CONNECT AND RUPTURE

Jesse McLean on *See a Dog, Hear a Dog*

ELI HORWATT

Jesse McLean's videos are an anthropological vantage on modern media—weaving together original footage with material culled from the web, reality television, Hollywood cinema, home movies, and texts appropriated from sources as banal as *Us Weekly* and as erudite as Alan Turing. As a collagist of remarkably heterogeneous material, she is at once idiosyncratic and egalitarian. Investigating the affective qualities of media with the acuity of a detective, her perspicaciously constructed works produce startling effects, magnifying the manipulative emotional responses we have to a song or piece of footage, while simultaneously pulling back to reveal an apparatus we are powerless to resist. She has carved out a truly singular practice amidst an increasingly procrustean landscape of experimental cinema.

McLean's latest work, *See a Dog, Hear a Dog* (2016), premiered at the 2016 New York Film Festival, where it screened on the first program of the Projections sidebar, "The Spaces Between the Words." A thematic and stylistic pivot from her investigations of media and affect in such works as *I'm in Pittsburgh and It's Raining* (2015), *Just Like Us* (2014), and *The Invisible World* (2012), McLean's latest piece interrogates a more fundamental aspect of human communication.[1] Through a series of sequences depicting interactions between human and non-human interlocutors, *See a Dog, Hear a Dog* unravels a spate of failures and uncanny successes at connection. Like McLean's other videos, the variety of subjects and materials included are wide-ranging: dogs, early computers, robots of assorted variety, text to speech programs, iTunes music visualizations, and A.I. programs. In a manner that differs from some of McLean's earlier work, however, the legibility and linearity of *See a Dog, Hear a Dog* is punctuated with explosions of densely-layered associative montages that McLean employs in conscious "rupture strategies." An undeniable observation emerges from these collaged scenes: human beings have a powerful need to communicate with nonhumans, despite the inevitable failures entailed by such efforts.

This insight comes through in several segments depicting McLean's typed exchange with ELIZA: a language processing computer program developed by Joseph Weizenbaum in MIT's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory in 1964. Effectively the first chatbot, ELIZA can perform several programmed scripts, the most famous of which, "DOCTOR," simulates a Rogerian psychotherapist by asking simple questions and rephraseing certain responses. When Weizenbaum introduced ELIZA to his secretary, she famously asked him to leave the room for privacy. But McLean's attempts at genuine communication with ELIZA are thwarted, as simple questions ("Are you a dog or a cat person?") reveal the program's restructuring of words. Never mind when McLean explains the Apollonian and Dionysian understanding of the origins of music—ELIZA is helpless to understand.

Conversely, the dog, a nonhuman entity with which we enjoy a certain superficial level of communication, is scrutinized by McLean's video on its most anthropomorphized terms. The video prominently features a Basenji (a svelte, compact dog) that

1 More curious readers would do well to consult Brett Kashmere's perceptive and probative interview with McLean for further insights into her earlier works. See: Kashmere, "You've Got to Look into the Light: An Interview with Jesse McLean," *INCITE: Journal of Experimental Media* <http://www.incite-online.net/mclean.html>

OPPOSITE Jesse McLean, *See a Dog, Hear a Dog* (2014), frame enlargement. All images courtesy the artist.

is able to paw atop a piano and howl to the discordant tones, or to appear genuinely moved as it sings along to the theme of *Braveheart* (1995). In these moments, an uncanny sense of the animal's sentience is on full display—a feeling that prompted an audible response from the audience at Projections, which elicited what the filmmaker Roger Beebe characterized ironically as a Pavlovian response. This audible reflex ("awww!") itself portends the thirst to be connected to the nonhuman.

