dear Brigitte,

how are you?

it's that time of the year where i'm compelled to write a long text
to friends and family about what i'm reflecting upon, and the
impulse for this came quite suddenly and admittedly it is something
messy which i'm trying to articulate and am failing to.

where my last text reflected on intimacy, i've landed in a headspace
a little further than what i expected to be in.

i've been thinking about the Tears for Fears' song I Believe a fair
bit for some time now, but more so since the pandemic got weirder
for all of us. at my most pessimistic moment, i feel that life at
this very moment can be summarised in that song. the lyrics to the
first part of the song is as such:

i believe,
that when the hurting
and the pain has gone
we will be strong
oh yes, we will be strong

and i believe
that if i'm crying
while i write these words
is it absurd?
or am i being real?

i believe
that if you knew just
what these tears were for
they would just pour
like every drop of rain

that's why i believe
it is too late
for anyone to believe

believing and belief is increasingly becoming something i'm
fascinated by. where the premise of 'trust' can easily be paired
with my interests in human—machine intimacies, belief / believing is
far more mysterious in the way we're navigating our tech—infused
lives. the subject of belief in relation to machines for instance,
reminds me of the premise where cameras are devices which trap or
capture souls, the belief that if you took a picture of someone, the
camera is capturing the soul of the person into the machine.

similarly it relates back to a belief i encountered surrounding audio tape recorders. in 2014 when i was visiting Yamaguchi, Japan, i had the pleasure of speaking to Takeshi Ito, an archivist who has been recording folk songs from within Japan. he told me about how it was a lot more difficult to record folk songs from people back in the 60s and 70s because of the belief that if you sang into the tape recorder, your voice will be captured in the machine and the song forgotten, never to be sung again.

admittedly i do not know the origins and source of these beliefs but seeing how common it is across cultures, i suppose i've been confronted with this question multiple times, what do i believe in? what's my belief and what is it based upon? is it important to have one? why should i believe? why should anyone? what do you believe in?

considering how personal beliefs are, allow me to share an encounter i had sometime back in 2001 relating to this. back then it was about a year since my father had passed on. together with my mother and youngest brother, we were in our living room just talking and laughing, one of those lazy days where we were just catching up and hanging out. in our living room is this old remote controlled car which we haven't played with for a very long time. in fact the batteries are out and the remote control is no where to be found. it's pretty much not working anymore. this RC car was placed on top of one of our old speakers which was also not in use.

at some point in this afternoon, the car started moving on its own, going back and forth a couple times before stopping. we all saw that and froze. moments later it started moving again. and then stopped. the fact of the matter is, there was and still are no explanations as to how this happened, or what caused it to move autonomously. at that point in time the only explanation we could think up of was that, perhaps it was our late father coming to visit and had gestured through the car that he was present. incidentally at the time of writing this, it is a month away since he passed on 20 years ago.

i am not attempting to make the point that my dad resides in that car, or that somehow the car as a machine had trapped my late father's soul in it, but that this was the beginnings as to how i had interest in thinking and believing about machines as vessels for spirits. i'm mindful of how i casually interchanged the words soul and spirit but there's a reason for this.

much like my frame of intimacy *(mesra)* through the Malay language, one of absorption, transformation and change, within the Malay

language the word used to place this entity of spirit and simultaneously the soul, is "semangat". *semangat* denotes a kind of force, an energy that resides in any given body, for instance, a person can have *semangat* just as a tree has *semangat*. it denotes a life force that is housed in any given shell. *semangat* also means "will", as in having the will to push forward, to survive etc. in short, *semangat* is really a means of identifying an entity that animates an object.

the complexity of Malay culture, one that's entwined with islam, would point to a premise where "ruh" as in "soul" in arabic, is also part of the definition of *semangat*. that soul is also perceived as energy that injects life into a person. but of course *semangat* isn't just bound by this islamic lens. a syncretic past sees both pre-islamic conceptions of life force merge together with the islamic frame of 'ruh', framing *semangat* as a concept that goes beyond just a soul or a spirit, but the existence of energy born of synthesised belief. *semangat* identifies the plurality of forces giving life to a body. it is never just one thing.

