

DANIELLE BRATHWAITE-SHIRLEY

THE DELUSION

SERPENTINE NORTH
15 JANUARY 2026
7-10 PM

HOUSE IS IN SESSION

HOW CAN WE
WORK TOGETHER
WHEN WE CAN'T
SEE EYE TO EYE?

I'LL NEVER
FEEL
ALONE
AGAIN!



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SERPENTINE ARTS TECHNOLOGIES
CURATED BY TAMAR CLARKE-BROWN

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SERPENTINE

LAUGHING ALONE IN YOUR ROOM: ADDICTIVE DESIGN & ALGORITHMIC ATTACHMENT

DR ROMAYNE GAD EL RAB

In 1919 Viennese psychoanalyst and neurologist Victor Tausk presented his essay *On the Origin of 'the influencing machine' In Schizophrenia*, in which he described patients presenting with 'delusions' of external or alien control by machinery that defied their technical comprehension. Over 100 years later, this description is not so far removed from our interactions with networked media and, more recently, anthropomorphised, conversational artificial intelligence. We feel controlled; we don't all know exactly how it works, but we can't seem to stop and it doesn't feel good.

I came across this network in the brain called the default mode network (DMN), a series of connections involved in creative thought and imagination of possible futures. The network is said to only be active when we are in 'wakeful rest', when we daydream or let our minds wander. While the DMN thrives in low-demand conditions, contemporary technological environments systematically suppress it, and the modern world offers increasingly few rituals or structures to activate it. What might it mean to rehearse collective rituals for its reactivation?

This is more than just touching grass. We need introspective design as a form of resistance.

When was the last time you had a daydream?

Can you think about others while in a constant state of consumption?

Are you able to imagine a new future without touching an algorithm?

EXERCISE: STEP AWAY FROM DEVICES.

TAKE A PEN AND PAPER, DESIGN AN EXPERIMENT TO ACTIVATE YOUR DEFAULT MODE NETWORK. WILL YOU BE SITTING OR LYING? WHAT ARE THE OPTIMAL CONDITIONS? WILL YOU BE IN A QUIET ROOM, SITTING AT A BUS STOP OR COLLECTIVELY REHEARSING WITH FRIENDS?

WRITE DOWN THE CONDITIONS DOWN AND CHALLENGE A FRIEND OR STRANGER TO TAKE PART IN YOUR EXPERIMENT.

RECORD THE RESULTS.

DR ROMAYNE GAD EL RAB IS A PSYCHIATRIST, RESEARCHER, AND ARTIST EXPLORING OUR INTIMATE ENTANGLEMENTS WITH TECHNOLOGY. WORKING IN THE FIRST NHS CENTRE FOR INTERNET GAMING DISORDERS, SHE COMBINES CLINICAL INSIGHT WITH INTERACTIVE INSTALLATION AND PERFORMANCE TO QUESTION DIGITAL ADDICTION AND THE POWER STRUCTURES BEHIND NETWORKED SYSTEMS. HER WORK HAS FEATURED IN PROGRAMMING AT TATE, SOMERSET HOUSE, AND DELFINA FOUNDATION, WHERE SHE WAS A UK ASSOCIATE FOR THEIR 2025 THEMATIC SEASON, *SCIENCE TECHNOLOGY SOCIETY*. A PUBLISHED ACADEMIC AND CURATOR, SHE CREATES SPACES WHERE SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND ART MEET THROUGH CONVERSATION, RESEARCH, AND MAKING.

DR PHOENIX PERRY

July 25 2022 This morning, I am contemplative. Yesterday, I got into it with someone that I skate with. He made dumb comments about athletic ability. He was into telling me about my performance and where I stood on his scale, which he claimed was universal, as if it were an ordained truth. I don't need that. I don't need other people's opinions. I think folks can say things, and I don't have to onboard it – internalise it, take it in. This last month, lots of folks have tried to take their nonsense out on me. I am not going to let them. It's good to know where you can just ignore people. Achievement is relative. I never thought I'd be able to be free in my own skin again, and skating gives me that.

