

Sony debuted its first AIBO robotic dogs in the late-nineties, and since then, the company has released new models about every decade or so. AIBOs are designed to gratify their owners with a highlight reel of dog-actions, all of the most quintessentially dog-like things (at least those that are mentionable in polite company). They bark, sit, nuzzle, and even workout in response to voice commands and facial detection. Owners of the dogs often report surprise at the responsiveness and apparent vitality of the dogs, and Sony itself has advertised them as possessing “real emotion and instinct.” By cataloguing and differentiating between sensory inputs, the dogs are able to identify individual humans and therefore, establish different relationships with each.

In a recent conversation, Keil offered to me that his interest in objects and artworks is based in their fluidity — not as “one manifestation of something, but as different possible narratives. All these strings that come together.” This interest might also characterize the work’s sculptural attitude. If objects are defined, in part, by how we relate to them, Keil’s interventions tend to blur those lines of definition, eschewing the knowable whole for scatterings of un-summable qualities. They put the viewer in the much more tenuous position of having to find a relationship to the object, and the work, while stepping outside the familiarity of roles and cues they already recognize.

Maybe it’s somewhere along these lines that the artificial, interspecies relationship promised by robot dogs begins to pose itself as fertile territory for Keil’s inquiry. Because isn’t there always a degree of unknowability, even ignorance, in whatever relationship people assume themselves to have with their pets, robotic or not? For me, that unknowability starts to remind me of Keil’s work when I start to think about how there might be value in the gap. The theorist Eve Sedgwick first helped me to see how such misunderstandings are potentially instructive. Sedgwick describes what happens every time she tries to draw her cat’s attention to something by pointing at it: “I point at the thing I want her to look at, and she, roused to curiosity, fixes her attention on the tip of my extended finger and begins to explore it with delicate sniffs.” Sedgwick is clear that there’s a misunderstanding happening in the mistaking of the referent (the object indicated) for the sign (the finger itself), but not only that. What kind of a shift in understanding would you need to locate meaning—learning—happening anyway in the near-miss? This seems to me to be exactly the kind of attitude Keil’s work asks of its viewers.

Keil’s DIY, motor-controlled AIBOs, which he has installed in the interiors of cars parked inconspicuously in public spaces around Munich, make room for open-

ended responses by performing as abstractions of the originals. The project zeros in not on the AIBO's AI technology, but on the physical mechanisms that produce its gestures — sitting, fetching, sniffing, and so on. A key component of this is the stepper motor, a basic and ubiquitous piece of technology used in anything from computer printers to camera lenses. Stepper motors are able to divide a rotation of movement into a number of equal steps with the ability to pause at any point. Reduced to gesture alone, Keil's "dogs" speak to viewers through varied qualities of motion, rhythm, and sound as they collide with the cars' interiors. The perfect, cyclical regularity of the stepper motor becomes the impetus of a seemingly random series of movements set in a wider field of contingencies — the cars' materiality, the soundscape of the city, the weather, the curiosity and receptivity of the viewer — that accrue into a kind of Fluxus-like happening. Relating to the ensemble means risking, or maybe even inviting, a near-miss.

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