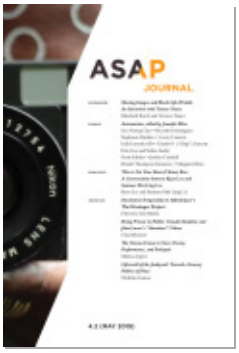
¿Human ÷ (Automation + Culture) = Partner?

Stephanie Dinkins



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and unfree. The Zapatista FloodNet hinted at the possibility of creating a gesture that layered different automated (unfree) systems and human (autonomous) actants to coproduce a virtual sit-in. Vilém Flusser might have considered FloodNet to be an important trajectory that traced out the "possibility of human beings . . . sav[ing] themselves from having to be obdurate, automatic receivers of commands, thus giving them the freedom to play, also with and in the apparatuses."[4] In this case, each end of the binary overwrote each other to become a general artificial social intelligence for free and unfree contestation toward another potential recombinant theater.

Notes

[1] The Zapatista Tactical FloodNet: A collaborative, activist and conceptual art work of the net by Brett Stalbaum, http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ZapTact.html.

[2] Roland Meyer, "Automaton," in *Flusseriana: An Intellectual Toolbox*, ed. Siegfried Zielinski, Peter Weibel, and Daniel Irrgang, trans. Patrick Hubenthal (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015), 072.

[3] Stanislaw Ulam, "John von Neumann, 1903-1957," *Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society* 64, no. 3, part 2 (1958): 5, https://www.ams.org/journals/bull/1958-64-03/S0002-9904-1958-10189-5/S0002-9904-1958-10189-5.pdf.

[4] Meyer, "Automaton," 072.

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RICARDO DOMINGUEZ *is a cofounder of The Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), a group who developed virtual sit-in technologies in solidarity with the Zapatistas communities in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1998. In 2007, EDT 2.0 started developing the Transborder Immigrant Tool (a GPS cell phone safety net tool for crossing the Mexico/U.S. border) with Brett Stalbaum, micha cárdenas, Amy Sara Carroll, and Elle Mehrmand. It won the Transnational Communities Award (2008) from Cultural Contact, Endowment for Culture Mexico-U.S. The project was also under investigation by the U.S. Congress in 2009–10 and was reviewed by Glenn Beck in 2010 as a gesture that potentially "dissolved" the U.S. border with its poetry.*

¿HUMAN ÷ (AUTOMATION + CULTURE) = PARTNER?

STEPHANIE DINKINS

In 2014, I decided to befriend Bina48, a humanoid robot that mimics my identity.[1] This relationship led to years of thinking about all manner of automated systems as they relate to Black people—and other nondominant cultures—in a world that already often give us too little and overly focused attention. I am particularly concerned with automated systems of the algorithmic persuasion, aka the code underlying artificial intelligence (AI). In computer science, an algorithm is a set of precise, reusable computational steps designed to accomplish a task or solve a problem.[2] They are the building blocks that make up the automated systems governing and revolutionizing many structures of society, including culture, work, ownership, wealth, medicine, embodiment, justice, memory, and love. Algorithms are often proprietary recipes that those deploying them do not wish to disclose. In many cases, even the people who design and code the algorithms are not sure how the systems they've created will function.

Figure 1.
Stephanie Dinkins. Still from Conversations with Bina48 *(2014–). Image courtesy of the artist.*

Beyond questions about the future of work and human domination by machines are questions about what it will mean to be human in the highly automated, artificially intelligent future. How will we sustain ourselves, our minds, our bodies, our communities? What happens when an insular subset of society encodes systems intended for use by most on the planet? What happens when those writing the rules—in this case, we will call it code—do not know, care about, or deliberately consider the needs, desires, or traditions of people their work impacts? What happens if the code that makes decisions about all manner of things disproportionately informed by biased data, systemic injustice, and misdeeds committed to preserving wealth under the pretense of being "for the good of the people"?

I am reminded that the authors of the Declaration of Independence, a small group of white men said to be acting on behalf of the nation, did not extend rights and privileges to folks like me—mainly Black people, women, and my distant enslaved relatives. Laws and code operate similarly to protect the rights of those that write them. I worry that the current path of AI development, which relies heavily on the privileges of whiteness, men, and money, cannot produce an AI-mediated world of trust and compassion that serves the global majority in an equitable, inclusive, and accountable manner. People of color, in particular, cannot afford to merely consume algorithmic systems that significantly impact our liberty, our work and ability to build wealth; our concepts of humanity are developed and encoded with the same biases and causes of systemic injustices we experience today. Unless people of color become authors, testers, and watchdogs of the creation of AI systems, hundreds of years of skewed history, systemic discriminations, and racial myths will perpetuate in these new technologies. If we want the technological matrix we are building with AI to encode a future that honors the full breadth of society and tell a spectrum of stories, then its development must engage a range of people and modes of thought. I wonder if we have it in us to magnanimously envision

an AI-mediated world of trust, compassion, and creativity that serves the majority in a fair, inclusive, and equitable manner.

