

Dean Kenning's Kinetics

John Roberts

Kinetic art and animatronic sculpture have until recently been mostly condescended to in critical art theory. This may have something to do with the fetishized opposition between technological 'failure' and captivation by technical adroitness that machines in art tend to succumb to, in a kind of binary embrace. The first position invariably identifies machine-technology with an attack on technological progress; the second position with the fluent insertion of art into machine-technology as an extension of art's post-aesthetic use-values – art needs to remind itself that its relationship to the new lives in the same world as technology. The first position under-identifies with technology (mostly through irony and hyperbaton), the second position, over-identifies with technology, in the hope of art exiting from modernist negation into a newly positivistic world of art and science. Despite, the pitfalls of both positions (the crowd pleasing and quirky, and the sleek and imposing), it is the first position that continues to have the greater scope for critical inventiveness. Building or utilizing machines that 'don't work' or 'work badly' – resulting in outcomes that are adventitious or strangely hybrid – allows some light into the understanding of technology as an ensemble of social relations. Building machines that 'do work', not only obviously bypasses this, but attaches the rationalization of art's outcomes to the belief that art might have a part to play in reordering or humanizing technological reason and progress. This is why the dream of such machine-builders is to move out of art all together, in the way computer programmers, technicians and engineers have left their specialist scientific domains to find a common home in the games industry and techno-sphere generally. Both positions are involved in 'world-building' in this sense, but these two worlds are very much chalk and cheese: the latter sees machines and technological knowledge in art as part of 'cultural production', the former wants nothing to do with this, and sees old and abandoned technologies and old machines as a space for reflection on what technology carries along with it, like a virus: imminent death, violence and the loss of reason.

In this sense, this salvaging is not strictly anti-technology, but anti-historicist, and functions precisely as a ghost-practice in which old technologies form a revenant landscape of lost or diminished use-values. This approach subjects old technologies less to a sense of an 'ending', than to a deflationary re-imagining on the basis that technology never truly arrives at its destination: the rational distribution and organization of human needs. This is why much of this work, with its refunctioning of redundant machinery and parts, taps into DIY, eco-conservationist mode. This refunctioning of old machines, or the making of new machines from old parts and components, allows the artist to open out the possible part that art (as non-instrumental technique) might play in a new mode of production; a mode of creative non-growth.

But, if the deflationary logic of these DIY ghost-practices appeals to 'failure' as the subfusc truth of technological progress, this sense of loss also enables the artist to draw significantly on another sense of loss, the relationship between technology and (surplus) jouissance: that is, the notion of technology – in its deathly passing – as a dead realm of desire, or more generously, trapped desires unable to attach them-

selves to new drives. It is precisely this sense of ghostliness, that Dean Kenning has been concerned with in his own kinetic refunctioning of old machines and machine parts. His investment in 'moving art' more broadly is less the result of idiosyncratic eco-tinkering, than a re-assimilation of machines as things that were once drivers of surplus-jouissance and, as such, things that had not just a functional, but an imaginary, hold over lives. This is strikingly evident in his large kinetic-'musicological' installation *The Origin of Life* (2019, shown at Beaconsfield, London March–April 2019). A number of motion sensors placed inconspicuously around the gallery floor triggered one or two thick, white, silicon rubber 'fingers', to play, 21 small electronic keyboards (including one analogue synthesizer) from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Bontempi, Korg, Casio and Yamaha), repeatedly striking the same notes in a kind of manic persistence. Moving quickly around the work, navigating various routes, you could trigger all the 'fingers' simultaneously creating a cacophonous overlapping of clusters of repeated notes. When the cacophony dissipated, invariably there would be one or two 'fingers' that would have switched off in the act of depressing a key and so certain notes persisted longer than the rest, as if they were urging the other keyboards to continue. Indeed, this forlornness is what remained most distinctive about the installation, particularly when the sound of one keyboard faded to be replaced by another and then another, in a kind of desperate and diminishing chorus of sonic assertion. The human-aided discontinuity or broken temporality of the sound, consequently, produced a distinctive user-work relationship. Rather than 'turning on' a pre-set system, the triggering of the sensors produced a strange intersubjective relationship with the 'fingers', as if the visitor was less the audience, than the 'other' of the 'fingers' desire. It felt as if you were giving life to the 'fingers' in order that they could persist in their slightly demented need to make a noise at all costs, before blackness and silence descended again. This is why the forlornness of the solitary 'fingers' banging away for all they were worth, felt like a kind of pleading from inside the death-drive of technology, as if the 'fingers' were the last bodily remnants of a jouissance barely recognisable as jouissance, given that desire in this fragmented state was now embodied in the nonhuman and thus unable truly, fully to attach itself to its own autonomous drives.

