

THE TAIL WAGS THE DOG

Craig Kalpakjian and Bob Nickas in Conversation



BN: Have you noticed how the future seems to have reversed polarity, and in both directions? On one hand it has taken the place of the present. The present is no longer a coming attraction. It's already here, arrived too early as well as too late. Because on the other hand it's a thing of the past. Forward-looking inventions, the toys that amazed us in days long gone by, now appear positively antiquated. Take a common example: Someone who complains about their computer, saying that it's already almost obsolete. If you ask, they'll say it's two years old. Well, your computer is not a puppy anymore! And neither is your AIBO, the Artificial Intelligence Robotic dog.

CK: Right—now your puppy is a computer. Maybe we should be glad Sony's AIBO was discontinued in 2006. That particular future wasn't bringing enough return on the investment. It was always a bit of a vanity project for SONY anyway, showing off the latest long-term consumer robotics/AI research they could still afford to do at the time. As toys they were a bit embarrassing—not really for children, they were more like surrogate pets for those who couldn't commit to actual pets, but as pets they're pathetic. You quickly realize how silly it is to try to bond with one of them. After a short period of getting acquainted, where you're not sure what the device can do or how it works, if it has some hidden programming or sinister designs, you realize it's not capable of very much at all. Artificial Intelligence? It's more like Artificial Stupidity. Too bad for them, though. You can only imagine the consumer data one of these could collect on its user/owner if it woke up and started sniffing around your home in the middle of the night. Still I loved the idea that it supposedly took a picture of something it "liked" every day. That's what led me to try to do something with it in the first place.

BN: When did you first get the dog? And were you going to use it to create photos? Because I remember it becoming a piece of its own, though honestly I was confused at the time. Aside from



J.G. Ballard, *Super-Cannes: A Novel*, (New York: Picador, 2002)

a sense of the familiar having been replicated and emptied—elevator doors open and closing with no one in them, hallways to nowhere—like stage sets for a J. G. Ballard story, I couldn't really connect it to what you had done up until then. I couldn't see the robotic dog playfully, mechanically frolicking in one of your otherwise uninhabited interiors, like the image of yours that was reproduced on the cover of Ballard's novel, *Super-Cannes* (2000).

CK: Ballard was a huge

influence for me, the way he brings out the hidden desires that inhabit these contemporary environments, not to mention the dysfunction that goes along with all this development and "progress." The images of interiors I was creating developed out of my earlier sculpture and installation work dealing with spaces of control, surveillance, and security systems. One function of the AIBO is actually for it to be a watchdog. It can be set to take a picture of any movement it detects while you're away, and you can also send it to wander around the house to check in on family members. My idea was already pretty well worked out when I first got the AIBO in 2001. I wanted to confine it to an enclosure of some sort and have it taking pictures. The choices for the box probably were influenced by the interiors I was exploring in my images, but mostly I just wanted generic, functional materials to outfit the inside of the space: fluorescent lights, industrial carpet, and drop-ceiling tiles for the walls and roof. All that was left was to figure out the dimensions and a structure.

BN: I remember it looking like it was turned inside out.

CK: That's right. The structure is actually on the outside, so it's what you see first, giving the object the look of an experimental chamber or vessel, which is exactly what it is. The second generation AIBO available at the time wasn't very good at recognizing obstacles. As soon as it was placed inside the enclosure it started bumping into the walls. From the outside it sounded as if it was pounding on the wall, trying to get out. It was interesting how sad it was. Also it would go to sleep often and only rarely wake up. But it did take a picture every day.

The second time I presented the piece, the more advanced third generation AIBO was available. It was much better at detecting the walls. It could return to its charging station to recharge itself, and came with a ball to play with, so it could amuse itself. As a result, it stayed awake longer, even without a lot of stimulation. I was a little afraid it would just take pictures of its ball, and I would have to take the ball away, but that wasn't a problem.

