13), commissioned by Res. in response to Kathy Rae Huffman's Media Art Library. 'Writing-with' in the title nods to the conceit of this text, which is to write *with* the work and with Roberts' methodology in mind, as opposed to 'writing over' the top of *MIASMA*. 'Writing-with' is a variation of Donna Haraway's 'making-with', in which Haraway pictures humans as sympoietic dynamic entities in a complex system that comprises the global environment (see [Sympoiesis] in 'MIASMA_a Reader' below for Haraway's definition). Within Haraway's scenario, humans are not the sole harbingers of the Earth's future but are constantly 'worlding-with' other organic and non-human entities. Writing-with is a strategy that engages with the actants in *MIASMA* and its extended environment, as opposed to signposting their existence and purpose. In a constellation with each other, the artwork

MIASMA_A READER

[Sympoiesis]
Or, worlding-with

'*Sympoiesis* is a simple word; it means "making-with." Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer "world game," earthlings are *never alone*. That is the radical implication of sympoiesis, *Sympoiesis* is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.'

Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016, p.58.

MIASMA, fictional text 'Writing-with_MIASMA' and lexicon '*MIASMA_a Reader*' continue [**The Three Body Problem**] referenced in '*MIASMA_a Reader*', in which the deployment of a third term opens up a set of actants to contingent effects. '*MIASMA_a Reader*' is another textual fold in this tripartite landscape of text and image.

Within this fictional text, bold bracketed terms indicate a corresponding entry to be cross-referenced in '*MIASMA_a Reader*' below. What follows are extracts from both texts, the full versions can be accessed at: beingres.org/miasma/

[**The Three-Body Problem**]

Or...

1. Machine Vision – non-human agents
2. Algorithm – technical medium
3. Maggie Roberts – human filter or 'informed intuition'

'I then introduced a third sphere, and to my astonishment, the situation changed completely. Like I said, any geometrical figure turns into numbers in the depths of my mind. The sphereless, one-sphere, and two-sphere universes all showed up as a single equation or a few equations, like a few lonesome leaves in late fall. But this third sphere gave "emptiness" life. The three spheres, given initial movements, went through complex, seemingly never-repeating movements. The descriptive equations rained down in a thunderstorm without end.'

Liu Cixin, *The Three-Body Problem*, translated by Ken Liu, Head of Zeus Ltd, 2014, p.207.

WRITING - WITH _ M I A S M A

Siphon [Arachnid Networks]

A cephalopod was using its muscular arms to wade through the detritus on the swamp floor; its complex neural network staying alert to notify the brain of any interesting objects that brushed past or underneath the system's suckers. In the cephalopod's mantle, the master consciousness – or as humans would identify it, a brain – was taking a timeout, confident that its multi-independent consciousness – present in each of its arms – would alert it to anything of interest [**Informed Intuition**].

While the network made its way through the immersive landscape, the cephalopod's mouth also remained open, in order to absorb code and image fragments from its environment. On this occasion 000111100 was plucked from its course by the cephalopod's beak, which immediately retracted back into its mantle. The cephalopod digested and denatured the code

[**Arachnid Networks**]

- 1 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016, p.32.
- 2 Hilton F. Japyassu and Kevin N. Laland, "Extended spider cognition", *Springer*, 2017, www.research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10023/10466/Japyass_2017_Extended_AnimalCog_CC.pdf?sequence=1. Accessed 28 July 2017.

[**Informed Intuition**]

Or, Perverting Bergson...

An awareness that experience and research informs any intuitive process.

Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, translated by F.L. Pogson, Elibron Classics, 2005, pp.136-8.

as it passed through its body and back out into the swampy matrix. Occasionally the decayed information would make its way into a porous vector within the volcanic bed and travel to another dimension. A few would return [**Swamp Dwelling**].

