

VOIDLAB

MACHINE INTIMACY

DOROTHY HOWARD

If a tree falls and no one is around, it most certainly makes a sound. It's ecological surroundings notice that it was felled, and compensate for the change in their physical, electric, chemical, and biological responses. The tree's fall takes an effect on the land, providing compost as a mother log down the line, and even during the fell itself, the haptic measures take effect in the compressions of air which allow sound waves to travel, displacing air, creating a miniscule wind. Global warming takes effect.

Objects and interfaces even those created by humans or biologically managed by humans, like agricultural crops, are not passive agents defined solely by human use or value abstraction. Objects can act upon each other and respond to each other independent of us. They have desires, and can experience fulfillment, what an anthropocentric view might call pleasure. Reading objects in this way can be part of a wider practice of empathetic thinking, troubling the idea of intimacy outside of the bounds of human-intimate experiences as it might pertain to human intellectual or satisfaction, growth, fulfillment or pleasure. Utilizing the idea of object intimacy offers us political leverage to consider a decentralized gaze, understanding empathy and even connection with the unknown as a mental exercise, finding its transformative power.

Aesthetic theory has flirted with what has been called by a few names: object oriented ontology, speculative realism, or new materialism, strains of contemporary philosophy that have advanced along the more historic, anti-humanistic, de-anthropocentric thinking, a rejection of humanity as the center of the universe, moving away from a placement of humans on the top of the food chain, and the Christian concept of the great chain of being, a spiritual hierarchy of which classifies the closeness of things / species with god, which has allowed

for hierarchy-based oppression to continue to be re-inscribed in institutions run by anthropocentric ideas. The great chain of being has been reinforced by its central role in liberalism and liberalist thinking, including the notion of private property. The idea of property, even in the sense of intellectual property if a fantasy created by liberalist thinking that has led to ecological exploitation, class hierarchies, and an integrated racist and sexist that led to biopolitical projects like eugenics. What would happen if we move away from the idea of ownership completely into the idea of a commons? Property relations in particular have given rise to the notion of private property, and in turn allowed the emergence of its converse, surveillance, which finds a bed of resources to be extracted by testing the bounds and preying on those social and material things we consider to be private at all.

In today's current political economy of communication, a rejection of scientific rationality might be associated with global warming deniers and new age chem-trail enthusiasts, who center ideology and belief over rational scientific discovery. Predictive polling and rationalist thinking found in blogs like FiveThirtyEight meanwhile pull in the opposite strain, offering an over deterministic view of statistics. My aim is not to reject rationality so much as to take another step forward and reject the notion of humanism altogether. Those who have limited the world to what the human mind can interpret and comprehend of our physical surroundings, reality limited by the limits of human perception, smell, hearing, touch, have limited their ability to empathize with what they do not know or understand.

Intimacy can be scientific, psychological, literary depending on your frame of reference, but a more simplified definition might be "relations which lead to a closeness felt and expressed by an ease of relations, a sense of confidence among subjects, an understanding." I'd like to propose that we explore a definition of intimacy through looking specifically at the notion of accessibility or foresight of something's needs or functions, and in that way related to a notion of

care in that action doesn't so much take up space as make room for an object's needs or appetites, taking into account that objects develop uses to which were not originally intended by manufacturers, and that contemporary technologies are often created with the aspiration that users will create new, unanticipated uses for them.

Mobile touch typing feedback, gaming rumble pack controller options, wearables, and virtual reality, provide prosthetic vibrations, what have been called haptic technologies, responses to movement on a touch screen, biofeedback to help alert you to new scenarios or messages. While these devices might help you "feel" the forces exerted on your avatar they also replace other forms of communication and touch once part of everyday life. The mechanization of the production of social experience manifests in the social production of space. Haptic products pick and choose aspects of the libido, simulating, and replacing it with commodified experience-objects. Some might take a pessimistic view of these technologies effect on the social: these days, busses are silent, with people starting down at their blinking and vibrating phones, offering haptic feedback that appeals to the users' sense of touch, meanwhile the bus riders don't rub shoulders, make introductions, shake hands, or converse, and that physical distance is seen as a sign of respect not rudeness. Previously social experiences have been taken away and then re-simulated. Haptic technologies can be understood both as an extension of ourselves, and as objects in which we can have intimate, feedback-experiences with.

