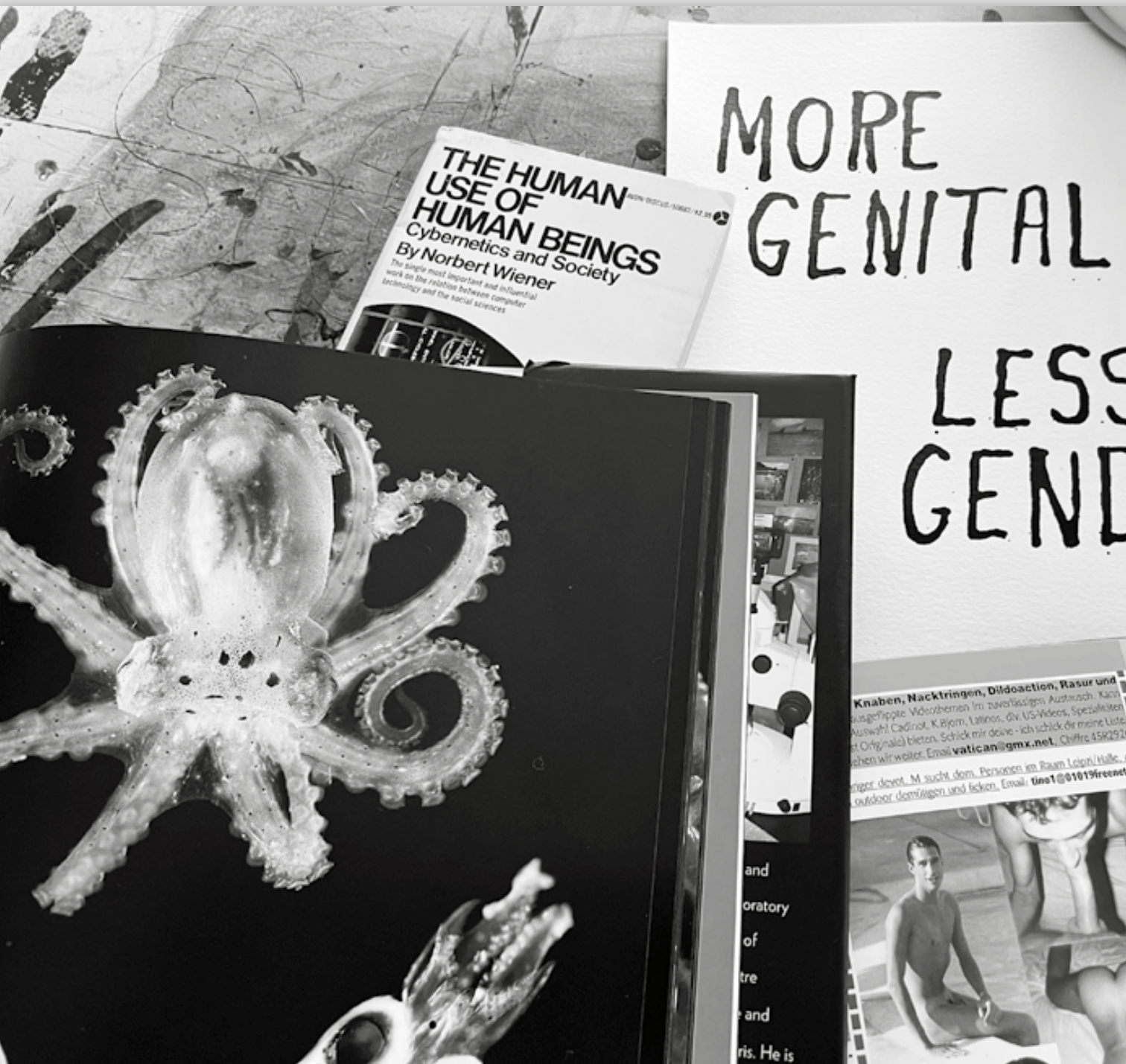


# Planktic Cybernetics

## Steve Reinke





**01** Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics: Or the Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* and Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* were both published in 1948. If read together, one cannot help but notice that the Kinsey scale is best read cybernetically, as a feedback loop. The scale goes from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual). (It also includes X — not a numeral, but an unknown — for the most forward-thinking category, the only one which escapes the scale, the spectrum: asexuality in body, mind and spirit.) Cybernetics teaches that the scale should not be read statically, but dynamically, as a system with feedback loops. For instance, whether you are a 1 or a 4 at a given time depends on who you are in the room with, how they are interacting with you (what they are doing to you), how they smell, where the warden is, etc.

**02** Plankton is X.

**03** You know, Nietzsche was right when he said that never had more been demanded of living creatures than when dry land appeared. Dry land really is the beginning of our troubles. The expulsion from Eden was really a myth; the prelapsarian world was aquatic.