Swamp Living

A swell of water oozes across the screen in fragmented and glitchy flows. Eyes try to focus. It's just possible to decipher a set of uniform modernist bridges amidst the streams of pixels; degraded monolithic architectural forms emerging from within the digital drift. They appear as if seen at a distance through frosted glass, an oily fingerprint obfuscating the pane's top right-hand corner. These overpasses are washed away by a relentless liquid landscape that bleeds across the display only to reveal another watery expanse underneath [**Trash / Flows: Wastelands**]. There is a crack in the concrete floor located in the foreground of the image.

[Swamp Dwelling]

Or, fissures for displaced forces

'There are ravines. Presences something between molluscs and deities squat patiently below eight miles of water. In the lightless cold a brutality of evolution obtains. Rude creatures emit slime and phosphorescence and move with flickerings of unclear limbs. The logic of their forms derives from nightmares.'

China Miéville, *The Scar*, Pan Books, 2011, pp.1-2.

[Trash / Flows: Wastelands]

Or, Edgelands

'The concept of landscape is gaining a new dimension not only in the field of Urban Studies and the systemic approaches pursued by

The Dark Secret

Nestled in the fifth interconnected layer of its hive mind, 505 received an input message. As a neuron in the middle layer of its network, 505 searched for identifying features that when combined with the other 95 layer 5 neurons would contribute to aspects of the image, such as fur and eyes. Its calculations complete, 505 waited for its signal to be calibrated with the other middle layer neurons before producing an output that would make its way to the deeper and more abstract layers of the system.

505's fixed location, within the middle layers of the hive mind, means that it cannot know the inner workings of the upper and lower layers. It is not for 505 to question its position, its learning [**Machinic Vision**] is quite indifferent to this subjective issue and the neuron is more concerned about maintaining an efficient system. In fact, to think one's own subjectivity would just decelerate its decision-making. However, 505 did find itself making intuitive responses based on previous calculations and

sociologists. People are also optimistically advocating the Parliament of Things (Latour) or investigating the autopoietic network culture of trash or human dependency on non-human communication clusters. Such holistic approaches may be based on trust or shadowed by apocalyptic forebodings. But in either case, the landscape (which is to say, the dynamically networked communication currents in matter itself) is an actor, and no longer simply a passive backdrop to the accumulation and interaction of objects.

Any landscape able to process information independently subsequently joins forces with landscapes of a similar composition. Interventions in such circumstances appear to be not so much regulations or controlled arrangements; rather, the currents technician himself is now deployed solely in this strange undead-living landscape, which manipulates him rather than he it. The material landscape and its currents, the dark and vibrant matters, themselves become active agents in our habitats. Here, the opposite of crystallization and glassy immobility defines the end (or the new beginning): untrammelled autonomous proliferation.'

Mark Fisher and Reza Negarestani, 'TRASH / FLOWS: WASTELANDS' *SPECTRAL CTM.12 – Festival for Adventurous Music & Related Arts*, 2012, www.ctm-festival.de/archive/festival-editions/ctm12-spectral. Accessed 27 June 2017.

[Machinic Vision]

Or, Invisible Frequencies

1 'X-rays confuse the common sense difference between light and matter, since they can directly wound and destroy life, even as they illuminate it, brighter than bright.'

Timothy Morton, 'X-Ray', in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p.311.

the experience of hundreds of thousands of inputs, which it had received from the upper layers.

Level Heaven Interface [Medium is the Message]

A digital image of a woman's face is treated with a noir filter on her Apple iPhone 6: she likes the way the black and white tones bring out her cheekbones and soften her hair, while also inflecting a trendy nostalgia for the 1920s. As she makes the final crop on layer seven of the image before uploading it onto Facebook, the primary level of code – zeros and ones – is also changed. When she clicks upload, the coded pattern of zeros and ones is scattered into a variety of ordered packets. Her iPhone software manages the dispersal of packets so that they can exit her device via the quickest and most efficient route.

2 'They see you so intensely that in sufficient quantities they kill you – X-rays (also known as gamma rays) give the lie to the artificial division between perceiving and causing that has plagued philosophy and ideology at least since the Kantian time.'

