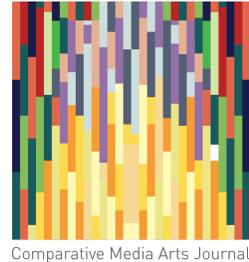


american made machines

Christopher M. Carruth



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Abstract

We live in the age of the algorithm. It's organized around an ancient impulse alive and well in both the contemporary collective and individual — the desire to bring order to chaos, to control the unknown, to domesticate the wild. In this contemporary moment, in the digital age, we experience this impulse through an obsession with information, convenience, and productivity. The machine is us, yet only a projection of a very slim part of ourselves: that portion devoted to efficiency, order, and cold logic.

A great deal of our lives are shaped by the dynamic of this techno-social reality, with a logical terminus on this quest for illusory control being a world where every interaction is monitored, analyzed, optimized, commodified, exploited - where every thing + every one is objectified and thus, ultimately, controlled. Indeed, the underlying, if unstated, ethos of a data driven society is that all stable processes we shall predict; all unstable processes we shall control. The price of this quest for constructed order is a world without genuine wildness, without chaos, without chance.

the *american made machines* series agitates the normative process of being online, ultimately interrupting the alluded to impulse and creating an unknown, wild, and random visual aesthetic. It is not only a subversion of the structure and driving forces of the internet, but a method to

create instead a space for reflection; an attentional prosthetic which reminds one that we must transform ourselves to transform the world.

Keywords: resistance, interruption, subversion, net.art, embodied experience

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It's 2018, the end of March and it's no longer a question of getting somewhere on the Internet, but instead one of how we are navigating with and through it, just as it's navigating us. A student asks if FB is creeping on them, that they get spooked when they talk with their friends about being hungover and ads - not just on FB, but everywhere - start showing up for "boozy brunches" and "hangover remedies"....

....I tell them that FB doesn't need to be actively listening.

That so long as you are logged in FB already knows where you were last night (thanks location services!) That FB's algorithms triangulate your GPS coordinates alongside that of the people who were near you during the evening, particularly FB friends, validating location(s). You further verify based on the check-in at the bar or on that selfie you uploaded (the slight blur further proves your inebriated state.) They make an inference about the timing of your 2am Uber ride, you know, when bars close (good on you for not driving...) Now, today, you've searched for Bloody Mary recipes, made an online reservation for brunch (or ordered food), all while tagging your friend in more blurry pics. Your friends exhibited the same pattern of behavior as does your larger demographic. Add this together, and, voilà! An educated guess a la predictive analytics. As for why and how the ads started showing up outside of FB's network? Ask Shoshanna...she says that's the system at play¹ & I couldn't agree more.

¹ In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshanna Zuboff explores how surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data. The capture and mining of data lies at the heart of the business models of the most successful firms - Meta, Google, Apple, Amazon, etc and otherwise. Given that these entities are viewed as content providers and their data mining is based on an opt-in system, the tradeoff between privacy and convenience has largely been accepted. Yet, in 2017 the USA's Federal Communications Commission revoked the Broadband Consumer Privacy Proposal, opening the door for ISPs to capture + mine data. To be clear, you do not need to use Facebook or Google to go online. But you most certainly do need a service provider. There is no-opt out for that. #NewNormal #SadFace #VeryveryverySadFace

To use a metaphor, you don't have to drive a car to get around, but modern N. America was built with motorists in mind. So it goes with life in our current digital age. You don't need to use the internet to survive (not in the purest sense of the word) but if you want to participate in the full range of what the 21st century has to offer, then you kinda, sorta, just a touch, have to feed the machine. This is the society, the economy, the brave new world we live in.

Zuboff, Shoshana. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of*

i remind myself
that i have to remind myself, that
you cannot love something and exploit it at the same time ²

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There's an inherent value, an urgency even, in revisiting our relationship to what Timothy Morton describes as the "*whirring machinery of capitalism*".³ As a hyperobject, the internet and the riches of its always on ubiquity, envelope us. We cannot stand outside them, we cannot think without them; the system reflects us. Quoting Harvard Magazine⁴ from a public discussion between noted Sociologist E.O. Wilson and James Watson, moderated by NPR correspondent R. Krulwich, (9.10.09), "*The real problem of humanity is the following: we have paleolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and god-like technology. And it is terrifically dangerous, and it is now approaching a point of crisis overall.*" "*Until we understand ourselves,*" concluded Wilson, "*until we answer those huge questions of philosophy that the philosophers abandoned a couple of generations ago — Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?*" *We're on very thin ground.*"

When you have godlike technologies, you need the wisdom to match that power. Our relationship to technology has not allowed for our wisdom and thinking to be commensurate with the complexity present. Modern technosocial systems and applications are further undermining our ability to make sense of the world. We don't have balance or scarcity, rather we have the

Power. New York: PublicAffairs.