Many people seem to think there's a definitive good or right way to be a place they get validation if they see themselves as such. I don't think that. I think there is just an ongoing flow of relations—a web of contingency and messy connections. Maybe that makes me less successful at things by their standards, but I'm okay with just being enough on my own terms. I don't need to be the best according to an external scale – I am happy just having fun, and that fun is the win. Joy can be the destination. I'm going to set myself free from that pressure. As of today, I am not going to show up for that energy in other people. Their expectations can get lost. I am going to stay expansive, stay open. You can close off to people working through their own nonsense. That doesn't have to be you. Someone judging themselves doesn't mean you need to do the same. People miss that you can feel joy for other people being happy without yourself feeling bad—that's totally ok. You can be your own scale of good.

DR. PHOENIX PERRY RESEARCHES EMBODIED INTERACTION, SMALL-DATA MACHINE LEARNING, DATA COMMONS, AND THE WAYS PEOPLE DEVELOP COGNITIVE MODELS TO UNDERSTAND AI SYSTEMS. AS A READER AT UAL, THEY DEVELOP TOOLS AND PRACTICES THAT ENABLE MORE ACCESSIBLE, CONTEXT-AWARE, AND INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO ENGAGING WITH COMPUTATION. THROUGH OPEN-SOURCE PROJECTS, SUCH AS INTERACTML, THEY SUPPORT ARTISTS AND DESIGNERS TO CREATE EMBODIED MACHINE LEARNING INTERACTIONS WITHIN GAME ENGINES. THEIR CREATIVE WORK CENTRES ON DEVELOPING EXPERIENCES THAT AMPLIFY SOMATIC AWARENESS IN GROUPS TO PROPOSE NEW WAYS OF SENSING AND FOSTERING DEEPER CONNECTION WITH AUDIENCES.



WHAT BEGAN AS A TOOL FOR EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE HAS BECOME A MECHANISM FOR RESTRICTING IT. ALGORITHMS CURATE OUR REALITY BASED ON WHAT KEEPS US ENGAGED, TRANSFORMING US INTO COMPLIANT PARTICIPANTS IN AN ECONOMY BUILT ON CAPTURING ATTENTION – CRITICAL THINKING NOT INCLUDED. THIS CONVERSATION EXPLORES DIGITAL SATURATION, HABIT-FORMING INTERFACES, AND THE EROSION OF REFLECTIVE THOUGHT. FROM PLATFORM ALGORITHMS AND REWARD MECHANICS TO AESTHETIC COMFORT ZONES, MOOD-DRIVEN CULTURE, COGNITIVE DECAY, IDEOLOGICAL ISOLATION, AND SELF-REINFORCING BELIEF SYSTEMS – WHAT DOES THIS EMERGING MENTAL LANDSCAPE MEAN FOR US, AND IS THERE A WAY OUT?

ALEX QUICHO

Everyone knows that struggling against a trap will only make things worse. Submitting to a pre-existing force or set of mechanisms may be the only way to conserve energy in order to achieve the correct conditions for escape. Or as designer and strategist Benedict Singleton writes, arranging both environment and behaviour 'so that the weak can prevail over the stronger'.

If something is excessively interpretable, it overflows its form. I want us to think about how the prey animal exists on its own terms, rather than according to the predator's singular focus and the definitions codified by its appetite. We can do this without denying the realism of predatory power. The realism, and allure.



Embracing being prey means embracing this overflow. Being excessively interpretable—as in having your unique individuality disseminate into a swarm or a herd – while also being at the mercy of being torn open or turned inside-out. It means being pragmatic about the dangers and attraction of being the object of desire: to be the thing that will be torn open, to understand that someone will always want to turn you inside-out.

Consider the generative properties of becoming what poet and theorist Fred Moten calls an illegible body. Moten, in his understanding of fugitivity and refusal, coaxes us to understand what it might mean to productively withdraw from representation. In fact, the “unrepresentable” condition of being prey – that is, the traits possessed by a prey-subject that are not factored into the design of the trap, and therefore are excluded from the predator's assessment—are its greatest signs of life.

