



Allison Leigh
Holt's *Stitching
the Future with
Clues, Indisposable:
Structures of Support
after the ADA*, Ford
Foundation Gallery
online, 2021.
Courtesy of the
artist

Silhouetted figure of a person with short hair leaning over a control board. In front of them are multiple round lenses, casting projected light into rounded, looping patterns on a dark wall.

ALLISON LEIGH HOLT

STITCHING THE FUTURE WITH CLUES

Stitching the Future with Clues is a neurodivergent-futurist manifesto, presented as a single-channel film. It was commissioned by the Ford Foundation Gallery for the exhibition *Indisposable: Structures of Support after the ADA*,¹ curated by Ann Fox and Jessica Cooley. Combining animated diagrams, video and audio feedback processes, live performance, and expanded cinema techniques, it asks viewers to consider feedback systems as conceptual frameworks. It also reveals, through a cybernetic lens, how neurodivergence can be viewed as a system of sense making: one differently attuned to temporal, psychic, and environmental embodied existence and holding key insights for urgently needed world building.

This script largely emerged from research for my article “THE CONVERSATION: Feedback Structures, Ways of Knowing, and Neurodivergence,”² and through the process of carving the complex ideas in that piece into a PhD proposal. When the Ford Foundation Gallery approached me with a film commission, I economized my language as far as I could and broke it into annotated sections. This served the purposes of directing voice-over actors, using their audio to construct nine separate animated videos, and tracking runtimes of those videos, whose playback I could control independently during performance with sound and video feedback artists. Crossing two video beams through a single glass sphere of water, I further distorted their projected images with additional spheres of water, resting them in steel trivets. For the final film, I edited the separate videos together, along with footage of the live performance.

On its own, the script proposes an entire, phenomenal worldview, but its conversational voice-over (alternating somewhat between a studio-recorded actor and another recorded by phone) is steadily, insistently paced and phrased to be understood. It makes clear logical connections as it moves from point A to point B to point C, creating a linear, recursive stream of sense amid a swarm of sound and image. Critic and author

Daniel Coffeen notes that “within the film, however, the words are one system, one register and mode of sense making, in conversation with the play of images, diagrams, sound, and performance, which have their own modes of sense-making.”³

The film’s animated diagrams, computer simulations, and topological models do not *illustrate* the words. Rather, as Coffeen puts it,

We could say the art “uses” and “incorporates” documentary and science. This, in fact, is the very premise of the film: life is an ever-emerging set of dialogues and conversations between systems of every sort—human, vegetal, cosmic, conceptual, linguistic, microbial. The film, then, is a *conversation* between science, art, and (for lack of a better description) ethical philosophy. It at once argues, shows, and preaches. No one mode is subservient to another. Rather, they conspire together, a network of sense-making modes conversing with each other.⁴

The complexity and multi/trans/antidisciplinarity of this project reflects how I work, how I experience myself and the world, and my own neurodivergent sense making. The film’s almost entirely black-and-white visual language (also economical, emergent, and repetitive) is didactic but also performative: the explanation is the art, a poetic intersection where there is no difference between art and science, and invocation.

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A. PROLOGUE 01:18

1. We are born and educated into an ontology that divides up and thingifies our world.
2. Globally, we gauge and mark our existence based on the sun above the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London,
3. until time comes to a grinding halt, teeters for a few months, and then just cascades out of control.
4. Even as we try to mitigate its effects, we embody and enact the very constructs that caused them.
5. We’re bound to REPEAT.
6. But maybe that’s the solution.
7. At every turn lies a chance to adjust . . .



The silhouetted figure stands, holding one of the round lenses up to the projector stream. A distorted and fragmented image of nested Möbius strips is projected onto the back wall.

Allison Leigh Holt's
*Stitching the Future
with Clues*. Courtesy
of the artist

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B. A SPARK or:30

8. It begins with a spark: an event, a phenomenon, a signal.
9. Trees, responding to an infestation, produce insecticidal chemicals and exchange them across a network of roots and fungi called mycorrhiza.
10. A predator ignites a murmuration of starlings, and each bird is simultaneously attracted to, repelled by, and in alignment with its neighbor, creating a perpetuating, liquid swirl.
11. Think of the sensing, processing, and exchanging of information happening, here:
12. each is a system engaged in DIALOGUE.
13. observing its own behaviors, each then uses what it knows to modify them, toward its purpose, and loops on.
14. We move through a world in never-ending conversation with itself.



