AI, SLIME MOULDS, AND A VILLAGE DISCO.

A True-Enough Dialogue, as a Stage Script.

BASED ON A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MEDIA ARTIST **GEERT MUL** AND SOCIOLOGIST / PHILOSOPHER **SIRI BEERENDS**, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS, DECEMBER 2024.

Geert Mul, 2025.

Version XIII

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Artist Nicolaas and sociologist Sigrid engage in a dialogue about art, artificiality, and artificial intelligence.

They explore how AI transforms our desires, our choices, and our ways of seeing nature and knowledge.

Against the backdrop of a village disco, slime moulds as symbiotic intelligence, experimental AI, and a Judeo-Christian garden, Nicolaas and Sigrid examine technology, ethics, and the desire to no longer be human.

Scene 1: Now Everyone Knows What Time It Is

Scene 2: What We Eat, Whom We Date

Scene 3: Village Disco and Disneyland

Scene 4: The Luxury of a Philosophical Essay

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Nicolaas: artist, researcher, thoughtful and poetic

Sigrid: sociologist, philosopher, media critic, clear, committed

SCENE 1:

NOW EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT TIME IT IS

(Lights up. We see Sigrid and Nicolaas sitting.

Two chairs facing each other, a table between them.

Tea is ready.)

NICOLAAS

Thanks for the opportunity, Sigrid.
I came across your voice
in podcasts, and…
it was refreshing
to hear someone
I could recognize.
I'm researching a possible critique of AI,
and art is my entry point.

But art and AI –
that's not a given.
There's fear around AI.

SIGRID

What kind of fear do you mean?

NICOLAAS

A justified fear.
To name one,
AI models are built on data,
but intellectual property is absent.

SIGRID
(ironically, smiling)
Ah.. a detail,
but a crucial detail.
Yes… people are so impressed
by generative AI –
“Wow, look how smart it is!”

But it can only do what it does
because we’ve poured
everything into it.

As soon as a computer is involved,
we assume it’s magic.
And we forget how much human thinking
came before it.

NICOLAAS

Magic…
The machine
pretends
to be human.

That’s fascinated people
for as long
as machines have existed.

Because we cant help ourselves;
If it looks like a duck,
swims like a duck,
quacks like a duck…

But gradually
the distinction disappears.
Concepts blend together –
people, machines, technology.
Then it becomes… invisible.
Then it becomes culture.
Then we become the sum of it all..

SIGRID

(thoughtful)
Maybe…
But generative AI
goes further.
Every new technology
meets resistance first,
then familiarity.
AI is different.

NICOLAAS

What are
the core questions for you?

SIGRID

AI is:
statistics on steroids.

Hiring people?
Statistics.
Dating?
Statistics.
Art?
Statistics.

Everything is subjected
to pattern recognition,
calculation,
and efficiency.

AI optimizes
from narrow goals.
Short.
Fast.
Tight.

But that ideology of efficiency
is much older than AI.

Lewis Mumford already wrote about it – in 1967
humans building pyramids,
Are like cogs
in the grand cultural machine.

NICOLAAS

Yes! exactly.
Lewis Mumford
The Myth of The Machine !

I tell my art students
The ‘machine’ that built the pyramids
was not made by people,
But made of people,
language, math and culture –
not gears.

And our modern
meta-machines
are just the same.

Made of people,
with culture
as software.

SIGRID

But growth is not limitless.
“It’s always been this way.”
“We’ve always done it like this.”
That does not justify
what we are doing.
(thinks)

We have to search
for the mechanisms
that brought us here.
Because the price we pay now
is far too high.

Exhaustion of natural resources,
the climate crisis –
God… but we've grown so used to these words
they've lost all meaning.

NICOLAAS

"The end of the world"
is as ancient
as the world itself.

But the Anthropocene…
this time it is us
who bring the end.

SIRI

That..
Indeed, is something new.

So many species gone extinct.
And we can feel the heat..

Through the absolute mechanisation
of our worldview,
our view of nature…

As if nature
fits inside models.
We quantify biodiversity
Just to monetize it.

As if measuring everything
grants control…

NICOLAAS

As if control grants survival..

What gets lost?

SIGRID

Human interactions…
Species that don’t fit into taxonomy.

NICOLAAS

(excited)
Yes yes, slime moulds!
I did months of research
in Japan
on a fascinating Japanese thinker,
researcher, scientist.
Kumagusu Minakata.