**04** It is not quite correct to say that plankton is the most content species, for plankton is not a species. Plankton is not defined by phylogenic or taxonomic classification. In this way, it escapes having a name pinned to it. They cannot swim but drift suspended; their names float away. Once desire is separated from motility, one is truly free.

**05** The so-called »paradox of the plankton« is that they flout the competitive exclusion principle. This principle states that when two species compete for the same resource, one will be driven to extinction. Plankton is just not down with the competitive exclusion principle. They ignore it completely. They leave it to the sharks and turtles, etc. While scientists have a range of theories for solving this »paradox,« they have missed the most obvious. When names float away and desire is separated from motility, there is no more competition. Plankton is the most contented species; it is suspended in itself; its own endless, structureless nutrient bath.

**06** Fifty years ago Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri turned from tree-thought to rhizome-thought. Now it is time to turn from rhizome-thought to plankton-thought. Plankton-thought: a suspension, form without structure, without points of entry or departure, pure flow, all immanence, no lines of flight, no need for memory, nothing to remember.

Steve Reinke is an artist and writer best known for his monologue-based video essays. His work is in many collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Centre Pompidou, Paris; MACBA, Barcelona; and National Gallery, Ottawa. He has shown work at many international film festivals, including Sundance, Berlinale, Rotterdam, Oberhausen, BFI London, and the New York Film Festival. In 2006 he received the Bell Canada Video Award. He is participating in the festival & symposium Non-Knowledge, Laughter and the Moving Image.

**07** Edgar Morin tells us about video and plankton: »All things projected are pre-selected, impregnated, blended, semi-assimilated in a mental fluid where time and space are no longer obstacles but are mixed up in one plasma. All the sticky molecules of the mind are already in action in the world on the screen. They are projected into the universe and bring back substances — both identifiable and not — from it. Video reflects the mental commerce of plankton. This commerce is magic. Magic and, more broadly, a magical participation that inaugurates an active commerce with the world. It teaches us that the penetration of the human mind in the world is inseparable from an imaginary plankton efflorescence.«

**08** Norbert Wiener said: »Information is information, not matter or energy.« Is it possible to assert: »Plankton is plankton, not matter or energy.«? No, that is absurd. But still...

**09** Norbert Wiener quoted from his 1950 published book which was meant (hence its dystopian, chilling title, *The Human Use of Human Beings*) for a wider audience: »We are immersed in a life in which the world as a whole obeys the second law of thermodynamics: confusion increases and order decreases. Yet, as we have seen, the second law of thermodynamics, while it may be a valid statement about the whole of a closed system, is definitely not valid concerning a non-isolated part of it. There are local and temporary islands of decreasing entropy in a world in which the entropy as a whole tends to increase, and the existence of these islands enables some of us to assert the existence of progress. Thus, the question of whether to interpret the second law of thermodynamics pessimistically or not depends on the importance we give to the universe at large, on the one hand, and to the islands of locally decreasing entropy which we find in it, on the other. Remember that we ourselves constitute such an island of decreasing entropy, and that we live among other such islands. The result is that the normal prospective difference between the near and the remote leads us to give far greater importance to the regions of decreasing entropy and increasing order than to the universe at large.«

**10** Plankton is immersed in a life which avoids both the »temporary islands« of decreased entropy and the »world« of increased entropy. Planktic existence is entropy-free (or, more accurately, net entropy zero). It exists in its own world, floating without even noticing these temporary islands.

**11** Here Norbert Wiener makes a half-hearted plea for human dignity within the context of the complete irrelevance of both »life« and that special, horrible case: human life: »It is quite conceivable that life belongs to a limited stretch of time; that before the earliest geological ages it did not exist, and that the time may well come when the earth is again a lifeless, burnt-out, or frozen planet. To those of us who are aware of the extremely limited range of physical conditions under which the chemical reactions necessary to life as we know it can take place, it is a foregone conclusion that the lucky accident which permits the continuation of life in any form on this earth, even without restricting life to something like human life, is bound to come to a complete and disastrous end. Yet we may succeed in framing our values so that this temporary accident of living existence, and this much more temporary accident of human existence, may be taken as all-important positive values, notwithstanding their fugitive character.«

**12** The Anthropocene (which I keep wanting to spell »Anthroposcene,« as it does seem like such a scene, a crazy disco, or something) means nothing to plankton.

**13** Most of the concepts in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* are funky elaborations of cybernetics. Or, to be more generous, they bring cybernetics into psychoanalysis (and back out again): desire becomes primary. And while they may at some points attack certain psychoanalytic institutions, their work doubles down on psychoanalytic theory. Schizoanalysis is the thermostat that traces the feedback loops between unconscious libidinal investment and the socio-political-historical field. A desiring machine, with all its forces and relations, is cybernetic. Plankton is the only body without organs that can sustain itself.