This is an amended version of the paper first delivered at GA2017XX 20th Generative Art Conference in Revenna 14th December 2017 – James Whitehead JLIAT

The Black Swans. - Art in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction.

In Art, the humanities, and almost everywhere (for some!) the world seems confusing and alienating. This paper sets out a subjective response, the production of totemic objects or 'devices' which maybe are similar to artefacts of pre-agrarian humans, so called primitive peoples and what are known as 'Cargo Cults' [1]
The move may not be overtly rational or properly academic. This involves a strategy towards and with technology to 'generate' novel devices. The power of these devices, these 'technologies', is generated by a simple primitive psychological force.

An Historical Crisis.

The Cuba missile crisis marks an event in the cold war of the 1950s and 60s, one of the closest to an actual nuclear war. Cuba had become a communist state after the revolution of 1959, and in October 1962 the United States became aware of nuclear missile sites which the USSR was installing on Cuba. The then ICBM technology[2] would in effect give the USSR a first strike capability. President Kennedy enforced a blockage of Cuba by the US Navy. Ships from the USSR – carrying more missiles were already underway. If these ships didn't turn back the US Navy would sink them and a Nuclear War would almost certainly follow. In 1962 I was eleven, living with my mother and grandfather in Birmingham. My grandfather, who had fought in the Great War was very interested in politics, I remember the T.V. broadcasts from the USSR each Mayday, long columns of soldiers and more worrying for a young boy, missiles, at which my grandfather would point and say, "you see these, they are pointed at us!" So though only 11 I was still very aware of the then current situation. In late October I watched the skies in fear. I had from library books seen diagrams of nuclear weapons, I was very afraid, perhaps traumatised, a feeling of helplessness caught in this showdown between superpowers. I sketched imaginary devices for cutting up nuclear weapons before they could detonate, I imagined and made models, one of these had a carved head of a swan, it was the Swan Device. These devices were obviously not practical, rather like the aircraft and control towers made of palm trees by tribes in Polynesia, so called 'cargo cults', they were neither Art or Technologies, but in some way strange totemic devices....

I want you to hold in your minds for latter the 'nature' of such devices rather than dismiss them as silly childish toys or products of 'primitive' and ignorant minds.

The current crisis.

When asked in an interview what takes the place of philosophy now? Martin Heidegger replied – "cybernetics"[3].

Heidegger predicted the end of philosophy with the advent of computer technology. It would be wrong to say he was averse to technology, more that he saw it a crisis which demanded a response.

Contemporary philosophy however is anything but over, though can be seen as being in crisis, a crisis of 'meaning'. We have competing philosophies of the likes of Zizek, Derrida, Badiou, Laurelle, Deleuze... and those of the more recent Speculative turn. Of The Object Oriented Philosophy of Harman and Morton or the critique of the correlational crisis of Kant by Quieten Meillassoux.

Philosophies marked by dense exercises in metaphysics or analysis within which factions fail to agree. The texts open themselves to multiple interpretations, from considerations of brilliant insights but for others that they are nonsensical rubbish. And attention to some of these excesses have been made, for instance by Alan Sokal, in the Sokal Affair. Such excesses as the misuse or abuse of scientific and mathematical terms, for example that of Lacan's that the erectile organ...is equivalent to the square root of -1.[4]

Or as the philosopher Ray Brassier has said of the contemporary Speculative Realist movement in philosophy.

> I see little philosophical merit in a 'movement' whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity.[5]

His main target has been Graham Harman and his fellow Object Orientated Ontologist Tim Morton. My point here though is not to dam contemporary theory, but indicate its complexity and hence confusions and interpretations within it. For Morton, despite some 'remarkable' ideas regarding physics, he addresses another contemporary crisis. Global Warming or Climate change. And one would suppose a consensus here, or if not a disagreement drawn from scientific evidence. But this is obviously not the case, it is the site of a political lack of consensus.

If all this seems to be getting us nowhere or confused as to what to do, Accelerationism offers an answer. We accelerate the cause of the current problems, - technology, to the end.

It has two political 'flavours', Right and Left. For the Right technology produces via capitalism The Singularity of an artificial super intelligence with the ability to solve and resolve the current crises. However it's associated with Dark Enlightenment, and Neo-Reactionism (NRx) anti democratic and extreme right-wing movements.

To the left, Paul Mason in 'Post Capitalism: A Guide to our Future' sees a solution to the current political, economic and environmental problems via a Marxism which employs technology. Both left and right are reactions to the perceived failure of neo-liberalism.
Their technologies are those of AI, are deeply complex. Technically and philosophically dense. Wrapped in the complexities of neurobiology, computer simulations and complex mathematics. And our universe is it seems mostly dark- dark matter and dark energy. Its exploration and understanding requiring technologies costing billions and mathematical constructs beyond simple comprehension.

What of art? Again there is a clear right/left divide. The super-collectors such as Saatchi, and an art industry focused on the gallery system and auction houses contrasted with politically active

movements in Art of the Left, in the UK typified by Art Monthly.