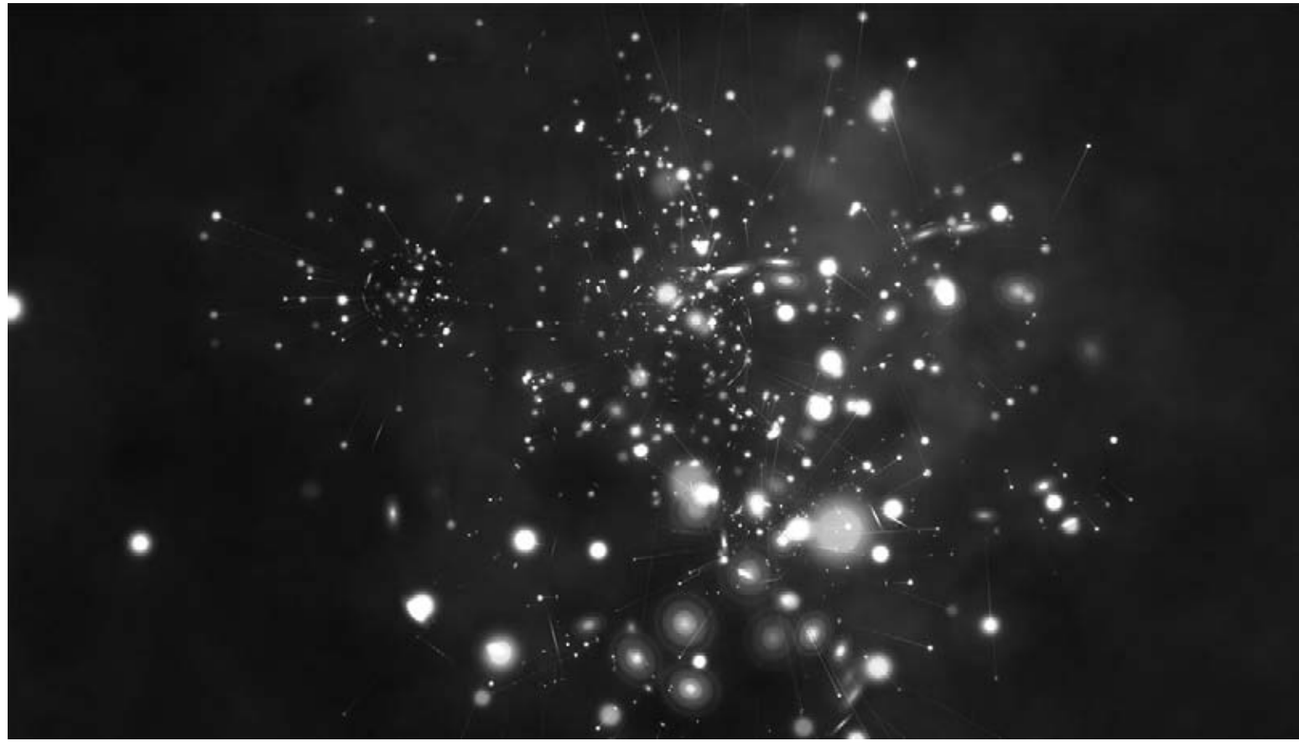
This interview was conducted via email over the course of several weeks in November and December 2016.

ELI HORWATT: Your latest video makes very productive use of juxtaposing how human beings anthropomorphize computers and animals. Could you talk about how these two concepts became linked for you, and how you amassed the material you use?

JESSE MCLEAN: The connection began with the title of the film, "see a dog, hear a dog." I encountered this phrase in a book about sound design for film. It related to the idea that what you see onscreen is also what you are hearing, how aural and visual information are believably linked in the viewer. Sound design is highly deceptive, though, and much of what we hear is a construction in postproduction. We may be seeing an image and hearing ambience from an entirely different part of the world. This ability of ours as viewers/listeners, to put it together and make meaning, fascinates me. But I'm equally fascinated by the construction and the fragility of the connection. Previous work has been concerned with the emotional relationships people form through experiences with media objects, and this piece feels like a continuation of that interest with more purposeful ruptures strategies.

We want to communicate not only with each other but with nonhuman animals and other conscious beings, but the way we experience the world is anthropocentric. We understand these kind of nonhuman connections on human terms, so there's a level of the unknown and a lot of trust. I related this to the trust we place in the cinematic image/sound relationship, the fragility built into the whole endeavor of communication. Some people find the idea of a sentient, communicative machine inevitable and exciting, some find it nightmarish. People talk to inanimate objects all the time, but it is experienced as a one-sided conversation. With animals, it's different as they obviously are conscious beings, but still, it's a connection reliant on trust and a level of uncertainty. Humans most likely communicate far more than they realize to animals, and vice versa. Perhaps with objects it's the same…