Ibid., p.314.

[Medium is the Message] Or, Allatonceness – instantaneous information super-highways

'Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. "Time" has ceased, "space" has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us.'

Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore and Jerome Agel, *The Medium is the Message*, Penguin Books, 2008, p.63.

All traffic surfing on 000111100's wave is flowing at a super high speed but those that are on other lanes are travelling at varying velocities through the air due to different levels of crowding or blockage. Gliding across the radio waves, through buildings, flesh and trees, 000111100 reaches its data farm in record time and enters one of the three racks of servers created for Facebook to store its information on every day. Packet 000111100 is then united with the rest of the code that was sent on alternative pathways, as each set of data is indexed with its place in the sequence so that it can be reassembled by the receiving device into a whole and cohesive image. Waiting as the icon circles itself, like a snake eating its own tail, the owner of the iPhone finally sees her image with heightened features appear on her Facebook page. Her hard drive's magnetic field had just femtoseconds before it received the code of the altered interface and deployed its magnetic fields to calibrate this change on the Facebook page on her screen.

Siphon

Iridescent colours shimmer on the cephalopod's skin, as the animated network glides through the swamp. Occasionally it becomes invisible to the naked eye, as the organic network deploys its camouflage to trick predators. Cells in the cephalopod's skin activate the iridophores to reflect their environment's colours and the networked system slips off-screen, withdrawing into its mirrored shell. As the cephalopod moves, its arms construct a complex dance unrestricted by a skeletal frame; occasionally bending its tentacles into rigid shapes and bouncing off the floor and sporadically sporting a frilled pirouette, which is periodically followed by a... The biological network freezes, as a geometric shape [**The Raft**] passes overhead changing the temperature of the lower depths. Alerted to its surroundings, the cephalopod's gelatinous form shivers. In the shadow's wake, glittering fragments drift and eddy down towards the unwitting observer.

[The Raft]
Or, Humanitarian Entrepreneurs

'Another news piece, this one apparently done a few years later. Again, we are on the Enterprise, but this time the atmosphere is different. The top deck has been turned into an open-air refugee camp. It is swarming with Bangladeshis that L. Bob Rife plucked out of the Bay of Bengal after their country washed into the ocean in a series of massive floods, caused by the deforestation farther upstream in India—hydrological warfare. The camera pans to look

Swamp Living

A pulsing animistic landscape emerges from the murky waters and dense foliage, as if constructed out of the same material matrix. Three-dimensional amorphous shapes suggest their presence; the hint of a back, as it curves into the leaves beneath and a dislocated eye flickering in the frothing river. Myriad prismatic colours pulsate around the spherical orifice's central portal.

Monstrous multi-tentacled ocular spheres without lids propagate the sky and appear to survey their audience; fractal eyes observing those that occupy the outer physical world, as well as those that reside or traverse into the depths of the dark mirror and its inner network [**Artificial Sublime**]. In the background, the water continues to rush and collect in a pool. Flamingos in the centre of the landscape remain untouched by the distortions of form around the edge of the image, as they sift through the stagnant waters at the river's banks. 🦩

out over the edge of the flight deck, and down below, we see the first beginnings of the Raft: a relatively small collection of a few hundred boats that have glommed onto the Enterprise, hoping for a free ride across to America.'

