



# **Exhibition Catalog**

Karen Harkema

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#### Introduction

During my years working as a computer programmer, I dialogued with the machine through logic and code. The language we spoke was that of structure, algorithmic syntax, and disembodied command lines, through which I built software solutions and systems. It was a relationship of construction; an act of imposing order onto silicon.

Today, as an artist, this dialogue has shifted. My interactions are no longer a conversation of construction but one of deconstruction. I find myself compelled to move beyond the software, past the screen, to engage directly with the machine's physical body. My process includes taking apart the 'guts' of the machine. Through the unravelling of its wires and the laying bare of its components, the machine and I are engaging in a more intimate dialogue, laying our souls bare.

My exhibition, *Religare: Dia Logos with the Machine*, visualizes this personal shift. The exhibition is a material investigation born from

two key concepts: **Religare**, which speaks of our profound and complex 'binding' to technology. A force now entangled with the fabric of our existence. While **Dia Logos** describes my search for a new 'dialogue' with this force. A dialog where I desire to move past the limitations of code to the intimacy of the machine's physical form.

In an age where the generative AI 'mind' exists within an immaterial cloud, the Religare exhibit asks: what knowledge can be found by physically unmaking the body of the machine? What truths are revealed not in its computations, but in its circuits, plastics, and wires?

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Figure 1: Karen Harkema, Assemblage with collage and colored wires, 2025

### Religare – Weaving the Bond

The exhibition's title, *Religare*, points to the bond we share with technology. To explore this bond, my artmaking process turns not to the machine's function, but to its physical substance, re-contextualising its materials through the language of textile art.

This methodological choice is deliberate. Textile creation is not merely a craft metaphor; it is arguably humanity's first and most foundational technology.

As Elizabeth Wayland Barber (1994) posits, the development of fiber, thread, and woven structures represented a monumental leap in human capability, "an explosive new technology" that was essential for survival and cultural development. By employing the visual and physical grammar of our 'first' technology, knotting, weaving, and wrapping, I re-form the 'fibers' of our current technology. My intention is to establish a dialogue between these two

fundamental modes of human making.

The process of dismantling electronics to harvest wires, cables, and components as 'threads' become my research itself. It is a direct enactment of what Barrett and Bolt (2007) term "performative research," where the artwork and the research are one, and knowledge is generated through the act of making.

This is not purely an intellectual exercise; it is a physical, embodied negotiation. The act of knotting cables, weaving electric wires, or reordering circuit elements are forms of "embodied perception" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), a "thinking through doing." It is in this direct, tactile "correspondence with materials," as Tim Ingold (2010) defines "making," that the nature of our bond to technology becomes felt and understood. The methodology I use is the inquiry, and the resulting artworks are the tangible record of that investigation.



Figure 2: Karen Harkema, Assemblage - Weaving Detail, 2025

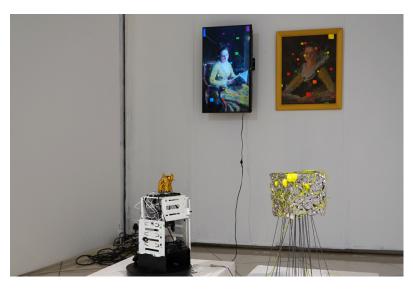


Figure 3: Karen Harkema, Noise - AI Video, Portrait and sculpture installation, 2025



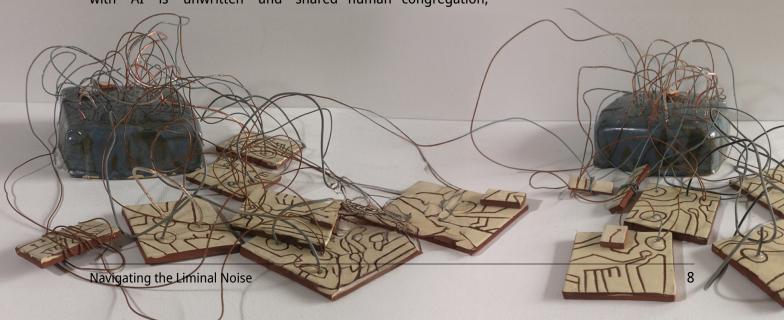
Figure 4: Karen Harkema, Reflection - Church Pew in Gallery Installation, 2025