In terms of amassing material, I knew this piece would employ computer aesthetics as I wanted the computer to be both a technologic portal and a character(s). Given the anthropocentric lens, humans had to be heard and seen, trying to communicate with both each other and the viewer. The dog images/footage



Jesse McLean, *See a Dog, Hear a Dog* (2014), frame enlargements.

throw the piece off track in terms of a tidier thesis but also open it up to encounters that are more accessible and perhaps more troubling. The YouTube dogs singing and playing piano seem to be emotionally affected in a way that is astounding, funny, but which also reinforces our human desires for them to be like us. The significant image of the film for me is the handprint on the computer screen. It is emblematic of the limits of desire and the screen as a both portal and barrier.

EH: You mentioned that this film specifically dialogues with the work of Arthur Lipsett. Could you expand on his influence?

JM: When I mentioned rupture strategies, I was thinking of the montage sequences that occur throughout the film. I'm using these to break the connection to the viewer, to evidence the construction of the film. To disrupt, more plainly. These sequences, in particular the opening montage, are heavily influenced by Lipsett. I find his montage work to be continuously inspirational. It evidences how much meaning can be generated from the combination and collision of disparate images and sounds. The meaning is created not only in the immediate relationships between sources (being atop or next to one another), but in how these edits are combined to serve a greater whole, develop a thesis, or engage the viewer in an intuitive way. The complexity of his work is astounding. I love the intense start to *Very Nice, Very Nice* (1961), a nice breeze over the title card and we're off! I wanted to try something similar, to take the ground out from under the viewer immediately.

EH: How does your process of mixing found footage with original material unfold? What segments were shot, and how were you working with your actors?

JM: It's an intuitive process, in general, but I try to balance space for invention with my desire for control. I build in this space for invention and improvisation because I can be quite microscopic when editing. Also, I appreciate a certain messiness in cinema, and a hybridity of form and content.

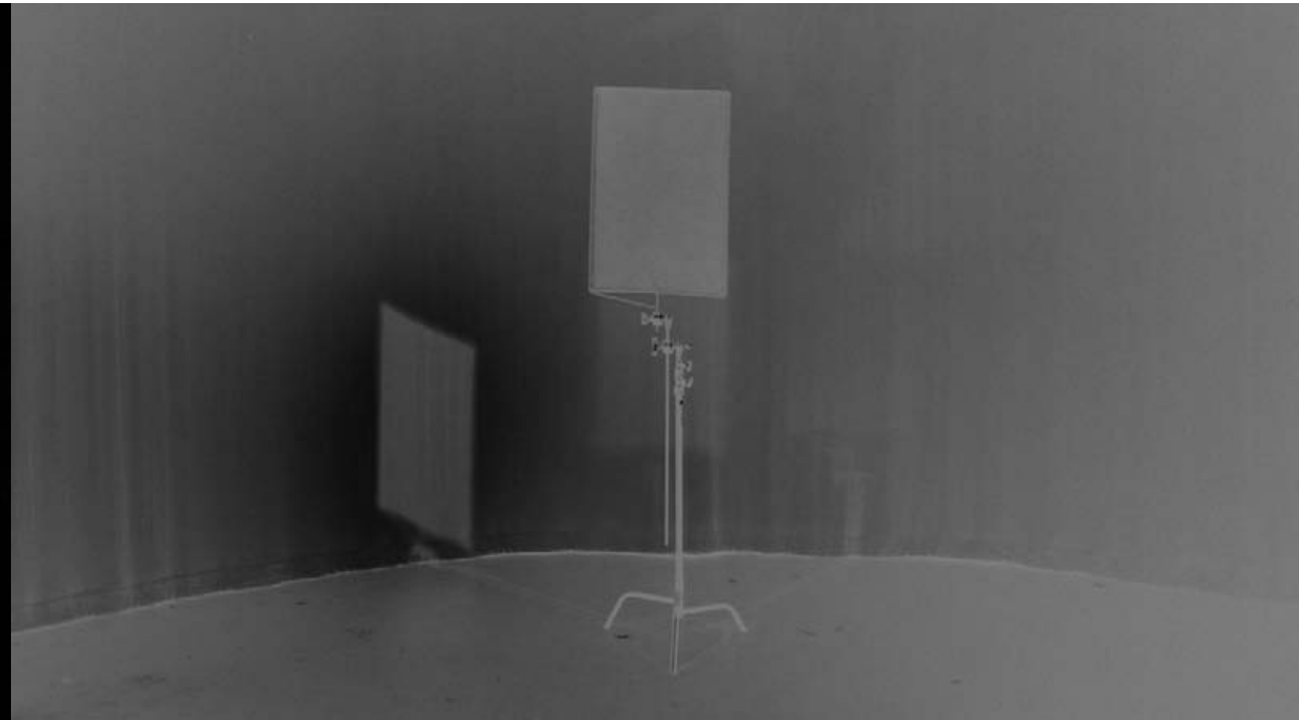
When I am looking for appropriated material, I almost always have a well-formed idea of what I would like, but I let the material speak to me and see how it presents itself. There are lots of discoveries and it feels improvisational, uncertain and open. When I'm working with performers I have more control and direction, but there are surprises there, too, and improvisation is also welcomed in this process. In this piece, I directed the man to be more insistent and gregarious. The woman was directed to be more skeptical, a little wary. For the voice-over performances, it was the reverse. The woman is more outgoing and the man is dubious, critical even. Although later, his is the voice pleading for connection (he delivers the line, "is there anybody out there?")

