

Thinking ecology through my Fairphone 2.

Here, at the dispersed and diffuse horror-show that is the human species' slow-witted acclimatisation to their parasitical relationship with (of all things) the climate, two breeds of fallacious 'eco-solutions' abound. They both aim for hermetically sealed micro or macro communities and in this they **both close down contingency, risk and play**. The first attempted solution travels along the hopelines of regressive smallholding; a bunkering down with our immediate kith and kin and eating occasional goat and roadkill. While the second approach embodies itself in the figure of the geo-engineer; aiming skyward for some measure of techno-utopia, a top-down application of supplementary grafts and infrastructural overhauls until an inevitable societal model that can accommodate "acceptable" (for this read *neoliberal definition of acceptable*) symbiosis of human and nonhuman concerns can be forged.

(ASIDE: Interestingly, the recent renewal of a fervent enthusiasm for the colonisation of Mars by various billionaires and their audiences points to a hybrid incorporation of both fantasies: a highly-advanced technological smallholding with remarkably little of modern life's luxuries coupled with the benefit of literally no extant lifeforms to poison us or for us to poison. Guilt free, free from shame and history, joyless off in the **wild red yonder**. Throwing out all the babies with all the bathwater.)

Both solutions differ in the scale, style and application of their models and tools (though if forced to choose, the regressive option certainly possesses a less carbon-heavy outcome, not to mention a more playful relationship with temporality than the other) in truth both remain trapped in an understanding of the planet as *for us* or, as some recent theorists have dubbed an 'agrilogistic' model of thinking. This monotheistic-Marxist understanding of the 'self' as consumer-by-birthright, separated from the Mystic-Mother Infinite-Provider of the environment, persists even as the absolutely enmeshed interrelations between humans and nonhumans are amplified to ridiculous, cancerous and baroque scales.

(ASIDE: *The Innovator propagates HIS Martian seed gazing up at the **nominally-blue dot** he knows to be intimately rife with chaotic life. The Forager artfully manipulates a zone of familial dependence that isolates HIS family from lethal encounters with the horrid proximity of chaotic life.*)

These dual responses to the indigestible phenomena of mass extinction and a weather model that is bizarrely and uncannily Deistic in its retributory flavour reveal themselves not as tactical – stances working towards a future of coexistence – but the reactionary fumbling of a subject aflame. Petroleum-soaked scraps hysterically dabbing out the framework.

We can interpret these binary shout-outs of '*progress!*' and '*retreat!*' (or '*accelerate!*' and '*reverse!*') as symptomatic of the same understanding, simultaneous reactions to the shock of material intimacy that global warming and its concomitant revelations force onto the previously isolated and innocent (*i.e. blood-soaked yet oblivious*) modern subject.

The violence of it, this unveiling. To take a lifeform that has lived as if it were a human being and to reveal to it that:

→ it is in fact a human being
→ that this being-human also involved being enmeshed with every other human, the entire planet and everything in it constantly to widely-varying degrees, and
→ that the human-corner of this enmeshed specieshood has been being really fucking destructive in a relentlessly alarming fashion for the entirety of the subject's conscious existence,

is to put any individual's sense of self, world and cosmology under an remarkable amount of strain, especially given the weight of the ecological crisis. Any renewed intimacy with the stuff of the planet is a renewed intimacy with the anthropogenic slaughter of the stuff of the planet. In this context it is understandable that many flee to the smallholding and the off-planet colony, far from the *charnel-ground* of planet Earth.

The agrilogistic model that has consumed and continues to pick the bones of the world (literally) via industrialised globalisation has no single, autonomous mind, but it does possess gigantic structural momentum, and the minds of its occupants (us) are both the biosphere of and the fuel behind this fatal momentum.

(ASIDE: potential hope exists in the possibility that an agrilogistic mindset will consume it's ideological home [our minds] at a faster pace than its parent model [neoliberalism] does the planet.)

The eruptive barrage of sensory awakening that the 'Anthropocenic reveal' engenders (and that recent² western historical understanding exported to the planet via globalised industrialism has been actively covering up with tarmac, landfill and an endless broadcast of celebrity-bodies) can lead the human in question to some daft conclusions beyond and alongside the figures of the forager and the geo-engineer detailed above. The state of fragility such a seismic quake in subjecthood triggers may also provide opportunities to disrupt the reigning model's fuel-line. If the truths of global warming and its causes are in widespread circulation, indeed is common (*if repressed*) knowledge inside our shared catacombs of discourse, can we see a mutation in the corpus? If the ontological radiation of global warming is beginning to have any effect at all then the body of capitalism should be blooming with *carcinogenic* aberrations.

