

INSTINCT WITH MACHINES IN RELIEF

Theo Ellin Ballew



I bought an Android in 2021 not only because it was cheap, but also because I wanted to see how deeply I'd accustomed to the iPhone interface I'd used since I was a teen. A flip phone wasn't necessary; to see our dependence on a machine, we don't need to get rid of it; we only need to shift/disrupt its interface: shuffle the position of the keys on your keyboard and you lose your fluency, connection, instinct. When I began moving in this foreign interface, I saw iPhone instincts, both physical and logical, that I never knew I'd learned—because they were now irrelevant. There was difficulty; but there was also surprise, joy.

I'm not saying "cyborg," because Jillian Weise teaches that real cyborgs actually depend on their machines (ie. as limbs) and should not be made into metaphors—and because it connotes campy other-worldly aesthetics—and because Haraway was mostly talking about why we should write sci-fi, anyway. I am talking about the machines close enough to breed instinct: close enough to make us into humans instinct with machines: these are instincting machines: we are instinct [with].

And I am talking about how and why we can throw a machine into relief. A sculpture in relief is very visible, but still wedded to its rock. We do not need to deprive ourselves of our devices, as I did not need to live life without a smartphone; but we do need to strategize so that we may know the machines with which we are instinct.

Nalo Hopkinson's, *Sister Mine* tells of a demi-god whose power is abstracted (violently) from her at birth. The power becomes a haint (once called a "corrupted file") that's disgusting,

unpredictable, and violent—that attacks her, longingly wanting to be a part of her. We see what a power/tool/machine looks like, abstracted from its human; when they are reunited, there is beauty, art.

Many celebrate the liberation and power that come when human is instinct with the non-human and I do too; I think of my grandfather's pocketknife, always fixing things, churning out habitual artworks. Tools/machines are beautiful when we anticipate their movements and are made to feel by their movements; when a malfunctioning sewing machine incites fury, there is love there.

In all her works (also in *Midnight Robber*, where a machine even accompanies a fetus before birth), Hopkinson not only celebrates the instincting of humans with non-human entities, but also resolutely asserts the rights of all beings, human and non-. In "Making Kin with the Machines", authors discuss long-lived native traditions of allowing inorganic entities to be on the same plane as "life." Could the tendency to demonize/dehumanize machines have colonialist roots (ie. wanting another being to be lesser-than, fear of the other)?

When I lost my un-backed-up and passwordless phone a couple weeks ago, I was very high late at night in Manhattan. Every stranger I spoke to rushed with help, faces set at emergency; my cis white girl body sanitized my desperation. I also got more propositions, catcalls during the 30 minutes I was searching for my phone than ever before; something sexy about helplessness and solitude and fear. Finally home, after a sprint of password-

changing and remote-locking concluded around 3am, I realized how much I was depending on the ability to return to the documentation (text, images) of a relationship I'd recently ended; I wept at losing a series I'd shot of that person from behind, throwing rocks at the ocean.

I never believe that any of my accidents or misfortunes are not my fault; I always believe that one part of me is doing violence against another part, possibly for a very good reason, like: Theo, see your loss.

Exiting sleep, I had a hard time remembering which of my beloved possessions were physical (unlost) vs. digital (lost); for the quickest tip of time, I mourned my favorite marble scrap, before seeing it still safe on the windowsill. I also realized I missed the itty machine itself, customized with a gaudy purple interface. I felt light, terribly: like gutted therefore gravity-less therefore groundless. A shop owner found the phone in the morning, blocks from where I'd lost it, called the rock-thrower back. Someone decided they had no use for an Android with no banking passwords saved and a cracked screen; I've wondered if they at least sent themselves some nudes, deleted the evidence.

When humanity leaves a burning building, we go for the photos, documents (archive, data). And, more and more, we scatter these things confusedly in cloud storage. Tung Hui Hu notes the political control that results from abstracting computation (a very physical thing made of literal wires and circuits) into a cloud: what is more formidable than the impalpable, nebulous? And Wendy Chun shows the same undefinability of code to be godly: what do we pray to but the unknown? Google could easily afford to make the remarkably bad UX of Drive better, but why would they: when we are disorganized, we have more unnecessary files, more fear of losing those files. What would we give, other than \$1.99/mo, when these things are held hostage?

We are sloppy with our digital stuff because we have a culture of being intensely alone with our screens: worlds never visited by even those closest to us. This may be inherent to the medium, but it is also now actively encouraged by big tech via personalized experiences. So, targeted ads are scary, but less in their manipulation of us; they are scary because they require our devices to be more and more private—and for us to become more and more instinct with them.

Our machines and the apps they hold want our interactions seamless, instinctive. We throw these instincting machines into relief not only because dependencies can be beautiful, worth seeing—but also because (co)dependency breeds inability to see another's faults—and because these tools, unlike pocket knives, are swelling.

I didn't backup my phone in the same way that I often chose not to charge it: a long habit I now recognize as abuse aimed at the phone, refusal to give to that which is often a conduit of violence, e.g. the censoring of content about the U.S.-funded genocide in Palestine. This abuse also hurts me, instinct with that machine—but keeping a phone near-dead also sets ourselves off from it, reminds us of our dependencies, throws the machine into relief.

My Casio F-91 W-1 also sets a boundary with my phone, but a healthier one. Clocks were the first machines people commonly kept on them, if glasses are not machines, and the desire to know the time remains a noble and maybe urgent one (ie, "place me, please" or, "please, tell me where I am"). No mistake the time is fat on locked screens; it's the most common bait.

There's also hope in the poorly working machine (thinking of Steyerl's "poor image," Russell's "glitch," Halberstam's "failure"). I like texting on Signal because it's like sending a letter; you don't know if/when it will arrive. End-to-end encryption is great, but imperfectly functioning notification systems are even better—human interactions should not have such definitive records as iMessage/Whatsapp claim. And I enjoy, feel freed by, my Android's myriad malfunctions: missed group texts; the spontaneous playing of a song from a four-year-old Spotify playlist every Saturday at 2pm; nonconsensual upgrades that have it off for an hour.

But the best way to throw our machines into relief is to build or alter them ourselves. Coding now is like cooking; as in: how disgusting to only ever eat out. Lorde says certain tools will never dismantle; but code, unlike the university, was not built to maintain an elite class; and, while its development may have been financed by war efforts, the developers themselves were largely pacifists. Tools/machines built and actively maintained by nefarious actors, like IG and React.js, will never dismantle. However, much code/computation is absolutely capable of being revolutionary (see the Xenofeminists for more).

Rich cis white boys will tell you coding is very hard, but most who claim something is "too complicated for you to understand" are lying to maintain an unjust status quo (e.g. Zionists). In the evolution of Geocities to Myspace to FB/IG, social networks shifted from inviting users to code into their interfaces, to making the act impossible. Apple's done something similar, slimming down customizability in all its devices. The message: these devices are not malleable but holy, incomprehensible, beyond our reach. It is politically crucial to assert that code is easy, understandable.

We're instinct with machines; they grow, instinct in us, in ways we cannot see or control; we must invent new ways to throw them into relief: or, set boundaries with them, defamiliarize them into knowability, build them.

¶ Theo Ellin Ballew writes poetry and code. Their first book of (sci-)fictional poems is forthcoming from *Ornithopter Press*; their poems appear or are forthcoming in places like *Second Factory*, *Everybody Press*, *240P*, *Juked*, and *3AM*. Theo has taught cyberfeminism, computational revolution, and net.art at many universities, most often/recently at NYU's *ITP*. They started and direct *ORAL.pub*.

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