

Nizan Shaked

### **Katie: are You Talking About the Brain or the Mind?**

If someone tells me that they had a dream about me I don't ask them what the dream was about; I ask them: "why are you telling me now?"

Larry Johnson<sup>i</sup>

All the attempts to reduce the mental to the physical, which is to say "consciousness" to "the brain," will simply not work.

Rosalind Krauss<sup>ii</sup>

On November 28, 2010 at 11:13 PM I received a group email from Katie Grinnan asking myself, as one of about fifty of the artist's friends, family, and art community, to send her my information.<sup>iii</sup> By "information" Grinnan meant anything of interest that we did not feel proprietary about: "links to stuff, scans of things, recipes, theories...anything," to be used in a work about the brain, primarily her brain, but intended to also include all of the recipients' brains, towards a work she later described as "a growing idiosyncratic knowledge center."<sup>iv</sup> I sent back one PDF—a single page evidencing an insignificant gesture, an example of my personal need to pester the dominant order by using what I considered to be the language of the power apparatus, talking back to it on it's own terms. Inconsequential as it was, it was an example of "my information," or so I thought at the time. A facsimile of the page reads:

Netflix: Contact Public Relations

<http://www.netflix.com/ContactPR>

**Jobs**

**Media Center**

**Netflix Prize**

**RSS**

Service Code

**Browse Watch Your DVDs Instantly Queue**

Welcome, Nizan Shaked

## Contact Us

Request Sent

## Movies You'll

### Instantly to your TV

Movies, actors, directors, genres

 

**Thank you for contacting us. We will contact you as quickly as possible.**

### Request Summary

From:  
To:  
Subject:  
Message:

Nizan Shaked (nizanshaked@verizon.net)

### Public Relations Product Offerings

Hello, I am contacting you for lack of a better contact rubric. I would like to kindly protest the lack of a category for Palestinian Film under foreign films section, I hope in the name of peace and cultural exchange that this will be remedied.

Best Regards, Nizan Shaked, Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Art History and Museum Studies Department of Art, College of the Arts California State University, Long Beach 1250 Bellflower Boulevard Long Beach, California 90840

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{119} USA

I was listed as a collaborator on the invitation for the 2013 iteration of the piece at Alice Könitz's, metaphorically named, Los Angeles Museum of Art. The work, titled *For Your Information*, first shown in June 2013, is still ongoing, and has been shown in several venues, evolving at every one of its iterations with more collaborators and the audience contributing at every stage. The armature of the work echoes the aesthetics of gym equipment and office furniture, the information arranged in file folders, and printed stills from U-tube videos solicited by the artist form its floor. The work unsettles meta-categories and terms of classification, hierarchies, orders of significance, and scholarly conventions brushed aside.

I put my gesture, initially intended to be invisible, up for potential resurfacing. Yet, that it was now part of Grinnan's odd archive did not necessarily mean that my customer request to Netflix would have become visible either. Most likely it was destined to disappear in another sea of data—access to its significance drowning in too much information that did not present a methodical sifting mechanism or theory of synthesis. Absence of neither was not oversight, but rather a deliberate gesture on the part of the artist, whose work is never aims at organizing the world, but rather at questioning given modes of how it is that we come to know it. The term “information” was itself destabilized by the work, as I will show when I return to question the status of my gesture and its meaning.

Grinnan's work skirts adherence to any one inherited discourse, or set of discourses, as to not reinforce preexisting world-views or dispositions to viewing art. She freely uses examples as incongruent as astrological charts to move one work, neuroscience in another, and so on. In fact, what is so refreshing about her attitude (and what also separates her work from the market-art of her contemporaries) is the rejection of overarching position, personal style, and signature aesthetic. A renewed attitude to every project yields an incredible diversity of visual and spatial solutions to a range of predetermined photographic and sculptural problems. The elements driving the different works also stem from divergent, even contradictory, epistemological orders. Some of her works take the form of figurative sculpture; others play on the tensions facilitated by a combination of photomurals and dimensional structures, as well as complex scattered compositions. *Enter-Face* (2012–2015) takes the latter. A cornucopia of elements materialized in a very broad assortment of materials and forms, and

arranged throughout the space, it is based upon Grinnan's dream contents. She demonstrates a part of her thought process:

I had a dream that I saw a cat underwater up to its nose. I think it was breathing? I made a piece about it called *Nighttime Encounter with Schrödinger*, which I showed in the window at LAXART because it reminded me of Schrödinger's proposition where the cat is simultaneously alive and dead, performing a term in quantum mechanics called superposition which is a probability state where all positions happen simultaneously. Later I had a dream with the same elements restructured. This time, I had a coconut respirator that fit over my nose and mouth, turning my face into a cat face, and I was next to a pool filled with water. So the cat, the water and the feeling of suffocation or concentration on breathing were just reordered to form a different narrative. I wanted to create a situation from a series of loose reenactments from my dreams that would form an arrangement of objects and videos, where the viewer would constantly restructure the elements based on their associations and their position in space, so that the viewer reperformed the gestures of thought, creating multiple permutations. This piece was called *Enter-Face*.<sup>v</sup>

