

## Interview with Claudia Schmuckli

*Uncanny Valley, an ambitious exhibition at the de Young, examines human-machine interface as it shifts from its original meaning within the context of 1970s visions of literal androids into complex networks of algorithms and surveillance. In the words of Claudia Schmuckli, Curator-in-Charge of Contemporary Art and Programming at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the exhibition is meant to reflect us back to ourselves in the form of cryptic “statistical montages.” The show is sweeping both physically and intellectually, taking up emerging visual vocabularies of AI, data-mining, labor, and models of swarm intelligence. Deeply critical and engaged both with technology and the culture around it, Uncanny Valley offers a trenchant perspective on our current human-tech assemblages. I spoke with Schmuckli about the show’s background and inspiration, the changing metaphors for intelligence, and how the terms of the human are being redefined.*

**Monica Westin:** You’ve been living in San Francisco for three years now, and you seem to have been thinking about this show since you arrived.

**Claudia Schmuckli:** Yes, pretty much! At the time I moved here I was thinking more about how research within the field of artificial intelligence and artificial life might result in developments that we can’t yet imagine. This original line of thinking was very much inspired by the precarious conditions that we are facing environmentally—thinking about climate change and potential survivalist tools, as well as the rather distressing prospect of seeking refuge on other planets. How to confront this future was something that was very much in the forefront of my mind, and I thought there might be solutions within the intersection of artificial life and artificial intelligence, without knowing what they could or should be. That’s where my curiosity was a few years ago, and I started researching artists who were working at that intersection. But then the political reshuffling of the world, with elections increasingly influenced by operative forms of artificial intelligence—or social media, really—made me refocus on AI in its current operative forms rather than its speculative future.

Even before the 2016 presidential elections it was readily apparent that social media played a significant role within the political rearrangement of societies across the globe. I just kept thinking about why it was so effective. That was the jumping-off point for this exhibition: to understand “AI” as we know it now—I use AI with implicit quotation marks because, of course, what we’re talking about primarily are forms of machine learning, which in the public mind have become synonymous with AI. As I was trying to develop programmatic strategies for both institutions, the de Young and the Legion of Honor, that were grounded in each museum’s history and identity and collections and sites, including architecture, this exhibition was a project that was always on the horizon, but I knew it probably wouldn’t happen overnight because it needed research.

**MW:** It’s tempting to draw a parallel between the curatorial work that most people in San Francisco know you for, which are contemporary art exhibitions that intervene with the permanent collection at the Legion of Honor, and this exhibition as an intervention with San Francisco, Silicon Valley, and tech as you found it. Do you think any of the strategies cross over?

**CS:** That’s a really great way to think about it. I was very interested in this environment and in a critical unpacking of the cultural and economic conditions that define San Francisco, because it is such a unique and exciting but also highly problematic environment. It’s

unlike any other city in the United States at this particular moment. I was, and am, very interested in reflecting on the regional conditions and modalities that define this ecosystem, which is so particular. I did some of that in a very different way with the collection when I curated [Specters of Disruption](#) at the de Young: A collection presentation divided into five chapters that tried to draw out regional symptoms, defining characteristics of this area, in terms of nature, culture, technology, history, and art history. I was working with a historical collection and making it resonate in the present, and trying to unpack some of these questions that I had: “Where did I move to? What is this environment? What informs how it has been shaped and why?”

*Uncanny Valley* is definitely in line with that investigation...although one could argue that artificial intelligence, and the research and development of it, is certainly not limited to Silicon Valley. But it is still very much grounded in this area, even though we have seen “silicon alleys” springing up in different cities around the United States and around the globe, for example with China taking on an increasingly important role in the development of their own AI systems. But as we think of the future of AI we are still talking to a great extent about both the capital and the creative energy that resides here on the peninsula. So yes, the uncanny valley is also Silicon Valley. The show’s title implies that association without spelling it out.

**MW:** As someone who works on a large tech campus, I spend a lot of time noticing how the company I work for, Google, designs spaces to make things feel a certain way to its workers. How did you think about architecture, both at the tech campus and in the de Young, literally as well as in terms of tech infrastructure?

**CS:** Certain aspects of the de Young have an occasional visual blending of indoor and outdoor spaces, something that is very prevalent on tech campuses. [Zach Blas’ \*The Doors\*](#) deals with this quite explicitly. There is a culture of integrating an interior garden into the larger structure of a tech campus that is essential, it seems, to an understanding of labor and play, and the conflation thereof—or one might even say the inversion thereof, the positioning of labor as play and play as labor that is very much part of the corporate culture in the tech industry. And this embrace of fake nature—nature that is being incorporated into an architectural structure—prevents you from going out. The attempt to incorporate every necessary aspect of life within a tech company’s architectural space is fundamental to the erosion of the boundary of work and life that I’m interested in. That is very much at play in terms of how AI operates.

