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Money, Disembodied Art, and the Turing Test for Aesthetics

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The Value of Art, the Value of Money

It is an old point, but consider how alike are art and money. And how more alike they are becoming. Recently, both have tended to dematerialise, to shed their physical form. Both have greatly increased the speed at which they circulate, and have made thoroughly international the scope of that circulation. Both are also increasingly switched into and out of for their short-term yield. So these ever more weightless artefacts are blown this way and that by the gales of fashion and opinion. A sympathy seems to exist between objects which have very nearly no use (works of art) and those which have nearly every use (banknotes).

Art and money represent an almost pure form of exchange: in the opposition between use value and exchange value (to grasp the difference, consider how much use a bottle of water is to someone after a long walk in the heat, and how much they are likely to have to pay in exchange for it),¹ their weight is on the side of exchange. In the pricing of art, exchange value is tied above all to aesthetic judgement. The association is so familiar that it has developed the power of truism; if people say an artist's work is undervalued, they generally mean that it is a good investment prospect. People rarely say that some body of work is fine, but the market does not recognise this and, what is more, never will.

This is not to say that money and art have no use value, but it is marginal and tends to be redeemed only in extreme circumstances. Duchamp's famous quip about using a

¹ A few academics have made their careers criticising the opposition. Most famously, Jean Baudrillard derived his entire apparatus of the simulacral from a denial of the difference between use value and exchange value. Such a view can appear plausible only to people whose lives are habitually comfortable.

Rembrandt as an ironing board makes the point that works of art can have use value if they are no longer looked on as works of art; likewise, money can be burned to provide warmth, or used to write poems or make drawings upon.² But when things swing along happily, as they do at the moment in Britain, with only average suffering, how obsessed people are with the money embodied in art—with how much this or that piece cost to make, with what sponsorship, and above all with the condensation of judgement in price, its rise and fall, or more commonly rise and rise.

The rule of money has been greatly extended of late: not only in the East, where the Communist regimes have fallen, opening the countries to the whims and small subsidies of the great global economic powers, but in the West, too, where in part as a consequence of that fall (for one undoubted benefit of state socialism was that its existence kept capitalism in the First World on its best behaviour), no realm—even medicine or schooling—is free from the criteria of instrumental aims and cost effectiveness. One of the most striking areas of this new colonisation has been high culture, so that the link between art and money becomes more actual, as art fronts the image of business.

In these circumstances, poverty may have a painful virtue. In Lithuania, where there is little in the way of a domestic market for contemporary visual art, artists (unlike the stars of the scene in Britain) are free of dealers making Taylorist demands about the quantity, timing and quality of their work. Like many of the less successful artists in Britain, they are also free of the encumberment of income, except from teaching or whatever other job they turn their hands to. Nevertheless, an enviable freedom is imposed upon them in this situation in which one demanding patron has evaporated, and another has not yet materialised: in which art does not quite equal money.

Dead End

To survey the scene of contemporary art is to look upon a vista at once chaotic and strangely uniform. Amidst the variety, so many things now seem forbidden. Could anyone make the following historical paintings of Lithuanian or British history?

² Mayakovsky, writing of Russia's Civil War period, told of a time when "There appeared poems which no one printed because there was no paper, no one had money for books, but sometimes books were printed on money which had gone out of use." "Broadening the Visual Basis", *Lef*, no. 10, 1927.

“Lithuanian collaborators help the Nazis exterminate the Jews of Vilnius”; “The last Lithuanian guerrilla fighter against Soviet occupation”; “The British invention of the concentration camp during the Boer War”; “The Royal Air Force bombs villages in Afghanistan in the 1920s” (Britain and the US, not Germany, compete for the honour of establishing the bomber as a terror weapon for use against civilians).

Such restrictions are partly to do with the weakness of painting, but there is also a more general feeling that art itself is in a good deal of trouble, that art may be coming to an end, or that it did so some time ago, or even that an ethical philistinism waits in the wings which will be not mere ignorance or boorishness but a principled refusal of culture.³ Such imaginings may be the product of millennial fever, as comets brightly fly, and clocks of inhuman exactitude tick on towards that fatal flipping over of numbers which will snare unprepared computers. But it is also a substantive issue in which high culture appears to have pulled up at a dead end, though somehow artists still carry on making things. When culture is stripped of the narrative of modernism, of the promise of a happy ending, and when even the liberatory promise of postmodernism has declined into market-niche relativism, it is hard to know how, where or indeed why to proceed. Some, turning the situation on its head, see this as a positive matter. For the philosopher-critic Arthur Danto, “life really begins when the story comes to an end”,⁴ and those who now expect art to progress have missed the point, which is that the final synthesis has in fact been reached. Although Danto does not mention him, this stance is close to Francis Fukuyama’s widely publicised political views, and is based on the same Hegelian contention that, while of course events still continue to occur, history has come to a close.⁵ Once art had passed through the black night of the 1970s (“a period in its own way as dark as the tenth century”) with all that dreadful politically engaged work, Danto claims, it emerged into the sunny Elysian fields of universal permissiveness, never to leave.⁶

³ For these positions, see respectively Jameson, F., “‘End of Art’ or ‘End of History?’”, in *The Cultural Logic of the Present: Writings by Fredric Jameson on the Postmodern*, London: Verso, 1997; Danto, A.C., *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, New Jersey 1997; Bull, M., “The Ecstasy of Philistinism”, *New Left Review*, no. 219, September-October 1996, pp. 22-41.