Determining which material is "original" and which is found is complicated. All the computer aesthetic materials (the flurry, the text-based conversations, the iTunes visualizer sequences) were generated specifically for this film, so they aren't "found" but are obviously coded images. Some of this footage is recorded off the screen and some is screen-captured. I filmed the computer lab footage and the scenes of the reddish dog that opens the film and the brown dog that closes it. My talented collaborator, Mike Gibisser, filmed the two people seen in close-up. Everything else is either from my own archive, books, online image banks or YouTube.

EH: Could you expand on this idea of rupture strategies? I was particularly struck by how images that convey the uncanny valley appear in close proximity to a sequence in which a Basenji howls along to the soundtrack to *Braveheart*.

JM: I don't use montage to speed up time, but rather to disrupt it. Montage works to both construct and deconstruct meaning through collisions of clips, but also, in a larger framework, montages interrupt linearity, introduce new rhythms, and offer complexity. In this piece, there *are* contemplative sections where

Jesse McLean, *I'm in Pittsburgh and It's Raining* (2015), frame enlargements.



Jesse McLean, *Just Like Us* (2014), frame enlargements.

the film is extending itself towards the viewer. I wanted that kind of communicative effort, but knew I would disrupt it, too, by using chaotic montages that close this down, or rupture it.

These montages are also a chance to add content and emotional value. The last montage is less disruptive and percussive; it's crooning and tragic. The edit was built around the video of the Basenji performing the *Braveheart* theme song. The quality of the dog's performance recants the idea that animals can't think or feel, because here is this animal singing, and greatly affected by the music.

Even though this montage is less percussive, I'm still using some rupture strategies to interrupt the performance. The raw clip carries a lot of affective power, but I wanted this to become a true catharsis, painful at times, and a journey. The frustration and fear of computers, the empathy towards non-sentient machines, the control we exercise over animals, with both success and failure, is all here. The montage is a wild mix of melancholy, rage and empathy.

EH: The conversations with ELIZA are particularly striking. There is a powerful longing for connection in these segments that is both touching and frustrating. Could you expand on this research and how you devised your "scenes" with ELIZA?

JM: I am interested in computer history, especially precursors to artificial intelligence, and the ELIZA story taps into complicated human desires and longing for reassurance, or just someone/thing to listen. Users know they are communicating with a computer program, but it is strangely addictive nonetheless. Perhaps that is my interest, in how little it can take to talk to us, and how willing

we are to connect. I'll admit my own conversations with ELIZA went on longer than I thought they would while making this piece, but I'll also tell you that we haven't chatted lately.

I was initially considering using chatbots instead of ELIZA, or the kinds of programs that successfully fool people into thinking they are communicating with another human. So in the first ELIZA scene, I hoped it might seem like it was a chat between two people, before the responses become too odd or ill-timed to be human (ELIZA responds immediately, she is not contemplative). I thought of ELIZA as a text form of the iTunes visualizer and the computer music; all of these iterations were used to shape my computer protagonist, which isn't limited to one form.