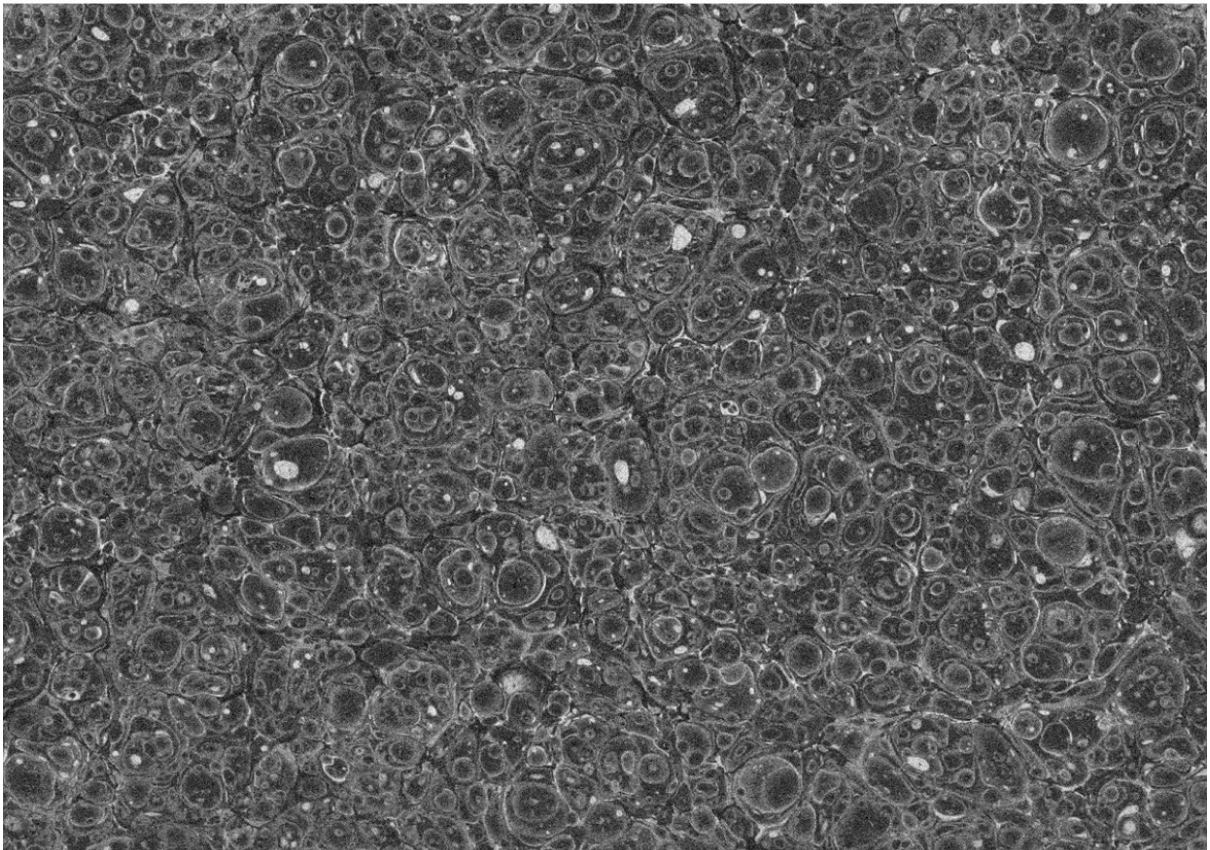
Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, Penguin Books, 1993, p.109.

[Artificial Sublime]
Or, Scientific Apparatus

In his talk 'Hyperstition', at TEDx Table Mountain, Delphi Carstens states that the constant 'Call to the Old Ones' creates an ideology, which attests to the existence of a hidden dimension to nature. Carstens' term the 'Old Ones' refers to the belief that aliens exist on the other side of the technological subject-centred dark mirror and on the alternate face of this technological surface there is a world of

objects we cannot know. In this belief, technology is a mirror that can only reflect the human subject's own representations while the scientific images attest to a real outside this technological apparatus. Micro and macro images bring humans closer to a scientific understanding of the universe(s), at the same time they invoke a world beyond the lens that humans can't directly contact. It is the increasing technological mediation of human interactions in the practice of science, which has made the real world of matter appear as more distant and less directly related to subjective reality. Physical distancing produced by technology, counter-intuitively, cultivates the belief in a real that exists behind a veiled reality and maintains the disciplines of theology and philosophy.

Delphi Carstens, "Hyperstition: Figuring the Apocalypse", *TEDx Table Mountain*, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wdj9Ch1RoqU. Accessed 23 November 2012.



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