⁴ Danto, *After the End of Art*, p. 4.

⁵ Fukuyama, F., *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

⁶ Danto, *After the End of Art*, pp. 12, 15.

The Universal Simulator

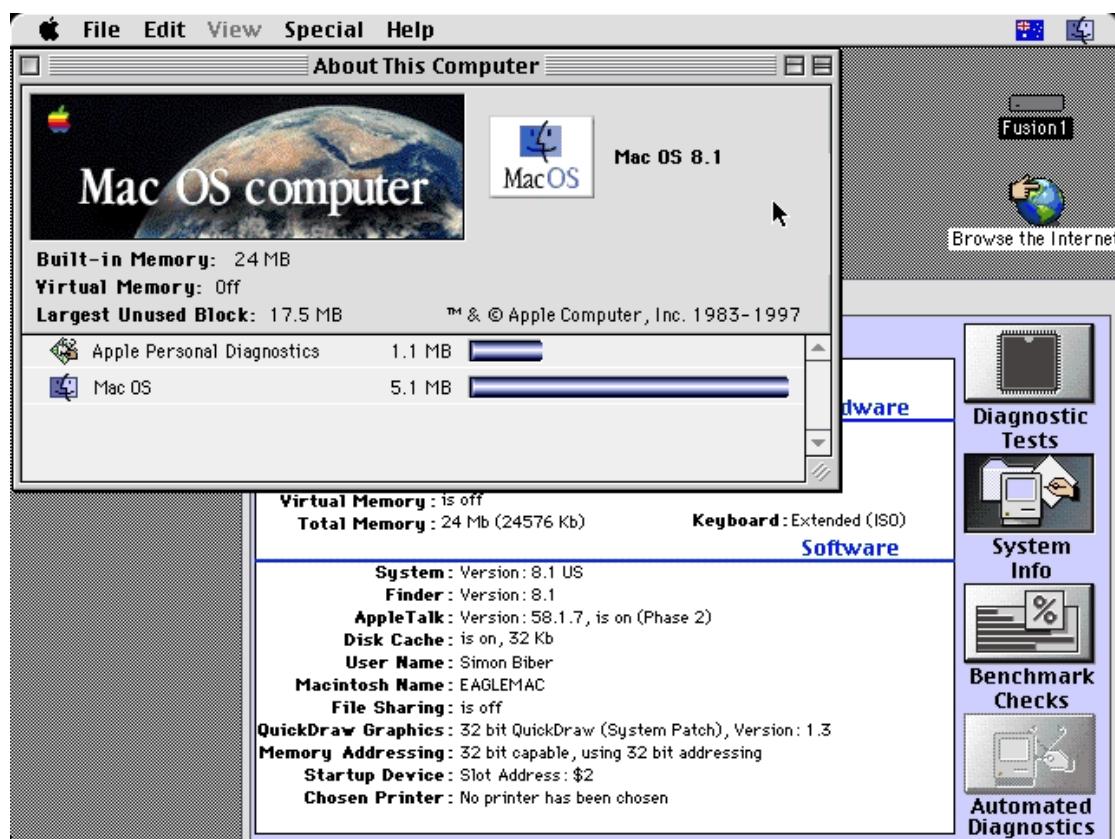
Computers, however, are a new force in this cosy cultural scheme. Their dizzying evolution sits uneasily with the view that narrative is done with, and everyone is living happily ever after. They have the potential to transform radically the making of visual art, merging separate media, permitting constant change, continually responding to viewers, and tossing aside the material form of art to resurrect it as pure spirit. Some commentators see this force as a potential exit from the current impasse and even as a reinvention of modernism.⁷

Currently, however, two opposing tendencies appear to bear upon the art object, although both are responses to the baleful competition of mass culture and the mass-produced commodity. The first is the tendency to various kinds of dematerialisation; the second to the infusion with the aesthetic of highly material forms, a hyper-materialisation of the art work which impresses itself on the viewer by sheer material presence, and which is dependent on an intimation of weight, density, temperature, or some other as yet unreplicable quality. So the work of art appears to evaporate into digits and condense on the screen of the CRT, while other works of art are simultaneously transfigured in mass alone. Both are extreme solutions; in the first, art becomes pure, eternal spirit floating free of base material; in the second, the aesthetic is snatched from brute matter by the least modification.

Neither tendency is new; dematerialisation is implicit in the dominant exchange-value function of art, and while the ready-made took material form, its specific materials were incidental, and it could be assembled and reassembled at any time. Ever since, much conceptually based art has sought to reduce its dependence on the visual and, in so doing, also to reduce its dependence on any material base. Similarly, much art of the past has impressed by virtue of its physical presence, by the weight of its matter, though not

⁷ Among very numerous examples, symptomatic are the articles by H.W. Franke, "Mathematics as an Artistic-Generative Principle", *Leonardo*, supplemental issue: *Computer Art in Context: SIGGRAPH '89 Show Catalog*, 1989, pp. 25-6; "Editorial. The Latest Developments in Media Art", *Leonardo*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1996, p. 253-254. For an analysis of cyber-hype, see Stallabrass, J., *Gargantua. Manufactured Mass Culture*, London: Verso, 1996, ch. 3.

generally *only* because of it. But what is new, and this is very much to do with computers, is the dematerialisation of *sensuous* visual form.⁸