This might be clearer in the second ELIZA scene, which was an opportunity for me to introduce other content, specifically R. Murray Schafer's writing on the conflicting Apollonian and Dionysian theories of how music is produced (the former credits the sonic properties of material instruments, the latter chooses human emotion). These are central ideas in this piece: the arguments that machines and animals can or can't think, feel, or create music. The user is telling ELIZA about these theories, and then the computer protagonist refutes some of these claims by playing its own music in the following scene, music that undoes or complicates both theories.

The last scene is from both the perspective of this computer protagonist and the user. By this point the user is more desperate/frustrated. But the timing of questions/responses has become more widely spaced, so it's harder to tell who is who. This resonates with the surprise outcome of Weizenbaum's invention: how it is both comforting and limiting to have ourselves reflected back at us.

EH: Would you characterize *See a Dog, Hear a Dog* as a pivot in your work, despite reflecting some of your enduring interests? I got the impression that a significant amount of historical research was unfolding before me. What was the research process like, and did it differ from other videos?

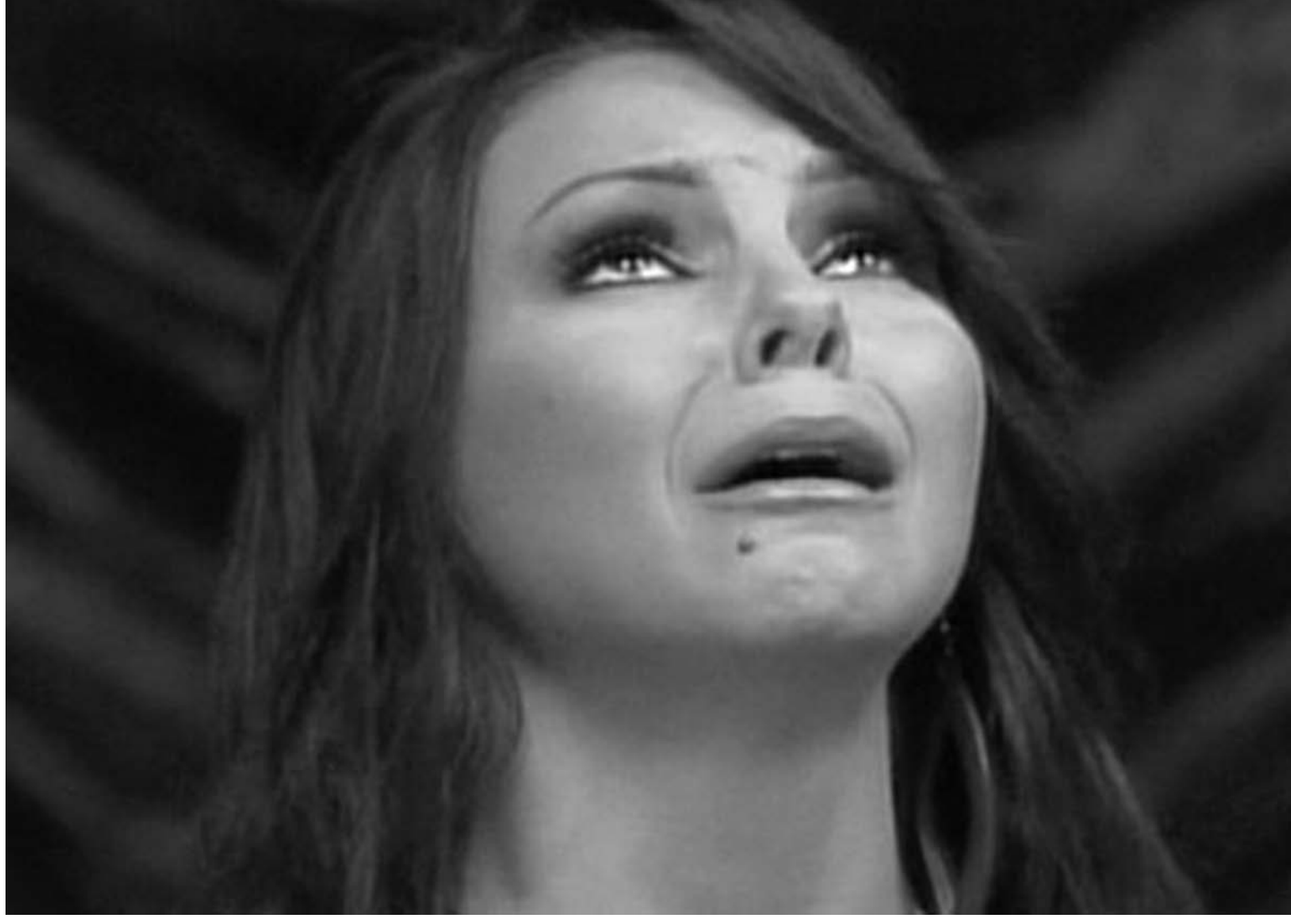
JM: My research was more targeted for this piece, and concerned subjects I was already invested in. So it was less discovery than finding pathways of connection between the concepts and sources, and continuing to learn about the difficulties of any form of communication. Hopefully the pivot is that I'm getting better at striking a balance between my desire for density and the need for some clarity, so that my viewer can wade through my collages and trust that they're headed somewhere.