² Chabria, A. (2018, May 27). *Amazon's Love memo*. Medium. Retrieved June 19, 2022, from <https://scashwin.medium.com/amazons-love-memo-39dc4118d533>

³ Timothy Morton's concept of the *hyperobject* underscores my work. For those unfamiliar, Morton uses the term to explain objects so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization, such as climate change, "styrofoam", black holes, socio-economic classes, the biosphere, and "*the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism.*" The latter of which can presently be interpreted as not only internet-related opaque machinery and inscrutable code, but the resulting manifestation of our aspirations, our fears, our selves. In this system, with those aspirations as inputs, and data and predictive algorithms as key outputs, the general thrust of the field is that all stable processes we shall predict; all unstable processes we shall control. What follows is a present spiritual inertia, our current crisis, our failure of imagination.

Morton, T. (2021). *Hyperobjects philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. University of Minnesota Press.

⁴Referencing Interview with Harvard Magazine:
<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/breaking-news/james-watson-edward-o-wilson-intellectual-entente>

opposite. More info, more access, more data, and, as a result, less wisdom. Moreover, our technology does not emerge from a vacuum rather it is the reification of a particular set of beliefs and desires. We believe we are creating the system for our own purposes and making it in our own image, yet the technologies built upon algorithmic thinking are only projections of a very slim part of ourselves: that portion devoted to efficiency, order, and cold logic. This produces a crisis that, if nothing else, is a crisis of imagination - we are failing to see life in any other way - with a clear/present outcome being the prioritization of profits over people.

The *american made machines* series reveals a hidden and alternative potentiality inside of our relationship to modern technology, while simultaneously encouraging a reflection of the personal, ethical, and social dimensions to this dynamic. The work is as much a (re)presentation of the form and function of the always-on digital infrastructure of our 21st century lives as it is a chance to revisit individual intentionality and possible futures within this relationship. While the imagery itself is literally composed of HTML and CSS objects, through their algorithmically generative transformation these visualizations function as abstract color fields or Rorschach tests. This seductive (re)presentation of the www asks you to look inward as much as it does into the digital world. What is your relationship to the internet, to screens, and technology at large? How do you define productivity? Where is your attention? On a larger scale, are we ready to do the difficult work of training ourselves out of problematic internet behaviors and into a deeper appreciation of one's own role within these systems? How do you confront and factor in your role within these systems? What do you want it – and yourself + the future – to be?

Interruption as a tactic is useful, yet the solution is not simply a pivot to the overused and facile notion of “being present”⁵, which views base awareness as a solution to past problems and future potential. This new-age informed intentionality is misguided and half-baked. Rather, if we must rely on intention, let's intentionally borrow from our understandings of the past and future. From the past, take what we've learned – regrets and triumphs and the great swath of the middle — to make more meaningful choices; we pull from the past in order to inform our richer future. And, from the future, we remind ourselves that certain things are undone. Once we do this, once we locate ourselves as flowing between past and future, in this moment, we begin to expand a

⁵Our culture of the screen, of information, produces an experiential poverty. We are inundated with information, with activities, with notifications and tasks. It's easy to assume the essence of the problem of technology is technological, but it's you and me and everyone we know - our technology is an extension of us.

previously narrow cultural, personal, and digital language for how to live. That is the importance of creating a contemplative experience: pausing the world (wide web) is not about turning your back on your surroundings, but rather the opposite. It's seeing the world a bit more clearly, reconnecting with yourself - the one thing you can always change - and moving forward with intention. In this light, *american made machines* serves as an attentional prosthetic, ultimately interrupting our desires to control and creating an unknown, wild, and random visual aesthetic.

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While, the work best presents as a contemplative immersive installation in which viewers are encouraged to stay and contemplate the display for an extended duration, it can be just as useful as participatory art. To that end:

Instructions for running *american made machines*⁶:

1. Step one: Open your web browser of choice (may I recommend Google Chrome?)
2. Step two: Navigate to a webpage of your choosing (might I suggest your Gmail Inbox, calendar, drive, slide, note, etc?)
3. Step three: In your browser open the browser console
 1. In Chrome, for Mac OS: Cmd + Opt + J
 2. In Chrome, for Windows and Linux: Ctrl + Shift + J
 1. Instructions for opening the console across a variety of browsers are [here](#)
4. A new pane will open in the current window.
 1. Disregard errors or other notifications in this new panel, instead scroll towards the bottom and look for the Console space (marked by '>')

⁶The original code, and subsequent versions, were informed by the generous work of Alexander Rice and James Bridle. Standing on the shoulders of giants, always.

5. At the '>' copy and paste the following:

```
function FeverDream ()
{let hexNumber = Math.floor(Math.random() * (16 ** 6)); return "#" +
hexNumber.toString(16).padStart(6, "0"); }

let paragraphs = document.querySelectorAll("*");

function HitMeWithYourBestShot () {
for (let paragraph of paragraphs)
{
paragraph.style.fontSize = Math.random()*0+"px";
paragraph.style.backgroundColor = FeverDream();
paragraph.style.filter = "blur(25px)";
}
}
setInterval(HitMeWithYourBestShot,5000);
```

6. Hit Enter. Close the console window. Go full screen.

If you have an understanding of Javascript, or a general curiosity, you are encouraged to tweak various variables to produce different results. This code is an instrument - make some music.