Look around. The cancer against capitalism is erupting everywhere. Neoliberalism's long slow death rattle has finally degraded to the point where its altruistic facades have decomposed and the foul vapours of its current and imminent form - unapologetic fascism - are stenching up the place. Even those stationed in Washington D.C. have abandoned publically secure adherence to the Washington Consensus. Globally-networked movements of resistance have risen too and demagogues across all divides are smuggling either populist or socialist language into their claims to the throne.

What to do in this instance? Where to find solace or evidence of deviant tissue-cells at the personal level? If the weird appearance of non-human agency has brought us here, then non-human agency should be detectable at a closer proximity than that of governmental rhetoric. As intolerance and tribalism climb out of the poisoned swamp is there an artefact closer to home that bears the scarring mutations of Anthropocenic awareness, preferably one that leans toward something other than renewed violence and nostalgia for a mythic eugenics-fuelled dys/utopia?

Material intimacy does not just arrive in the form of the aberrant weather models, hyper-adaptive bacterial strains nor my privileged musings about the labourer who

harvested my chia seeds for me. The networked smartphone of the 21st century has enabled billions of humans to dissolve their subjectivity and activate the planet as never before.

And so, can we find evidence for neoliberal-decay – a loss of market-based faith in the logics of recent capitalism – within this parallel system of material intimacy, one that doubles as one of the market's greatest (if contested) technological victories in the sanctified realm of quality-of-life and individual power? I would like to home in on one particular aberrant polyp in the global body, a recent addition into the field of eco-consumerism, the smartphone market and my latest major electrical purchase: the Fairphone 2.

Released on the market in summer of 2016, the Fairphone 2 (the 'ethical, open and built to last' smartphone) embodies so many ecological tropes that the very tragicomic existence of the device is something of a blessed miracle.

'Meet the Fairphone 2. We've created the world's first ethical, modular smartphone. You shouldn't have to choose between a great phone and a fair supply chain.

We want your Fairphone to last as long as possible. The modular design and spare parts make it easy for anyone to repair, plus the integrated regular or slim cover protects it from drops. Regular software updates keep everything running smoothly.

The Fairphone 2 comes with everything you'd expect from a top quality smartphone. In addition to features like a 5-inch full HD screen and Android operating system, you'll find convenient extras like two SIM slots, expandable memory and a replaceable battery.

The Fairphone 2 is a smartphone dedicated to creating positive social change. We're sourcing conflict-free minerals and Fairtrade gold, improving working conditions at the factory and recycling electronic waste.'

This is a model of techno-utopian potential in microcosm; a way to have the luxury goods of recent capitalism while offsetting consumer anxiety of ghastly extractivist or abhorrent labour conditions that led to its convenient birthing.

(ASIDE: Do not misinterpret this writing as cynicism. As this is an art-writing-essay, you might be reading this in a sneering tone of self-congratulatory wiser-than-thou mastery of doom-and-gloom. If we are to have phones, and we should <see later> then we should all have Fairphones or similar. Fairphone have tasked themselves with the righteous goal of changing the attitudes and practices of a vast and vastly destructive industry that will not disappear anytime soon. Their work is remarkable and all power to them! This writing investigates what the phenomenon of the Fairphone 2 could mean and achieve at an affective and ontological level.)

But the Fairphone 2 does more than replicate current 'phone aesthetics and upgrade their production history. It recognises that regular smartphone use in itself presents opportunities to combat agrilogistics on a daily basis and as such, it arrives self-stocked with passively ecognostic content. A preset background photo shows the miners who helped build my phone, thumbs up close to the screen. Etched into its modular circuitry is a map to the Congolese mine in where its constituent tin and tantalum was pulled out of the ground. *Vitally, it seems to loathe itself.* It's lock screen declares: 'You've had peace of mind for 0 MINUTES Your record peace of mind was 955 MINUTES'³ and as

such the Fairphone 2 is constantly undermining its very being, equating smartphone usage to a lack of piece of mind. It tries to sacrifice itself for the greater good, by imploring you to look at it less. Simultaneously proud of being a part of the change and ashamed of its material and carbon-heavy very existence, the Fairphone 2 is not just *for* the eco-consumer, it echoes the attitudes of the eco-consumer and shrinks them down to it's own phone-sized subjectivity. As any successful 'phone does, it is the very model of its owner's self-identity.

Impressively the Fairphone 2 also attempts to expand the traditionally narrow window of smartphone-time into the future and the past, something it does by registering the length of its ownership – i.e. how old the phone is – on its lock screen. In this it tries to avoid the depressive blinkers of neoliberalism's eternal present by evoking the shockingly present temporal realities of the 'phone's constituent materials and subsequent manufacture.