Mac OS 8, 1997

For the time being, the way we look at art on the computer is highly mediated and material. It is usually framed with the detritus of the Mac or Windows interfaces or those of some Web browser, with all their cultural specificity and technical peculiarity; it is also determined by the quality of hardware as well as software—to a degree, that is, by the depth of someone's pockets. Yet the promise of the medium, and its current impetus (for here technology certainly has, for the time being, a teleological bent), is to provide an illusion of the real, indistinguishable from normal experience, and measured against the physical limitations of the human organism. So today's tinkering with screens, cursors and mice should be contrasted with the not-so-distant promise of full-on virtual reality,

⁸ It should be clear that we are talking about actual dematerialisation here, not the attenuation of matter, the use of fragile, transient matter, or the creation of art works in which the specific material used is contingent. The 1996 São Paulo Biennial exhibition, devoted apparently to the theme of “the dematerialisation of the art object at the end of the millennium” was able to include in its main exhibition such shunners of the material object as Basquiat, Bourgeois, Goya, Kapoor, Munch, Picasso and Warhol. See Leffingwell, E., “Report from São Paulo. Nationalism and Beyond, *Art in America*, March 1997, pp. 35-36.

of a seamless experience and even an invisible interface, guided by mind or body in a way that seems natural. As such interactive illusion becomes more effective, opportunities for unrepresentable experiences which galleries claim as their arena of operation, shrink.

While art has similarities to money, and aesthetic judgement to exchange value, the art work as pure commodity is oddly dependent on a material supplement, its existence as an object. This is apparent in that, other factors being equal, large works usually cost more than small ones; the museum's distinctiveness is substantially to do with gigantism, in supplying massive works which could not feasibly be housed even in very grand living rooms. More fundamentally, the material base seems necessary to realising monetary value; the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* is valuable not just because Picasso painted it, and it is seen as a historically important work, but because it is a unique object. Its exact replica in cyberspace, copiable with absolute accuracy and easily distributed, might be very nearly worthless.

Port Out, Starboard Home

That art and money have a close relationship is not one of art's foibles but deeply affects its character and the character of its viewers. Some think that computer-distributed art will provide universal access to high culture in a way that museums and galleries can never hope to. It is certainly true that the opposite tendency to hyper-materialisation is largely a matter of distinguishing high art from the dubious taste of the masses. To stand about in a big, white space musing on the import of some dysfunctional pile of matter at your feet is to stake a claim to being a very particular sort of social animal. It is a reflection of social distinction, of, not to put too fine a point on it, snobbery.⁹

The exclusion of the unwashed lies at the heart of aesthetic judgement, exchange value and the link between the two. For as long as great divisions exist between people's material circumstances, useless art will tend to be the preserve of those with the prolonged time and resources needed for self-development. Art's uselessness, its very basis for the critique of society as a whole, makes of it a form of conspicuous consumption about which, as long as there are people who go unfed, or without safe drinking water or adequate shelter and heating, as long as there are people on whose

⁹ See Bourdieu, P., *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice, London 1986.

poorly rewarded labour the privilege of the art lover rests, there must also be a measure of guilt.¹⁰

There are a number of contemporary responses to this problem: among them, the creation of a demotic art which addresses the problem directly, wallowing in what it should most fear (reproducing on a gigantic scale spreads from tabloid newspapers, or making meticulous hand-crafted versions of mass-produced, kitsch ceramic figures) and the digital dematerialisation of art. How far are these strategies successful?

To take demotic art first, it rightly criticises high art's haughty distance from the world in which most people live. This is an art which takes mass culture as its material and is therefore on some level accessible to a wide audience. However, its physical context puts a different spin on its apparently democratic pretensions. Think of where, for instance in Britain, such art is seen: first and foremost, at the private view. These events are not publicly announced, and people go because they, or someone they know, have been invited. Unsurprisingly, the audience is rather homogeneous, and the private view is as much a social gathering as an exhibition of art. Once there, it is important to know other people (there's nothing sadder than circulating alone in those crowded rooms, sponsored booze in hand, actually looking at the art), and to know the chat—know, that is, things more talked about than published. In these settings, much can be assumed, not just about the viewers, but about the art which speaks to them—most of all, that it usually speaks gently to them, at least, and confirms their sense of who they are.

What of dematerialised art? While there is no addressing the problem at the level of content (though there is no reason why it should not also be demotic), a good many of the problems of exclusivity appear to be resolved. It is certainly true, even in a country like the United States, but more so in Britain and greatly so in Lithuania, that only people of some wealth have access to the Internet.¹¹ But let us concede this point; while access is not universal, and is unlikely under capitalism ever to be so, it is true that the group of people with access to the Internet is both wider and qualitatively different from the

¹⁰ Much of the argument here follows T.W. Adorno: see his *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, London 1984.

¹¹ In the USA not only is computer equipment considerably cheaper than it is in Europe, but local phone calls up to a certain generous limit are free, so Net users only have to pay the service provider, not the phone company as well. Local phone calls are also free throughout much of the former Soviet Union, but there generally people buy food and fuel first, and modems a distant second.

group that attends private views (which are, after all, free, and even entice their visitors with the gift of alcohol). Surely with art just a few mouse clicks away, without an intimidating social setting, with an art which may be freely copied and may appear on a billion screens at once, the problem is resolved.

Unfortunately, this is too idealist a manner of looking at the issue. The worlds of society and digital connection are hardly separate. Instead, one gives meaning to the other through conversation, through personal links and networks. Just as the Lisson Gallery (let alone some of the exclusive artist-run establishments which do not deign even to put a sign outside their doors) is a good deal harder to find than your local branch of McDonald's, so some places in Net-land are less well connected than others—and this may be a matter of exclusivity as well as lack of resources.