Obsessed… with slime moulds.
We’re in Japan, early 1900’s

And slime moulds didn’t really fit..
into biological taxonomy
Not plant.
Not animal.
Not fungus.
Not mushroom.
Many forms.
Many genders…

And clever.
They navigate.. built efficient networks.

For Minakata,
they were intelligence.
Beyond human boxes.
they were arguably
the most interesting organisms
in the universe…
How come they did not fit biology?!

SIGRID

Definitely intriguing…
Capitalism measures

whatever suits its purpose.

Nitrogen.
Biodiversity.
We keep measuring.
And if the data doesn’t fit,
we measure differently.

As if we’re building paradise
with numbers
and AI.

NICOLAAS

And what kind of paradise is that?

SIGRID

I think mostly
the paradise
of tech companies.

A paradise
for some.
But not for me.

I take this very personally…
That’s why I critique it.

A LOUD SIREN SOUNDS OUTSIDE.

NICOLAAS’ PHONE ALSO BLARES AN ALARM. BUT SIGRID’S OLD NOKIA REMAINS SILENT.

SHE LOOKS ANNOYED AT NICOLAAS’ PHONE.

NICOLAAS

Oh shit.

The first Monday of the month.

12 noon…

(In the Netherlands, air-raid sirens are tested nationwide on the first Monday of each month at 12:00 noon, using both public outdoor sirens and mobile phone alerts, and are audible to everyone across the country.)

SIGRID

(smiling, ironically)

Now everyone knows what time it is…

Would you like some more tea?

Sigrid exits. Nicolaas stands, walks a few steps and looks out through an imaginary window. Lights go briefly to black.

SCENE 2:

WHAT WE EAT, WHO WE DATE.

(Light on. We see Sigrid and Nicolaas seated.

Two chairs facing each other, a table in between.

NICOLAAS

How do you position yourself in your own criticism?

SIGRID

I always mention that my criticism comes
from the world I want to live in.
It’s very personal.
Subjective…

NICOLAAS

(Smiling)
Ah. Subjective and personal.
That’s not unusual for an artist…
But in science…

SIGRID

(Interrupting)
I don’t really find it complicated either.
Everyone brings their preferences.
Be honest about it.
Don’t pretend you’re objective!

We can’t do that
as humans.

But feelings…
our desires…
have no place in science.

NICOLAAS

Yet it’s also a form of knowledge, isn’t it?

SIGRID

Exactly.
Nolan Gertz, my co-supervisor,
showed me
that technology also emerges
from our desires.

We are not
helpless victims.
Technology is not simply
‘done to us’.

People value privacy,
yet they give away their data.

Freedom is sacred,
but we’d rather let an algorithm decide
what we eat,
who we date.

NICOLAAS

(Smiling, ironically)
At least then you don’t bear the burden
of having to choose yourself.

SIGRID

According to media theory,
we make technology,
and technology makes us.

Maybe we should
explore that –
our reciprocity
with technology.
Instead of complaining
about bad media.

If we change ourselves,
tech changes too.

Right now we make technology
like a mold,
and then try to squeeze ourselves
into it.

NICOLAAS

Yes, I heard you say that before.
That’s important.

I see the software interface
as a metaphor
for our relationship
with a technological culture;

You have to do it
exactly by the manual,
or the world simply won’t work.

SIGRID

(Emphatically)
My PhD research is about
how we adapt to AI
and not the other way around.
How we shift
toward the machine.

But to get better technology,
or better tools,
you first need
a different kind of human.

Our desires
will have to change
fundamentally.

I don’t really believe
in “better technology”.
Technology alone
is too narrow for me.

Another economic system, for instance –
that’s such a tool.
But you don’t immediately think of that
when you think of technology.

NICOLAAS

(Pensively)
Uh, well… I do.

Even language is already technology.
So certainly –
a complete economic system.

I’m also looking for conditions,
prerequisites,
for such a different system.
What you call –
exploring reciprocity
with technology –
I fully understand.
It’s really applicable
as a strategy.

Even in an art
that doesn’t want
to be strategic…

(searching for words…)

I’m writing –
about the Judeo-Christian creation story.

The Garden of Eden,
a world without nature,
because everything was nature.

There stands
the tree of knowledge.
Where humans eat the fruit.