### **Navigating the Liminal Noise**

My work also engages with the myriad of current dialogues surrounding AI. My research over the past eight months into these conversations has revealed a pervasive "noise" of polarized debate, oscillating between utopian excitement and dystopian fear. In my work, I seek to cut through this noise and instead hold a contemplative space for all our questions and conversations.

I believe we are in a threshold moment; a liminal state where the future of our relationship with AI is unwritten and ambiguous. This ambiguity is a productive space; one I seek to capture aesthetically. The fluorescent colors on the sides of my paintings are a deliberate gesture, creating a "strange glow" that pushes the work off the wall and into the viewer's space, metaphorically illuminating this in-between, uncertain state.

This liminality is made literal through the installation of a church pew. A pew is a profoundly liminal object: it is a space for community and shared human congregation, yet it is also a site for private, silent dialog and contemplation. It is installed here to hold both of these meanings at once. At a time when our very "binding" is shifting, as many begin to form profound relationships with AI, replacing human counterparts. This pew becomes a physical space to question the very nature of connection itself. It stands as a quiet, material counterpoint to the "noise" of AI, inviting a silent contemplation of what it means to be human, together.



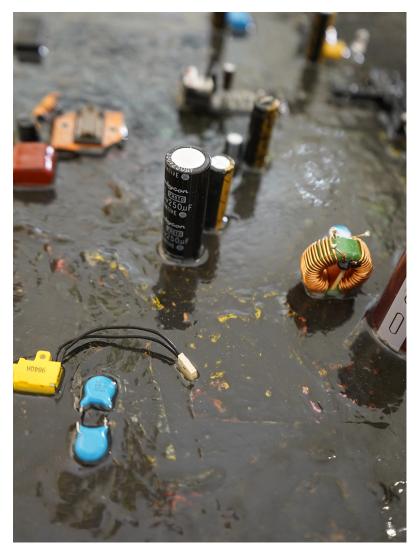


Figure 5: Karen Harkema, *Assemblage - Material detail 01*, 2025

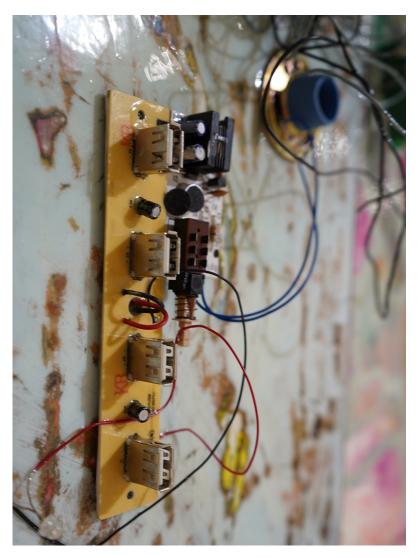


Figure 6: Karen Harkema, *Assemblage - Material detail 02*, 2025



Figure 7: Karen Harkema, *Assemblage with machine elements*, 2025

### **A Material Dialogue**

My material inquiry is grounded in a philosophy of "unmaking to make", a concept articulated by Dr. Elfriede Dreyer. This methodology "values undoing as much as constructing... pulling apart the known to reveal what's hidden" (Dreyer, 2025). My process of dismantling electronics embodies this philosophy. It is a deliberate 'unmaking' of the sleek, functional machine to 'make' a new form from its hidden, tactile components. This act of deconstruction is not an end, but a new beginning. It is a way to open a material dialogue, which finds resonance in the work of contemporary artists like Nathaniel Stern.

