A Thesis Presented to

The Faculty of Alfred University

“Our Soul is Made of Tiny Robots!”

by

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Throughout history humankind has created machines to mimic nature. As a result, it is possible to connect our relationship with our genes to a machine's relationship with us. We are the programmers of machines in the same way that our genes are "programmers" of us. Both simply determine initial settings, then relinquish control.[1]

With this in mind, how do existing "settings" within our brains affect the more traditionally considered "metaphysical" aspects of our mind? Are these exempt from an empirical world view, or are they only another facet of it? It seems ungrounded to adhere to most theistic faiths (metaphysics expressed as spirituality) in a time when an increasing number of people have access to scientific discoveries. However, does our enthusiasm over scientific advances point to the idea that there is nothing in the universe which is worthy of reverence? In my Senior Thesis, I allow the viewer to consider what these questions reveal about the nature of human freedom. To do this my strategies are the manipulation of elements of the gallery space and its light, interactivity and the viewer's experience of time.

This essay will connect those previous considerations to each other, and will form relationships between concepts and their application in my body of work entitled *My Soul is Made of Tiny Robots*[2].

In recent times, there has been more specific research seeking why, exactly, humans are pre-inclined to spirituality. Scientists may have discovered the set of genes which are responsible for spirituality in humans. Spirituality here, refers to the more universal inclination of humans to gravitate towards acknowledging an existence

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[1]Dawkins, Richard. "Selfish Genes and Selfish Memes." In *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

[2]Dennett Paraphrase of a headline written about a lecture of his in Italy.

beyond the physical. In theory, these genes may be common across the world because genes may give humans an innate sense of optimism. In turn, optimism has been known to be an important part of good health- it helps with healing and recovery time and keeps people believing that life is important even though death is inevitable. All of those traits give the person great survival advantages which allow her to procreate and pass on her genes.

If genes are our hardware, then memes are our software. Memes are customs and behaviors which are passed through a culture via interaction between people. Scientific theory points to religion as a cultural meme (versus a genetic trait) which manifests itself very differently within various cultures. But as we learn more about the way the universe works, there becomes less reason to believe in a mystical world view. In other words, we have the option to reinvent our cultural memes the more we understand our tendency towards "believing."[3] The more that we understand the way the laws of nature work, the more we are able to counter our innate behavior as we choose based on long term trial and thought. Our understanding is constantly in flux, and it's the artist's role to keep our minds open to this fact.

My previous works create interactive scenarios. The viewer encounters a simple machine performing a task which is reminiscent of an automatic or social function within the human body. It shows the social and the automatic parts of a person to be coming from a similar place. Despite only having one task to perform, they all contain clues which hint at a profile or personality that each of the works potentially possesses. These personalities imply the presence of holistic and reductionist explanations in the analysis

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[3]Hamer, Dean H. *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes*. New York, New York: Anchor Books, 2005.

of an individual socially-inclined person. There is the materialist view of a person full of parts with no intentions, and the person as a whole who constantly acts with intent. The former is often denied or at least less considered on a daily basis.

As the year progressed, I decided that I wanted to take my work in a direction which was a bit more ambiguous. My installation *120/70* became a more removed version of this idea of a glorification of automatic processes which keep a human body alive. The installation is an amorphous bubble wrap form of roughly twelve feet which maintains a rhythm of inflation and deflation via two box fans- one to push air in, and one to push air out. Inside the hollow of the form is a grounded spiral of neon-filled glass of approximately two feet, along with approximately fifty white balloons. The form is additionally lit from the front with two small lights in order to create projections on the wall and to highlight the surface of the material, making the space an immersive experience. I chose to add balloons as a dual reference to air molecules as they are in motion inside the lungs, and as a method of containing actual human breath inside the form. This metaphorically addresses the holistic and the reduced view of breath, both as a whole and at the level of individual molecules of breath. I use bubble wrap as a material since the piece is influenced by the process of breathing, and bubble wrap is full of air sacs in a way which is reminiscent of lungs.