The ways in which the artist is making the connection between the various dream images is a mode of interpretation that can be directly traced to psychoanalysis. Although she does not reference this discourse directly, Freud's system of decoding individual dream imagery and narrative as a means to access the unconscious has influenced our culture so dramatically, that it is likely that the roots of most systems of symbolic interpretation can ultimately be traced to his momentous *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). The slippage of *Enter-face* with the term interface is undeniable, opening the work to a myriad of interpretations ranging from how dreams rearrange content stored as memories (whether those are conscious, or not), to the ways in which an individual interfaces with the world when they awaken to it and find themselves to be submerged in its vocabulary. Another play of reception would be to submit the work to the various retorts to Schrödinger's famous thought-experiment, which the readers of this essay can now perform independently if they took an encyclopedia entry that details the responses of scientists to his dead/living cat paradox (the Copenhagen worlds, ensemble interpretations, etc). Suffice here to underscore that each and every such theory contradicts the original hypothesis and its equivalent rejoinders, and that for us the point is that the dreams and/or the art offer a mediating layer, an interface relaying not to the artist's mind (after all, we can never know what has been fictionalized and how), but the idea of mind as a mediator of reality, as one type of perspective, as something elastic, parts of which are still unknown but is potentially knowable. To classify Grinnan's project as a philosophical intervention

into the mind/body problem, or the philosophical question of consciousness, is to categorize it too soon. Allowing it for the moment to be potentially discipline-less, the point here is that the artist has approached the question on the level of content.

The philosophical underpinning and processes that drove the form of *Enter-Face* dramatically contrast with that of *5 Minutes of Dreaming* (2016), which is based not on dream contents, but rather on the mechanics of the brain and its biometric outcome. A preparatory work for what will become a musical instrument, *5 Minutes of Dreaming* is a single freeform object, made of one material and one type of gesture, translating information extracted from Grinnan's sleeping brain activity into a drawing in space. Made with a 3D pen, a tool resembling a glue-gun, which allows the maker to draw three-dimensionally, the sculpture appears as an incomplete circle formed of overlapping black lines that render Grinnan's brainwaves and their coordinates. Balanced on a set of white scaffolding legs made from the same materials and resembling power-lines, the opening in the sculpture's circumference allows one viewer (and later a musician who will be playing the piece), to enter and view (activate) it from inside.

Both deriving from the dreams of the artist, *Enter-face* and *5 Minutes of Dreaming* mark two ends of human self-understanding, which, although they presumably share an organ, are yet to meet. Grinnan's work traverses the unbridgeable distance between the two.

In my 2010 email reply to the artist my knee-jerk reaction was to ask: "Katie, are you taking about the brain, or the mind?" My logic at the time was that the brain is the biological substance and its electrophysiological mechanism, akin to hardware. The mind is the content, the software, networks of thoughts and states of mind formed from conscious and unconscious experiences, an autopoietic system that in its expansion continues to create and organize itself. The latter (software/mind) is determined by a combination of an individual's particular hardwiring and circumstances, such that the brain and the mind are intertwined, defining as the mind everything that emerges from the biological activity, yet is distinct from it. The brain is a necessary but not sufficient component for the mind. In distinction, the operation of the brain per-se does not mirror this logic—it can function without the intervention of the mind, and as such is sufficient. Thus, although the brain may carry the mind, to produce information we need both, while to produce data the hardware will suffice. Assembled from the conscious choices of subjects, in this case, the content of the *For Your Information* archive is technically therefore a product of the mind, not the brain.

Before my deeper engagement with Grinnan's work it was evident to me that

consciousness is an emergent property, something that arises from the dynamics of a system, but does not exist in any of its individual parts. Our inability to locate where, why, and how consciousness emerges from interaction of electric current in biological matter was clearly an unbridgeable gap, complex to the extent that attempts to resolve the question of the relation between the physical matter and our capacity for mental cognition seems to lack certain critical capacity. When posed as a philosophical problem of consciousness, my instinct cohered with this logic:

Colin McGinn (1995) has argued that given the inherently spatial nature of both our human perceptual concepts and the scientific concepts we derive from, we humans are not conceptually suited for understanding the nature of the psychophysical link. Facts about that link are as cognitively closed to us as are facts about multiplication or square roots to armadillos. They do not fall within our conceptual and cognitive repertoire.<sup>vi</sup>

Yet, as I found out, the above position is but one within an enormous range of scientific and philosophical inquiry, where the diversity of descriptive, explanatory, or functional perspectives is so vast that within a broad gamut of irreconcilable perspectives that scholars cannot even agree on how to ask the basic questions, let alone embark on a theory that will initiate a journey towards any type of answer or facilitate a multi-disciplinary net coherent enough to cover all possible debates. The very basic terms such as consciousness, intuition, or intentionality are defined in paradigmatically divergent ways, depending on what and how one asks. Becoming convinced by one or the other is itself a factor of the self-creating system that is the mind. The trick is to trick one's own mind, to be able to avoid its becoming automaton.