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The pulsing heart of my artistic process is concerned with how the interplay, or tension, between control and release often forces a constructivistic, contemplate, state. Letting go; losing oneself to find oneself. This work is an example of that process, with the randomization of various HTML/CSS allowing for a literal and figurative measure of such. The decision to edge towards random sizes of these objects as well as color - as opposed to a limited, or black and white, palette - is a conscious choice as I view this vibrancy lends itself to optimism. And, at heart, I'm an optimist. I want the audience to be reminded that we must transform ourselves to transform the world, that while within this hyperobject we maintain some measure of autonomy and control. So drop out - like they did in the 60s - and move laterally to connection with self.



Image 1. *american made machines*, 2021+ C-Print, Generative Code / Gmail Inbox

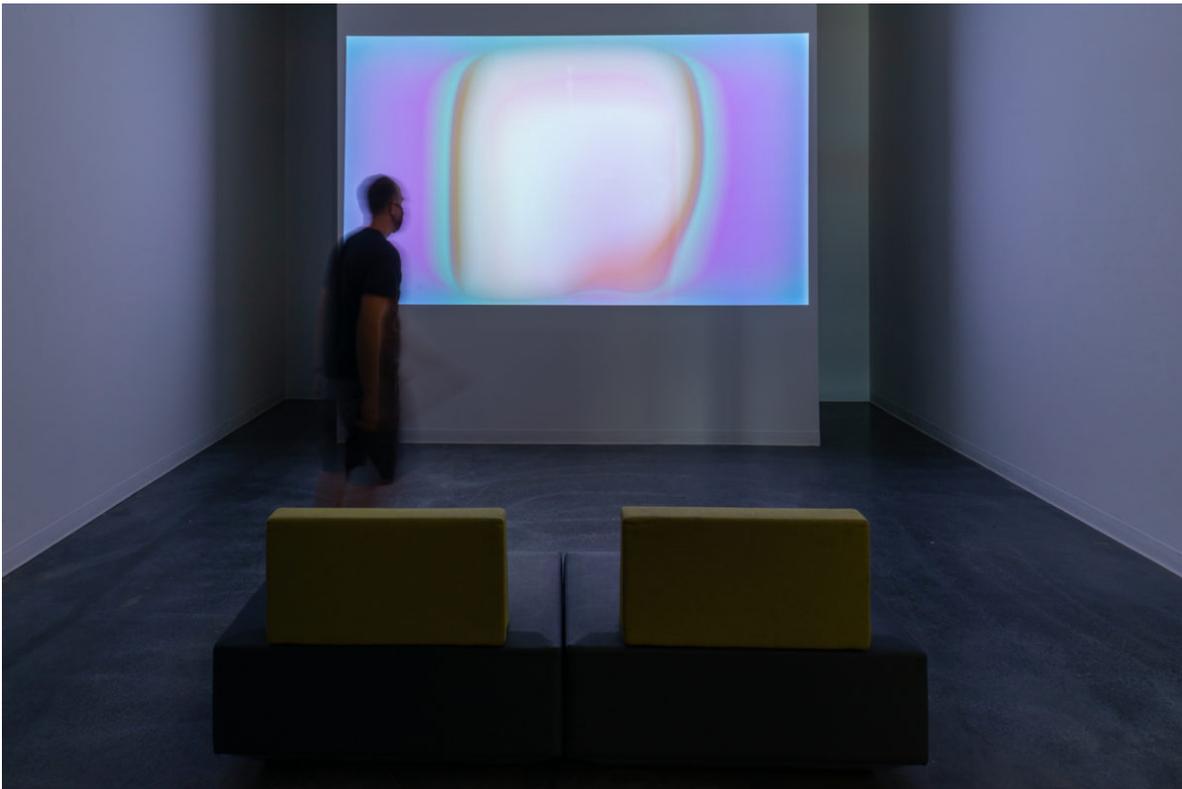


Image 2. *american made machines*, 2021+ C-Print, Generative Code / Meta feed⁷

⁷Video of the code running may be found [here \(meta\)](#) and [here \(google\)](#).

About the Author

Christopher M. Carruth is an artist, educator, and technologist. He is currently rostered as Associate Teaching Professor of Information Sciences at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

His creative work is an investigation into society and technology's mutual influence. As a practice, he's interested in how data, text, imagery, and the body serve as critical mediators towards understanding the social, emotional, and existential impacts of technology on contemporary life, with an eye towards critical making and reimagining future potential. The complexities which emerge from digital cultures and our technologized landscapes are research subjects, while the methods of interaction, exploration, and engagement collapse into a research-based practice that itself formally resolves as time-based media, creative coding, poetics, performance, and new media. More than anything, he works toward developing attentional prosthetics so we can more fully inhabit this eternal present.

He currently splits time making/teaching/(un)learning/questioning/making friends with animals at parties between Vancouver, BC, and Boulder, CO.