Excerpts from *Prey Mode* (lecture version), 2024

ALEX QUICHO IS A THEORIST BASED IN LONDON. HER PRACTICE DEVELOPS NOVEL WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING LIFE WITHIN TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS, UNFOLDING IN MULTI-YEAR CYCLES THROUGH CRITICAL WRITING, PERFORMATIVE LECTURES, AND MOVING IMAGE. PAST MAJOR PROJECTS INCLUDE *GIRLSTACK* (2023–2025), AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PLANETARY IMPACT OF INHUMAN 'GIRL' INTELLIGENCE; *ALLEY TO HEAVEN* (2021–2023), A TRILOGY OF VIDEOS AND PERFORMANCES ON DATA ANNOTATORS AND EDGE COMPUTING IN THE CONTESTED SOUTH CHINA SEA; AND *SMALL GODS* (2017–2020), A BOOK OF DEPARTURES IN DRONE NARRATIVES. SHE TEACHES THEORY FOR MA NARRATIVE ENVIRONMENTS AT CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS, AND STUDIED CRITICAL WRITING AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART.

DESIGNING BELIEF: TROLL ARMIES, PROPAGANDA PUPPETS & THE POLARISATION LOOP

DR JULIA EBNER

As extreme voices grow louder in parliaments, street protests and online debates, our society is becoming increasingly fractured. We are seeing a rise of hyperpolarised communities along the dividing lines of racial justice, gender equality, queer rights, climate activism and vaccine acceptance. But today's polarisation is not just the product of competing ideologies. These conflicts are deeply entrenched in people's identities. Opposing groups hold differing views not simply of the world, but of themselves. Powerful identity dynamics are the main thread that runs through radicalised communities. Movements create a sense of exclusivity, which evokes a strong feeling of belonging. Sometimes, a group member's personal identity might become equivalent with their group identity. This phenomenon is called 'identity fusion', and it can be triggered in extremist groups when members get into fights with political opponents, or when they perceive themselves as having their rights suppressed by the government. A fused identity based on powerful bonding experiences and a perceived existential threat from an outside enemy may be enough to lead to violence. Disasters, wars and uncertainty present unique opportunities to extreme movements.

[...]

The wider effects on public discourse have been chilling. Many politicians, journalists, artists and activists have started to self-censor, some have even withdrawn from their vocation, in order to avoid hateful backlash. In theory, the enemies of progressive liberalism campaign in the name of free speech. In practice, they destroy open debate and suffocate those who hold different views. In theory, radically regressive movements quote their rights to justify provocative campaigns. In practice, they seek to undo the most fundamental human rights milestones: achieving legal, moral, and political equality of opportunity for people independent of their race, religion, gender and sexual orientation. In theory they say they want to protect their democratic rights. In practice, they destroy all trust in democracy.

Excerpt from *GOING MAINSTREAM: How Extremists are Taking Over*, Julia Ebner, Ithaka: UK, 2022

DR JULIA EBNER IS A CALLEVA RESEARCHER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD WHERE SHE LEADS THE VIOLENT EXTREMISM LAB AT THE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL COHESION AND SHE IS ALSO CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT THE INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, WHERE SHE HAS WORKED ON PROJECTS ON ONLINE RADICALISATION, TERRORISM, CONSPIRACY MYTHS, AND HATE SPEECH. JULIA IS AN AWARD-WINNING AND INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SEVERAL BOOKS, INCLUDING *THE RAGE: THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF ISLAMIST AND FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM*, *GOING DARK: THE SECRET SOCIAL LIVES OF EXTREMISTS* AND *GOING MAINSTREAM: HOW EXTREMISTS ARE TAKING OVER*.

KUMBIRAI MAKUMBE

The following conversation took place after my mother asked me to collect some garden soil and place it in a bag. That night I heard prayers coming from her room. The following morning we had a discussion.

Kumbirai: So, the soil absorbs?

Mum: Yes...because we are also created from dust.

Not just Adam?

Mum: No, we all come from dust. Eve too. Our bodies are created from the dust of the earth. That's why when someone dies, you are returned to where you came from.

So that's why they say, "Dust to dust"?

Yes. So, I'm exercising dominion. I'm instructing the earth to do things that I want it to do. To bring forth good things in my life.

But what about the soil absorbing?

If something brings something out, it can take something back.

So once the soil absorbs something, will you get rid of it?

No, I'm using the soil as a point of contact.

With the earth?

Yes.

Like a proxy?

What's a proxy?

Something in place of something else.

Yes. Like bread and wine representing Christ's body and blood. It's the same principle.

But if you want the soil to absorb things, won't you want to discard it afterwards?