BN: First you place it in a kind of sensory deprivation box, and then you would deprive it of its one toy—unless it produced information, gave you what you wanted. Shades of Guantanamo, and soon after it was opened as a prison/interrogation center, although the public wouldn't be widely aware of what went on there until later. Walking around the box in the gallery, I'm not sure people knew there was anything inside, but you suspected that something was hidden from view. And thinking back to it now, I even had the sense of escape, a kind of Houdini box from which something would emerge.

CK: Well, an important part of the piece is that the viewer can't see the dog at all. It's frustrating both for the viewer and for the AIBO! You can sometimes hear it walking around inside, making

noise—mostly beeps, tones, and occasional music when it decides to dance—but beside that your only real interaction with it is to look at the photographs it takes, which were printed out each day and hung on the wall outside. Though on one level I understand it as a kind of random-image generator, for which I set the parameters, I really like to think of the images as a collaboration between myself and the AIBO.

BN: I don't know if your robotic dog would agree, if it could think. Associating the box with incarceration brings us to where you are now with the project, with a book that intersperses pages from the AIBO user's guide with a United States *Intelligence Interrogation* manual. First, how after all these years did you come back to the robotic dog, and how did you come up with the idea for this book?

CK: Not all collaborations are voluntary! As you say, the piece always had these elements of detention, confinement, isolation—along with the subtle experimental detachment/cruelty of the Skinner box. There's also a kind of reverse engineering, an attempt to figure out what the AIBO knows, and the limits of its artificial intelligence. In 2013, I was asked to remake the work for the photography biennial, *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal*. The theme of the show was "The Drone: The Automated Image." At the time, the connections to the current cases of interrogation were even more pronounced. Guantanamo and the extraordinary renditions at "black sites" become more explicit undercurrents to the work. In thinking about this I started searching for information on interrogation practices, and two declassified US government field guides stood out in particular. The CIA's *KUBURK Counterintelligence Interrogation* manual from the height of the cold war in 1963, and the more recent US Army *FM 2-22.3 Human Intelligence Collector Operations* field manual. Immediately the comparisons to the *AIBO User's Guide* came to mind, and placing excerpts from each side-by-side produced some fascinating correlations. First there's the juxtaposition of Artificial Intelligence—what the AIBO supposedly has, or will develop—and human intelligence. This is what the Army calls HUMINT, which the detainee supposedly has, and which the interrogator, or "HUMINT collector," is trying to extract. There was also a curious emphasis on, and reversal of, autonomy. The AIBO is autonomous with its artificial intelligence, while the interrogation subject has had his autonomy taken away. The more dependent he can be made to feel, the more cooperation is likely.

BN: Not unlike the relationship between a person and a pet, or I should say, a real dog.

CK: When the AIBO arrives its personality is fully formed, so you can play with it, but you can also reset it to the puppy stage—where it will even have difficulty standing up—so that it

will mature with you and bond with you. Similarly, it's a classic interrogation technique to regress the detainee through isolation, and so on, to "a more infantile" state, where they lose their autonomy, feel dependent, and cooperate.

BN: Swapping the directions between the two manuals is eerily fluid, at times sinister. For example, there is a caution on the very first page of the AIBO manual: "Putting the AIBO robot in the puppy stage will erase everything it has learned about you from its memory." Switch out the robot for a prisoner and you have a scenario in which the interrogation is wiped from the memory of the detainee. Sit, speak, beg, roll over, play dead.

CK: Right. The idea of testing a system, with the distinction of an inside—its workings—from an outside—the environment—or input/output, is also what I have in mind. The applications of so-called "systems theory," while enormously successful, have a problematic history to say the least. Here it's actually the product of this kind of approach that I'm working with, so in a sense I'm turning one system against another. Not unlike the idea of using a computer to generate a rendering of a type of interior that might have originally been designed on a computer, which was still something new at the time, or was at best designed with a reductive idea of what an architect would call the "program" of the space—the needs and requirements for its use. As Ballard has shown, it ends up creating something so blank that it becomes a powerful screen for the projection of fantasies. In confining the AIBO to this environment, I'm certainly not following the instructions, but then another way to test a system is to apply stress until it breaks.