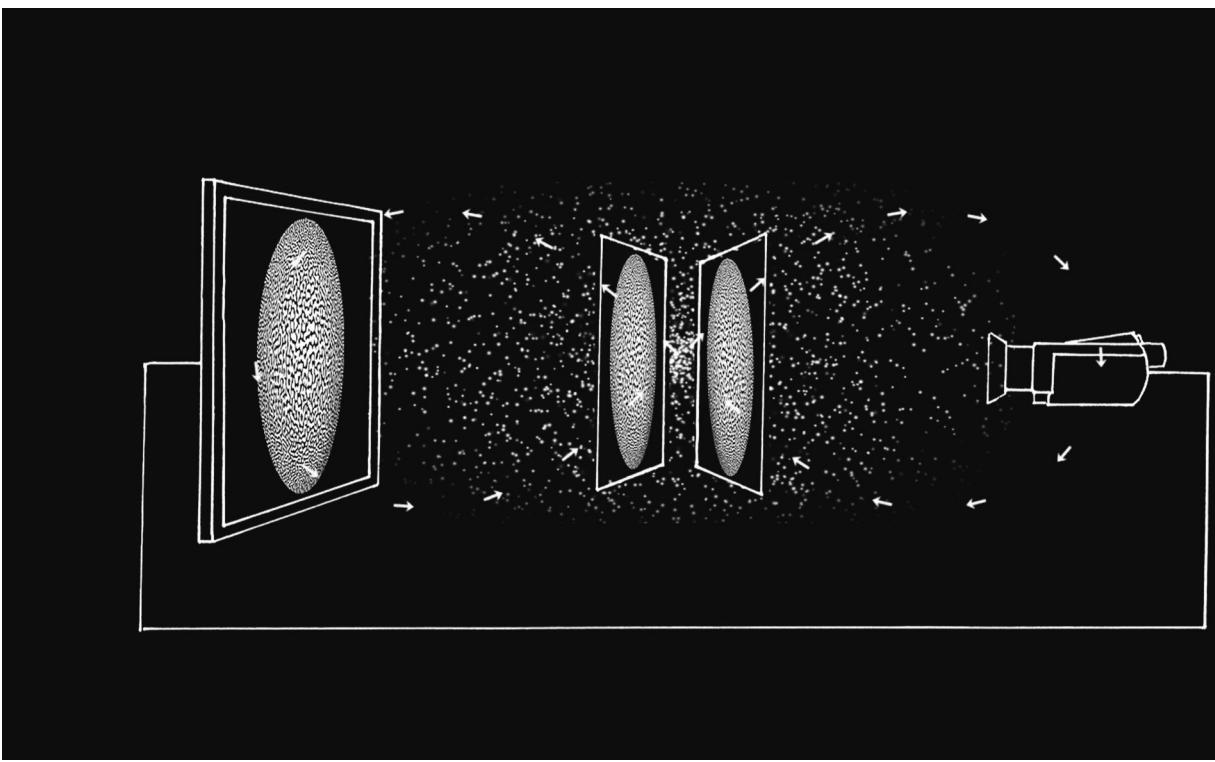
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The word DIALOGUE is projected onto a black backdrop. The letters are black-and-white, like static. Over the top of the word are dancing white lights forming dots and trails that zigzag across the whole image.

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C. ANY SYSTEM OI:O2

15. Any system looping information from its output back to its input is engaged in FEEDBACK.
16. The internet incorporates a multiverse of looping behavior that mirrors the human neurology creating, using, and being used by it.
17. Through ritual, humans align with and adjust the social, natural, and spiritual systems of which they themselves are an intrinsic part.
18. Aim a video camera at a monitor that also displays the camera's view; what results is a self-sustaining, emergent phenomenon in 4D space.



A white line drawing of a video camera pointed at a square monitor displaying a circle of white squiggles, which look like reflected light. Between the camera and the screen are two frames pointed at each other, each showing the same circle of squiggles. The camera and the monitor are connected by a squared-off line that runs below the image. A figure eight of arrows traces a path from the camera, through the lenses, to the monitor, and back again, over a drawing of an explosion of stars.