It is certainly true that Internet discussion groups could provide the human links necessary to support a lively, Net-going art scene but this simply reproduces the problem of distinction. For the bar in the art world is not generally to do with the forms of identity which are currently masked in computer communication. It is not to do with colour, gender or sexual orientation (though it may be to do with class and in some cases age) but above all with a quality of conversation, knowledge and thinking which tends, as a matter of course, to exclude certain types of people who may only then be identified in terms of conventional identity categories.¹² In other words, computer conversation, because it is still usually image-free, because your interlocutors will not have the opportunity to be impressed by the cut of your leather jacket, your ruffled hair or pierced nose, actually compounds the problem of exclusivity.

This argument assumes that the rise of a dematerialised art in itself has no profound effect on the work of art, and thus on the art world and art audience. This, however, may not necessarily be so.

¹² For a salutary reminder of the results on the British art scene, see Chambers, E., "Whitewash", *Art Monthly*, no. 205, April 1997, pp. 11-12.

A Digression on Material Aesthetics

By way of illustrating the next point, let me describe a somewhat sentimental experience of mine. The Courtauld Institute's art collection used to be housed at the top of an out-of-the-way building in a Bloomsbury square. On bright days, the lighting was exclusively natural. So on one of those days when the sun comes and goes behind rapid clouds, I stood alone before a landscape by Van Gogh and watched as the sun struck it, then faded and struck it once again, bringing the surface to a strange and moving life. The effect was due to the shadows cast by Van Gogh's three-dimensional ridges of paint, and it was to do with the contingency of the situation and with having a strong sense of the painting as a material object. It led me to ask how dependent the aesthetic experience (if there is such a thing) is on fragile effects such as these.

Such contingent experiences are generally not sought after by galleries and museums which play down the materiality of their objects and their relations to the environment (except where explicitly sanctioned by the artist), preferring the works to manifest themselves in controlled conditions as pure spirit. This is partly to shut out unwarranted and unsanctioned meanings which might escape the commercial collaboration of artist and institution, and partly to ensure that the works lie unambiguously on the side of unadulterated and dematerialised exchange value.

To talk of “the” aesthetic these days is to invite ridicule, at least in some quarters. Even in analytic philosophy, which has proved largely resistant to the sophisticated irrationalism of Continental high theory, there is no agreement on this matter. Different contributors to the *British Journal of Aesthetics* announce with equal confidence either that the aesthetic has no definable core whatsoever, being pure social construction into which people pour whatever content suits them at any particular time, or that it is an entirely incorrigible sensation which people have before a class of objects (usually works of art), as unmistakable as a poke in the eye.¹³ Neither view seems to be quite adequate, though plainly another account can only be hinted at here. However, though each is just as extreme as the other, the shortcomings of the latter have been recently aired a good deal more than those of the former.

¹³ For an example of the former, see Muelder Eaton, M., “The Social Construction of Aesthetic Response”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 35, no. 2, April 1995, pp. 95-107; for the latter, Matravers, D., “Aesthetic Concepts and Aesthetic Experiences”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 36, no. 3, July 1996, pp. 265-277.

For a start, it is difficult to know how the claim that there is *nothing* inherent in the aesthetic could be substantiated. The model of psychoanalysis is useful here because it provides a set of assertions that the aesthetic can be reduced to various kinds of psychological ruse, whereby the viewers of, say, Mondrian, are unconsciously fooled into thinking they are participating in an elevated pursuit when actually what they are experiencing is the product of some cunningly diverted sexual drive. As Ernest Gellner pointed out, beyond a certain level of recursion (as, for instance, in the sophisticated games that spies play), such ruses can be used to “explain” any behaviour whatsoever, and one can never be sure what is a ruse and what is not.¹⁴ Further, the idea that the aesthetic is a pretext for the exercise of some sexual drive (rather than vice versa) assumes the proposition that it is supposed to be demonstrating: that the one has more reality and coherence in our nature than the other. Likewise, while Bourdieu is surely correct to point to the ideological convenience of the aesthetic in societies divided by class, this alone does not explain its persistence if convenience is *all* it is, if there was not some intrinsic good that the elite gained from it, for otherwise why should such convenience not settle upon other masks?¹⁵

The curiously solipsistic view that the aesthetic is pure social construction, that our relation with objects is, in this case, all one-way, asks us to believe that the objects which people take to have aesthetic qualities at various times have no shared inherent qualities whatever, or at least if they do, then it is mere coincidence. A consequence of making such a claim is that *any* object may be taken at one time to be the highest expression of beauty, and may at another be dismissed as aesthetically worthless. It is very hard to find instances of such a development. Iconoclasm is no such example, for the iconoclast is certainly not indifferent to the fate of the work in question, far from it, and in any case is motivated by considerations which are felt to be far more pressing than aesthetic ones. Duchamp’s original ready-mades were perhaps accidentally thrown away but this was long before they were lionised, and of course these objects were made precisely to discover whether it was possible to “make works which are not works of ‘art’...”¹⁶ If

¹⁴ Gellner, E., *The Psychoanalytic Movement. The Cunning of Unreason*, London: Fontana, 1993, ch. 8.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Bourdieu, P. and Darbel, A., *The Love of Art. European Art Museums and their Public*, trans. Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman, Cambridge 1991.