what i'm grappling with here is precisely the *semangat* found in our machines today. going back to the belief of audio devices capturing voices and rendering them forgotten in time ahead, and juxtaposing that against the premise of a captured spirit, i return back to my obsession of what it means to live with our personal machines. how much of our essence is now stored and held captive in these devices through numerous sensors and processed by big tech. it would seem companies like Apple, Google etc are pretty much running massive dungeons holding our spirits captive.

i could go on about the kind of complicated relationship status we have with our machines in light of its connection to these parent companies or applications, but the impetus here is not just to critique the way things are but to continue imagining other frontiers where we, perhaps ambitiously, reclaim and regain the bits of us that at this moment do not seem to be with us, but more importantly for me personally to be able to identify other frames which helps facilitate the birth of these ambitions. if truly our *semangat* have gradually and increasingly been vacuum sealed into our machines, what are some steps we can take to ensure our fragmented or dismembered *semangat* is still ours? can we summon other *spirits* to accompany our lost or imprisoned *semangat* in the machine?

as someone who works with sound, one thing that i've been thinking about revolves around how our machines are "listening", or maybe more accurately what they sense and register of sounds made. for those of us who are able to speak, from voice memos to the (almost

infinite) video or voice calls we make these days, our personal machines could easily build a kind of taxonomy of our speech thru voice recognition, itemised to indicate the frequency of how happy, annoyed, upset, the list goes on. to me this process of recognition and profiling a user through the kinds of data is where the birthing of another *semangat* occurs.

the data stored in our machines are only as valuable as the "intelligent" mechanism or AI that's deployed to learn and generate a profile useful for companies to capitalise off. the issue of privacy is just one thing to be concerned about, for me its also the implications of what these "intelligent agents" embody, machine cognition as a spirit that's giving a different life to our aggregated profile, our avatar or digital selves.

AI as a form of electric animism briefly addressed by way of Matteo Pasquinelli in his essay "Abnormal Encephalization in the age of Machine Learning" helped frame this idea that AI as a kind of *semangat* is the entity that i desire to sit with and think about further. could i perhaps summon or install my own artificial spirits as a means of protecting the bits of me that live inside the machine? what are the various spirits i could install, to be intimate with as a means of evolving together intimately over time?

coupled with *mesra*, i've been working on expressing this unsettling space of belief and *semangat*. a few days ago as part of a group exhibition titled State of Motion, which is curated by Syaheedah Iskandar, i presented a new work titled "momok elektrik", or electric phantoms. it is a mixed media, 9 channel audio installation work which consists of encrypted spells done with screenprints on these large, used coffee gunny sacks, and a new programme i wrote which is generating a choir of voices done with the help of 3 amazing singers, Leslie Low, Nur Wahidah and Suhaili Safari.

Syaheedah and i co-wrote this short text as a means of placing the work which i'd like to share with you:

momok elektrik is a choreography of sounds speculating our machine's manner of codifying speech in a time to come. The installation imagines the *momok* (ghost, phantoms or spectres in Malay) in the machine as a being conjured through the continual interaction with human speech. From surveillance in the form of listening and its function in accumulating data, our relationship with machines in the future will revolve around the interdependency between us and machines, where both entities are entwined yet autonomous in the way we know one another. Conjuring new worlds and dimensions, these samples are now part of the machine's vocabulary. Our speech is rendered musical. *momok elektrik* is a sonic commentary on imagining

machine cognition as the modern-day spirit that wards off threats;
an act of refusal to be listened to.

to view a brief documentation of the programme, please visit here:
https://youtu.be/gyDk5wUhkZk

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clearly i am still grappling to articulate all of this, there are
threads that come together, some require so much more untangling,
others, remain knotted and perhaps required to temporarily as a
means of believing in this process of understanding a greater
unknown of being. but i am quite certain that our life force is
quite intricately woven with our machines and untangling that is
what i am most curious about. will we ever be independent from these
external shells? or rather, could we and our digital spirits not be
subjugated to the dungeons of big tech?

believing and belief is such a personal thing, and perhaps it is in
this very personal and intimate relationship we have with it, is
where i think there is a sliver of space to think about how we build
technologies or the conditions of future machines based on how we
each orientate around our personal beliefs. all this is to return to
one question which i am thinking about more deeply; what is belief
in the age of machine cognition?

till we reconnect and speak again, Brigitte.
stay safe

better days ahead