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D. THE INFORMATION OI:O8

19. The information being sensed, processed, and exchanged in this dialogue can be tuned into
20. as a single cross-section of self-generating moving image.
21. This dynamic lies at the root of all intelligent behavior.
22. Look around you. Imagine this happening between or even within other agents (because it is):
23. Between a human's neurological system and her mind
24. between two self-watching humans
25. between a human and another species, like a tree,
26. or a tree's roots and the forest accompanying it

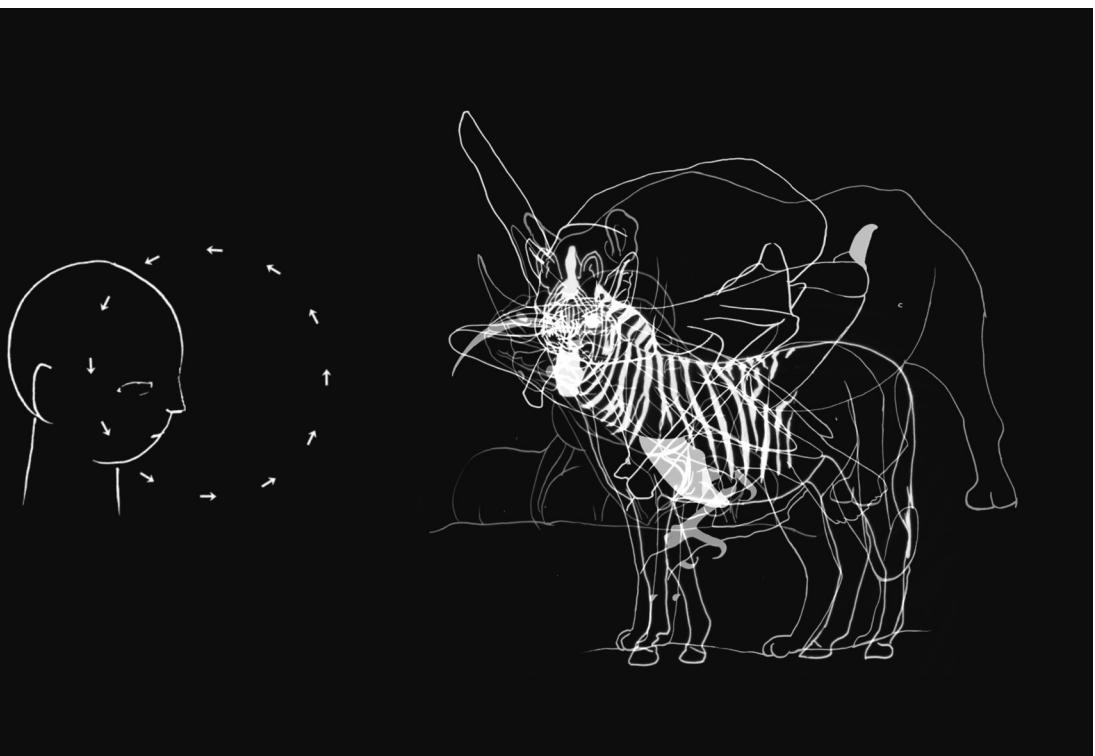
Allison Leigh Holt's *Stitching the Future with Clues*. Courtesy of the artist

27. All living beings participate in an astounding feedback system composed of a community of feedback systems.
28. This exchange of information *is* communication, beyond language; between humans and the not-quite-fixed world in which we find ourselves.
29. As cohabitants in that world, are we really concerned with reducing the harm we cause?
To do that we have to face its roots in our own thinking.

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E. ANTHROPOCENTRISM 02:03

30. Anthropocentrism means exploiting every other species, and the earth you're born of, and pretending that you didn't do it. Because you ignore their side of the conversation for so long that you never hear the torment there. (And when a pandemic, and climate chaos, finally arrive, you deny that you ever talked at all.)



Allison Leigh Holt's *Stitching the Future with Clues*. Courtesy of the artist

On the left side of the image is a white line drawing of a bald head in profile. A circle of white arrows moving counterclockwise intersects the head and extends out past it. To the right, a drawing of a zebra is scribbled over with other line drawings of animals, including a rhinoceros and an elephant, to the point that individual animals are hard to distinguish.