¹⁶ Duchamp, M., note of 1913 included in the *Green Box*, cited in Tomkins, C., *Duchamp. A Biography*, London 1997, p. 131.

there is a particular aesthetic experience which is felt in front of some objects but not others, then it would seem odd, to say the least, if the objects had no role in its arousal.

Furthermore, while the aesthetic is a historically contingent and perhaps transient category, the difficulty in thinking about classes of aesthetic objects was not shared by our ancestors. Either we (post)moderns are far less ideologically bamboozled than they were, or our difficulty is a historical matter. It is perhaps conditioned by two linked developments: first, what manufactured objects in the Western world are not now aesthetic, given the legion of designers that lie behind them, calculating consumer taste? The commercialisation of every aspect of Western life has been a perverse realisation of the avant-garde dream that high art would lose its autonomy in the general aestheticisation of life—in this, at least, modernism has been a notable success. Artefacts from the former Eastern Bloc, where this symbiosis between corporation and consumer did not hold, are a lesson in what truly functional objects (in which aesthetics matters not a jot, as opposed to objects which like to *appear* functional) really look like. Second, and in large part in response to this aestheticisation, artists took to questioning the coherence and the boundaries of the aesthetic, producing works which were deliberately anti- or an-aesthetic. Such local difficulties should not lead us to assume that the aesthetic is a pure construct.

The reason for this digression should be obvious. For Kant, since appearance is everything in aesthetics, whether or not the object exists is a matter of complete indifference.¹⁷ It should not make any odds whether we are confronted with, say, a sculpture by Brancusi, or its perfect digital simulacrum. However, if objects contribute anything to aesthetic experience, then it will be altered by their disappearance. With the computer, the work of art finds itself in new territory. Even reproducible photographic prints change because they are material objects and are tied through representation to other material objects. It is true that Walter Benjamin and perhaps the Surrealists found Atget's photographs agreeably banal, and Benjamin argued that they presaged a time when the “aura” of the unique art object would no longer hold sway.¹⁸ In the 1930s, these prints were objects of the recent past, old enough to be a little out of fashion, but

¹⁷ See Kant, I., *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith, Oxford 1973, p. 43; and the useful discussion of “disinterestedness” in this limited sense in Crowther, P., “The Significance of Kant’s Pure Aesthetic Judgement”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 36, no. 2, April 1996, pp. 109-121.

¹⁸ Benjamin, W., “A Small History of Photography”, in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, London 1979, pp. 249-250.

not to have acquired antique virtue. Yet as the prints aged, and as the Paris they represented increasingly passed away, they began to acquire a most definite aura in Benjamin's sense. A reversed radioactive half-life, the emission of the aesthetic increases with time.

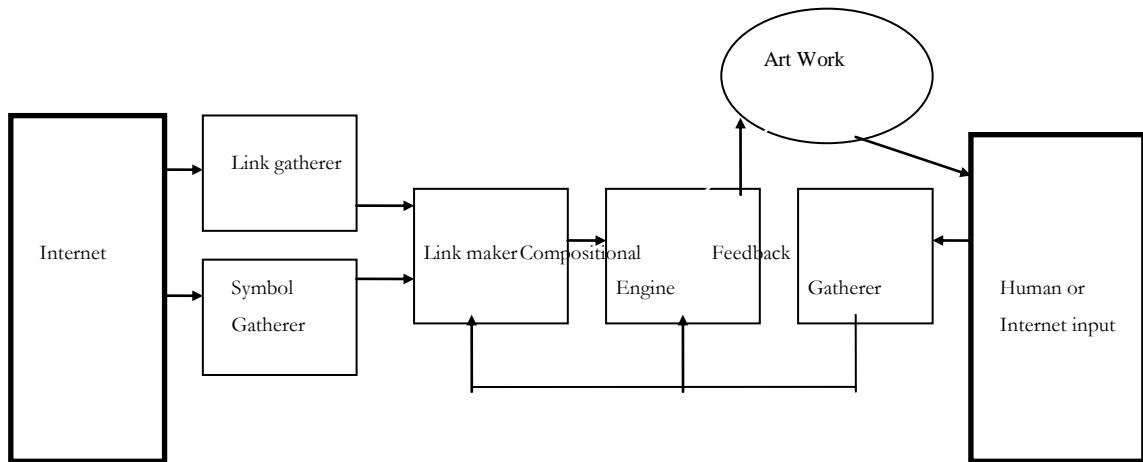
Digital media ally their eternal, immaterial nature to the appearance of objecthood. While there is a curious oscillation between the extremely temporal and the eternal in digital work (think of the contrast between the display, renewed 75 times a second, and the sequence of ones and zeros that rigidly constitute it), this is quite different from the attraction of the object in which persistent themes and concerns are bound to a fragile, temporal form. For one digital enthusiast, "once the [analogue] information is digitised, it dies and goes to heaven ... it has no alliances to the physical world of the sort that slavishly bound analogue media to their materials". Thus digitised media open the door to the sacred.¹⁹ That the work of art dies is a definite possibility; heaven, however, is another matter entirely.

A Thought Experiment

Computers, as we know them, were born in a thought experiment in the brain of Alan Turing. As is well known, he also devised a test for artificial intelligence in which people were to participate in relayed conversations, not knowing whether they were talking with a machine or a human; if they could not reliably tell the difference, then the machine passed the test. To draw out some of the implications of dematerialised digital art, it may be useful to attempt a little thought experiment of our own, asking how a computer could make art. Thinking about this some fifteen years ago, the computing power involved seemed prodigious, and the task extraordinarily complex. It is very difficult even now to imagine a machine making new but recognisable paintings by "Vermeer", for instance, if we decided we wanted more of them. But in the last fifteen years, two factors related to the question have changed. First, of course, computers have continued their dizzying technological ascent. Second, and more importantly, art itself has changed, and now more usually involves the manipulation of ready-made symbols.