Certain strands of science seem to exhibit degrees of certitude that one may find disconcerting. One example is the Blue Brain Project, an attempt to reverse engineer the human brain and recreate it at the cellular and subcellular levels by a computer simulation. The basic description of the project, as taken from its website, reveals its inherent contradictions at face-value, right there, on the surface of the writing:

The goal of the Blue Brain Project is to build biologically detailed digital reconstructions and simulations of the rodent, and ultimately the human brain. The supercomputer-based reconstructions and simulations built by the project offer a radically new approach for understanding the multilevel structure and function of the brain. The project's novel research strategy exploits interdependencies in the experimental data to obtain dense maps of the brain, without measuring every detail of its multiple levels of

organization (molecules, cells, micro-circuits, brain regions, the whole brain). This strategy allows the project to build digital reconstructions (computer models) of the brain at an unprecedented level of biological detail. Supercomputer-based simulation of their behavior turns understanding the brain into a tractable problem, providing a new tool to study the complex interactions within different levels of brain organization and to investigate the cross-level links leading from genes to cognition.

That the project seems to be at once detailed and not raises a question: how is it to be determined which areas should be detailed, or not? If consciousness (which, based on the Stanford Encyclopedia summary cited above, can be taken to be equivalent to cognition) is an emergent property, what if it emerges just at those junctures that the simulation neglects? Furthermore, as complex biological science demonstrates repeatedly, phenomena refuses to act according to what mathematical models predict. We need more for a computer simulation to be applicable to the human brain/mind. Something is too arbitrary about the information the Blue Brain project is assembling; science is not a work of art. We do not know is that their choices on what to include and what to neglect will result in the same processes that are happening the brain. While the Blue Brain project may offer scalable data bases for technological application, what guarantees us that they are asking the right questions in the right manner? Hyperbolic descriptions laced with adjectives (the Genome project being another example) smack of commercial interest and populist science. Both examples purport to offer a total picture, but seem to consist of a series of fragments. Since most philosophical theories on the matter point to either an impasse or a gap so wide it would require a collaboration of much more than science alone, how, as a collective, do we know that our resources are well applied?

When looking at *5 seconds of Dreaming*, where such a diminutive, abstracted, reduced, and pre-interpreted amount of data has come to life in front of our eyes, sensing its incredible richness allows us to imagine the infinity of possibilities from which something like the mind can emerge. It allows us to gauge and intuit our distance from an answer, and push us to ask how the question should be asked, when the artist Larry Johnson's psychoanalytically inflected joke, cited in the epigraph, shifts the question from reference, not to structure, but to motive and interpersonal, spatial, interaction. For that we need philosophy, and art is philosophy.

Grinnan does not purport to be making science, fully understand it, apply it, or translate its content for the viewer. Her terminology in this case is incredibly precise, the key verb being "to traffic":

Science is one of many lenses that I traffic through in order to conceptualize and spatialize my work, but I'm not interested in a scientific or analytic approach when it comes to making. I don't want to explain something or give an answer, although there is a rigor in the way the structures are organized.<sup>vii</sup>

*5 seconds of Dreaming* is both an independent sculpture, and also a model for a future stringed instrument. As I imagine it from Grinnan's description, it will make sensual, or shall I say *kinesthensual*, the ways in which one form translated into another. Information becoming something other than what it formally was, allows us to sense by other means what happens to it as it is filtered through layers of mediation.

In the first stage of the project an image was generated not by mediating visual data, but rather from the activation of spatial thinking in the sleeping subject.

In November 2015, Katie Grinnan was hooked up to a 64 channel EEG device at the lab of Dr. Jose L. Contreras-Vidal, director of the laboratory for noninvasive brain-machine interface systems at the University of Houston in Texas to conduct a sleep study, a task that was atypical of the studies done at the lab. In *5 seconds of Dreaming*, five seconds of the electrical waves or delta brainwaves are extracted from an eight hour stream of data. In this miniscule data set, it shows that the visual centers have minimal activity while the channels displaying spatial thinking, motion, and planning are high according to Anastasiya Kopteva and Jesus Cruz-Garza at the lab.<sup>viii</sup>

Grinnan considers the work to be a response to a photo problem. Indeed, it essentially visualizes a recording, and as such can be thought of as a photograph of her mind. She cites Vilém Flusser as an important reference. His critique of the photographic apparatus can be applied to the ways in which *5 seconds of Dreaming* disrupts our blind belief in the ability of the data to convey information.