To the left the art work disappears in favour of collective activism and is validated by the social results of such confrontations.

On the right, is money!

As the YBA Hirst said

"I can't wait to get into a position to make really bad art and get away with it" [6]

Damien Hirst's 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable' of 2017 consists of 190 works across 54,000 square feet of gallery spaces in Venice. Galleries owned by François Pinault.
Who owns Christie's Auction House, which sells "Hirst's" work.
Who is estimated to be worth 13.7 billion dollars as of 2015.

The artworks of 'The Treasures' were produced *for* Hirst, not by Hirst at Hirst's personal expense, at a cost of between 50 and 100 million UK pounds to manufacture.

Art has become 'technological' in the complexity of its social, political, economic, philosophical structures and networks. It too brings therefore an alienation[7] for any individual. The individual is now part of a network[8], group or industry. Culture is now an industry.

Art was defined by Walter Benjamin as being once that of objects which had traditional and ritualistic values. Art in the Pre-Industrial age consisted of singular objects, a statue, painting or building. For Benjamin Art had no intrinsic Aura, Art's Aura was given to it by the bourgeoisie. The 'powerful' would collect artworks, commission art, musical compositions, and latter endow institutions. Benjamin's argument is that with mechanical reproduction of the industrial age the 'original' was no longer needed .

 In the post-industrial age digital reproduction is 'perfect'.

Art today in the broadest sense as a communal activity exists as perfectly reproducible and transmittable digital data. Art is now entertainment. It is music, drama, film. We spectate via TV, Computer and smart phone. Entertainment also is news and sport. We participate in gaming and social media. This is the cultural input for the many.

Social Media is interesting – it has no external material or cultural content as its focus, it is just social interaction without any particular object. It mediates individual directly with individual without anything other. The only requirements for its engagement therefore is to be an individual who uses it. It is Baudrillard's "Ecstasy of Communication". And it is empty.

The individual object maker of a 'thing' is replaced by an industry facilitated for all by complex software and hardware from corporate providers.

Such corporate art involves advanced technologies and billions in investment.
No longer are art galleries or institutions validated by their collections of individual objects of

art. Where once the art object gave a gallery its prestige now the products located in these galleries become art by being in such prestigious situations. You put a bottle rack, unmade bed or anything in the Tate, and it's art.

With the industrialization of art now an artist gains his or her status by virtue of the galleries they are exhibited in and the investment from the super-collectors or from media interaction.

The artist can no longer decide to be an artist, this decision is made by the industry of galleries, curators, collectors and the art media.

These systems make the art, an individual is subsumed into the system or is alienated from it. This is the crisis of technology.

So to now to quote Vladimir Ilich Lenin… "what is to be done?"!

How can the individual produce art outside these contemporary technological systems?
The recourse is to the production of art not just prior to industrialization but prior to the development of agriculture.

And as Tim Morton points out with the development of agriculture the path to where we are now began, Where are we? We are in….. the anthropocene.

Yet art existed before agriculture, in pre-agrarian cultures individuals made objects we now consider as art. And some of these works such as the Lion-man figurine date to some 40,000 years ago, 30,000 years before the beginnings of agriculture.

Pre-agrarian art had an essential quality which an individual now, as attempting to be an artist and make art works, can also utilize. In Pre-agrarian art the object's Aura was not from society. Pre-agrarian art objects could never be known, shared or communicated with more than a handful of others. The significance of these works or in Benjamin's term their Aura could not be social as they existed and were created for many millennia before societies and civilizations existed.

The resource the individual today has is simply a need or desire to make a work, a thing, an object, despite an alienated world around them. This alienated world is similar to that of humans before agriculture. Strange, dangerous and beyond individual understanding.

We can only speculate of how these pre-agrarian objects gained a value. But as someone now who simply feels the need to make 'special' objects, the need is sufficient and provides the value. The aura of my proposed artworks, or of what I call the black swans is not from outside, or is it intrinsic, it is "childish". Many of us have encountered this aura as children in our interaction with 'special' toys.

And I think this need is no different from the totemic or fetish quality of so called primitive art. The experiences of such objects are difficult to describe because they occur even before we acquire a language sophisticated enough to signify them. The possibility of these objects opens the possibility of an individual making, for what ever else it could be called, an art object.

The Black Swans are examples of such objects. Their creation derives from remembering a personal psychological experience of an historically profound event. In 1962 my swan device was not 'real'. The object, or 'device' was totemic. 40,000 years ago the materials to hand were flint knives, and animal bone. I use broken computer boards, resin, and simple programs I write myself from scratch.

The current devices do function, not only as objects but devices for the location, storage and performance of sound works. But these are not 'Real'. They use comparatively simple computer programs to 'simulate' modern music, to produce a cargo cult un-real 'replica' of avant garde music. Cargo cult because of the simplistic algorithms which are nothing like the sophisticated structures of serial music. And they are manufactured from the dead waste of contemporary technology...

A Post Script: From Martin Heidegger.

> Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it.   Such a realm is ART. [9 my emphasis]

Addendum. What follows from this...

Many things do follow. But one is very significant. If we take the reasonable assumption that art began at least 40,000   years ago[10] then the history of art prior to large societies, civilization, capital and political systems, pre-agrarian art,   is an historical period three times longer than what followed. So lets take an assertion as an example, 'Western Art in the main has been male dominated'. This given a period of a few thousand years of recent practice could be maintained. But it cannot be maintained for Art History of a 40,000 year period. 30,000 years at least is problematic, there is no conclusive evidence for who made pre-agrarian art. Thus any assertion of the form "Art is the main has been..." is not disproved but rendered an uncertain speculation. Even the assertion that pre-agrarian art was ritualistic is problematic. If the history of art escapes definitive explanation, maybe some modern art does not ...

"I can't wait to get into a position to make really bad art and get away with it[11]".

"A Man Climbs a Mountain Because it is There. A Man Makes a Work of Art Because it is Not There." Carl Andre.

"Art is art and everything else is everything else" Ad Reinhardt.

"Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." Sol Lewitt sentences on conceptual art.

Though maybe it does...

"The semantic horizon which habitually governs the notion of communication is exceeded or punctured by the intervention of writing, that is of a dissemination which cannot be reduced to a polysemia. Writing is read, and "in the last analysis" does not give rise to a hermeneutic deciphering, to the decoding of a meaning or truth."[12]

Though here Derrida sees writing as allays having (the possibility of) an 'excess' which escapes a final meaning, if I can return to my own situation or predicament, if I think carefully and deeply as to why I want to make art, (and why and how I do) and its purpose I simply do not have a clue. And by this I do not mean I merely lack the knowledge, be it from a Marxist criteria of art, or a Freudian, or neurophysiological... Art existed before complex signs and sign systems. Signs are generalizations, an artwork is not. And once art becomes a generalization it loses its 'power' - of the individual. Remember the special toy, its speciality is unknown.

Art exists in fundamental opposition to identity, from the Lion Man, through to Cages 4'33" or Duchamp's urinal.

This is crucial – individuality is destroyed by identity.

> Not an individual endowed with good will and a natural capacity for thought, but an individual who does not manage to think either naturally or conceptually. Only such an individual is without presuppositions. Only such an individual effectively begins and effectively repeats.[13]

> "I'm Bad!"[14]

Notes:

[1] "A cargo cult is a millenarian movement first described in Melanesia which encompasses a range of practices and occurs in the wake of contact with more technologically advanced societies. The name derives from the belief which began among Melanesians in the late 19th and early 20th century that various ritualistic acts such as the building of an airplane runway will result in the appearance of material wealth, particularly highly desirable Western goods (i.e., "cargo"), via Western airplanes. Cargo cults often develop during a combination of crises. Under conditions of social stress, such a movement may form under the leadership of a charismatic figure. This leader may have a "vision" (or "myth-dream") of the future, often linked to an ancestral efficacy ("mana") thought to be recoverable by a return to traditional morality. This leader may characterize the present state as a dismantling of the old social order, meaning that social hierarchy and ego boundaries have been broken down." –Wikipedia.

[2] The mainstay of the USA's ICBMs at the time was the Atlas missile developed under the direction of John Von Neumann who amongst many other things was responsible for the design of the principle computer architecture still in use today.

[3] Interview given in 1966. Quoted in Frank J. Tipler, The Physics of Immortality (London: Macmillan, 1994) p.86.

[4] Sokal, Alan & Bricmont, Jean, Fashionable Nonsense x.

[5] Ray Brassier interviewed by Marcin Rychter "I am a nihilist because I still believe in truth", Kronos, March 4, 2011.

[6] Julian Stallabrass, High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s, p.31.

[7] Ray Brassier has picked up many strands of alienation – see https://monoskop.org/images/2/24/Brassier_Ray_Alien_Theory_The_Decline_of_Materialism_in_the_Name_of_Matter.pdf and elsewhere https://contingentpower.net/tags/ray-brassier. And an accompanying nihilism in which he equates philosophy to extinction. See Nihil Unbound pp.238-239. His trope is extinction, part perhaps of a leftish Accelerationism.

[8] Networks are an obvious contemporary feature, ones which become for many their environment for work and leisure. There are sociological models such as ANT. Key to a network is connectivity and opposed to individuality. A mesh network (the internet) is non hierarchical & so rhyizomic. "The multiple must be made... subtract the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted... A system of this kind could be called a rhizome." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia' p.6.

[9] Martin Heidegger Ibid. pp. 237,238.

[10] Whilst a perverse argument could argue the nature (use) of such artefacts as the Lion Man is unknown so its art status problematic there are flutes made of bone which have a similar date, and the purpose of a flute, to make music, should be beyond contention. See 'Ice Age art: arrival of the modern mind'.

[11] Hirst - Ibid.

[12] Jacques Derrida Signature Event Context (SEC).

[13] Giles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, Continuum 1994 p. 166.

[14] Michael Jackson -1987.

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