¹⁹ Binkley, T., "Personalities at the Salon of Digits", *Leonardo*, vol. 29, no. 5, 1996, p. 338.

So imagine a symbol-manipulation device—and what else is any programme?—its basic structure being fivefold; a symbol gatherer, a link gatherer, a link maker, a compositional engine and a feedback gatherer. The symbol gatherer will draw its material, words, video, still images, or whatever combination, from the Web. The programme may in crude number-crunching ways be able to assess the topicality of particular symbols. Armed with a dictionary and a thesaurus, and capable of examining Web links, the link gatherer builds a database of associative links—it does not understand the meanings behind the links, perhaps, but just logs the fact that certain items are linked.²⁰ The link maker, which chooses the links and symbols to be used in a particular piece, and the compositional engine, which determines their arrangement, are plainly the most complex elements in this ensemble, but there would be little need to programme them actively; rather a programme which simulates the evolutionary process coupled to a feedback device, which provides the programme with a measure of human approval or otherwise, could quickly adapt these elements to produce pleasing results. The device as a whole may be thought of as a relational database capable of autonomously generating reports. In these circumstances, perhaps machines can make works of art as well as (or better than, if that has a meaning) humans do, and certainly very much quicker.



One objection to the viability of such a device is that it is extremely difficult to make computers parse sentences. This is because language is often very ambiguous, and people supply the appropriate context from their general knowledge about the world, understanding that “Man eating sausage” has only one likely meaning. Words are precise instruments, and only certain types of play are generally sanctioned. With visual works of

²⁰ For a fictional account of how it may be difficult to tell the simulation of intelligence from its creation, see Richard Powers’ novel, *Galatea 2.2*, London 1996.

art, though, the game is very different: ambiguity, difficulty and quirkiness are expected. Viewers are very likely to put apparently arbitrary associations down to their own stupidity or lack of information, to the artist's originality, to the fundamental undecidability of meaning, or to a dozen other factors or platitudes; or, more likely still, they are able to invent plausible interpretations from the myriad intellectual and affective links available to them (think of Freud who, prey to a mistranslation, expected to find a vulture in Leonardo's *The Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist and St Anne* and went right ahead to do just that).²¹ Another obvious objection is that, since tastes are so various, the feedback device could not meaningfully guide the programme. There are two things to say to this: the first is that among the homogeneous art world audience, tastes are not *that* various; the second is that the machine may be designed to average out its feedback responses, playing to the middle market of statistically average taste.



After a time, it is unclear whether human judgements would even be required to fuel the feedback mechanism. Such programmes could rely upon the judgement of their many peers, evolved at a furious rate over millions of generations of virtual art works. In this way a system of symbol-combining machines could be established which was self-sustaining and evolutionary. No doubt, it would be said, accusingly, of such a system of "art" production that it was a self-perpetuating, onanistic mechanism, engaging with nothing in the world, spinning endless dreams for itself or, at best, for a homogeneous

²¹ Freud, S., *Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of his Childhood*, London 1984 [1910].

bunch of like-”minded” producers. But the charge, however true, would hardly be so damning. It was, after all, made with some justification by Dada artists and writers against human culture, and it is a charge made often enough today, not only against art but also against increasingly aestheticised theory.

This thought experiment is meant not so much as a recommendation as a warning. It illustrates less the wonders of modern technology than the current debility of at least some contemporary art in the West. It is also intended to suggest that the computer is not merely another tool which artists may or may not choose to employ, and that the visual aesthetic may be tied, not just to human thought, but to the manipulation of matter.

Art Work



Fiona Banner, *Apocalypse Now*, 1997, pencil on paper, 274 x 650 cm

The experience of the aesthetic may, then, partly be an appreciation of the non-instrumental manipulation of material, and, when that material is simulated, something of the experience is lost. It is also perhaps to do with admiration for the quality and quantity of labour expended on an object—for talent, certainly, but also for skills long developed—and sometimes, given the great scale of some hand-made works and an awareness of general human frailty and inattention, for brute force and endurance. Seeing Fiona Banner’s giant, handwritten descriptions of Vietnam films in lines too long to be properly read, viewers may marvel at her perseverance and, despite the postmodern pretensions of the project, may take the scraps of horrific sense read from the work as indications of the ungraspable horror of the events those films dimly depict.

Computer labour is unusual because of the disconnection between the labour itself and the result. Even work apparently so immaterial as writing is irrevocably altered by the computer. The physical task of typing or writing on sheets of paper meant that there was a strong incentive for the author to get it right the first or second time. With word-processed documents, it is no longer meaningful even to talk of drafts, for all stages are merged into one. Before the printing deadline (a materially imposed affair), no word is ever fixed. New possibilities are certainly opened up but, in the process, writing itself has changed. The fabric of human work and its connectedness with objects is altered, and it is fair to ask whether this is only a liberation and not also an impoverishment.