No, I don't want the soil to absorb something in this case. I'm just speaking to it. Like someone speaking in Zimbabwe while I'm here. I'm speaking into this soil, and it affects every place.

Is this an act of faith?

Yes. Once you have faith or belief, taking an act of faith reinforces that.

This feels like a blend of Christian faith and other spiritual practices.

It is Christian, but it's expanded.

It's an interesting blend. For example, you used to leave a Bible open around the house so that the scripture would radiate into the room.

Yes, I used to do that.

Why did you stop?

KUMBIRAI MAKUMBE IS A LONDON-BASED ARTIST WHOSE WORK THROUGH A BLACK QUEER FEMINIST LENS IS AN ONGOING EXPLORATION OF FABULATION-NOT JUST STORYTELLING, BUT WORLDING THROUGH ELEMENTS OF MYTH, SHONA FOLKLORE AND SPECULATIVE FICTION. RATHER THAN FOCUSING ON A SINGLE NARRATIVE, THEY SEE THEIR PRACTICE AS A GROWING ECOLOGY OF SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR THOUGHT, TRANSFORMATION, AND SURVIVAL. EACH CONCEPT ACTS AS A SITE OF SPECULATION, SELF-DEFINITION, AND HOLDING.

A DISCUSSION EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BELIEF AND TECHNOLOGY. INTERNET POLARISATION IS WIDELY DISCUSSED AS A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN FOSTERING SOCIAL DIVISION, HEIGHTENING ANIMOSITY BETWEEN GROUPS, AND ERODING A SHARED, FACT-BASED UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD – WHICH SOME INTERPRET AS A LOSS OF COMMON SENSE. WITHIN THIS FAST-EVOLVING DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM, NEW TYPES OF WEAPONS ARE EMERGING, INCLUDING COORDINATED HATE AND TROLLING CAMPAIGNS. HOW DO DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND PLATFORMS SHAPE THE FORMATION OF IDEOLOGY, AND THE DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC OPINION?

DR TONY D. SAMPSON

A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media (Polity, 2020) approaches polarisation and societal fragmentation by rejecting simplistic notions of users as autonomous rational agents, instead proposing the conceptual persona of the sleepwalker. The somnambulist is a blurry subject, neither fully awake nor merely passively asleep. This is subjectivity continuously made in collective mimicry and, in recent decades, attached to a dark refrain of affective and virally entangled platform architectures, which amplify shock events, conspiracy, misinformation, big lies, and hate speech.

The book situates these processes within broader socio-political contexts, showing how the 'virality of experience capitalism' embedded in social platforms intensifies affective loops that align users into antagonistic experiential clusters rather than cohesive publics.

DR. TONY D. SAMPSON IS A COMMUNICATION THEORIST BASED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX'S BUSINESS SCHOOL (EBS). HIS RESEARCH CRITICALLY EXPLORES HOW DIGITAL ARCHITECTURES SHAPE SUBJECTIVITY, SOCIAL RELATIONS, AND POWER. THIS WORK SPANS DIGITAL MEDIA, AFFECT, VIRALITY, UX, AND NEUROCULTURES. HE IS AUTHOR OF *VITALITY: CONTAGION THEORY IN THE AGE OF NETWORKS*, *THE ASSEMBLAGE BRAIN: SENSE MAKING IN NEUROCULTURE*, AND *A SLEEPWALKER'S GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA*. TONY'S FORTHCOMING BOOK, *THE STRUGGLE FOR (USER) EXPERIENCE* EXAMINES THE CULTURAL PERVASIVENESS OF EXPERIENCE DESIGN (XD), SUGGESTING THAT UX SHAPES SUBJECTIVITIES AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN WAYS THAT FRAGMENT AND ESSENTIALISE EXPERIENCE.





HOUSE IS IN SESSION TURNS THE DELUSION INTO A FORUM FOR TRANSDISCIPLINARY EXCHANGE. THE EVENING EXPLORES CRISES OF TRUTH, FAITH AND REALITY IN OUR RAPIDLY EVOLVING DIGITAL WORLD.

7.00PM DOORS OPEN
7.10PM INTRO & EXERCISE
7.20PM ROUNDTABLE
7.50PM EXERCISE
8.00PM ROUNDTABLE
8.30PM EXERCISE
9.00PM FREE GAME PLAY

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