This interface between the nonhuman and human gives the kinetic dynamic of *The Origin of Life* its peculiar force and wild, anxious, 'subjectivity'; machine and rote, mechanized desire, are brought to repetitive, frustrated, splenetic life by the unconscious sadism of the visitor ('play, play, play'; 'entertain me'); and, as such, what appears to be given life 'intersubjectively', is in the end, sustained by non-reciprocity. The visitor brings the 'fingers' to life, but only, as a repetitive exercise. This is why the imputed musicological content of the piece is perhaps misleading; even if the structure of the work owes a formal debt to a post-Cageian, aleatoric aesthetics, the 'aesthetic' outcome of the sound patterns is incidental to the staging and impact of the 'fingers' ghostly jouissance. Indeed, the 'fingers' announce their fading desire not just as the amnesiacal and broken recovery of lost musical horizons and pleasures (of good times, spent in the presence of ecstatic 'repetitive beats'; of clubs now closed and deserted), but as a kind of self-brutalizing libidinal entrapment; that is, the frenetic and repetitive outbursts appear to 'reason desire' back into the 'same', rather than give up the desire of desire for one

moment. And this of course is where the disenchantment, repetition and pain of jouissance under capitalism intersect, at their most intense, with the utopian; or at least its dulled memory.

This relationship between the uncanny and unexpected life in the inhuman human-like body-fragment is well known. Getting robot-like machines or machine parts to perform human-like actions, is denaturalizing in precisely this uncanny way; and Kenning's keyboards as broken 'desiring-machines' do this beautifully: the pleading, 'forgetful' repetition of the sounds, appears unbearably close to a call for love, insofar as the mechanical 'fingers' mimicry of (barely functioning) human drives, demands from the respondent an immediate, affective response. Indeed, the response to this call is the basis of the work's uncanny technological-sadistic relation: 'I'm still lovable, look what I can do'. 'Talk to me' says the talking doll. 'Play me, play me, I haven't forgotten,' say Kenning's keyboards. Getting Kenning's 'fingers' to move then is 'irresistible' to the visitor, precisely because the stomping of feet gets us to take a pleasure from the hubristic overcoming of the past, at the same as the 'fingers' ask us to listen to the fragile but persistent 'voices' released by the superseded technologies. And this is why ghost-kinetics and the charms of physical, machinic animation in art remains such an uneasy, even queasy, affective experience; the broken DIY machine wants you to be its friend, so to speak – to get you to see through the technological sadism of the 'new' – even when, as in the case of Kenning's sad, floppy 'fingers', all you want to do is punish it for its sickly pleading presumptuousness and run a mile from its demand for love.

