

## **The Black Swans.**

### **The Work of Art in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction.**

('Post-Mechanical Reproduction' 'Mechanical' as in a machine which is physical and makes physical stuff using force. 'Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction' = 'Age of virtual production.' "Ecstasy of Communication" - Baudrillard)

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#### **Abstract:**

This paper sets out a subjective response in Art to the post-modern situation of confusion and complexity in the nature of art, the development of technology and a perceived crisis in the Humanities. This response is the production of totemic objects or 'devices' similar to those of pre-agrarian humans, made in order to deal with a world which for some is alienating, mysterious and threatening.

#### **Introduction:**

This paper will use three unrelated, as of yet, subjects.

One: The Cuba Missile Crisis of 1962.

Two: Alienating hyper-complex systems and Accelerationism.

Three: An addendum to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by Walter Benjamin – 'The Work of Art in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction'.

Each of these can be regarded as a global crisis whose overcoming is beyond the scope of this paper, beyond the scope of any individual, perhaps even beyond the scope of humanity.

That they are related, or will here become related requires a move which is certainly neither overtly rational or properly academic. One which in my case re-asserts the individual despite the scale and complexity for any individual by and from all three crises. This involves a strategy towards and with technology to 'generate' novel devices. The power of these devices, these 'technologies', is generated by a psychological force, 'the essence of [this] technology is nothing technological'. I've compared this to Pre-agrarian art, whereas such an art might use a dead animal bone, I use a broken computer circuit boards. In the naivety of practice and object I also note a comparison with the Cargo Cults of Polynesia [1].

#### **One:**

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 would in effect give the USSR a first strike capability. President Kennedy's advisers therefore were convinced a nuclear strike by the USA on Cuba was the best option. He instead enforced a blockage of Cuba by the US Navy. Ships from the USSR – carrying more missiles were already underway, and the reality of a Nuclear War was common to all, if these ships didn't turn back the US Navy would sink them and a Nuclear War would almost certainly follow. The then ICBM technology was significant in making the crisis as ICBMs at the time were liquid

fuelled and took around 15 minutes to prepare, missiles fired from Cuba could effectively destroy U.S. missiles before launching was possible[2]. 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 the 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 they were neither Art or Technologies, but in some way strange totemic devices.... I want you to hold this 'nature' of such devices rather than dismiss them as silly childish toys or products of 'primitive' and ignorant minds. The boy had to deal with something he could have no power over and not fully understand, the creators of Cargo cult 'devices' were in a strange way in a similar position, they witnessed the arrival and departure of advanced western technologies and commodities during the War in the Pacific in WW2 and constructed unreal effigies in the hope of returning the good fortune they brought.

**Two:**

SPIEGEL: And what takes the place of philosophy now?

HEIDEGGER: 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 as (another) crisis or challenge.

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 Badiou, Laclau, Deleuze... and the more recent Speculative turn. It is 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. Particular attention to some of these excesses has been drawn by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont...

"that famous intellectuals such as Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Baudrillard, and Deleuze have repeatedly abused scientific concepts and terminology..."[4].

for instance quoting Lacan

"Thus the erectile organ...is equivalent to the square root of -1[5]."

Or as Ray Brassier has said of more contemporary philosophy,

"The 'speculative realist movement' exists only in the imaginations of a group of bloggers promoting an agenda for which I have no sympathy whatsoever: actor-network theory spiced with pan-psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy. I don't believe the internet is an appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to exploit the

misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students. I agree with Deleuze's remark that ultimately the most basic task of philosophy is to impede stupidity, so I see little philosophical merit in a 'movement' whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity[6]."

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. Nick Land, a founder of The Cybernetic Culture Research Unit is a proponent of Right Accelerationism. And he is significant as being a tutor at Warwick of many now involved with Speculative Realism and even those exponents of Left Accelerationism, Land was influential in the arts, associated with personae such as Jake and Dinos Chapman, mixing cybernetics with art and occultism. Land is now linked with Dark Enlightenment, and Neo-Reactionism (NRx) anti democratic and extreme right-wing movements. 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 yet like technology itself are products of it.

Space and my limited individual capability precludes detailing the complexity of modern physics, biology, neurobiology, computer technologies and mathematics. Whatever they produce, they all do produce a feeling of personal alienation.

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.

But as much as this is seemingly bifurcated and confused so is the nature and legitimation of Art itself. 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, money!