Further: a glitch in this particular feature incessantly, yet obliquely reminds me, that this 'phone isn't really mine. My Fairphone 2 ownership-clock currently reads:

Your Fairphone for
04 MONTHS
01 WEEKS
02 DAYS

But I definitely haven't had it that long. When I first turned it on it read as already being mine for 02 MONTHS, definitely longer than when I ordered the contract.

(ASIDE: On the Fairphone 2 Forum we find a similar complaint thread:

Hi everyone,

I recently received a new FP2 since my first one was completely buggy and kept rebooting by itself. The new one is working perfectly, a real pleasure.

But on this new FP, the date indicated on the lock screen for "your own this fairphone since..." is not correct. Actually the time is in the future so it's quite weird, and of course the date is not link to when I received my first FP2.

Is there a way to modify this date? Even it's quite complicated?

I know its base on the date/time when I first boot the phone and if it was connected or not but, the date itself is save somewhere?!

Regards!

This user is prepared to undergo 'quite complicated' work to correct the seemingly trivial temporal disjunct between their ownership of the phone)

The 'phone existed before it arrived through my door. This is awkward in several ways. One it re-reminds us of the 'phone's mineral prehistory. Secondly, it seems to imply that this 'phone was mine even before my old 'phone broke, that the **tin and tantalum** underground in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, dormant for however-many millions of years was headed to me, channelled by my desire for an ecological smartphone. If the 'phone-prosthesis notion is accurate (it is) then a part of me has been underground in the Congo for that amount of time. Just as the mobile-networked extrapolation of internet-me is a part of me and is anchored to the blue

rectangle in my trouser pocket, the minerals that make that rectangle possible dissipate any secure notion of me by continents and eons.

And yet for all its guilt-ridden materiality **it is a smartphone**. The very magical item of technological prowess, individuality, consumerist identity and consistently updated contemporaneity. *Yours to Keep Yours To Own* the packaging beckons, providing the unblemished assurance of fresh ownership and posthuman extension while suggesting that this new toy must also be retained, fixed and kept alive until it becomes an old toy. It still shimmers with a fetishist promise of a cleaner design-led self.

The common-place cyborg nature of the 21st century 'phone has been well discussed. Much like traditional bodies or organs, 'phone-appendages require updating but traditionally these are components that, when updated, are definitely new components. Elements of the old phone are transferred via hosts and back-up units (cloud storage or micro-SD and SIM cards) but the failure of the older model, either by genuine technical fault or falling out of step with global trends and demands, is seized by the consumer as an opportunity for a total upgrade. This does not occur with the Fairphone 2. Rather you are expected to replace individual elements of the 'phone. It aims to be slower with the physical trash generation and less brutal with the mineral-birth. Built around a modular design it can be fixed without throwing the whole thing away.

(ASIDE: Recognising that appearance is also a fundamental part of the smartphone's potential shelflife, the external body of the phone is also updateable and has already been shrunk and had a colour-range tweak since its release. As my original case is becoming a bit worn I may update to a turquoise, clear or red model.)

But for many, it seems that to even announce the problem – the violence of contemporary supply chains and global logistics – is already too heinous, too heretical a statement to bear. It's very mention and the possibility that a smartphone could have a near-neutral impact on the planet and the bodies employed to extract and choreograph their manufacture seems laughably unfunny.

Eco-products and the engagement with them are as sure-fire a way to garner accusations of idiocy from the enlightened as anything else. From Organic chicken corpses to environmentally minded bleach cleaners, these are futile objects, naïve and systemically part of the problem. The eco-consumer is decried as pathetically offsetting their shame; expensive blame-shifting. What is interesting as well as depressing here is that often these accusations of hypocrisy are voiced far louder than any complaints levelled at the captains of industry behind the violent systems the eco-consumer is seeking to disrupt. Hippy-ness is never tolerated.

It is precisely through the absolute derision of its detractors that the eco-product performs its power; an almost gothic presence. By assuming the position of the well-meaning tech-object, the Fairphone 2 unearths the wide-spread knowledge-belief that a smartphone (a banana, a whatever, consumerism as such) is totally incompatible with ecological being. The eco-product provokes contempt for the sad-sucker alleviating their consumerist guilt via luxury consumerism but it also kicks into gear a melancholy self-loathing for/by the critic and their alternative proposal: doing nothing. Cynical and neutered. Powerless. *(Presumably the greater the hippy-shaming, the greater the self-loathing of the wise traditional-consumer.)*

(ASIDE: 'No-one likes having their unconscious pointed out and eco-awareness is all about having it pointed out.')