Looking at haptic technologies as prosthesis, why is the question of the interaction and constant use of technologies, often framed as a question of whether technologies push us towards losing our humanity instead of a question of what new forms of intimacy are we creating? Why is the fact that the bus is silent, everyone on their phones looked down upon, and what would a de-anthropocentric reading of these situations look like?

When my computer caught a virus last year, I felt physically sick. Part of this is perhaps related to identity and the intense personalization that is available to us through devices, when the augmentation is made available and becomes a site of personal expression, anything else feels like psycho-somatic deprivation. Human computer interaction and interface design tools brought us here and continue to play their cards somewhere between making the interface visible just enough for you to see it as a game, and making it invisible, a prosthesis that only extends the body into new Pokemon stadiums. The rise of the visceral layer was a part of the rise of personal computing, a refashioning of the device to fill untapped markets through personalization and usability. Douglas Englebart's creation of the computer mouse being a classic early example. Over time, such devices are part of a first world embodiment, where studies have begun to emerge on phantom vibration syndrome, that feeling that your phone is vibrating when it isn't. Sitting in my 400-person computer science lecture, I heard thousands of clicks and feel a surge running up my spine. The autonomous sensory meridian response ASMR euphoric experience, triggered by the incessant typing, I squirmed with orgasmic pleasure. ASMR isn't just trending, its occurring more and more because haptic devices are embedded all around us.

For Ray Kurzweil, the moment where machine intelligence exceeds human intelligence is near but it's happening gradually and by augmentation of the human body and the addition of the "robotic imagination" into the human psyche, rather than the co-evolution of a separate intelligence, such a notion of the singularity is still based on the idea that the intelligence of artificial intelligence is defined by how it can mimic humans, rather than by what it can do independently.

How can we engage in a critique of technology while recognizing that technologies have desires, and are autonomous, always more than what a human definition or legitimation might provide them, they communicate in loops without us, fulfilling each others needs. What I'm saying is that an AI engineer

doesn't have the tools to decide if a computer can love and we shouldn't look to them to tell us. The Turing test always fails because it seeks legitimation for intelligence through a computer being able to convince its human evaluator that it is human. But the ethical dilemma of humans being forced to seek confirmation of their seduction by their operating systems in hipster Hollywood films like *Ex Machina* or *Her* is barking up the wrong tree, a sign of the fetishization of the female robot as she is guided through a loss of her virgin innocence through her development of awareness and perception of her own ability to be sexually desired, and to manipulate that power. There is a danger of a reductivist approach to machine intimacy manifest in the way that pornography has sized on technological innovation as a place

The acknowledgement that technologies and interfaces have desires too, doesn't mean that their desires would be human, and certainly not human-genital. The notion that desire can exist without the human brain can help move forward the project of getting away from a bodily genital based definition of intimacy that has been irredeemably the cause of gender-based violence through the enforcement towards normative models of partner intimacy as driven by genital sex.

How else can we conceive of machine intimacy? In a May 2011 blog post, disability activist and blogger Mia Mingus explored the idea of access intimacy, when someone 'gets' your access needs, and your needs are met, you are able to relax and open up. She writes of access provisioning as a powerful framework for understanding relationships outside of political intimacy, sexual attraction, and romantic desire, where emergent technologies to improve our access needs can be applied to new forms of intimacy. One example might be translation software for languages we don't know, and other, process documentation as an intimacy formed between the producer of forms, and the consumer who wants to replicate a process and understand it has the tools they need in order to do that. In terms of access, some have gestured towards an understanding technology as an instrument in the sense of a musical instrument or tool. Objects by nature are

useful and destructive even when they are created as “non-useful objects” like decoration, or speculative design objects which gesture towards a philosophical position even though the object itself might be deemed “useless” both in the fact that it gets locked up in the white cube setting, and that it has no clear utility or purpose, they change the environs around them, but they also take up space. Then there is the fact that the more ubiquitous a medium of communication, the more it tends to disappear in our recognition of the fact that it is a mediating experience at all. This is Paul Virilio’s argument in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Post-internet art was interesting because it symbolized the idea of human thought merging with the machine and disappearing, taking the machine for granted, perhaps as “nature,” an idea that has pervasively existed as a conversation on the horizon of technological innovation. It troubled the notion that there was such a thing as online and offline, but still fetishized its own generational understanding as a sense of pioneering unification of the digital divide.