Nature as a whole is a system in which information disintegrates progressively according to the second law of thermodynamics. Human beings struggle against this natural entropy not only by receiving information but also storing and passing it on—in this respect they differ from other forms of life—and also by deliberately creating information. This specifically human and at the same time unnatural ability is called 'mind', and culture is its result, i.e. improbably formed, informed objects.<sup>ix</sup>

Photography, Flusser warns, can easily turn into magic, which he defines as the eternal reoccurrence of the same. When used uncritically photography is

dominated by the apparatus. Repeating the illusion that images are states of things, they become screens that obscure how discourses have been programmed into the apparatus, which turns the table on human freedom, now subordinated to a world of images, and where the apparatus controls the maker, the latter being a mere functionary, not an active agent. The right way to use photography is to trick it into working against itself.

Flusser identifies photography as a most important human invention, second only to writing. His description of the image, apparatus, program, and code applicable to other apparatuses, the computer, state, and market (the examples he cites). Deliberately avoiding previous literature and keeping references to a minimum for the sake of a ground-up focused study on the subject, ideas nevertheless reverberate through, for example, Lacan's emphasis work on how language shapes our mental and intellectual parameters is a major precedent.<sup>x</sup> In Flusser's schema we know the world and ourselves through the domination of images. He sees the philosophy of photography as the only revolution available to us, a conclusion with which I, as a matter of fact, disagree. Nevertheless, Flusser's piercing definitions are tools for the critique of critique (and perhaps for a critique of programmed forms of organizing or activism, some of which desperately need a philosophy of photography, since they too approach images as if they are transparent, inadvertently perpetuating sameness and myth). Grinnan's "wrong" use of science, photography, and information, cuts across the automated application of all many typologies of technology. It now helps me cut against my own received conventions.

As a student at UCLA circa 2001, at a lecture by Stan Douglas, whose work and writing I adore and respect tremendously, the artist made a statement that was absorbed right into the fabric of my intellectual constitution. He said: "art and science make knowledge, design and technology make effects." It was a distinction I swore by for many years, until Grinnan's work undid my certitude. Some of the brain interface technologies Grinnan has employed are technological. They help disabled people walk. That is not mere effect but a true and good use. What would be wrong is to apply such gifts towards profit, to rob all those who need them of the right to common knowledge and advancement of humanity as a whole. Putting research to unconventional use, employing technology not as intended Grinnan's work woke me from the illusion that a letter to Netflix can be information. According to Flusser's glossary of terms, which appears as the outcome of his categorical analysis, "Information" is: "an improbable combination of elements," and "to Inform" is: "1. create improbable combinations of elements; 2. Imprint them upon objects."<sup>xi</sup> My limp e-activism could not be defined entirely as "information." Aspects of it were probable; it mostly reiterated the state of things. The language of the apparatus programmed it. For Flusser, an actual

photographer (as opposed to the functionary who merely activates the apparatus) is: "a person who attempts to place, within the image, information that is not predicted within the program of the camera." Perhaps the brain is the apparatus, perhaps the mind the photographer. Let us all find a way to make photographs now!

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<sup>i</sup> Personal communication with the artist (circa 2000).

<sup>ii</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Mind/Body Problem: Robert Morris is Series," in *Robert Morris: the Mind Body Problem* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1994): 2-17

<sup>iii</sup> Special thanks are due to Neuro-biologist Dr. Rafael Levi for consulting on this article. Dr. Levi has published in various scientific journals on the topics of electrophysiology, system and cellular neuroscience, neural networks, and non-linear dynamics. He has collaborated on a range of projects with physicists, mathematicians, computer and informational scientists and other biologists.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://printcenter.org/100/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Grinnan-PR.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Personal correspondence with the author, Nov 30, 2016,

<sup>vi</sup> Van Gulick, Robert, "Consciousness", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/consciousness/>. This encyclopedia entry summarizes key philosophical and scientific approaches to the question of consciousness.

<sup>vii</sup> Interview with Ragen Moss

<sup>viii</sup> Katie Grinnan, *Artist Statement* for the exhibition *Ours is a City of Writers*, The Los Angeles Municipal art Gallery, February 5-March 26, 2017.

<sup>ix</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007 [originally published in 1983]): 49.

<sup>x</sup> Krauss's essay on Robert Morris chronicles his use of language at the paradoxical conversion of between analytic philosophy's linguistic propositions and embodied somatic experience.

<sup>xi</sup> 84