31. We're doing this to them, but we're doing something much worse to ourselves . . .
32. Embodied, Embedded, Extended, and Enacted mind:
33. "4E" cognition describes humans as not only in constant conversation with other species already,
34. but the structure of the human brain as in constant adjustment to its living environment.
35. We are vibrant assemblages of ongoing perceptual, cognitive, and emotional processes:
36. Through our interactions, we re-create, maintain, and preserve a mental model of our environments, and of ourselves, transforming and being transformed, continuously.
37. In the face of an ever-changing environment, all organisms make efforts to maintain an inner equilibrium, or "autopoiesis,"
38. contending with what works in concert with their internal systems—and what does not—in a variety of ways. Like that murmuration of starlings, this ongoing self-adjustment is always unique.



An image of backward, illegible text against a starry sky is projected through circular lenses onto a dark wall. The circular lenses are illuminated by the projection and appear to float above a table. The control board's buttons glow bright in the bottom-right corner of the image.

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F. CURRENT EVIDENCE 02:15

39. Autistic scholar Nick Walker puts it like this: “CURRENT EVIDENCE INDICATES . . . THAT PARTICULARLY HIGH LEVELS OF SYNAPTIC CONNECTIVITY AND RESPONSIVENESS” CHARACTERIZE AUTISTIC BRAINS. “THIS TENDS TO MAKE THE AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS’ SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE MORE INTENSE AND CHAOTIC THAN THAT OF NON-AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS: ON BOTH THE SENSORIMOTOR AND COGNITIVE LEVELS, THE AUTISTIC MIND TENDS TO REGISTER MORE INFORMATION, AND THE IMPACT OF EACH BIT OF INFORMATION TENDS TO BE BOTH STRONGER AND LESS PREDICTABLE.”
40. All neurodivergents sense, process, and exchange information differently than most people.
41. Many autistics embrace the personhood of nonhuman beings, enjoy extraordinary sense perception, and are drawn to mythological structures describing cycles and epicycles of time that reflect their own physical and psychic rhythms.
42. Some function on a perpetual feedback loop, meaning they live in a place of repetition, with slight echoes out, and as it echoes out, it changes.
43. Like a DJ, beat-matching between familiar and foreign tracks, they do the same routine, but with a variation, purposely introducing new elements to keep expanding the system.
44. “That’s how he frames his world.”
45. Autistic rhythms differ from nonautistic ones mostly by degree, amplifying what all humans can experience: singular focus; obsessive interests;
46. insistence on sameness; taking pleasure in repetition and rhythm; devotion to or contempt for rules; extreme expectations. The genetic variants giving rise to autism are part of the natural range of human biodiversity.

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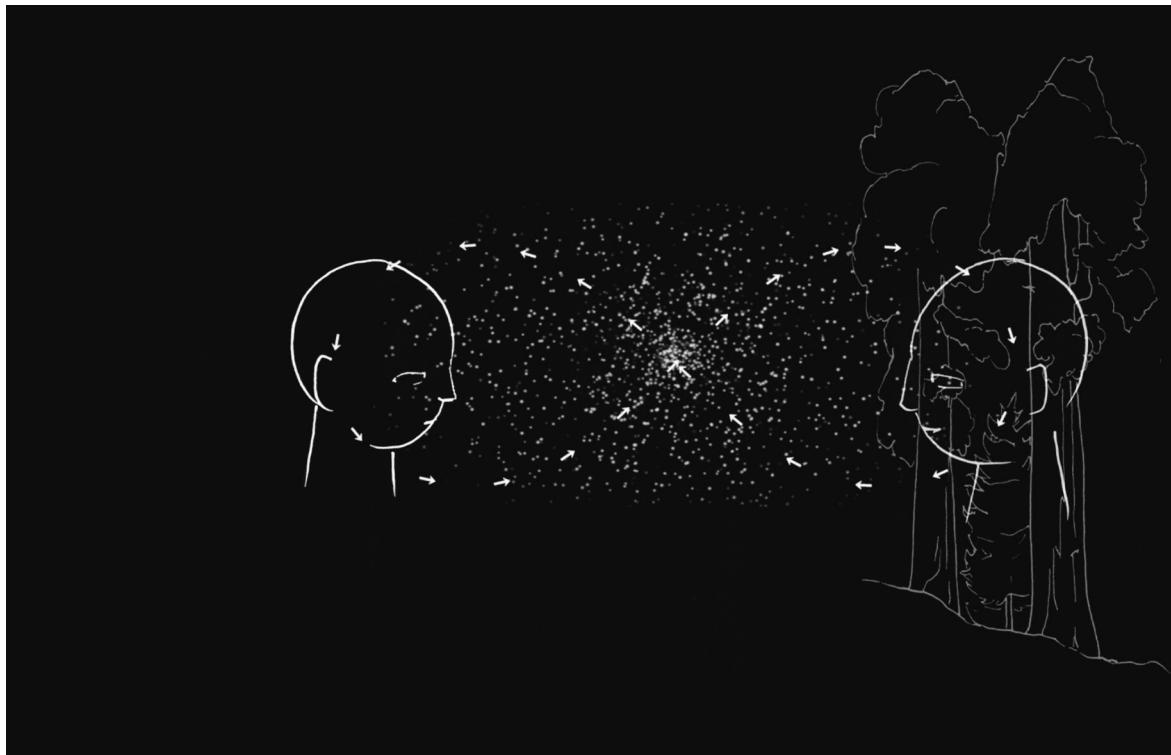
G. OFTEN REFERRED 01:00