This piece does signal the start of a new body of work that is broadly concerned with people's relationships to computers. Perhaps this is a pivot, too, because I'm engaging the technology more obviously. This work continues my interest in mediated experiences, but the technology which enables these experiences has become a more visible character. I'm less interested in binaries of object/subject or media/viewer or passive/active; I want to include the in-betweenness and consider the role of the interface.

EH: This new body of work would be particularly timely. There appears to be a resurgence of films examining the agency of robots. Remakes of *Westworld* (1973), *Blade Runner* (1982), not to mention *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Her* (2013) seem to portend a deep desire for the cyborg with A.I., as well as a revulsion by its power, and some kind of guilt inextricably tied to notions of slavery and sexual exploitation. Is this just a product of technological acceleration right now? Or do you think other issues are at play?

JM: We are surrounded by robots and replicants, more so than ever since they are in the palm of our hand, but we have been heading towards an automated world for decades if not centuries. Our fascination with automation is very old. Right now, I think we are both frightened and fascinated by our innovations because everything does move so quickly. In the tech world, innovation is prioritized over all else, often with little thought or concern for how the outcome will affect communities or culture. There is a kind of attitude of, "we did it because we could."

There does seem to be a notable wariness of the effects of industrialization in popular culture right now. And this might have something to do with the realities of increased consumerism, the failures of global capitalism and climate change. We are ruining the environment that is hospitable to our species and literally replacing ourselves with machines. Imagine robots and replicants (because they are designed in our own image) as archetypes of the Anthropocene. Could they not also indicate the end of this era and the world as we know it, foreshadowing instead an automated world populated not with humans, but with our replacements?



Jesse McLean, *Somewhere Only We Know* (2009), frame enlargement.

EH: Is there anything you can share about any of the upcoming pieces?

JM: I'm working on a short video, titled *Wherever You Go, There We Are*, and it's really a travel film about correspondence. The dialogue is taken from spam emails (a reclamation of sorts), and the piece is an exploration of the oddity of this type of communication. Really it's pushing the idea that corporate culture doesn't just want to be an legal individual, but also a trustworthy friend. So it's a tragic comedy of sorts. It features a lot of great music by Thad Kellstadt and an amazing vocal performance by Carl Bogner.

This summer I filmed/recorded an interview with David Cope, the composer and computer scientist who designed the Emily Howell software that I used in *See a Dog, Hear a Dog*. I'm planning of making a portrait of him, possibly he and Emily if things work out like I hope they will in the edit room.

And I'm finally about to really start to produce *When It Rains, It Pours*, an experimental nonfiction project that has been in the works for years. This multi-chapter video essay will question how digital culture has created more fluid boundaries between private and public space and altered human behavior. Additionally, the piece will analyze how the effects of industrialization and increased consumerism, relentless technical innovation, and the rise of corporate culture threaten to catastrophically alter geographic space through climate change and depletion of natural resources. It's inspired by *Red Desert* (1964), by Michelangelo Antonioni.