The powerlessness the critic feels is apt and at least a more enlightened version that either of our earlier agrilogistic reactionaries (the **Forager** and the **Geoengineer**). The **Critic** understands that consumerism, individualism and extractivist practice – all of which are succinctly crystallised in the body of any smartphone – are antithetical, even allergic to a future coexistence with the fellow inhabitants of this planet. What is gothic about the Fairphone 2 as opposed to its other smartphone sistren is its foregrounding of these truths. Of announcing these contradictions and mounting them within the very totem of our magical technological mastery. Confronted, the Critic gets gloomy and is taken aback at the hordes that surround them, both the mounds of corpses and the mounds of not-yet-corpses convinced that using Ecover products and eating organic quinoa (*that the communities nutrition-dependant on quinoa can no longer afford due to its increased demand in the Global North*) is a rational path into a shame-free future. They have misunderstood what is at stake and how to proceed. They perceive the eco-product as neither accelerationist nor regressive and therefore of zero use in the battle it purports to engage in. For the Critic the 'phone is just a shell that we inhabit with the hermit crab of our identity and our politics.

(ASIDE: For the Critic, one dead body is the same as a thousand. Why mitigate inequality when inequality is woven into the fabric of human being?)

But aren't 'phones more than that? Aren't they more than the corporeal anchor to our idealised public selves?

'Phones are now the blood of the social body. The channels of rewiring pass in two directions between our brains and our black mirrors. Our rage, our sexuality, our dumbness, our language and our imagination pool over the planet in a fashion that makes information retrieval in pre-2010s sci-fi uncannily foolish.

(ASIDE: These sci-fi dramas envisioned a future where such technological liberation would naturally engender a utopian society, much akin to neoliberalism's (advertised) hopes for the societies that free-flowing capital would propagate. The smartphone of the 2010s also makes the cross-sectional intercontinental playground of the 1990s Internet laughable, but this time the innocent chuckle at the tricorder's two-hour search is replaced by a bleak fatalist bark. 2016's political upheavals and the resulting shocks in the liberal West's populations have revealed how small our echo chambers truly are. It seems that print isn't dead, regrettably. Ecologically, your internet-environment is very different to your real-world neighbours'. As such, those '90s pioneers of the digital playground mourn longingly for the long decade of international and subcultural ambassadors online. However, the reality of an entire billion people being online is much less like the world in microcosm and much more like the world.)

Ignore the sentimentalists. The smooshed-up intimacy of the 'phone-internet-bodyspace is a model of ecology that fits more closely to the biological planet than the naïve universalists, who paint 'nature' or 'cyberspace' with a single-spiritualist brush, would have it. A planet of interconnectivities at several scales, of actually-existing relationships, feedback loops, echo chambers and infophagal qualities that nurture, sustain and impinge uncomfortably on each other. If we are to learn how to live ecologically, then our knowledge-environments need to be understood as being no different to biological interaction. And why leave it at the planetary scale? As the ozone

decays, our social media platforms will become ecstatically susceptible to solar fluctuations and extra-planetary radiation. Then our 'phone lives will finally cease resembling a refuge from reality into virtuality.

As the arguably fictitious boundaries of offline and online erode ever further so will the non-human elements of the biotic, mineral and climatic planet reveal their weird omnipresence similarly frequently. Our 'phones will become less and less miraculous and evermore embedded into the planet (as the planet embeds itself deeper into us), or at least reveal that they always-already were. As we become sensible to these truths the story of our 'phones will need to complexify. The binaries of self/other, inside/outside and material independence/material symbiosis will seem more and more outdated. The Fairphone 2 is an early player in how socially-conscious technology may bleed back into the consumerist body and bring all of these eroded structures back to the shore.

This is all fine and normal. This is fun and 21st century self. I am not concerned about the possible challenge to the modern subject such odd dispersals and coagulations might induce. I relish in them. But link all of these things to an attempt at ecognosis and what occurs?

Disjunct.

The Fairphone 2 troubleshooting board is filled with outrage. Battery drains within half a day. 4G refuses to work. Parts of the touchscreen don't work. How to get a refund for the highly unreliable FP2? Too unpredictable to be a business phone. FP2 stuck in buzzing loop and black screen.

Stuck in buzzing loop and black screen.

(ASIDE: It seems that ethically sourced tech just isn't up to scratch for some eco-consumers. To their fairness, Fairphone acknowledge that this is the start and about putting pressure on an industry that looks like its here to stay for a bit:

'Our phones hold a complex story of the hundreds of people who helped make it. We want to open up that story, so we can make a positive impact in how phones are made, used and recycled.