The piece that culminates the series *My Soul is Made of Tiny Robots* is entitled- *Real Life Simulation in Which You Are:*

a.) Bystanding

b.) Pleased

c.) Lukewarm

d.) Wrathful

The installation is a field of dried hare's tail grass which is formed by each piece of grass being placed one inch apart across an eight by four expanse of gridded styrofoam. Along the edge of the “field” are twelve box fans which are connected to a breath sensor located on the opposite side of the field. Each row of fans is activated as the person blowing on the sensor hits a new wind speed threshold. The speed of the air blowing on the grass increases the harder that the person blows on the sensor. The grid allows the viewer to measure the distance that the grass moves as it is affected by the air from the fans.

Plan for installation

Real Life Simulation... compares a process in the human body to a similar action which takes place in nature- one is a result of intention, the other is unintended. While *120/70* makes a small process larger in scale or compares it to a larger animal which completes the same process.

There is also a poetic quality to the work with the addition of grass which is tied in to our capacity for being able to abstract and manipulate our environment

symbolically.[4] Wind through a grassy field is a common sort of symbolism which crosses cultures as one that can spark a wide range of emotional responses within people, from dark, to peaceful or as a sign of higher purpose. In this case, the symbolic imagery is coming from lifeless or mechanical parts- which may or may not alter the meaning of the symbolism depending on the person. It's also important to note that each grass was individually planted in the grid as a reference to humankind's attempts to physically alter the natural world. Maybe what is important is the pattern over the matter[5]- and one can find something interesting in air moving through grass as a poetic pattern rather than as something specific to a certain setting. On the other hand, there is an eerie level of control present in the work- adding a dark aspect to the work.

Real Life Simulation... leads the viewer into a new vantage point in which he/she is made into a sort of god figure who can choose to send a breeze or a strong gust through the field according to his/her lung capacity. This interpretation is more humorous in the sense that it pokes fun at a theistic god who expresses wrath in terms of natural disasters and the likes. It finds humor in a creator of the universe who acts unabashedly human. It is also making fun of humankind's futile obsession with controlling nature- therefore making ourselves out to be a savior and destroyer of a world which existed long before us. The piece can also be read as an homage to Pantheists texts- which state that everything is god in the sense that science explains to us how god works, and how important it is to understand the mechanics which give way

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[4]Mumford, Lewis. *Art and Technics*. New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1952.

[5]Hofstadter, Douglas R. "The Turing Test: A Coffeehouse Conversation." In *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

to our actions.[6] These texts express that being in touch with the way the world works could be a key to happiness in life. Spinoza's *Ethics* is a text which is very much a result of its time, as it was written during the scientific revolution. His contemporaries were some of the greatest scientific minds in history. With new scientific discoveries came a call for a new way of interpreting the world and how the different kinds of mindsets affect our lives.

Real Life Simulation also points out the choice that the operator of the piece has to either blow onto the pinwheel to start the fans or not, though the “blowing onto a pinwheel” meme is one which most people are familiar with, or maybe do automatically.

Through *Real Life Simulation...* I attempt to transport the viewer by creating an interactive situation of which the viewer is only somewhat in control. This real life simulation allows the viewer to access basic information about the limited situation, and they can draw what conclusions they want from it. An emotionally-charged environment is created from mechanical parts, and anyone can be in control of what happens. The viewer may be lead to gather a new perspective on how science reveals poetry within ourselves and within nature. Yet at the same time she may realize that attempts to control the natural world are in vain- that there is significantly more that we do not understand about the universe compared to what we do know. The world view that my work expresses implies that our emotions are a holistic manifestation of reduced and “robotic” pieces. This world view allows us to question reasons for why we do many things, such as the acceptance of cultural memes. It's important to understand human behavior, so as to not fall victim to traps which dictate our behavior and limit our

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[6] Bennett, Jonathan. *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Pub., 1984.

freedom. I hope to show that a scientific world view is worthy of reverence because it points to the expressiveness of a materialist world of which we are a part. We are not god, and we are not created by one- but perhaps the way the world and universe unfolds can be that to which we give our ultimate respect and care.

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