Zach’s work very specifically deals with these architectural components as it conflates the glass corridors of Silicon Valley with the Mojave Desert, including fake plants and nootropics in projects that address the indebtedness to 1960s counterculture, along with the reformulation of certain rituals and attitudes—which at the time were all geared towards opening your mind and enhancing your spiritual capacities—in view of basically creating a better and stronger labor force. So that’s why his piece both literally and metaphorically acts as the portal to the Uncanny Valley. This work is also the only one in the gallery where you actually can see an interior garden through glass, so it always had to be adjacent.

Outside there is [Pierre Huyghe’s \*Exomind \(Deep Water\)\*](#), which is the only sculpture that lives outdoors in the sculpture garden itself (unveiled when the bees have moved in in May). One of the things it offers is a metaphor for the externalization of an idea of intelligence that is not necessarily limited to an understanding of human intelligence. It asks questions about forms of intelligence, how we think about them and how we define them.

It also visualizes very concretely a tendency within the machine-learning world to model algorithms or forms of intelligences on natural processes. In the early 2000s there was a tsunami of natural metaphors for algorithms that were drawn from the animal world and that referenced forms of collective intelligence, and within that, primarily swarm intelligence, whether termites or bees or flocks of birds. It’s come under a bit of ridicule since because it was so predominant, but there are a couple of algorithms like these that

have proven to be very useful and applicable. Historically, there has been a tendency in the engineering world to think about and model artificial intelligence on natural forms of intelligence, and Huyghe's work speaks to that.

Agnieszka Kurant is the other artist who clearly speaks to that, with her [termite mounds](#). The show also includes her liquid crystal paintings, which operate like heat maps. They take stock of social energy from very particular sources, in this case an algorithm that tracks hashtag activity of different activist movements. The algorithm charts this activity and then translates it into liquid crystal movements that give you a sense of the social energy on the Internet. And then of course her termite mounds offer a nice segue into Simon Denny because it talks about artificial artificial intelligence (AAI) as a form of ghost labor that is hidden within the idea of the automaton—the Mechanical Turk in this case. And of course, the exploitative strategies behind it...

With Simon Denny—because you asked about the architecture of the cage—it's less about the architecture than the [Amazon cage](#) becoming a container for a sort of contemporary canary in a coal mine. The Thornbill cage becomes an elegy about the environmental costs of the digital economy, which when taken to the extreme, can lead to our demise. Of course, it also talks to the dehumanizing conditions of automated labor which also ties it back to exploitative platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk.

**MW:** When you were talking about artificial life at the beginning of our conversation, it made me think about the excitement around bioart that had a similar moment. Do you see *Uncanny Valley* as a historical moment, either in terms of the way that we're conceptualizing what it is and what it means, or even more literally? If I'm thinking about the uncanny valley in terms of the space between "I know this is a person" and "I know this isn't"—

**CS:** Which is the 1970s definition.

**MW:** Yes, exactly. Is tech going to get good enough, smooth enough, that there isn't any kind of uncanny valley, real or metaphorical? Is the uncanny valley a historical metaphor?

**CS:** I'm riffing on it as a historical term while trying to redefine it for the present. I took this phrase as a metaphorical point of departure because it allows for many associations: from the uncanny in the realm of aesthetics and the uncanny valley within technology to the valley as a geographical marker for Silicon Valley and the valley of gradient descent, a common optimizing algorithm. All these references are being meshed up and recombined in many ways in this exhibition. I've used it as a tool for thinking about our current reality.

The only work in the show that really addresses and embodies the uncanny valley as we know it from the '70s, which has dominated the representation of the machine-human relationship in the 20th century, is [Stephanie Dinkins' Bina48](#). The argument I'm making here is that AI is redefining the terms with which we relate to machines in general, and also redefining the terms with which we think and imagine this human-machine relationship, which through most of the 20th century has been defined by the concepts of the uncanny and the uncanny valley. If you think about the uncanny valley as we know it historically, it's about questions of resemblance, both physical and intellectual, and it happens in an experiential realm of looking and confronting a physical object, a humanoid robot or a thinking machine that mimics our intellectual capacities. Whereas I would argue that the contemporary uncanny valley, whose crevices and borders we're just now exploring and trying to understand, we're dealing with invisible mechanisms. These digital alter egos, what I call statistical montages that reflect a version of ourselves back to us, and whose exact compositions we cannot fully understand or grasp—

**MW:** Because it's all private intellectual property—

**CS:** Right! To return to your question about this being a historical moment: I would hesitate to call it that because I feel we're just at the beginning of something that we are only

starting to comprehend. This show has no ambition to be definitive in any way, shape, or form. Truly what it wants to do is ask a set of open-ended questions without claiming to have all the answers.

I obviously want to lay bare some of the conditions and mechanisms and more immediate consequences that we *can* see—that we are capable of at the moment. But fundamentally it's really a show that asks the philosophical question about what it means to be human in the age of AI: How are the terms of humanism being redefined? Are they actually being redefined? I'm not sure. As this kind of inquiry, it's not a closed circuit, though it certainly captures a moment in time in which we are starting to think about ourselves in the world in very different ways than we did in the 20th century.