

Essay commissioned in response to Hazel Brill's: *Pup & Blubber*

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Stream Strange
by Louise Benson

I am living a double life. You are, too. Every morning, after I wake up, I check in on my other self. I scroll through images and watch endless videos, read articles and offer endless affirmation. I like it here, I say over and over again. I like it. Do you?

In the age of social media and smartphones, we must contend with multiple versions of ourselves. Never before have the possibilities for the creation (and fracturing) of the self been so great, even as technology continues to accelerate. Robotics and AI have morphed from science fiction to a creeping everyday, where Siri and Alexa have become bywords for convenience. No longer are these parallel lives that we lead distinct; nor can it be said that one remains more real than the other. Our online consumption, frequently guided by algorithms, is inextricably linked to our offline engagement with the world around us. The screen is not so much a portal to another place as a mirror image of our own reality.



Hazel Brill's latest film, *Pup & Blubber*, leads us by the hand into the liminal space between the two. Part documentary, part stream-of-consciousness, it takes a journey from an intimate puppet theatre in London to Lisbon's Web Summit, the largest tech conference in the world. Two eponymous puppets take the form of otters, scrappily sewn by the artist and slightly overstuffed; they are children's soft toys gone askew, nostalgic and yet oddly anachronistic.

Brill cuts this unlikely leading pair with footage of real otters, paddling languidly in pools of water—a visual refrain that she returns to throughout the film. Where the sleek otters splash and dive, their stuffed toy cousins tumble and clumsily embrace.

The intimate, often slippery overlap between reality and its representation is a connective thread that runs through *Pup & Blubber*. Brill's puppets are brought to life by Ronnie Le Drew, the puppeteer behind such iconic children's characters as Zippy and Sooty, whose affable persona had a hand in shaping British television for an entire generation of kids from the 1970s into the early 1990s. Brill's camera is never one to shy away from the behind-the-scenes workings of her set; where others might crop out the strings, rigs and artificial lighting, she zooms out to reveal the construction of her characters. Le Drew is shown getting to know the two puppets, tentatively pushing one hand inside before imbuing them with a personality of their own. These inanimate toys shudder suddenly into action. No longer puppets, but tender, playful otters. It is a wonder to behold.



Brill takes a similarly candid approach at Lisbon's annual web summit, which she visited this November. Billed as, "where the future goes to be born", featuring 1,200 speakers and over 70,000 attendees, it is a big, brash meeting of minds. Brill's handheld camera weaves between the crowds, many of whom are dressed up in novelty costumes—from spacesuits to jet packs—parading as mascots for start-ups and tech giants alike. Many display stuffed toys as a visual accompaniment to their often intangible offerings: "We take something that may be difficult for the average person to completely comprehend, and we make it simple, and fun, and sometimes humorous", one exhibitor explains. Another start-up—aptly named Otter—presents Olly the Otter, a stuffed toy. It is a primly cartoonish take on an otter, a strange brother to Brill's own unruly puppets.

Otter itself is an automated transcription service powered by AI; recorded voice conversations can be uploaded to the app for free to be translated to a rough text version.

As a writer, I am familiar with the pitfalls of services such as these, where transcribed interviews with artists can end up looking less like a coherent conversation and more akin to concrete poetry. While tools like Otter may set out to close the gap between artificial learning and human brain power, they often end up inevitably revealing the disconnect that remains between man and machine. I decide to try Otter out, and record a segment of the monologue that opens *Pup & Blubber*, before uploading it at home. The results dip in and out of accuracy, although I will leave it to the reader to decipher exactly where Brill's film and its automated transcription differ and converge.

It became normal for them to crawl across
my eyeballs and arrange themselves into the shape of a heart. framing all my vision and
love.

How could you not tear up that?

one special day, the crew

stream strange

ways and lifted me up with each arm hair.

They

carry forward through the straight curly side

and into it

without

stage for a tree,

down, down, down,

down, down, down,

down, down,

Down.



Onstage at Web Summit, a female robot is presented by a charismatic speaker who addresses the audience as a rockstar would a packed stadium. The music of the

conference, pumped up and slick with adrenaline, weaves its way into Brill's cut-up soundtrack, like the strange flashbacks of a lucid dream. Applause trickles through, rain on the surface of a glassy lake. There is an aching poignancy to *Pup & Blubber* as it swells and fades through moments of excitement into quieter reflection. Brill's puppet protagonists hint at alternative notions of the self, just as Vector, the robotic "home assistant" who also makes an appearance, offers another version of a half-imagined future—one built from circuit boards, shimmering lights and self-belief.



Staged amidst pools of glistening water, coloured lights and gently swaying wind chimes, *Pup & Blubber* extends beyond the screen. A red spotlight marks the entrance to the cavernous, darkened viewing space, while faux fur covers seats—a playfully tactile nod to the film's probing distortion of our reality. Organic forms rise from the ground, and even the two film screens follow a wavy, non-linear curvature. There is a wilfully untamed quality to Brill's stage set, inviting us to suspend our disbelief—even just for a moment—and enter a hinterland of puppetry, persona and performers. After all, she seems to say, aren't we all living under a series of ever-expanding illusions? Is this reverie, or is this our reality?

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