The half-life of the work of art is dependent, then, not only on passing time, but on the manifestation of human labour. To judge a work’s “life”, think of the old conundrum: in a burning house, does one rush to save the baby or the Rubens? The problem is unfairly weighted, of course, in favour of the baby, potential personified in its cradle. If it were the Rubens or an arms dealer, one might begin to ask questions about how good a Rubens it is. In this problem of exchanging works of art for lives, the difficulty is about the uniqueness of the objects involved, and that they (at least the best of them), while not living, breathing beings, have the presence of life, and are the product of it.

Can this be said of any digital creation? While human labour is most definitely involved in the creation of digital works of art (excessively so, some might say), it is not manifested in any meaningful way in the result. All traces of labour are effaced or, worse, simulated. Furthermore, the digital work does not age, is infinitely reproducible and, if

lost or destroyed, can in principle be exactly reconstructed. Such works are not so much heavenly as alien.

Promises, Promises

Trade has little meaning when commodities are weightless, reproducible and transmittable at little short of the speed of light. Notions of value based on place are thus undermined, as are those based upon the original object. Who would bother to steal the floppy disk on which Will Self composed one of his stories? (There are circumstances where such a disk, bearing perhaps his handwriting on the label, might become a heritage object of some value—as part of an ensemble recreating the country cottage where, no doubt, his tales are tapped out—but this would be quite independent of whether the magnetic traces of the story remained upon it.)

Artists and dealers have to make a living, and that is threatened by absolute reproducibility and ubiquity. The fate of photography in art is instructive here. In another age, Walter Benjamin argued that “From a photographic negative … one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense.”²² And now people often say the same about digital reproduction. But it is enough to read Benjamin’s statement today to see that artists and dealers have certainly found ways to make photographic prints authentic, or at least to ensure that, by virtue of age, uniqueness or direct connection with the artist’s hand, some are more authentic than others. It is possible to imagine many strategies by which computer artists can produce objects, though digital files themselves will remain recalcitrant. Another way to think about the problem is to see what is involved in turning a three-dimensional virtual object into a real one, using, say, a computer-controlled cutting machine. Immediately, one-off decisions must be made about material, scale and surface finish, which either make no sense in the virtual world, or can be fixed arbitrarily and very rapidly changed.

Turning around Benjamin’s famous remark that there is no document of culture which was not also a document of barbarism (he meant by barbarism the privileged self-

²² Benjamin, W., “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations*, London , 1973, p. 226.

development of a minority, and the base on which it rests),²³ is it now possible to imagine a work of art which is *not* a product of barbarism? In class-riven society, such barbarism is necessary to the aesthetic, tied as it is to non-instrumental labour, and this is why the aesthetic is also so closely linked to distinction and monetary value. The apparent promise of computer culture is the free lunch of non-barbaric art, of a resistance-less culture spinning its pure works in the realm of digits. Much art of the past aspired to such a condition of grace, in its humanism or godliness, in its absoluteness, and those who appreciate it understand the contrast between consummate expression and frustrated hopes. It is there especially in those old Soviet avant-garde photographs of the new life, frequently parodied in postmodern productions, but touching in their faith that ordinary workers and peasants could build utopia, and were already beginning to do so.²⁴ Computer art opens the door to a simulated utopia, apparently pure because loosed from the taint of matter, but covertly as implicated as any art in continuing social and economic injustice. For the free gift of computer art is a trick: while the art itself is dematerialised, the time and resources needed to make it are as wasteful as for any material art. Barbarism, if not the aesthetic, is present still, behind yet another veil.

The End of Art, Again

Previous “ends of art”, in the 1920s or the 1960s, finally produced only more art, but were tied into a radical critique in which the production of art was understood to be deeply involved in the perpetuation of a system which had pursued wars on a previously unimagined scale, wiping out generations and threatening the existence of entire peoples. Or there was another modernist strand in which art would not so much expire as diffuse, becoming united with life in a Hegelian synthesis in which art would be lively, and life aesthetic (there were materialist and idealist versions respectively in Constructivism and De Stijl).

Contrast postmodernism: a colloquium of high theorists in a revolving door, all pushing too fast to get out, while busily assuring each other that, in any case, there is no exit. Contrast also the state of art in the West today, where artists increasingly accept that it

²³ Benjamin, W., “Edward Fuchs: Collector and Historian”, in Arato, A. and Gebhardt, E., eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, New York 1982, p. 233.

²⁴ See, for instance, Walker, J., Ursitti, C., and McGinniss, P., eds., *Photo Manifesto. Contemporary Photography in the USSR*, New York 1991.

matters little what they do, with the extraordinary power of art in the old Eastern Bloc, where it was simultaneously honoured and feared by the authorities, where artists were granted privileges and lavish facilities, and where youngsters who showed talent were hot-housed in specialised academies from an early age. A Lithuanian curator I spoke to remembers KGB men turning up at his school discos to check that all the records were on the officially approved playlist: this was an act of oppression, certainly, but also an official acknowledgement of the power of an art not totally denatured and de-fanged by class divisions and immediate assimilation into the mass media and advertising.²⁵

In the West, as art and money became ever more alike, ever more people came to love art. Popularity and impotence went hand in hand. The rise of art prices in real terms through the 1980s was a sign of the commodification of the art world as a whole, not merely the result of excess funds looking for investment projects—for there is no explanation in that fact alone—why would that money go into art rather than elsewhere? As art became linked to corporate image making and the more general corporatisation of culture, prices necessarily rose. There has been a commercial democratisation of high art, an increase in market share, which means, among other things, that many more people get to see the sponsors' logos.²⁶ Art has also become increasingly important as an element in economic strategy, in the regeneration of urban areas, where bohemians serve as the shock troops of gentrification, and where museums are the seed-bed for a whole apparatus of commercial galleries and supporting facilities.²⁷