47. Often referred to as a “spectrum,” autism is anything but linear:
48. its network of interrelated traits, manifesting differently from person to person, wind up resembling the cloud a whole lot more than the rainbow:
49. The Narrow Autism Phenotype at the center, and at its fuzzy edge
50. the Broader Phenotype (often called Asperger’s)
51. But where are the distinctions between them? And really, where’s the end of that “fuzzy edge”?
52. This Cloud may encompass all humans; we may all be in there. And we may have been all along.

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H. BIOLOGICAL ATTUNEMENT 00:30

53. Biological attunement to feedback in neurodivergents is persistent.
54. There is something important here: Our alienation from THAT ATTUNEMENT is what the rapacious, untenable enterprise suffocating us all relies upon. Our self-conquest.
55. Neurodivergence is an ANTIDOTE.



On the left side of the image is a white line drawing of a bald head in profile. On the right side, a different profile is drawn, set against a softer line drawing of overlapping trees. Between the two images, dots of white, resembling stars, are overlapped with a figure 8 of arrows, running between the two heads.

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I. YOU ARE TETHERED 01:16

56. You are tethered to historical concepts of what you are, what you can do and be, when THERE IS NO NORMAL. You are building your model of the world this very instant.

57. Conceive of yourself beyond the confines of the human scale.

As a PROCESS INVOLVED IN LARGER PROCESSES. A building block for future forms.

58. Witness the intelligence in living systems, and exist as a companion species on the day-to-day.

59. We are engaged in feedback already, whether we admit it or not.

60. We have to begin to NOTICE.

61. We are beings of transformation, not accommodation

62. Stitching the future with clues.



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An image of overlapping figure eights of white arrows over a drawing of an explosion of stars is projected through a series of glass spheres filled with water, causing the image to distort and repeat across the black backdrop. The control board glows in the bottom right. Over the whole image, "STITCHING THE FUTURE WITH CLUES" is written in crisp white text.

NOTES

1. *Indisposable: Structures of Support after the ADA* was originally scheduled to run from June through August 2020 at the Ford Foundation Gallery (New York) during the fifty-year anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. *Stitching the Future with Clues* is part of the exhibition's yearlong 2021 online program, ahead of the autumn 2022 physical exhibition.
2. Allison Leigh Holt, "THE CONVERSATION: Feedback Structures, Ways of Knowing, and Neurodivergence," in "Interspecies Communication," spec. issue, *PUBLIC Journal*, no. 59 (2019): 104–13.
3. Daniel Coffeen, "Walking the Talk—and Vice-Versa: On Allison Leigh Holt's 'Stitching the Future with Clues,'" *An Emphatic Umph*, March 22, 2022, hilariousbookbinder.blogspot.com/2022/03/walking-talkand-vice-versa-on-allison.html.
4. Coffeen, "Walking the Talk."