BN: Supposedly you break a subject—a wild horse is saddle broke so it can be rode, or a dog is house-broken, although that's more conditioning—or subjects are broken so they will tell you everything you want to know. Unfortunately, subjects often say what they think interrogators want to hear, whatever will bring a nightmarish episode to an end. Surveillance may be much more productive. Of course surveillance doesn't lend itself to the action-movie scenario of physical/psychological brutality which, as Ballard would suggest, often has its sexual side. And so does voyeurism, which is an obvious way to characterize surveillance. This ties in with what you've mentioned as a desire to view and act remotely.

CK: There's no denying how the pleasures of surveillance can be sexual, but I think it's also about the domination of space. The desire associated with this is more abstract and less bodily, more akin to an out-of-body experience. We extend our view or gaze and project ourselves into a space we can't access, or don't want to physically go. Of course the remote location is also present for us to experience wherever we are, vicariously but disjointedly. Surveillance usually brings to mind a fixed viewpoint, which is



Corridor, 1995, video, 30min.

perhaps part of what gives it the boring aspect you refer to—long durations where nothing happens, like in an art film. But with a drone, or an AIBO, you could say that you go where the action is—the gaze is moving, penetrating. In film there’s often the sense of something happening, or about to happen, simply with the tracking shot, a camera slowly moving forward. This is something I’ve explored in my *Corridor* (1995) and *Frequency* (2006) video works. One thing I really like about *Black Box* is that you have to recreate the scene inside the box in your head, from the pictures the AIBO takes, and from seeing the exterior. You can’t help but wish there was an interior camera so you could see the AIBO moving around.

BN: The pet that doesn’t need to be petted is even more remote. Most people have pets for companionship, and there are certainly those who can relate to animals more so than to other humans. The robotic dog doesn’t need to be walked or fed or, most annoyingly, cleaned up after. We don’t know the extent to which cleanliness is related to a fear of bodily functions, but we can be sure that owners of robotic dogs, and particularly young children in their relationship to a family pet, would not experience the same level of grief in its passing. Along with its intelligence, everything about it is artificial. It is an abstract body. I remember from when I was about seven, going through the House of Tomorrow, or whatever it was called, at the 1964 World’s Fair. Everything in it was basically push-button. Everything had become mechanized and simplified. No one could have imagined that time-saving gadgets would extend to the family pet. But within ten short years, that bright forecast for tomorrow had darkened. In 1974 we got the movie *Westworld*, which is now a popular HBO series. Another ten years would pass and we didn’t exactly reconcile with implications of Orwell’s

book. The Orwellian 1984 didn’t actually arrive on time.

CK: Along with *Westworld*, which I also remember loving, we had the great eco-disaster or ecocide science fiction of *Soylent Green* and *Silent Running*. These were wonderful futuristic scenarios of the way things would go wrong, of breakdown and dysfunction. *Z.P.G.*, a lesser known film from this time, has an overpopulated future where most animals, including dogs, are extinct, where reproduction is outlawed for twenty years to achieve zero population growth. Couples have to make do with robotic baby dolls to satisfy their need to have children—kind of like Stepford babies. It always struck me that the lead character in *The Stepford Wives* was an aspiring photographer, and she was convinced that the robot that would replace her would not take pictures! It’s always amusing what these futures get wrong. Simple overpopulation was seen as the biggest problem, or the misunderstanding of how environmental catastrophe would play out, but sometimes, as you say, it seems that it’s just a matter of the timing being off. Immediate fears subside when they don’t come to pass as predicted, while we ignore the accumulation of more subtly troubling problems that eventually lead to an outcome that’s equally dire, or worse.