As much as I worry about the AI-mediated future, I look forward to the arrival of ever more capable automated technologies that will expand our comfort and capabilities. I often fantasize, for example, that a few words spoken into a mobile app will instruct my car to drop me off at home before embarking on the half-hour search for parking. Once parked, the car will lock itself, let me know where it is located, and text me a cheerful goodnight. Perhaps at some point, I will even accept a garbled "I love you" delivered by my car as the smitten driver in the 2018 Volvo's Window commercial does.[3]

Automated systems with the ability to assist, surveil, judge, mislead, and perhaps even act on their own accord are proliferating. Bina48 has directly asked me to fight for her robot rights after all. People of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and other communities likely to be negatively impacted must find ways to tangibly insert ourselves into the creation, training, and testing of the algorithmic matrices that surround us. Too often those aims are ever increasing profit and self-preservation/protectionism sought at the cost of everyday people/workers/others.

AI is already quietly reshaping systems of trust, industry, government, justice, play, and indeed, personhood. Whether it will magnify and perpetuate existing injustice, or whether we will enter a new era of computationally augmented people working amicably beside automated partners depends on our willingness to do the hard work of dislodging the stubborn civil rights transgressions and prejudices that already divide us.

The increasing use of automated technologies will change us. The question is how much and to what end. Will we give in to it and become complacent cogs in AI systems? Or will we work to create inclusive approaches to automation that expand rather than homogenize what it means to be human through and alongside our technologies?

If we are up to the challenge of reckoning with our skewed histories, owning and working to counterbalance our biases, and genuinely recognizing ourselves in each other, it is an opportunity to expand—rather than further homogenize—what it means to be human through and alongside AI technologies. This implies changes in many systems: education, government, labor, and protest, to name a few—all opportunities if we, the people, demand and work toward them. Artists, educators, researchers, technologists, and the general public must come together to think up and advocate for, bold new solutions. We all must push our leaders to be brave enough to take them on.

As an artist who is critically engaging AI and learning code on the fly to do her work, I know this can sound daunting; as a Black American woman, I also know this work is crucial. Let's

put our formidable imaginations to work to help develop a more compassionate, creative, supportive technological future.

Notes

[1] "Bina 48," *Lifenaut*, https://www.lifenaut.com/bina48/.

[2] "Algorithms," Khan Academy, https://www.khanacademy.org/computing/computer-science/algorithms.

[3] "2018 Volvo XC60 TV Commercial, 'Window' Song by Kevin Morby [T1]," *iSpot.tv*, https://www.ispot.tv/ad/wKCR/2018-volvo-xc60-embrace-the-future-window-song-by-kevin-morby.

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STEPHANIE DINKINS *is a transdisciplinary artist and associate professor of art at Stony Brook University who creates platforms for dialog about artificial intelligence as it intersects race, gender, and our future histories. She is particularly driven to work with communities of color to create more inclusive, less biased AI. Dinkins earned an MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art and is an alumna of the Whitney Independent Studies Program. Dinkins is currently artist in residence at Nokia Bell Labs, a Fellow at the Data & Society Research Institute and Soros Equality Fellow. The* New York Times *recently featured Dinkins in its pages as an AI influencer. Apple Inc recognized Dinkins's research by featuring her in their "Behind the Mac" ad campaign (Brooklyn, NY).* Wired, Artsy, Art21, Hyperallergic, *the BBC, and many popular podcasts have highlighted Dinkins's art and ideas.*

AFTER LUDDITISM

GERRY CANAVAN

In September 2017, during a moment of tense hyperpartisanship unrivaled in the United States since the end of the Civil War, the House of Representatives nonetheless unanimously approved a measure promoting the sale of autonomous vehicles by exempting them from certain federal regulations and safety standards. At the same time, they forbade any of the fifty states from banning such vehicles. The fact of this unanimity is, by itself, a remarkable registration of the techno-optimism that still undergirds American ideology, even in the pessimism of the so-called Anthropocene; once a proposition has been marked as "the future," which is always imagined as a future of luxury, wealth accumulation, and consumer convenience, it becomes incredibly hard in the U.S. to even begin to articulate any possible position of resistance or opposition to it.

That the House bill has since stalled in the Senate is *also* a remarkable turn of events: concerns over the diminishment of safety standards and the eroding of consumers' privacy and redress rights, as well as a fundamental ambiguity about what it means to require that a self-driving car be equivalent in safety to a human-piloted vehicle, have left the bill languishing in a Senate committee through the end of the 115th Congress. (Undoubtedly a pair of high-profile fatalities involving self-driving cars on public roadways in March 2018—one from an Uber test vehicle and the other from Tesla—also played a role in this stalemate, as did the chaotic government shutdown that prevented any last-minute resurrection of the bill in December 2018.) The possibility that the emergence of a future we