Then, according to the story,
their eyes open.
Here arises the human with knowledge,
the cultivated human
who must leave the garden,

sent by God.

Right there,
emerges the Western concept
of nature.

On one side –
the cultivated human.
On the other –
the garden, without humans, without culture.

That is the condition.
That must change.

SIGRID

While in many other cultures –
Japan, for example –
those…

NICOLAAS

(Enthusiastic)
Exactly!

With a different creation story,
you create a different nature.

Redefine nature,
and you redefine the human.

And that different human
creates different technology.

Not only Science…
Art is also a creation story…

SIGRID

I've also explored perspectives on nature:
Western capitalist-Christian,

Indigenous, and Confucian-Chinese.

But David Graeber shows:
even our view of ‘Indigenous’ is Western.
Hard to separate.
That discussion gets stuck
in polemics.

NICOLAAS

But culture is not
from ‘others’.
Culture is
from people.

You can navigate exoticism,
but not casually,
and never lightly.

The ‘East’ and the ‘West’
aren’t real things.
Roland Barthes wrote
in Empire of Signs,
so you cannot compare them.
But you can experience them.
And report on that.

(Sigrid takes a sip of tea,
Nicolaas continues speaking
passionately)

Kumagusu Minakata.
He connected in his work
Shinto,
Buddhism,
Japanese and Chinese knowledge,
and Western science.

And offered a radical alternative
to social Darwinism:
That so-called ‘natural order’,

based on competition,
on the right of the strongest –

A worldview
adopted by Japan.
But Minakata proposed
a different nature metaphor:

(Smiling)

The slime mold
as a model for civilization.

Symbiotic, transformative,
non-binary, emergent intelligence.

A way of attuning
not driven by struggle,
but by resonance and relationship.
Exploratory, but not passive.

Very humane, actually…

Through Minakata's eyes
I see Japanese nature.

Not my exotic gaze.
But his…

A LONG SILENCE, BROKEN BY SIGRID'S NOKIA: THE FAMOUS OLD NOKIA TONE.

SHE PICKS IT UP, GLANCES AT THE SCREEN, AND PUTS IT BACK DOWN.

SIGRID

(Pensively)

Some things can wait… others cannot.

SCENE 3:

VILLAGE DISCO AND DISNEYLAND

(Light on. We see Sigrid and Nicolaas seated.

Two chairs facing each other, a table in between.)

SIGRID

I read your exhibition invitation, by the way.
About your local AI experiments
in nature.

With pieces of forest floor,
moss,
plants…

And it reminded me of a project
we once did –
We wanted
to develop hyper-local tech.

We trained a single AI model
only

on photos
from one village disco.

Result?
Deformed heads.
But… the atmosphere?
Perfect.
Colors.
Light.

And the reactions:
“Bad AI” because
“the faces are wrong.”
They stayed stuck
in photorealism.

Whereas we had actually captured
that unique
elusive
‘sense of place’!

NICOLAAS

Ooo, that’s beautiful…

But yes, if it doesn’t meet the norm,
people quickly call it bad.

SIGRID

It reminded me of Weizenbaum,
Computer Power and Human Reason.
1970s already:

About the impossibility
of fully replicating a human
in a computer.

Think of ethics…

Now the media

almost every month claims:
Now a computer can
really think.

NICOLAAS

The question is:
do you want to define intelligence
separate from ethics?
I would say:
better not.
(Thinks)

New technology is always
evolution and revolution.
But criticism usually splits into two camps:

This is truly totally new.
Or
We've always done this.

But you must integrate both perspectives
in your criticism.
Otherwise, you completely miss
what is happening…

SIGRID

It's about how it coincides
with other societal processes.
That's what you must analyze critically.

NICOLAAS

How does your criticism find a place, Sigrid?
Do you do it because you cannot do otherwise?
Do you expect change?

SIGRID

At first
I was ridiculed.
“A sociologist talking about AI.”
But that has changed.
They ask me now.
Media, Parliament, Google, TikTok…
My criticism is heard.
But change doesn’t happen.
Sometimes I feel like an excuse-ethicist.
Awareness grows,
but power structures remain.

NICOLAAS

I’m a bit more optimistic.
I met you through the media.
You nuance my thinking.
That impact exists.

SIGRID

The greatest compliment
is when someone says:
“Now I can finally
put into words
what bothers me.”

But the desire
to no longer be human –
is also strong.

NICOLAAS

AI is an interface
with society.