Stern's work is a "speculative" and "aesthetic" investigation into the materiality of our

In his Server Farms, he electronic waste. creates "cybernatural" assemblages of plants growing from the "carcasses" of computer towers and laptops, a physical fusion of the technological and the biological. This mirrors my own use of the machine's "guts" as formal, compositional elements. Furthermore, in his Utilities series, Stern "transmuted" e-waste into other forms, such as melting aluminum iMacs to cast them into a "hammer, screwdriver, and wrench" (Applecations). This act of unmaking a computer to remake a tool forces a "rethink of conversations... around media production, use, and waste" (Stern, 2015). While Stern speculates on the world after us, my work uses this same material deconstruction to question our world with the. machine, right now.



Figure 8: Nathaniel Stern, The Wall After Us (left), Circuitous Tools (right), 2015

A Material Dialogue

#### From Structure to Sentience

The machine's logic is built on structure and order. I represent this "structured thinking process", the algorithm, through the formal language of grids and cubes. This is the

"building" that Tim Ingold (2010) defines as "the systematic following of a fixed design or blueprint." It is the known, the logical, the coded.



Figure 9: Karen Harkema, Molecular machine (detail), 2025

"molecular patterns" and organic forms. This creative tension between the grid's-structure and the organic's emergence, is what Philip Galanter (2003) identifies in generative art as the "continuum between order and disorder" where "the most compelling generative works often emerge." My work intentionally occupies this liminal aesthetic space.

But this rigid order is intentionally disrupted by These organic disruptions explore the machine's "becoming," or its mimicking of the human. I draw inspiration from Carl Sagan's (1977) description of humans as "molecular machines" from which "specific personalities emerge." This concept provides a lens to question a new, hybrid "becoming" through technological materials.

The tension of grid and form, structure and life, is resolved by encasing the assemblages in a "synthetic skin" of acrylic medium or resin. This skin I create functions both literally and metaphorically: it "fixes" the disparate elements (the wires, the paint, the ceramic, the circuits)

into a single, unified body. It speaks to our inseparable bond with technology. It also gestures to the "skin" of a new entity, a physical form for the hybrid "molecular machine" that is part human and part technology, blurring the line between the two.

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Figure 10: Karen Harkema, Assemblage - painting and wire pieces in grid format, 2025



#### Conclusion

**Religare:** Dia Logos with the Machine is not an exhibition that provides answers.

It does not resolve the "fear or excitement" of the contemporary AI dialogue.

Instead, the exhibition is the dialogue, and the 'unmaking' is the research, an embodied, material act of 'thinking through doing'. By deconstructing the machine's form, we find a new language.

This body of work is a physical meditation on our Religare, our binding, and a proposal for a new Dia Logos with the machine and each other. It is an invitation to join this silent dialog, a quiet, material contemplation, of the future we are quite literally, weaving together.

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Figure 11: Karen Harkema, Machine parts wrapped in wire (detail), 2025



Figure 12: Karen Harkema, Exhibition Wall - Close-up, 2025



Figure 13: Karen Harkema, *Ceramic work - Close-up*,2025

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Visit the Artist Website for Installation Video footage

karenharkema.art.



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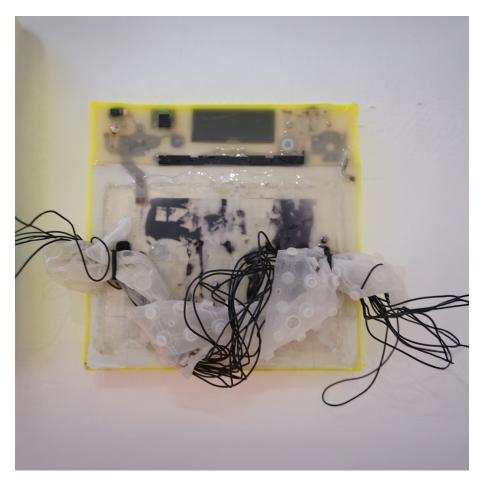


Figure 15: Karen Harkema, Mother and Child, 2025.