Change doesn't happen overnight. But together with our community, we're building a movement to show the demand for fair products.')

Personally however, I am quite charmed by the Fairphone's glitches. In many ways they seem the most attuned to ecological-being.

Perhaps my favourite element of my Fairphone's functionality is easily it's most inconvenient problem; it's totally erratic battery. Sometimes my phone charges fine and fast. Sometimes it takes 23 hours. Sometimes the battery life lasts all day while sometimes it is dead and gone in three hours. It seems freakishly sensitive to the differing currents between sockets, extensions and chargers. It is making me very aware, if illiterate, of the variety of electrical flow behind the wall. But best and worst of all is when it fails to charge at all.

I keep my 'phone under my pillow when I sleep. It's close to a socket and means I can hit the snooze button as often as I like without having to leave the bed. I always charge my phone overnight but occasionally the 'phone fails to charge at all and it superheats. I really can't overemphasize how weirdly hot it gets, confusingly hot for plastic and glass, especially when freshly woken up by a sense of impending trauma. I have no idea why but the current fails to reach the battery proper and it turns my 'phone into a very worryingly hot object directly under my sleeping head.

Could I ask for a blunter metaphor for global warming and our collective inability to deal with it?

Really this is not even a metaphor, this is global warming itself happening at the scale of me, my phone, its minerals, my consistent dependence on data, the fuel required for this, my sleeping head and the troubled sense of unease that successfully punctures the delirium-universe-womb of sleep that occurs when something potentially fatal from another universe is encroaching. This is exactly the disquiet of the Anthropocene. Materiality from nonhumans is heating up to such a degree that it punctures the anthropocentric relation to such nonhumans. Cooking things till they cook us.

So I wake up and move the phone from under my pillow. I fiddle with the connection until it's charging or I just unplug it all together and resolve to deal with it in the morning. Confused, I go back to sleep. Again, this is a clumsy metaphor, no matter how real it is. Remove the immediate peril and deal with it in the morning. Hot little rock.

-end-

A note on the background imagery:

This writing is presented against screengrabs I took on my Fairphone 2 where I was playing the game *Phone Story* designed for playing on Android and iOS supporting phones. The game was banned from Apple's App Store after only four days but it is still available on Android (and therefore playable on Fairphones.) A description from Wikipedia: Phone Story is a satirical mobile video game conceived by Yes Lab activist Michael Pineschi and designed by Paolo Pedercini for Molleindustria with the stated aim of demonstrating what the developers refer to as "the dark side of your favorite smart phone." The game consists of four minigames which require the player to complete activities such as forcing children in the Third World to mine coltan and preventing suicides at a Foxconn factory. The creators of the game stated the main purpose was to elicit a response from people who "fail to realize how their fashionable consumption can have negative effects on people in the globalized world." More info and an online version can be found at <http://phonestory.org/index.html>

Footnotes:

1 – Initially defined by Timothy Morton as 'An agricultural program so successful that it now dominates agricultural techniques planet-wide. It arose in the Fertile Crescent 12 000 years ago. Toxic from the beginning to humans and other lifeforms, and now responsible for a huge amount of global warming. It led to industry, the other huge global warming factor. Though toxic, it has been wildly successful, because the program is even more compelling than Candy Crush. It operates blindly, just like a computer

program. It promises to eliminate anxiety and contradiction--social, physical and ontological--by establishing thin rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman worlds, and by reducing existence to sheer quantity. Agrilogistics is the smoking gun behind the (literally) smoking gun responsible for the Sixth Mass Extinction Event.' via their Ecology Without Nature blog at

<http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.co.uk/2014/07/agrilogistics-quick-and-dirty.html>

2 – Here recent could mean the last 12,000 years of agrilogistic thinking, primitive accumulation through the last 800 years of expropriation, severing people from the land and means of sustenance forcing the transformation into waged labor, the last 500 years of European colonialism, slavery and indentured labor, the last 200 or so years of mass industrialisation or the failure to meaningfully instrumentalise sufficient structural responses to human-caused ecocide that can be attributed to the 54 years since the revelatory work behind and publishing of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.

3 – I only managed this length of time by being excessively ill and unable to look at a screen for days on end.

4 – p23 from Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology: for a logic of future coexistence*.

5 – See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/16/vegans-stomach-unpalatable-truth-quinoa> or <http://www.coha.org/appropriating-or-appreciating-an-examination-of-the-origins-and-rise-of-superfoods/> for an appraisal of the risks of superfood-trends in general on nutrition-dependant populations in the Global South.