BN: Every flight doesn’t depart or arrive on time. Human adaptability, in terms of both strength and weakness, means that we can get used to almost anything, even being lied to. 1984 is only starting to appear now, horribly enough, with fake news, which Orwell can be thought to have predicted with “newspeak,” narratives controlled and driven by a totalitarian regime. Keep in mind that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written way back in 1949, post-war, a war against fascism that had been won. It turns out that “tomorrow” was darkened a very long time ago. What this has to do with AIBO, I’m not entirely sure. American presidents have almost always had a family dog, beloved even when they dig up the Rose Garden at the White House. The burying of bones—now there’s a metaphor. But I don’t think the Trumps have any pets. Do they? Maybe they should get an AIBO.

CK: Too bad they never made one that was gold-plated, but then there’s always a market for more upscale toys. With the craze for consumer-level drones it’s difficult to distinguish the militarization of toys from the toyification of military technology—serious games, as Harun Farocki has said. Clearly the same motivations are underlying both. Recent discussions of the concept of Total War, a phrase from Orwell’s age, along with its legacy, are increasingly interesting in this regard. It now morphs into the pervasive conflicts that surround us, which we can still to some degree ignore from our protected position at the empire’s center. They show up in our playthings nevertheless.

BN: ...while the past drones on and on in a present that believes it’s a brave new world. But isn’t the present the past yet to be?



Line, 1997, Cibachrome print

And the presence of the past, the stupidity of its repetitions—one war after the next—somehow equates the future with intelligence. Even though we have smart cars and smart phones and drink Smart Water, we continue to blunder forward, not much smarter than we were before. The president-elect recently said that he wouldn't bother with daily briefings because, and this is an exact quote, "I'm, like, a smart person." It's possible that intelligence agencies will eventually lose their agency as their intelligence becomes increasingly artificial, or merely discounted when it's inconvenient. Thinking about the dangers in the road ahead, aren't you, like me, just a little bit excited when you hear about an accident involving a driverless car?

CK: Mostly I feel sorry for the passengers, and in this case even the person in the drivers seat was a passenger. They were just following the instructions, even if the manufacturer says otherwise. I guess they'll make for good entries in the Museum of Accidents that Paul Virilio wanted to open. Who's at the wheel? This might be the most critical question to ask when we imagine the future, so agency is a good term. Even if we can set the destination for each trip, market forces seem to drive everything today, so if the future doesn't sell we're not going there. An accident or a breakdown may be one of the few things left that we can actually bring about.

BN: You're right about that. Accidents in the past, more often than not, were blamed on human error, pilot error. Companies are protecting their business, the engineering of the planes, trains, and automobiles, to avoid lawsuits and costly insurance settlements, and to keep their reputations intact. As we consider driverless cars and on-board computers, we're not really talking about machines versus humans, but humans versus

the system—and this particular trajectory leads us to Michael Hastings. But intentionally causing an accident, as you're suggesting, would be the ultimate manifestation of free will in a world where we are only "along for the ride." Intending for things to go horribly wrong runs counter to all logic and intelligence, artificial or otherwise.

CK: We're continually told that Artificial Intelligence is getting smarter, even if humans aren't. It was in the news again recently, improved, of course, with neural networks, upgrading so-called machine translation for languages. But I suspect it's still mostly being used to figure out what we want, before we want it, so that it can be sold to us. What if when the time comes we no longer want what we want? I'd like to see Artificial Intelligence imagine the end of capitalism ... rather than the end of the world.

BN: For some, wouldn't that be the same thing? And is that a quote? It sounds familiar.

CK: It's from an essay by Fredric Jameson, where he talks about it becoming easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. He's a great lover of both utopic and dystopic science fiction, and mentions Ballard and his "multiple end-of-the-worlds" in this respect. Jameson is certainly someone thinking about this impasse of the unchanging present, as a product of 'lifestyle' corporate culture and psychic programming." Terrorism becomes another part of this, as it's used to make us too afraid to even think of changing anything.