Perhaps teleology is vital to the aesthetic, informing meaning and purpose, and even providing the glimpse of an ending, or at least of a possible utopia—and this is what permits Danto's view that art is over and everyone should be glad of it, though, like Hegel, he is likely to find that the Imperium is not all it is cracked up to be. Rather than thinking of the current impasse as the final synthesis, it is better to relate it to entropy,

²⁵ On the apparent paradox that the Eastern Bloc produced intellectual and artistic work of such high quality, and had large popular participation in it, see Plesu, A., "Intellectual Life Under Dictatorship", *Representations*, no. 49, Winter 1995, pp. 61-71. Both Plesu and various Lithuanian writers make the point that there was necessarily an accommodation, not outright enmity, between intellectuals and the authorities. See Narkevicius, D., untitled essay in the catalogue *For Survival/Experience/ Feeling*, The Contemporary Art Centre of Vilnius, 1996; Jurenaite, R., "Between Compromise and Innovation", in *Personal Time. Art of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, 1945-1996*, The Zacheta Gallery of Contemporary Art, Warsaw 1996. The former essay also contains an excellent account of recent Lithuanian artists' engagement with the material object.

²⁶ Another major factor in the rising popularity of high art and museum-visiting has been the rise of people going through further education. See Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art*.

²⁷ In London, think of Shoreditch for an example of the former, Bankside for the latter.

which captures just that state of simultaneous chaos and uniformity characteristic of late postmodernism. The analogy works at some level of detail: that postmodernism is entropic is no accident, for lacking the feedback mechanisms which regulate life and complex machines—and necessarily so, given its disdain for reality—it has no resources with which to oppose the dissipation of energy.²⁸ The current situation, though, will not last for ever. If capitalism works in long cycles of economic productivity followed by periods of destructive speculation which presage the next stage, then the current period is most certainly a period of speculation, blocking out, for the moment, the shape of the future.²⁹

To conclude, I shall risk speculating on what lies beyond speculation. Benjamin had an interesting take on the first end of art, the Dada movement, which came out of his observation that art often makes things to satisfy demands that do not as yet exist; Dada, then, prefigured the technical promise of film and it was redeemed in the popularity of Chaplin: a popular art which demanded not the aesthete's conscious act of attention, but rather just that it be comfortably inhabited. Dada productions were plainly useless for “contemplative immersion”, and “The studied degradation of their material was not the least of their means to achieve this uselessness.”³⁰

Now if this view has any validity, perhaps some technical innovation is waiting in the wings, ready to redeem the demotic, ironic, crass work currently salient in Britain and the United States? Or, to put it more in the spirit of Benjamin's epilogue to his “Work of Art” essay, is there some technical exchange of symbols, affective but meaningless, which this art is helping to ratify in advance? If Dada produced the (temporary) destruction of aura, perhaps Jeff Koons, Tracey Emin or Jake and Dinos Chapman produce the overlapping destruction of meaning, and presage the introduction of “computer art” in its fullest sense.

The current contrast between high material art and low digital culture could hardly be more striking; the former is arch, elitist and politically correct, the latter is immersive, highly interactive and ideologically dangerous. Nevertheless, a false synthesis may emerge

²⁸ For the relation of feedback systems and entropy, see Weiner, N., *The Human Use of Human Beings. Cybernetics and Society*, [1950] London 1989.

²⁹ See Arrighi, G., *The Long Twentieth Century*, London: Verso 1994. For a materialist account of postmodernism, see Harvey, D., *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford 1990.

³⁰ Benjamin, “The Work of Art”, p. 239.

between them, apparently popular, a hyper-materialised, mythifying but simultaneously simulacral art. Already in mass culture dematerialisation is bred with a compensatory hyper-materialisation to produce bizarre hybrids. They may be seen in digital entertainment, in the worlds created for those fantastically successful computer games, *Doom* and its more technologically advanced successor *Quake*.



Quake, 1996, id Software

Images of *Quake*: a laser bolt illogically bouncing off a castle wall to hit an armoured knight; a chain-saw-wielding ogre cut down by a machine gun firing, not bullets, but nails. In these games, in the marriage of computer technology and elements of myth, the worldview of the Nazis is approached, where the impression of a concrete (or, rather, hewn stone) reality meets a simulacral medieval fantasy with industrial elements thrown in (the two are now married in obsolescence), where an aggressive and furiously evolving, instrumental technology throws over itself the cloak of black magic. Such games have a large element of humour and their marriage of styles and themes may be thought no more harmful than postmodern pastiche except for the fact that they employ the technology of illusion, that they seek to convince the player of their virtual solidity. So perhaps there will appear, both in virtual worlds and equally in galleries, a further development of in-*yer*-face reality: tanks of blood, sump oil at nose level, razor wire in dangerous proximity, machines that make flames from human shit—works, in short, which pong or bite, set against but also merged with the ethereal shades which fly high

above the material world, respecting no boundaries, apparently mocking terrestrial control.

It is also possible, however, to glimpse in the possibilities of computer art and in hyper-materialisation, more than ever at the point of its death, the lineaments of another aesthetic, tied exclusively neither to commerce and spirit nor to use and material, an aesthetic which values equally human labour and earthly material, which takes seriously, and also delights in, their interaction. Where the rule of money is weak, it has the chance to become more than a dream.