Lose your phone –
you lose
your citizenship.

SIGRID

I still carry a Nokia.
Without internet.

But you're right:
the next step
is an AI-person
to whom you ask everything.

Simulating empathy
is not
having empathy.

That distinction
blurs.
That is
profound.

NICOLAAS

That's true…
but it's complicated.
If you want to separate simulation
from what is real.

According to Baudrillard,
it's not humans,
but media
that make reality.

And we believe Disneyland is fake,
so we can think
the rest of the world is real…

SIGRID

(Laughs)

And yet.
People are less manipulable
than is often thought.

You must already be affected
before you change your mind.
Social media alone
cause nothing.

They amplify,
they accelerate –
but they don’t create from nothing.

NICOLAAS

But with binary choices –
an election on the line –
a small margin
can decide everything.

And that margin
can be influenced.
With algorithms.
With social media.

No total control,
but still
decisive.

And that’s how
democratic states fall.
One by one.

I sometimes
get really desperate about it.

SIGRID

Social media push
people just over the line.
But under the surface
there are always deeper causes.

Lying dormant.
Not something you can just post.

NICOLAAS

Okay. Sorry.
I really have to
go now…
Where’s the toilet?

(Light off)

IN THE DARK, SIGRID SAYS: THERE, SECOND DOOR ON THE RIGHT…

SCENE 4, FINAL:

THE LUXURY OF A PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY.

(Light on. We see Sigrid and Nicolaas seated.

Two chairs facing each other, a table in between.)

NICOLAAS

For you, AI
is the newest chapter
in our drive to quantify?

SIGRID

Yes. My new paper
is exactly about that.

Our obsession
with AI.

The misunderstanding
that it solves our human
imperfection,
that it would fully understand us.
We are bad at dealing
with uncertainty.

But AI
offers a false answer.

NICOLAAS

Ooo… Yes… certainly.
You have to expose the cultural actors
who define AI.
That’s where power lies
that you can then counter.

SIGRID

AI eases
human burdens –

(Smiling)

I mean:
traits.

(Laughs)

Choosing,
incompleteness,
not knowing
who we are.

The urge to be relieved
of our own responsibility…
is strong.
Especially now
that existential threats
are increasing.

NICOLAAS

That…

SIGRID

…is always
a struggle.
Interviewers push
for flattened answers
you don’t want to give.
Media
is so different
from academia.

And academia
is again different
from the art world.

Out of twenty points
you leave nineteen aside.

That forces you
to clarify
what it’s really about.

In media
you don’t have the luxury
of a philosophical essay.

NICOLAAS

Exactly.

SIGRID

Otherwise everyone drops out.

NICOLAAS

But certain terms —
especially the terms

that can specify…
nuance –
you then
cannot use.

SIGRID

(Nods, laughs)
That's what keeps it interesting…

FINAL SCENE:

BOTH NICOLAAS'S AND SIGRID'S PHONES RING AT THE EXACT SAME TIME.

THE NOSTALGIC NOKIA TONE VERSUS A BUSINESSLIKE IPHONE RINGTONE.

THEY ANSWER, SAYING: "HELLO, THIS IS NICOLAAS / SIGRID."

THEY STAND UP AND WALK OFF THE STAGE,

TALKING, IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS.

LIGHTS OFF.

END.

SLIME MOLDS AND A VILLAGE DISCO –

A TRUE-ENOUGH DIALOGUE, AS A STAGE SCRIPT.

GEERT MUL 2025

Afterword:

On the initiative of Geert Mul, in December 2024 a conversation took place between sociologist, philosopher, and media critic Siri Beerends and artist and researcher Geert Mul. The theme of the discussion was: “Changes in the relationships between art, culture, nature, and the ‘self’ in the context of data-driven culture and AI.”

The conversation lasted 83 minutes and was recorded. Based on the audio file, a literal transcript was written. From this transcript, a ‘theatrical dialogue’ was created, also with the help of ChatGPT, in which the exchange of ideas took on a new, performative form. This text is thus the result of a personal exchange between two people and the application of an AI as a creative medium.

Mul has worked since 1990 as a media artist with generative digital media. His long-standing practice has taught him that meaningful interaction with generative technology is only possible when a human takes responsibility for what AI produces. Where that responsibility is lacking, the foundation for meaning is also lacking. Without accountability, every expression is merely optional.

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