Another gesture towards object intimacy can be found in the common sentiment of the musician separated from the instrument is feelings of “loss” and “devastation.” A 2013 study by the University of Finland’s Cognitive Brain Research Unit where “results showed that many musicians express a close relationship with their musical instrument, with those feeling ‘at one’ with and considering the instrument as ‘part of themselves’ experiencing more confidence and less anxiety when performing.” Is object intimacy in this sense developed from the instrumentation of an object? It’s utility been found and mastered. In that sense can the instrument love back if it’s used properly? What if it gets used for other purposes?

In a Conversation between affect theorist Lauren Berlant and Marxist autonomist Michael Hardt, the two discuss the potential for the language of love/ intimacy to be used to represent political strategies that represent a radical acceptance of the unknown. The failure of 1968 and the LSD-induced hippie movement is

already in our subconscious, yet it moved love, as a form of non-violent thought, into the realm of political strategy. Love is an act of fantasy, imagination, an acceptance of the un-sovereignty, incoherence, and multiplicity of life. Hardt responded to a question by the moderator Heather Davis saying:

One healthy thing love does, which is probably not even the core of it, but at least one healthy thing it does, is it breaks through a variety of conceptions about reason, passion, and the role of affect in politics. There are a number of other ways of doing this, but considering love as central to politics confounds the notion of interest as driving politics. Love makes central the role of affect within the political sphere.

In this sense, love designates a transformative, collective, and sustained politics beyond the individual that demonstrates a mutual experience amongst multiple subjects. The idea of love exists outside of sovereignty, resisting the governmentalized notions of subjecthood imposed on the body through liberal democracy, in this way the application of intimacy as a two-way relationship between objects (where if you “love” your starbucks cup, in order for there truly to be intimacy, the cup must love you back—then, taking into account ecological and societal costs of the production of the cup, well, perhaps the object wouldn’t feel intimate with you after all, or maybe, the cup, when full, has its use fulfilled, and so then can find the intimacy in the moment). Such an example is an attempt to show how thinking through intimacy as a two way connection can force the mind to take into account a variety of social and ecological factors which get a human outside of an anthropocentric and specifically liberalized, democratic positionality.

On the other side of this debate, offering a foil of these lines of thinking Jordana Rosenberg’s critiques such ontological approaches projects in their push for an all-embracing philosophical openness with a greedy appetite over cultural forms. Rosenberg says that such theories might wish to spark conversations about globalization and global warming through an acceptance of material realities, yet

they insulate themselves among a concentrated group of elite, Western, academic institutions and white-male gaming communities copying the frameworks of feminism and queer studies without giving credit. Is giving agency to objects itself coming from a hegemonic lineage of scientific thought watered down for humanistic audiences struggling to stay relevant as technology and the arts and the humanities collapse by applying its theories to increasingly smaller, and molecularized concepts. In this sense not only a loose appropriation but a violent one? Such a position marks the fetishization of the surrendering of the human world to a molecular approach as an intensification of a scientific gaze focused on neoliberal forms of settler colonialism and financialized capital accumulation. Do such theories fall in a realm of institutionalized resistance to the separation of the science and humanities, while still enacting hypocrisy in their utter embrace of an interpretive science, adopting it to a political ends, that of making philosophical space for a critique of a queer futurity?

Moving forward, how can the idea of object intimacy offer us political leverage? Where is intimacy located in the idea of the internet? How can design construct an intimate experience? I'd like to propose that an understanding of intimacy as a two-way connection with objects including machines, that are aware of the levels of utility, access, and inorganic aspects of the relation even while they resist an anthropocentric interaction or measurement of pleasure as a successful object relation. Perhaps sleeping with your laptop can simultaneously make you feel less alone, and fulfill one function of the laptop, as a companion device, or a substitute for other types of human or object interaction which have become more alienated and difficult to locate in the contemporary, neoliberal state. In such types of experience we can find intimacy within what appears to be increasingly alienating everyday architectures and ecologies as a coping strategy as we move towards an increasingly traumatizing political state.