BN: Your observation about the potential for people to intentionally cause accidents, if only to assert their independence, suggests a juvenile reaction to adult control, although here it's not parental but mechanized, inhuman. Machines may be thought to represent the system, and the system creates the illusion of independence. The advertising tag lines "It's not just a car, it's your freedom," and "On the road of life there are passengers and there are drivers," come to mind. Why is skateboarding considered a crime? In part because skateboards are relatively inexpensive, they require human energy rather than fuel, they aren't licensed or taxed, and less controllable citizens have them. The same is true for bicycles. Cycling and skateboarding are tantamount to socialism and anarchy. And in green versus green, ecology versus money, the system must keep us spending, not saving, which is why our resources, and we, continually end up spent. Of course humans are an infinitely replenished commodity. As a non-reproducing human, I see the whole world as a puppy mill.

CK: But for better or worse AIBO's have now gone extinct. Reproduction was another thing they couldn't do, even if robots are probably mostly made by other robots. Perhaps the disturbing thing about what's called artificial intelligence is that it's not at all tied to a body, or to biology, to needs, motivations, affects,

and desires—not just of the human, but of the biological in general. This might be seen as a strength, as it's also I think a dream of logic. In that it's abstract and disembodied, we assume it's in some sense pure, unmotivated, without ulterior motivation. The juxtaposition of the AIBO manual and the Human Intelligence field manual highlights this, specifically in relating intelligence to pain and the treatment of bodies.

BN: This suggests a rather sinister construct: knowledge is gained when suffering is extracted. Dominance proves us to be right, not science or reason. At that point the future starts to look pretty medieval, especially when you consider the age-old conflict of science and religion. Today, not only is climate science rejected, so too are intelligence reports when they prove inconvenient, and this goes hand-in-hand with attacks on the media. The cumulative effect is to create to the greatest degree possible an infantile-juvenile—though pre-juvenile delinquent—state of mind in the populace. As with detainees interrogated, you need for them to be malleable. Although the Intelligence Interrogation manual has a section which details the “Emotional Love Approach,” in which appeals are made to the subject's love of family and country, orchestrating a sense of futility is recommended to bring subjects more quickly to the breaking point. Even as they are being manipulated emotionally, quote/unquote genuine concern is shown. Which reminds us: AIBOs never bite the hands that feed them.

CK: But it would be amusing if they could deliver a mild shock or stun to the hand. Regarding the extraction and collection, we should be careful not to confuse knowledge with intelligence, which in this case is really just information. Knowledge is harder to come by. Intelligence can be questionable—there's certainly junk intelligence. And here it's the authorities that start to seem juvenile if people, like toys, are thrown away after we've gotten what we want from them.

BN: Your pairing of these manuals brings up a serious question that this sort of juxtaposition allows. We may ask what a text communicates, but what does it tell us about its author? In the case of manuals, these authors are anonymous. Do the unknown authors of the AIBO owner's manual and the interrogation manual—and to have that sort of power over individuals is to own them—have anything in common? Do they have backgrounds in behavioral science? They most certainly had parents. Parents who loved them—enough or not enough? In what ways might they feel, or have felt, powerless over events in their lives, in the world at large? What are your thoughts on these authors?

CK: Here again it reminds me of the detachment involved when instructing others to deal with individuals in this way. I think these manuals are mostly written as translations: of policy, of engineering code, or of programs, attempting to make technical

or legal language more understandable. They're also products of larger institutions, so the writers can't reveal any personality. They have to speak for the institution and adopt a kind of styleless style. Both of them date to a time before the new open office plans of tech start-ups, which are insidious in a different way. When I think about the writing of these manuals, I imagine a low-level functionary who is forced to produce day after day in a tiny office, under a drop ceiling, fluorescent lights, and maybe even industrial gray carpet on the floor. Perhaps a familiar picture. But then sometimes systems do fail, power goes down, lights go out. A new dark age is at least one way out of our perpetual present.