We also see this intersection between fascination, revulsion and violence in Kenning's *Untitled (Rubber Plant)* (2019) which is very different in formal structure and animating logic than the *The Origin of Life*. Nevertheless the pair of slightly malign sparring, rubber plant-figures, requires the spectator to find a point of understanding with them as believable sentient-like presences, as they angrily feint and dodge, as opposed to seeing it coldly as a kind of clunky fairground attraction, worked by hidden hands. If *The Origin of Life* stages the fading of jouissance as a kind of melancholic nonhuman remnant, imposing the sadism of surplus-jouissance (embodied in new technology) over the deathly passing of old technologies and desires, here desire takes a sentient nonhuman form that challenges the very boundaries of human desire as such. Here new life as a human-created 'second nature' – synthetic Life 2.0 – comes out fighting: two synthetic plants, square up to each other or dirty dance for territory and perhaps for sexual dominance, like Victor Hugo's fantasy of "murderous plants in subterranean combat". Whatever the slightly quixotic nature of this image, the overriding effect is deeply unappealing and threatening. In this respect, this is not just a commonplace image of vegetable 'second nature' gone rogue or 'super-smart', familiar from the outer-reaches of popular science and contemporary science fiction film. Rather, as in *The Origin of Life*, Kenning uses machinic animation to bring desire and science into alignment with freedom and non-reciprocity.

One of the key axioms of current ecological thinking is 'solidarity' with the nonhuman, on the basis that the human and nonhuman coexist, indeed are indivisible. But what if the sentient nonhuman is indifferent, even antagonistic, to this solidarity? In a future world of thinking and self-organizing plants

and self-organizing life-forms, non-reciprocity will be a matter of life and death with nonhuman desire and the threat of sadism. And perhaps, this is the key to Kenning's underlying attraction to kinetics: it not only allows the artist to create revenant and heteroclitic desires from dead technological remnants, allowing us a relationship with machines that provides us a little breathing space from the death-drive of technology, but also enables him to produce, strange, fictive, living, aggressive forms, that sharpen the limits of our understanding of reciprocity and human solidarity with the immanent violence of the human-indifferent human-created nonhuman. On this basis, Kenning's kinetics are not, exactly, dystopian; the denaturalization of nature here is not a mourning for a lost 'first nature' or 'human values', but a recognition that the creative biogenetic refunctioning of nature does not mean that solidarity with the nonhuman will be a violence-free process. Post-anthropocentric humans, as a condition of their freedom and therefore their exit from necessity will be forced to release themselves from the solidarity with this new nature – to kill what plans to kill them. There is no harmony with nature waiting for us, even if we get through this current global ecological crisis. Indeed, this is because the development of 'second nature' is part of the emancipatory solution to this crisis itself and will bring with it inevitably its own pathologies and reciprocal limits, unless humans in their post-anthropocentric penitence, truly do take the critique of human 'egoism' seriously and willingly offer themselves up in solidarity to the needs of these new nonhuman lifeforms – as foodstuff. Then the problem of non-reciprocity and surplus-jouissance will certainly be solved – at least for human life.

John Roberts is a philosopher and writer and the author of a number of books, including, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (Verso, 2007), *The Necessity of Errors* (Verso, 2010), *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (Verso, 2015), *Thoughts on an Index Not Freely Given* (Zero Books, 2016), and *The Reasoning of Unreason: Universalism, Capitalism and Disenlightenment* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

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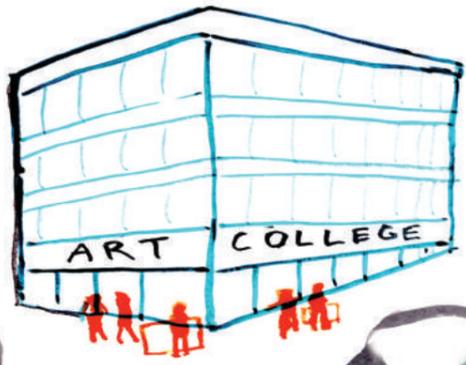
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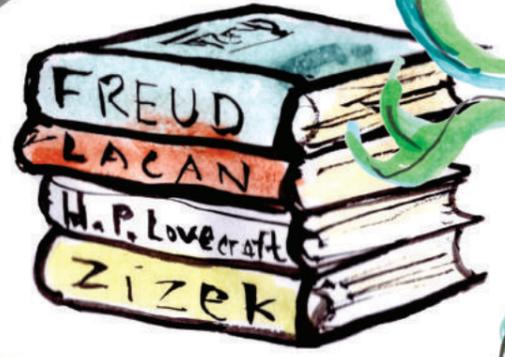


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