Quote Damien Hirst 1990.

"I can't wait to get into a position to make really bad art and get away with it" [7].

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, amongst other holdings owner of Christie's Auction House and is estimated to be worth 13.7 billion dollars as of 2015.

The artworks of 'The Treasures' were produced **for** Hirst at Hirst's personal expense, at a cost of between 50 and 100 million UK pounds to manufacture.

Whatever else art has become 'technological' in the complexity of its social, political, economic, philosophical structures and networks. It too brings therefore an alienation [8] for any individual. The individual is now part of a network[9], group or industry. Culture is now an industry.

### **Three:**

Art in its broadest sense was defined by Walter Benjamin as being once that of objects which had traditional and ritualistic values. Places of worship, architecture, painting, sculpture, drama, literature, music and performance were cultural 'spaces' in which individuals could interact, communicate, learn, entertain and be entertained. Within this framework individual works of art were unique productions. Art in the Pre-Industrial age consisted of singular objects, a statue, painting or building. It gained an Aura which was its validation by and from the society in which it was located. For Benjamin Art had no intrinsic Aura, Art's Aura was given to it by the bourgeoisie, or proletariat or by an authority, civil, religious, institutional or capital. It is a consequence of the Aura, no matter its source, that the powerful would collect and associate themselves with such art once societies developed strata and simple economics. 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 once the quality of production was such that difference from an original could become trivial or non existent. In the post-industrial age digital reproduction is 'perfect'.

In the post-modern, post-industrial age of digital reproduction and creation art or culture for the majority is neither the elite of High Art or the political activism of the left. Art today in the broadest sense as a communal activity exists as perfectly reproducible and transmittable digital data. As music, drama, the movies, also as news, and especially sport, as video games, and as the internet and social media. This is the cultural input for the many.

And Social Media in particular is significantly different to all past cultural activity because it has all the sociality of these other mass forms of art/entertainment but with no external content. There is no external 'origin' or originator. Social Media has no external content as its focus, it is just social interaction without any 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".

In social media reproduction of art has become redundant, and in the post-industrial digital age reproduction of art has become perfect, and creation and creativity facilitated for all by software and hardware. Art is the product of an industry, it is no longer an individual activity. And because of this no longer are art galleries or institutions validated by their collections of individuals work, their collections are validated by the institution, by the industry. Institutions such as The Louvre or National Gallery gained status because of their contents of 'great' works of individual Artists. With the industrialization of art now an artist gains his or her status by virtue of the galleries they are exhibited in. The artist can no longer decide to be an artist, this decision is made by 'the industry' of galleries, curators, collectors etc. Mass society can no longer provide the artist with any criteria because it has established itself as self-sufficient and in no *need* of art. The audiences can and do amuse themselves. And for any artist to be accepted as an artist it is for the system to decide. Such an individual is subsumed into the system or is alienated from it.

### **A Strategy:**

A strategy for how an individual can produce art, an art fundamentally different from the

contemporary technological system has recourse to the production of art not just prior to industrialization but prior to the development of agriculture. With agriculture came communities of cities and nations, class structures, commerce, specialization in craft and technology. For Benjamin here the societies created Art and art's Aura. Yet art existed before agriculture, in pre-agrarian cultures individuals made objects we now consider as art. For example the "Venus of Tan-Tan", Venus of Willendorf the Swimming Reindeer. And some of these works such as the Lion-man figurine date to some 40,000 years ago, 28,000 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 significant to its maker, and primarily significant. Such cultures, if they can even be called that, lacked even the rudimentary structures of agrarian societies in which sophisticated communities developed. Pre-agrarian artworks could be 'secret', were in effect secret without the need of communication and audiences. They 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 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. 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. And I think this need is no different from the totemic or fetish quality of so called primitive art. We may ourselves had this experience of the totemic object, or many of us have, as children in our interaction with 'special' toys. Such an interaction is not primarily religious, it lacks the sophistication for any religiosity. 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' then as now is totemic or fetishistic.

The current devices do function, not only as objects but devices for the location, storage, performance of soundworks. But these are also 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...

### **Post Script:**

"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[10]." - Heidegger.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZ608OQdHOk>

## 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] *Ibid.* p.86

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

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

[8] 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](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 leftist Accelerationism.

[9] 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 rhyzomic. "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.

[10] Martin Heidegger *Ibid.* pp. 237,238

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